

Gen 41 – Joseph and Pharaoh – Dreams Cows and Grain

THEME: The dreams of Pharaoh; Joseph is made overseer of Egypt; Joseph's two sons—Manasseh and Ephraim.

What a difference this chapter is from the previous one where we left Joseph down in jail, forgotten, forlorn, and forsaken. Yet all of this was happening to him for God's purpose in his life. If we could recognize God's hand in our lives today, it would give us a different outlook on life! In the chapter before us we will see that Joseph is released from prison when he interprets the dreams of Pharaoh. He is made overseer over the entire land of Egypt, and he marries Asenath, the daughter of the Priest of On, who bears him Manasseh and Ephraim.

This is a story of rags to riches. I know of no fictitious story more thrilling than this episode in the life of Joseph. In this chapter we can certainly see the hand of God in his life. And Joseph was conscious of God's care even during the days of adversity. This developed in him many virtues which are the fruit of the Spirit. One of them was patience. The truth expressed in Rom_5:3 that tribulation (or trouble) worketh patience is definitely illustrated in the life of Joseph.

We find here that this boy is brought into the presence of Pharaoh, the gentile king, just as later on Daniel will be brought in before Nebuchadnezzar. Both of them are to interpret dreams.

Then we will consider the famine at the end of the chapter. What purpose of God is to be accomplished by this? God will use it to get the family of Jacob out of Canaan, away from the sins of the Canaanites and to bring them to Egypt to settle in the secluded spot of Goshen. That is one of His objectives. God had, I am sure, many other reasons, but this one is obvious.

As we go along, I hope you are still taking note of the ways in which Joseph is like the Lord Jesus Christ. We will make more of these comparisons later on. It is something important for us to be noting. – McGee

Gen 41:1-4 *Then it came to pass, at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh had a dream; and behold, he stood by the river. Suddenly there came up out of the river seven cows, fine looking and fat; and they fed in the meadow. Then behold, seven other cows came up after them out of the river, ugly and gaunt, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the river. And the ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven fine looking and fat cows. So Pharaoh awoke.*

Notice that it has been two full years since the close of the previous chapter. Joseph has spent two more years in jail, waiting for something to happen.

Here is Pharaoh's dream— “Kine” are cows. We are talking about cattle here. He saw seven cows that were well-fed, fine-looking, fat cattle. Then he saw seven really skinny cows. Pharaoh woke up and wondered what the dream meant. He didn't have the interpretation, but there was nobody to help him that day.

Gen 41:5-8 *He slept and dreamed a second time; and suddenly seven heads of grain came up on one stalk, plump and good. Then behold, seven thin heads, blighted by the east wind, sprang up after them. And the seven thin heads devoured the seven plump and full heads. So Pharaoh awoke, and indeed, it was a dream. Now it came to pass in the morning that his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them for Pharaoh.*

While all of these magicians and wise men were called in and Pharaoh was telling them his dream, the chief butler was there listening. After all, his position was to stand before Pharaoh and get him anything that he wanted. When none of the wise men could give Pharaoh an interpretation, the butler spoke up—

Gen 41:9-13 *Then the chief butler spoke to Pharaoh, saying: "I remember my faults this day. When Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and put me in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, both me and the chief*

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baker, we each had a dream in one night, he and I. Each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his own dream. Now there was a young Hebrew man with us there, a servant of the captain of the guard. And we told him, and he interpreted our dreams for us; to each man he interpreted according to his own dream. And it came to pass, just as he interpreted for us, so it happened. He restored me to my office, and he hanged him."

I would call it a little more than a "fault!" It was a sin, in my opinion. But, you see, all of this was in the providence of God. We would call them the fortuitous concurrence of circumstances. The difficult experiences of Joseph could not be understood at the time, but God was letting them happen for a purpose. Now the chief butler says, "Oh, I just remembered that I promised a young fellow down there in prison that I would speak to you about him. And, by the way, Pharaoh, he can interpret dreams." Now he tells Pharaoh his own experience—

Pharaoh said, "Well, we've tried everybody else around here, and since that young man interpreted your dream and that of the baker, let's have him come because I have the feeling that my dreams are very significant."

