

**Genesis 41:1-36**  
**Joseph and Pharaoh, part 1**

For the favorite son of one of the great patriarchs, Joseph had not been having an easy time of it. To be sure, he had brought many of his troubles on himself, especially when we recall his impertinence and arrogance as a young man. But that was no excuse for his brothers to behave as they did by plotting to kill him and then settling for selling him into slavery. But through those difficult times, Joseph had matured and God's grace had worked its changes.

In Egypt, he served his master, Potiphar, with integrity, but despite resisting the affections of his master's wife, he found himself in prison. Yet, there he again served well, doing his best to be a good steward of whatever responsibilities he was given. And as in Potiphar's house, God showed him favor and those in positions of authority over him took notice. Unfortunately, when he took it upon himself to ease the troubled minds of two of his fellow inmates, his good deed went unrequited. Ignored and forgotten, it would have been only natural for Joseph to despair. But we know that God was at work, and in God's own perfect timing, things changed for Joseph in a more dramatic way that even this dreamer of dreams could have imagined.

**Pharaoh Dreams**

Joseph had been languishing in prison for two full years. He had had plenty of time to reflect on his situation and its hopelessness. For two years the baker had been dead. For two years the cupbearer had enjoyed his position at Pharaoh's court. And, we can safely assume, that for two full years the Pharaoh had dreams, though none troubled him so much as the ones he had now.

“<sup>1</sup>Now it happened at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream, and behold, he was standing by the Nile. <sup>2</sup>And lo, from the Nile there came up seven cows, sleek and fat; and they grazed in the marsh grass. <sup>3</sup>Then behold, seven other cows came up after them from the Nile, ugly and gaunt, and they stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. <sup>4</sup>Then the ugly and gaunt cows ate the seven sleek and fat cows. Then Pharaoh awoke. <sup>5</sup>And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time; and behold, seven ears of grain came up on a single stalk, plump and good. <sup>6</sup>Then behold, seven ears, thin and scorched by the east wind, sprouted up after them. <sup>7</sup>And the thin ears swallowed the seven plump and full ears. Then Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. <sup>8</sup>Now it came about in the morning that his spirit was troubled, so 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 to Pharaoh” (v. 1-8).

The Nile River was the lifeblood of Egypt. Indeed, the classical historian Herodotus referred to Egypt as “the gift of the Nile.” It was the central geographic feature of Egypt. It divided Egypt into Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt, though confusingly Upper Egypt is in the south and Lower Egypt in the north. That is because the geography of Egypt was, and is, determined by its relationship to the Nile. The river was deified in Egyptian religion and was represented by the God Hap. The timing of the flooding of the Nile was carefully studied (it flooded regularly in the fall) and the overflowing waters were used, even in the ancient world, to irrigate the land and provide for agricultural production. This period of flooding was celebrated with a two week religious festival. Thus, successfully harnessing the river was essential to

maintaining Egyptian civilization, and when the flooding was inadequate or overwhelming, disaster occurred. Its centrality to the setting of the dreams of Pharaoh must have alerted him to their importance.

Pharaoh's first dream involved two sets of seven cows that emerged from the Nile River. The marshy grasses that grew along the banks of the river provided a natural habitat for birds and other animals. The first set of cows were "sleek and fat" (v. 2) and were quite naturally feeding on those reeds. The very fact that they were grazing so comfortably was, no doubt, the cause of their health. The second set of cows, however, were "ugly and gaunt" (v. 3) and did not feed on the grasses. By standing next to the healthy cows, the dream emphasized the stark contrast between the two groups of animals. This rather bucolic and naturalistic scene was rudely interrupted, however, when the emaciated cows began to devour the healthy ones. Such a disturbing and fantastic occurrence was likely the reason Pharaoh awoke, probably with a start and with his heart pounding.

But Pharaoh collected himself and fell asleep again. And again he dreamt. The second dream concerned a staple of Egyptian agriculture. Grain production was a fundamental element of Egyptian farming, and provided the bulk of the food eaten by the approximately two million people that inhabited Egypt during the height of the Middle Kingdom. And again we have a pattern in the dream. First, there are seven "plump and good" (v. 5) ears of grain. These ears of grain were the part of the plant that was harvested and eaten. That seven ears grew from a single stalk only served to highlight their fruitfulness. The second set of ears of grain, though, were "thin and scorched by the east wind" (v. 6). Miraculously, they "swallowed up" (v. 7) the healthy ears of grain. Again a very realistic scene from Egyptian life devolved into the fantastic.

