

July 1, 2007

**SERIES:** Joseph: From Pit to Prominence  
**SERMON:** From Dreamer to Prime Minister  
**SCRIPTURE:** Genesis 41  
**SPEAKER:** Pastor Dick High

**Introduction:** The amazing journey of Joseph's life continues to unfold in unforgettable ways as we come to Genesis 41. The account in this chapter has two primary areas for focus. The first is the two dreams that the Pharaoh of Egypt has along with his pursuit of their interpretation. The second is the significant changes that occur in Joseph's life as he becomes involved in the interpretation of these dreams. This is a lengthy chapter. I do intend to read a majority of it through the course of the sermon. Throughout we will be looking for Biblical principles that are instructive for us today.

The initial portion of the chapter that I will read is from verse 1 through verse 14. *1 When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile, 2 when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. 3 After them, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. 4 And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up. 5 He fell asleep again and had a second dream: Seven heads of grain, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk. 6 After them, seven other heads of grain sprouted—thin and scorched by the east wind. 7 The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads. Then Pharaoh woke up; it had been a dream. 8 In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him. 9 Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "Today I am reminded of my shortcomings. 10 Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard. 11 Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. 12 Now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us, giving each man the interpretation of his dream. 13 And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was hanged." 14 So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh.*

As the text details, we are now two years after the conclusion of chapter 40. Clearly what occurs at this time builds upon what we noted last week from an earlier occasion in Joseph's life when he interpreted dreams. Before we consider the dreams of Pharaoh that are noted here, please give your attention to the very first phrase in verse 1. The way this phrase is worded in the Hebrew is quite interesting. Here is how it literally flows; "And it came to pass from the end of two years days..." This phrase is quite different from the two generalized phrases we noted in chapter 40 – "some time later." It is very specific, and appears to emphasize that it was at the very extremity or cut off point of two years time, which has passed one day at a time. This could possibly mean that we are again on the birthday of Pharaoh (see 40:20). If that is true, such timing could have significant impact on the chief cupbearer's recollection of Joseph's interpretation of his dream which was fulfilled exactly two years previously. The construction of the phrase could also convey that these had been two long years in Joseph's life, passing minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. I believe both of these perspectives are reasonable interpretations of the text. And if the latter is true, things are certainly about to change!

Pharaoh has two dreams in relatively close proximity of time, both in the same night. They involve two groups of cows (seven in each) and two groups of the heads of grain (also with seven in each). Having grown up on a farm, I do not find these unusual subjects for dreams. But the activity that occurs and the contrast between the two separate groups of cows and the separate heads of grain does capture one's attention. Of

specific interest is the context for Pharaoh, the one who had these dreams. In the words of H. C. Leupold in his Genesis commentary, “Egypt was known as the granary of the ancient world. Seven ears on a stalk were not at all uncommon. These seen in the dream were so ‘plump’ (literally: ‘fat’) that it was a pleasure to behold them...” The second group of seven heads of grain was not only “thin,” they are also described as “scorched by the east wind.” This description of weather phenomena in Egypt is likely explained by the following. “A phenomenon of Egypt’s climate is the hot spring wind that blows across the country. The winds, known to Europeans as the sirocco and to Egyptians as the *khamisin*, usually arrive in April but occasionally occur in March and May. The winds form in small but vigorous low-pressure areas in the Isthmus of Suez and sweep across the northern coast of Africa. Unobstructed by geographical features, the winds reach high velocities and carry great quantities of sand and dust from the deserts. These sandstorms, often accompanied by winds of up to 140 kilometers per hour (86 mph), can cause temperatures to rise as much as 20° C (35 F) in two hours. The winds blow intermittently and may continue for days, cause illness in people and animals, harm crops, and occasionally damage houses and infrastructure.” It was this second group of heads of grain, already thin and now scorched by this east wind, that devoured the earlier group. That would catch your attention.

What about the cows? Consider this information by Caroline Seawright in an article entitled *Animals and the Gods of Ancient Egypt*. “Hathor, Isis, Nut and Bat were... goddesses who were often depicted as cows, with the horns of cows or with the ears of cows. Because of this, and because of the relationship of the pharaoh as a living god, the cow came to symbolize the mother of the pharaoh. The cow was also a solar icon, where Nut carried the sun across the sky on her back, when she was in cow form.”