Gen 41:14 Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him quickly out of the dungeon; and he shaved, changed his clothing, and came to Pharaoh.

Note that Joseph shaved himself. You must remember that the Hebrews were not shaving in that day. But have you noticed that the statues and paintings of the Egyptians show a cleanshaven people? Many of the rulers sported a little goatee to add dignity to their position—if they couldn't grow their own, they wore a false one—but generally the Egyptians were without hair on their faces.

There is a tremendous message in this. This man is lifted up out of the prison now. He shaves, and changes his prison garb for proper court clothing. This is a new life that is before him. It is like a resurrection; he is raised up. Now he goes to the Gentiles. What a tremendous picture of Christ this gives to us here. – McGee

Notice: Joseph did not say my clothes are good enough or say our custom is not shaving. Sometimes, God asks you to change so he can use you!

Gen 41:15-16 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that you can understand a dream, to interpret it." So Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace."

From Joseph's viewpoint, God must receive the glory. Again, let me say that the child of God should be very careful that God gets the glory for all of His accomplishments. If what we do is a blessing, it is because God is doing it through us. Joseph is aware of this, and he says, "It is not in me—I can't interpret it—but God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace."

Pharaoh repeats the dreams to Joseph. Actually, it is one dream of two parts, and it is treated as a single dream. - McGee

Gen 41:17-25 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph: "Behold, in my dream I stood on the bank of the river. Suddenly seven cows came up out of the river, fine looking and fat; and they fed in the meadow. Then behold, seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and gaunt, such ugliness as I have never seen in all the land of Egypt. And the gaunt and ugly cows ate up the first seven, the fat cows. When they had eaten them up, no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they were just as ugly as at the beginning. So, I awoke. Also I saw in my dream, and suddenly seven heads came up on one stalk, full and good. Then behold, seven heads, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprang up after them. And the thin heads devoured the seven good heads. So, I told this to the magicians, but

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there was no one who could explain it to me." Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do:

Joseph says that the dream is one—both speak of the same thing. And the fact that it was repeated, given to Pharaoh twice, adds to its importance. The reason for the dream is that God is letting Pharaoh know what He is about to do. Here is the interpretation—McGee

Gen 41:26-32 The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads are seven years; the dreams are one. And the seven thin and ugly cows which came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty heads blighted by the east wind are seven years of famine. This is the thing which I have spoken to Pharaoh. God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do. Indeed, seven years of great plenty will come throughout all the land of Egypt; but after them seven years of famine will arise, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine will deplete the land. So, the plenty will not be known in the land because of the famine following, for it will be very severe. And the dream was repeated to Pharaoh twice because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.

Called before Pharaoh, Joseph explained that there would be seven years of great plenty in Egypt, followed by seven years of famine which would devastate the land. The repetition or duplication of Pharaoh's dream meant that it was established by God and that He would shortly bring it to pass. We see this also in Joseph's two dreams concerning his future (Gen_37:6-9) and in the similar visions of Daniel 2 and 7. In the Bible, two is the number of witness. Joseph gave the same reply to Pharaoh in the royal hall as he gave to his servants in the prison house. "It is not in me; God will give . . . an answer of peace" (v. 16; cf. Gen_40:8). It is this humility that made it possible for the Lord to entrust Joseph with tremendous responsibility without fear that it would corrupt him. – Believers Bible Commentary

Gen 41:33-36 "Now therefore, let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh do this, and let him appoint officers over the land, to collect one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven plentiful years. And let them gather all the food of those good years that are coming, and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities. Then that food shall be as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which shall be in the land of Egypt, that the land may not perish during the famine."

Joseph counseled Pharaoh to set aside reserves of grain during the years of plenty so that there would be sufficient during the famine years. His plan was what has since been called "the ever-normal granaries." – Believers Bible Commentary

Joseph Rises to Power

Gen 41:37-41 So the advice was good in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of all his servants. And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?" Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you." And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt."