In these dreams, no reason was given as to why the ugly and thin cows were the way they were, but it did indicate why the thin ears were weak. They had been scorched by the east wind. These winds were the sirocco, and they occurred in the spring and fall and actually came out of the south. We are also not told why seven ears of grain escaped the effects of this wind and the others did not. Further, we must remark that these dreams were unlike those of the cupbearer and the baker. Pharaoh's dreams dealt in fantastic imagery, not reality. Cows do not eat cows, and ears of grain do not eat ears of grain.

Since the imagery of Pharaoh's dreams were disturbing as well as symbolic, it was only logical that he turned to his magicians and other wise men at court to interpret them. The grotesque image of cows cannibalizing one another and the unimaginable act of ears of grain feeding one another must have been frightening. Pharaoh understood enough of the imagery of his dreams to be disturbed, but not enough to determine their meaning. So, naturally, he called all of his 'magicians' and "wise men" together and related to them his dreams.

These terms referred to the "chief lector priests" of Egypt and these men developed their skills in an establishment called the "House of Life" where they studied the "dream books" that analyzed the meaning of dreams by interpreting their imagery. Such counselors were integral to life at the Egyptian court and played a role in the Moses narrative.

<sup>8</sup>"Now the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, <sup>9</sup>"when Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, "work a miracle," then you shall say to Aaron, "take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, so that

it may turn into a serpent.”<sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup>So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and so they did, just as the Lord had commanded; and Aaron threw his staff down before Pharaoh and his servants, and it turned into a serpent. <sup>11</sup>Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers, and they too, the soothsayer priests of Egypt, did the same with their secret arts. <sup>12</sup>For each one threw down his staff, and they turned into serpents. But Aaron’s staff swallowed their staffs. <sup>13</sup>Yet Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, just as the Lord had said” (Exodus 7:8-13).

So clearly these men had some skill with the occult, but in this case their talents proved inadequate. Scripture gives no details, but concludes that, despite employing all their skills, none of the magicians or wise men were able to convince Pharaoh that his interpretation was correct. So Pharaoh remained confused and troubled.

### **The Cupbearer Remembers**

At some point the news that Pharaoh was troubled and that his magicians and wise men were of no help came to the attention of the cupbearer. He may have been attending him, perhaps refilling his wine glass frequently as Pharaoh tried to calm his nerves. In any case,

“<sup>9</sup>Then the chief cupbearer spoke to Pharaoh, saying, ‘I would make mention today of my own offenses. <sup>10</sup>Pharaoh was furious with his servants, and he put me in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, both me and the chief baker. <sup>11</sup>And we had a dream one night, he and I; each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his own dream. <sup>12</sup>Now a Hebrew youth was there with us, a servant of the captain of the bodyguard, and we related them to him, and he interpreted our dreams for us. To each one he interpreted according to his own dream. <sup>13</sup>And it came about that just as he interpreted for us, so it happened; he restored me in my office, but he hanged the chief baker” (v. 9-13).

The text is unclear as to whether the cupbearer intentionally had forgotten about Joseph or if this event recalled his memory. But certainly when the subject of disturbing dreams was brought up, the cupbearer must have remembered his own dreams in prison and how narrowly he had escaped the fate of the baker.

So the cupbearer took the initiative and spoke to Pharaoh. He did so humbly, beginning by acknowledging his own error. But when the cupbearer related the events during his time in prison we can notice that he quite naturally, perhaps, omitted some things. For example, he did not mention how troubled he and the baker had been by their dreams. Nor did he inform Pharaoh that they told Joseph of their own inability to interpret the meaning of their dreams. He also made it seem as if he and the baker had taken the initiative in approaching Joseph. He also did not tell Pharaoh that Joseph denied having any innate ability or power to interpret dreams, but rather that he credited his God with providing their meaning. In fact, it seems that the one detail the cupbearer included was that the man he spoke of was a Hebrew. In any case, no doubt the main purpose of the cupbearer was not to alleviate his guilty conscience but rather to gain increased favor with Pharaoh by providing a possible solution to his troubles.

### **Pharaoh Finds an Interpreter**

Upon hearing of this Hebrew, to no one's surprise, Pharaoh took immediate action.

“<sup>14</sup>Then Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon; and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came to Pharaoh.