This part of the dream, which occurred first, was possibly more disturbing to Pharaoh, because of the prominence of cows in his belief system. But then when an apparently similar message is repeated with heads of grain, it is not surprising to observe the statement found at the beginning of verse 8.

These things troubled Pharaoh’s mind. He is disturbed. There was inner turmoil as he would bring his thoughts back repeatedly to these dreams. His attempt at finding an interpretation is unsuccessful. In this context the chief cupbearer recalls his own experience from two years previously, and relates that to Pharaoh. Hearing that, and very desirous of some interpreting his dream, Pharaoh summons Joseph from prison. One can only imagine the thoughts of Joseph as he is told of Pharaoh’s request and as he learns some of the context of why he is being summoned.

If the previous two years have gone by at an apparent slow pace, that is something that will soon change, and change dramatically. We’ll see that shortly, but I want to give focus to one application before moving forward. There is significant evidence in Genesis 39 and 40 of God’s sovereign, active, and personal care for Joseph during the years when he was a slave and then while in prison. I am quite certain, because of the length of time covered in those chapters, that there were times when Joseph saw more of that evidence than at other times. What I believe is stressed in the opening phrase of chapter 41 is that God is very much at work, even when there is an absence of observable affirmation. On those occasions when one day seems to drag into the next, we need to know, we need to believe, we need to trust that God is “up to something.” He is very much at work for His purposes. The evidence for us to see that may be less, or perhaps considered as nearly nonexistent, but the reality is different from mere appearance. Philippians 2:12-13 emphasize this when it states, *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

## **The Dreams Restated and Interpreted vs. 15-32**

Let's return to Genesis 41, now at verse 15. *15 Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."*  
*16 "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."*

Joseph makes a similar statement in chapter 40. But the wording here is a more direct statement of his faith, of his belief in God's ability to do this, and I believe gives a greater acknowledgement of Joseph's inability. The first thing that Joseph wants understood is that when an interpretation is given, it will be quite apart from himself; *I cannot do it!!!* He is merely the means through which God will do something only He can do!

It perhaps would appear to be only a minor difference in emphasis between the statement in chapter 40 and that here in chapter 41. Yet it does provide indication that even during those two years that many have seemed to drag along, Joseph's faith is developing and deepening. In the words of John the Baptist regarding Christ, "He must increase and I must decrease."

Joseph seeks to draw Pharaoh's expectations away from himself and focus them on God. And because it is God that will give the answer, the result will bring peace to Pharaoh's troubled mind. The word translated in the NIV as "desires" is the Hebrew word *shalom!* God's answer, provided through interpretation of the dream, will cause the strife and turmoil in Pharaoh's mind to cease!

As believers in Jesus Christ, we have strong promises of peace given to us in such passages as I Peter 5:7 – *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.* and Philippians 4:6-7 – *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

The peace that Pharaoh will experience will occur because meaning will be given to his dream, and that will be followed with the offering, and ultimately implementation of a plan that will meet the challenging years that are ahead, as revealed by the dreams.

We will not read Pharaoh's relating of his dreams to Joseph. But let's do pick up the account in verse 25. *25 Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. 26 The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; it is one and the same dream. 27 The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine. 28 "It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. 29 Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, 30 but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. 31 The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe. 32 The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.*

This interpretation highlights the duplication that occurs within the dream. It identifies the emphasis that such duplication is meant to convey. It also confronts Pharaoh with the reality that he is not sovereign. The statement in verse 28 conveys that. God has (shown) "caused Pharaoh to see what he (God) is about to do." The form of the verb indicates that Pharaoh is incapable of seeing this on his own (or through the expertise of all the magicians and wise men of Egypt). He is the recipient, not the cause! The other point of emphasis is that regardless of the level of abundance – and it will be significant – during the first seven years, the latter seven years will be extremely difficult. The abundance will be "forgotten" and the land "ravaged" according to verse 30 (Lit. = it will do us in). The abundance "will not be remembered" and the famine will be "severe" according to verse 31 (Lit. – grievous, heavy, hard).

I do find it of interest that God has respected Pharaoh's position by giving the dream to him and not anyone else. The concept as explained in verse 25 is that God has graciously placed this reality in clear view before Pharaoh. The word "revealed" refers to placing a matter very conspicuously before someone. This emphasizes that God is being very gracious to speak the truth here to Pharaoh. It would be inaccurate to think that God would always, or even often, give us such specific warnings of impending difficulty. In this situation it did suit His sovereign purposes to disclose details to Pharaoh from the next fourteen years. On a broader scale Scriptures do provide us with warnings of sins' consequences – "the wages of sin are death" – and warnings of eternal separation from Him apart from faith in Christ. In speaking such truth God is gracious even then.