Notice the significance of this. At the beginning this boy had been in the back of the prison, forgotten, forsaken, and forlorn. Now he is brought out at the right psychological moment because nobody else can interpret the dream of Pharaoh. Not only does he interpret it, but in his enthusiasm and because he is a man of ability, he suggests what Pharaoh should do. God is leading him in all of this, of course.

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There is to be a worldwide famine, a famine so severe that even Egypt will be affected. Because Egypt is an irrigated land, it is not dependent upon rainfall. The Upper Nile, the Blue Nile, comes down from Central Africa and furnishes the water upon which Egypt depends. Egypt gets about an inch of rainfall in a good year; so it is famine all the time as far as rainfall is concerned. But the Nile overflows the land every year, bringing not only water, but sediment which fertilizes the soil. However, God has warned that there will be seven years of famine which will affect Egypt, also.

As Pharaoh listens to Joseph, what he says makes sense. It is too bad that in my own nation there have not been men in our government who have had some sense of the future. Our foreign policy since the years before World War II, even from the days of Hitler's rise to power, has been more or less a first-aid program, something rushed in as an emergency measure. Someone once asked Gladstone what is the measure of a great statesman. He said it is the man who knows the direction God is going for the next fifty years. Well, here in Genesis, Pharaoh is told what is going to happen for the next fourteen years. Our nation could use a man like this, also.

Now, who could take over better than Joseph? Pharaoh recognized that he was a man of ability. Now don't you see how God had been training him in the home of Potiphar? We may wonder why in the world God ever let him go into that home in the first place. Now we realize that he had received quite a bit of training in the home of Potiphar where he had charge of everything the man owned. Now he is going to have charge of everything in the land of Egypt. This is a tremendous transition in his life. He went all the way from the back of the jail to the throne next to that of Pharaoh. - McGee

Gen 41:42 Then Pharaoh took his signet ring off his hand and put it on Joseph's hand; and he clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck.

By the way, that ring had a signet on it. When that was put down in wax, it was just the same as Pharaoh's signature. Pharaoh is making Joseph his agent. He has the right to use the king's signature.- McGee

Gen 41:43-45 And he had him ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried out before him, "Bow the knee!" So he set him over all the land of Egypt. Pharaoh also said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no man may lift his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnath-Paaneah. And he gave him as a wife Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On. So Joseph went out over all the land of Egypt.

I like the name Joe better than I like Zaphnath-paaneah, but that was the name that Pharaoh gave to him. It is a Coptic name, and it means "the revealer of secret things."- McGee

Gen 41:46 Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt.

We are told Joseph's age here, and we see that he has been in the land of Egypt for thirteen years. We know that two of those years were spent in prison after the episode with the butler and the baker. He probably had been in the prison a year or so before that. So he may have been in the house of Potiphar close to ten years. This gives us some idea of how his life was divided into time periods while he was in the land of Egypt.

After these thirteen years in Egypt, Joseph finds himself in a position which would correspond, I believe, to prime minister. He was second only to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt. Have you ever wondered why Pharaoh was so willing to accept him? Primarily, of course, the answer is that God was with him. All the way along we have been seeing that. The hand of God, by His providence, was leading this man. Joseph says himself that the brothers meant it for evil but that God meant it for good. It is wonderful to know that.

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There may be another very practical reason for Pharaoh's accepting Joseph so readily. Many scholars hold that the Pharaoh at this particular time in history was one of the Hyksos kings. The Hyksos were not native Egyptians but were Bedouins from the Arabian Desert. They were a nomadic group, and for a period they came in and took over the throne of Egypt. If this is true (and I think it is), Pharaoh was actually closer in nationality to Joseph than to the Egyptians, and this gave him confidence in Joseph. Actually, these Hyksos kings found it a little difficult to find someone in Egypt who would be loyal and faithful to them. Faithfulness was certainly characteristic of Joseph. His confidence that God was moving in his life produced in him a faithfulness to whomever he was attached. He was faithful to his task because he knew that God was in it. A racial bond with Pharaoh may well be a reason that Joseph found such a ready reception with him at this time, and he certainly proved to be faithful to him, as we shall see.