<sup>15</sup>And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it; and I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.’ <sup>16</sup>Joseph then answered Pharaoh, saying, ‘it has nothing to do with me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer’” (v. 14-16).

Here begins the transformation from Joseph the Hebrew into Joseph the Egyptian. The passage emphasizes that Joseph was brought to Pharaoh immediately. All other state business and personal pleasure were set aside until Pharaoh knew what his dreams portended. In preparation for his royal audience, Joseph took a bath, changed his clothes and shaved his head. The change in appearance was soon to be a reflection of Joseph's change in status. How much of this was Joseph's idea, to appeal to Pharaoh in the Egyptian style, and how much was mandated by his guards we do not know. It would be sensible that after many years in prison Joseph would take a bath and put on new clothes, but Hebrews traditionally did not shave their heads, and the wording implies that he shaved his head as well as his facial hair completely; he did not just get a haircut.

Joseph must have been anxious. He likely did not know why he had been summoned before Pharaoh. He can be excused if he remembered the fate of the baker rather than the cupbearer as he was brought into the splendid palace. But he quickly knew why he was there, and with that information he must have breathed a sigh of relief.

The interview between Pharaoh and Joseph reminds the reader of the conversation among the cupbearer, the baker, and Joseph in prison. In each case there was a dream and the one dreaming could not interpret its meaning. As Pharaoh spoke to Joseph, though, he did not tell him that his own magicians had not been able to interpret the dream, though Joseph probably surmised that for himself. Neither did Pharaoh tell Joseph how he had become aware of Joseph and his abilities, though I have to imagine that Joseph and the cupbearer exchanged knowing looks when Joseph was brought into the audience chamber. The cupbearer no doubt tried to avoid making eye contact as best he could and busied himself with his duties refilling in abundance the cups of those around him. Joseph, perhaps, had the same expression as Jesus did when he saw Peter across the courtyard after the latter had denied him three times. A look of forgiveness and compassion at his embarrassment and shame.

Joseph was not presumptuous. He took no credit himself for the ability to interpret the dreams. As with the cupbearer and the baker, Joseph was quick to give all credit to Joseph's God. And we must note that Joseph immediately spoke up about his God. This was no small matter, since Pharaoh was considered to be, himself, a god incarnate. Yet Joseph was undeterred by his surroundings. First, Joseph began by denying his own inherent abilities to interpret the dream. “It has nothing to do with me” (v. 16) is a completely self-denying assertion. It was not false humility; Joseph was genuine and he knew that he alone could not interpret the dreams. Second, Joseph boldly claimed that God would give Pharaoh an answer. Joseph had not yet heard the dreams, but he did not need to know that His God would be able

to provide their meaning. Finally, Joseph asserted that the interpretation he was about to receive would be “a favorable answer” (v. 16). That is, Joseph told Pharaoh that his God would provide an answer that would put Pharaoh’s mind at ease. It did not necessarily mean it would be an interpretation that Pharaoh would be pleased with, as in fact it was not, but rather that by knowing the mind of God, Pharaoh would have the opportunity to respond properly.

Pharaoh took Joseph at his word. He conducted no further interview. He also took no offense at Joseph’s boldness, nor at his faith in his God. Whether he believed Joseph was merely being humble or he thought that perhaps Joseph’s God had the ability to reveal the meaning of the dream we do not know. And in any case it was unimportant. Whether the interpretation came from Joseph or from Joseph’s God, Pharaoh wanted to know the meaning of those disturbing images that haunted him. So, satisfied with Joseph’s representation of the matter, Pharaoh began.

“<sup>17</sup>So Pharaoh spoke to Joseph, ‘in my dream, behold I was standing on the bank of the Nile; <sup>18</sup>and behold, seven cows, fat and sleek came up out of the Nile, and they grazed in the marsh grass. <sup>19</sup>And lo, seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and gaunt, such as I had never seen for ugliness in all the land of Egypt; <sup>20</sup>and the lean and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows. <sup>21</sup>Yet when they had devoured them, it could not be detected that they had devoured them, for they were just as ugly as before. Then I awoke. <sup>22</sup>I saw also in my dream, and behold, seven ears, full and good, came up on a single stalk; <sup>23</sup>and lo, seven ears, withered, thin, and scorched by the east wind sprouted up after them; <sup>24</sup>and the thin ears swallowed the seven good ears. Then I told it to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me”  
(v. 17-24).