### **Recommended Response vs. 33-40**

Let's return once again to the text. I will read from verse 33. These are Joseph's words which follow his relating of the interpretation to the dreams. *33 "And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. 34 Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. 35 They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. 36 This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine." 37 The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. 38 So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" 39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."*

We are not told of any time delay in the transition from verse 32 to verse 33. If there was some time that elapsed, it was likely brief. It was very soon after Joseph concludes relating God's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream that he initiates the suggestion of a comprehensive response. I believe this allows us to see a bit of the skills with which God has gifted Joseph and that have been honed in previous administrative positions. I think this provides a glimpse of how Joseph thought, how his mind worked when faced with challenging situations. But I also think this is a testimony to God's continued blessing in Joseph's life. That is certainly the perspective of Pharaoh, when he states in verse 39 "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" In the words of commentator H. C. Leupold, "The Spirit of God did more than merely enable Joseph to interpret the king's dream; he enabled him to furnish a comprehensive plan to meet this unusual emergency. This plan is as masterful as was the interpretation that preceded."

Just a short time earlier Joseph has entered the presence of Pharaoh on temporary release from prison and now Pharaoh is ready to place him in the second highest position in all of Egypt! WOW! The implications of that action quickly unfold in verse 41ff.

Before moving forward, I do want to suggest three applications. First, these verses again give witness to Joseph's faith. He is so certain that God has given interpretation to these dreams, and that His interpretation is accurate and will occur that he boldly suggests the plan laid out beginning in verse 33. Because God has emphasized that these events will soon begin (see verse 32), he believes there is no time to delay. Does our faith translate so readily into appropriate action? Certainly this is a unique situation and God is at work in unique ways. Yet, Joseph's response of faith and his actions taken on the basis of his faith provide a challenging example for us to both verbalize and put our faith into action! Second, we can see here the fuller picture of why God had placed Joseph in lesser situation of administrative oversight to sharpen his skills. Joseph now faces an enormous challenge. But God has been taking His time to develop in Joseph the skills and experience necessary. That does not ignore or discount the power of God's presence in his life and the wisdom that God can and does give. It is just that we now can begin to understand the earlier years, some

thirteen years, actually from God's larger perspective. Let's thank God for such times in our life, be they rare or often, when we can say "Aha, so that is what God has been about in my life." He certainly can be trusted to work in our life, not just today, but also in view of tomorrow. Thirdly, and this really sets a stage for moving on to the final verses of this chapter, think with me about the importance of humility. I believe that what we observe during the past 13 years of Joseph's life is that God is at work nurturing the presence of humility in Joseph's heart. It is not there when God begins the process, but it is there now. I find these words again from the pen of H. C. Leupold so on target. "We feel very keenly that Joseph never for a moment thought of himself as a possible candidate for head administrator. Verse 16 shows how little Joseph thought of turning the situation to his own advantage. How utterly unreasonable for one who had never held an office of state, who, besides, was a foreigner and still almost smelled of the prison whence he had been brought – for such a one to anticipate immediate advancement to a position second only to that of Pharaoh!" A little later he also comments, "Only a man like Joseph, schooled by adversity and sorrow, could meet a sudden elevation like this without pride and self-exaltation." If God is seeking to nurture humility in your heart, are you willing to accept that today, as difficult as that may appear to be?

### **Significant Changes vs. 41-57**

As I read now from verse 41 through verse 52, we'll see the breadth of changes that occur in Joseph's life. He goes from being a slave, in prison, to nearly unbridled freedom. There is an enormous change in position and scope of responsibility. He will get married, and sometime in the next seven years will have children. And from an overall perspective he will transition from overseeing and managing a time of abundance (that's a great way to begin your career), to managing a time of increasing famine.

*41 So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." 42 Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. 43 He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, "Make way!" Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. 44 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt." 45 Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt. 46 Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from Pharaoh's presence and traveled throughout Egypt. 47 During the seven years of abundance the land produced plentifully. 48 Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it. 49 Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure. 50 Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. 51 Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." 52 The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."*

That is so incredible! Were things now so good that Joseph had all his past pain and sorrow erased from his memory? Absolutely not!!! But God has been very gracious to him. One interesting consideration is that even now, God has not accomplished the fulfillment of Joseph's own dreams! In those dreams it was his family that bowed down to him, not Egyptians! I would certainly like to know what he did think about these unfulfilled dreams, and about his family in that context; but at best, I can only speculate.