By the way, the Hyksos kings were later expelled from Egypt, which I believe to be the reason that in Exo_1:8 we read: "Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph." The Pharaoh of the oppression certainly had no fellow-feeling with the Hebrews!

Note that Pharaoh placed a chain about Joseph's neck, which gave him the same authority that Pharaoh had. Also, Pharaoh gave him for a bride the daughter of the priest of On. Her name, Asenath, means "dedicated to Neith (the Egyptian Minerva)." Evidently she came right out of heathenism.

This event in Joseph's life furnishes another parallel in the life of the Lord Jesus. Joseph had a gentile bride, and the Lord Jesus Christ is presently calling out of this world a gentile bride, which we call the church.

And in this same verse there is still another parallel; Joseph stood before Pharaoh when he was thirty years old, and the Lord Jesus began His ministry when He was thirty years of age. So at thirty, Joseph takes up his work in Egypt. During these seven years of plenty, he is gathering into storehouses the abundant produce of the land. - McGee

Gen 41:47-48 Now in the seven plentiful years the ground brought forth abundantly. So he gathered up all the food of the seven years which were in the land of Egypt, and laid up the food in the cities; he laid up in every city the food of the fields which surrounded them.

Notice that he "laid up the food in the cities." He was planning ahead for easy distribution. I remember that during the depression of the 1930s men stood in the lines of the soup kitchens of Chicago and New York, and the lines were blocks long. Although at that time there was an abundance of food, there was a problem of distribution. But Joseph is doing a very practical thing. He is laying up the food in the cities. He is gathering up the surplus, and he is putting it in the cities, ready for distribution. - McGee

Gen 41:49-52 Joseph gathered very much grain, as the sand of the sea, until he stopped counting, for it was immeasurable. And to Joseph were born two sons before the years of famine came, whom Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On, bore to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh: "For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house." And the name of the second he called Ephraim: "For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction."

These boys were born before the famine. He called his first son Manasseh. I'd say a good name for him would be "Amnesia" because it means that God had made Joseph "forget." He was so much involved that he forgot about his father's house. He'd been a homesick boy at first, but he's not anymore.

In the first part of this chapter we saw that Joseph, when he was released from prison, changed his clothes and shaved himself before appearing before Pharaoh. It may seem to you that shaving may not be very important, that only the

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Gillette Company would be interested in that fact. But to us it has a symbolic interest. The Hebrews wore beards, and when Joseph shaved himself and changed his clothing, it speaks to me of resurrection because he laid aside the old life and began the new life. From that point on, he dresses like an Egyptian; he talks like an Egyptian; he lives like an Egyptian. He says “God made me forget.” So he names his son Manasseh—and you may call him Amnesia if you want to!

The next boy he names Ephraim because that means “fruitful.” So you can call this next boy “Ambrosia” if you like. Someone may object that this is free translating. Maybe it is, but if you put those two boys' names into their English counterparts, that is exactly what they are. His boys were Amnesia and Ambrosia. Joseph gave them these names because God had made him forget his father's house and had made him fruitful in the land of Egypt. - McGee

Gen 41:53-57 Then the seven years of plenty which were in the land of Egypt ended, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. The famine was in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Then Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, do." The famine was over all the face of the earth, and Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians. And the famine became severe in the land of Egypt. So all countries came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine was severe in all lands.

The seven years of bountiful crops are over now, and the famine will begin. At this time Joseph is thirty–seven years old. Keep that in mind for the next chapter.

May I call your attention to the fact that Joseph is the one who had the bread. There is another parallel here. Jesus Christ said, “I am the Bread of life.”

Notice that the famine is worldwide.- McGee