Pharaoh related his dreams quickly. It seems as if the hours of distress caused by the lack of support from his own magicians had intensified his concerns. In staccato style, Pharaoh recounted his dreams. For someone who was considered to be a god, the failure to interpret his own dreams had placed Pharaoh in an untenable, and frankly somewhat embarrassing, situation. His anxiety was reflected in the quickness of his speech.

It was also reflected in the language. In this second retelling, things appeared worse than in the original version. The ugliness of the cows was more pronounced. The wretchedness of the ears of grain was more distinct. The cows were not just “ugly and gaunt” now they were “poor and very ugly and gaunt” (v. 3, 19). Also, the ears of grain were not merely “thin and scorched” but they were “withered, thin, and scorched” (v. 6, 23). Pharaoh also added his own analysis of the dream. He remarked that “when they had devoured them, it could not be detected that they had devoured them, for they were just as ugly as before” (v. 21). Hardly an interpretation, but clearly Pharaoh had had time to ponder his dream and in brooding over the images, they had become worse and he had reflected on what he had seen.

And Pharaoh ended his speech with the distressed and exasperated comment that “I told it to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me” (v. 24). He must have glared around the room at his abashed counselors as he did so. A candid admission of impotence from the greatest ruler on earth and a man who was considered to be a god himself.

## **Joseph Interprets**

Joseph understood the importance and meaning of Pharaoh's dreams as quickly as he had discerned those of the cupbearer and baker. Again, though Scripture makes no mention of his praying for guidance or wisdom, Joseph was quick to give glory to God for his ability to correctly interpret the dreams.

<sup>25</sup>Now Joseph said to Pharaoh, 'Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do. <sup>26</sup>The seven good cows are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one and the same. <sup>27</sup>The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven thin ears scorched by the east wind will be seven years of famine. <sup>28</sup>It is as I have spoken to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do. <sup>29</sup>Behold, seven years of great abundance are coming in all the land of Egypt; <sup>30</sup>and after them seven years of famine will come, and all the abundance will be forgotten in the land of Egypt, and the famine will ravage the land. <sup>31</sup>So the abundance will be unknown in the land because of that subsequent famine; for it will be very severe. <sup>32</sup>Now as for the repeating of the dream to Pharaoh twice, it means that the matter is determined by God, and God will quickly bring it about" (v. 25-32).

Joseph began his speech to Pharaoh by making two observations. First, there was but one interpretation of the two dreams. In fact, the dreams "are one and the same" (v. 25). Second, Joseph was clear that God was the messenger. It was Joseph's God Who had sent the dreams, and He had done so to tell Pharaoh "what He is about to do" (v. 25). Joseph was clear that it was God Who had revealed what He was about to do. In fact, it seemed that it had already begun. They were already in the first year of plenty. Joseph boldly asserted to the most powerful in his world, that he was at the mercy of the Hebrew God.

Joseph recounted his interpretation in two parts. First, he focused on the meaning of the number. In this case, in contradistinction to the dreams of the cupbearer and baker, the number seven meant years, not days. Likely this was because of growing seasons for the grain. Both the healthy and robust cows and ears of grain represented seven years, as did the weak and unappealing ears of grain. Then, Joseph turned his attention to the interpretation of the time period. The seven years represented by the healthy cows and robust grain would be seven years of abundance throughout the land. But the seven years represented by the seven weak cows and withered grain would be seven years of famine. And Joseph was clear that this famine would be so extreme that the men and women of Egypt would forget that there had ever been seven years of prosperity.

Joseph was clearly focused on making Pharaoh understand how devastating this famine will be. He spent but one sentence to describe the abundance (v. 29), but several sentences to describe the ensuing famine (v. 30-31). The once productive and abundant fields would be ravaged by wind and drought. He stated that "the abundance will be forgotten" (v. 30). He emphasized the extent of the famine, "the famine will ravage the land" (v. 30). All of Egypt would be under duress. He repeated that "the abundance will be unknown" (v. 31). He concluded succinctly that "it will be very severe" (v. 31).

The reader might pause at this moment to wonder if such a thing as a seven-year famine was possible, or if this was a literary device not to be taken literally. In fact, in the ancient world, and even into the early modern period, famines were frequent and often lasted more than one season. While a seven-year famine

was certainly unusual, it was not unheard of. There are Egyptian records that tell of a seven-year famine during the reign of Djoser during the Third Dynasty (c. 2700 BC). It recorded that “the entire Upper Egypt was dying because of hunger, with every man eating his own children.”