Of course, we know the rest of the story. We know that in time his brothers will bow down before him. The transition toward that time begins to unfold with verse 53. *53 The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, 54 and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. 55 When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people*

*cried to Pharaoh for food. Then Pharaoh told all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph and do what he tells you." 56 When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. 57 And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world.*

I know that I need to close soon, but I do want to share these additional thoughts:

Earlier I presented the commentator's perspective that "Only a man like Joseph, schooled by adversity and sorrow, could meet a sudden elevation like this without pride and self-exaltation." The more we see the breadth of change that rocketed through Joseph's life, especially beginning at verse 41, the more that highlights the enormous change that God had accomplish in his life to bring about humility. What I want to emphasis is the importance of that characteristic to the health of a church family. On the back page of each weekly bulletin we print the statement of our mission. That mission declares our desire as a church "to glorify God through honoring His name, teaching His word, loving His people, and expanding his kingdom." Today, as every week, we expand a portion of that mission. The focus this week is on loving God's people. The first sub-point states "We value loving relationships characterized by humility, honesty, accountability, forgiveness, and restoration." Allowing God to accomplish humility in our lives is something we value as a church family. I would encourage mutual prayer that we be receptive to God's work toward that purpose in each of our lives. I would encourage mutual prayer that we relate to one another throughout this church family as those on a journey of maturing faith together. None of us have arrived. We all have things yet to learn. Even when we receive a promotion and perhaps especially then, humility is to be desired. We need the care, encouragement, and understanding of one another. And even when we believe that we are right in what we say to another, especially in the context of correction, we must strive to speak with true humility before God.

Secondly, as I think about the sovereign working of God to accomplish his purposes, I think of situations here, not just "out there," or in someone else's life. Limited time will only allow two suggestions. An email forwarded to me early this past week originated from one of our families visiting relatives in Columbia (South America, not Missouri). A relative there is planting an evangelical church in his home, and evidently conversations in time centered on children's ministry. There was inquiry regarding AWANA, which upon investigation has Spanish material. Interesting how a ministry that we've invested in for 30+ years has this past year touched the life of a family new to First Free. They may be the conduit in helping to build ministry in a new church plant in Bogota. Is that merely circumstantial? I suggest it is evidence of the sovereign working of God to accomplish his purposes. Another email this past Monday was from one of the workers we support through our mission budget. Their family had previously worked in a creative access country, but has now returned to the US (over 2 years ago?) to address some needs in the life of grown children. The very city to which they returned has become the location where numerous families of the ethnic background and language they left have immigrated to the US. Some will no doubt know of whom I speak. Further, their home church is the church where our former senior pastor, Tom Macy, is now pastor. Pastor Tom participated in our second vision trip investigating ministry to this people group. Is that merely circumstantial? Again, I think not. I believe both instances are admittedly small yet certain witness to the sovereign working of God to accomplish His purposes through us. We need that encouragement. And I'm grateful for these two timely reminders.

Finally, we've spoken a great deal about the sovereignty of God throughout our examination of these last two chapters (40 & 41) in Genesis. In light of that I will close with a quote from Donald Gray Barnhouse in an article entitled "The Sovereignty of God." It reflects the time in which he lived, specifically during and following WWII.

“Do you not believe in the sovereignty of the general staff of the army? Our joint armies, American and British, were all waiting in England in 1944 for D-Day. At that time by common consent one man had been chosen to say “This is the day,” and Eisenhower was in supreme and sovereign command. Nobody questioned his right to say, “This company shall go there and land under the emplacement and die.” “This one shall go there and do this.” We recognize the right of a commanding general to say to one man, “Take this map and find this bridge; take a parachute, fly over, drop down over the bridge and destroy it, and we will give your widow the Victoria Cross,” and to another, “That lorry over there is bogged down in the mud; go and blister your hands and get it out.” If a general may do this, please allow God Almighty to do what He wills. He knows what He is doing. He has a vital plan for all that is going on, and we are part of it, although we do not know why. There were many men in the army who did not know where they were going; whether they would be sent to Norway, Greece, or anywhere else. They recognized the right of their officers to send them where they would. Shall we not recognize the right of God to be sovereign?”