Finally, Joseph told Pharaoh that the fact that God had sent two dreams with the same interpretation meant that God would not relent in His purposes. He had determined to do this, and so it would come about. Pharaoh could make no appeal, he could only prepare.

### **Joseph Counsels**

Joseph had told Pharaoh about the future. Now he took the liberty of telling him what to do in the present.

“<sup>33</sup>And now let Pharaoh look for a man discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. <sup>34</sup>Let Pharaoh take action to appoint overseers in charge of the land, and let him exact a fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven years of abundance. <sup>35</sup>Then let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and store up the grain for food in the cities under Pharaoh’s authority, and let them guard it. <sup>36</sup>And let the food become as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land will not perish during the famine. <sup>37</sup>Now the proposal seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his servants” (v. 33-37).

Joseph was again bold. Just as he had been by asserting that only His God could provide the interpretation, so now he told Pharaoh what steps he should take to avoid the worst.

Joseph suggested that Pharaoh find “a man discerning and wise” (v. 33), something Pharaoh had recently had difficulty doing since none of his wise men and magicians could interpret his dream. The term literally referred to one who was trained in wisdom literature, though the wisdom literature of the Egyptians and that of the Hebrews was quite different. Pharaoh must also give him great authority, in fact he was to “set him over the land of Egypt” (v. 33). Furthermore, Pharaoh was to allow this man a staff of capable administrators to carry out his wishes. The man was not only to be empowered, but equipped.

But Joseph did not merely suggest that Pharaoh appoint a good administrator. He advised Pharaoh on the best plan to ensure that Egypt survived the famine. Their tasks were simple. They were to collect, store, and keep safe the precious grain. Grain should be collected throughout the land and deposited in safe cities where it would be protected from both looters and spoilage. Joseph wisely expected that as the famine worsened, the potential for looting would increase, so keeping the excess grain in cities under Pharaoh’s control would keep it from being stolen by the desperate and starving people. In addition, being stored in different cities throughout the land would make its distribution easier when the time came. And, perhaps most importantly, this must all be done with the absolute authority of the Pharaoh.

Pharaoh was convinced. He and all those around him. Though those Egyptian courtiers must have resented a foreigner stealing the spotlight and being able to discern what they could not, at least Pharaoh's anxiety was eased, and he was likely in a better mood. And Pharaoh proved to be a close listener, since later he would use those very same words to describe Joseph (v. 39). But there is no indication that

Joseph was lobbying for the job himself. He was genuine in giving Pharaoh counsel and as sincere as when he interpreted his dreams. Despite how he had been treated in Egypt, Joseph had Pharaoh's best interest in mind. And soon he was to be rewarded for his efforts.

### **Takeaways**

This particular passage marks a transition in the life of Joseph, and in fact, of the nation of Israel, though that name had no meaning as yet. As such, it is a good place to pause and reflect on God's timing. We mere mortals think in terms of minutes and hours and days. Our lifespan of seventy or so years compels us to have a limited and short-sighted view of time - although it is ironic how much time we waste. I have discovered through many years of teaching history that one of the great difficulties students have as they approach the subject, is that they have no real experience of time. My students today were not alive on 9/11. To them, that event is as much history as are these ancient Egyptians.

But God is eternal. And while He does plan for each individual moment, He also thinks in terms of eternity. His purposes are eternal. His ultimate agenda is eternal. Joseph, languishing in prison for those two years, no doubt wondered time and time again about what God was doing. He must have thought that those promises he had heard had been abandoned. He must have considered that God had changed His mind, perhaps. He must have reflected on the fact that he had done something to offend Him. After all, God had not revealed Himself to Joseph for years, and Joseph had done plenty to offend God.

And we can feel that way as well. We can feel as if God is distant, remote. We can begin to think that His plans for our lives are forgotten or overwhelmed by circumstances and events. Few of us could have imagined eighteen months ago the social, economic, and cultural changes that have come about because of Covid. We could easily wonder what God is up to by allowing such a thing to happen.

But ours is not to question. Ours is not to ask why. God is not accountable to us for either His purposes or His timing. God is up to what He is always up to - His good, pleasing, and perfect will (Romans 12:2). Ours is to know that He is just and righteous and holy. Ours is to remember that He loves us and has called us to Himself. Ours is to hold onto the truth that all things will eventually work for our good and His glory (Romans 8:28). With Joseph, God was faithful to bring about His plans in His own good time. And so He is faithful to us.