

From Dream to Reality 1/27/08

Genesis 41:1-40

¹ *When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: ...* Joseph told the cupbearer to please speak to the Pharaoh about his unjust imprisonment two years earlier. Do you suppose that if at that time you asked Joseph when the dreams God gave him in Canaan would be fulfilled, he would have guessed two more years of imprisonment? Maybe Joseph was such a man of faith that he would have just answered, "In God's perfect time." But I suspect he was just like most of us. He would have said, "Any day now, I'll be released."

We have that tendency to read into situations what we think would be best - for us. "Surely I have gone through this trial long enough." Who wouldn't think 11 years was long enough? God, that's who! He knew exactly what Joseph needed for the many temptations he would face. Haven't you been going through your trial long enough? (Psalm 13:1) We all think so, but God knows exactly what He is working into your life. It isn't super-spiritual to say, "In God's perfect time." It is the voice of faith that believes God knows best. (James 4:14-15)

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.* Notice that a dream from the Lord causes one to be troubled. Pharaoh sensed the need to have the dream interpreted. It bothered him. It was detailed and vivid. He knew it was significant.

The two dreams couldn't be interpreted by any of Pharaoh's magicians or wise men. There must have been a penalty for a false interpretation or someone would surely have taken a stab at it. (Daniel 2:11-12) Perhaps God directly intervened and kept them silent so that what followed would come to pass.

⁹ *Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "Today I am reminded of my shortcomings.* This is one of those times when we see the intersection of the Sovereignty of God and the sinful free will of man. The cupbearer didn't keep his promise to Joseph. It was a full two years after he promised. But this was the perfect time. What would have happened if the cupbearer kept his promise earlier? Joseph might have made his way back to Canaan and we would have a totally different story. Before God formed the cupbearer in his mother's womb, God knew he would not keep the promise. This kind of wonder is only possible because of the greatness and omniscience of God. (Isaiah 40:28) To paraphrase Kent Hughes, "God is at work in the rich compost of sinful men's lives."

The cupbearer told the Pharaoh the story of how Joseph correctly interpreted their dreams. 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.* Hebrews wore beards, and Egyptians were clean-shaven. Joseph knew he needed to fit in and be respectful of the culture. He made himself presentable. (1Corinthians 9:22) This is what he had been waiting for over the last 2 years, if not the last 11. He knew his dreams were going to come to pass. He knew God would elevate him to a

Commented [notes1]: Psalms 13:1 (NIV)
1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

Commented [notes2]: James 4:14-15 (NIV)
14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.
15 Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

Commented [notes3]: Daniel 2:11-12 (NIV)
11 What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among men."
12 This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon.

Commented [notes4]: Isaiah 40:28 (NIV)
28 Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

Commented [notes5]: 1 Corinthians 9:22 (NIV)
22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

position of authority. He just didn't know when or how. Was this finally a step in that direction, the end of the years of difficult lessons of faith?

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."* Here is his big chance. But notice carefully that Joseph does not exalt himself. Most people would make some kind of statement of false humility like, "Awe shucks king, its nothing really. It just kind of comes to me." But Joseph has already shown us that he is not that kind of person. (Genesis 40:8) He knows his gift is from God and he gives all the credit to God.

¹⁶ *"I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."* Joseph declared clearly that he couldn't do it. It is a curt one-word answer in Hebrew. "Not I!" (John 15:5) He didn't point to himself in any way, but clearly said that God will give Pharaoh, literally, "an answer of peace." In other words, God will interpret the dream so Pharaoh's heart can be at rest about it. Is that how you speak of your gift? I can't, but God can! Joseph was just as sure he couldn't do it, as he was that God could.

Imagine the setting. Here is a man who has been working in a dungeon (the Hebrew word is "pit") standing in the court of the most powerful man in the world sitting on his royal throne, incense in the air, giant bodyguards with spears line the court, a leopard chained before the throne. Talk about a man out of his element. Anyone whose knees didn't knock would be quite a person. Remember Pharaoh is considered to be a god, the son of the sun god, Re. But Joseph answered that God can. The Hebrew is *ha Elohim* – the God! "Not you Pharaoh, not a scarab, not the Nile but The God!" That was almost reckless boldness. This was not politely trying to worm his way into power but language that shows us Joseph was totally dependent on God. (Psalm 37:5) If there had been a hint of him trying to bring the dream to pass two years ago, that self-dependency is no more. Joseph is a servant of God alone!

Chuck Colson noticed that as people come for an audience with the president, the lions turned into lambs when they sat in the Oval Office. He said that, ironically enough, it was religious leaders who were especially compliant. And I quote, "Theological knowledge sometimes wilts in the face of worldly power." Joseph remained a lion before Pharaoh and all the mystique of his royal court. (Proverbs 28:1)

Pharaoh relayed the two dreams. In one, seven fat cows came up out of the Nile and then seven emaciated ones. The scrawny ones ate up the fat ones but were still as emaciated as ever. He awoke and went back to sleep and dreamed again.

In the second dream there were seven heads of grain on a single stalk. They were full and healthy. Seven other heads of grain sprouted but they were withered. The seven withered ones swallowed up the seven healthy ones but didn't look any better for it.

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.* We have learned that Joseph

Commented [notes6]: Genesis 40:8 (NIV)
8 "We both had dreams," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret them." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams."

Commented [notes7]: John 15:5 (NIV)
5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Commented [notes8]: Proverbs 3:5 (NIV)
5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;

Commented [notes9]: Proverbs 28:1 (NIV)
1 The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.

understood that when God wanted to make something clear, He confirms it with a second revelation like the first. We saw this in Joseph's first two dreams. Here stood Joseph at the crossroads. If he didn't hear from God, it would be back to prison. God made it very clear by giving Pharaoh two dreams so Joseph would be certain.

Again, we have God showing an idol-worshipping king what He is about to do. God was showing the Hebrews and us that He is at work in the hearts of all men. Just as He spoke to the two imprisoned culinary workers from Pharaoh's court, and just as He revealed things to Abimelech in a dream (Genesis 20:3), He is now showing His mercy and grace to the current Pharaoh who claimed to be a god.

Joseph used the *ha Elohim* expression at the beginning, middle and end of his interpretation. The cupbearer may have forgotten that it was the God of the Hebrews that interpreted the dream, but Joseph wasn't about to let Pharaoh forget it. Joseph is a sold out, unashamed, fearless spokesman for God Almighty. (Psalm 29:2) He got that way through 13 years in the school of tribulation. I wonder what it will take for some of us to become that fearless.

He explained that there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. The dream had the cows coming up out of the Nile. That may sound strange, but the Nile was the source of irrigation as well as nutrients for the soil. Yearly flooding kept the delta and river banks moist and verdant. Unlike adjacent nations, Egypt rarely experienced famine. Their neighbors were used to coming to them to buy food in times of drought. We read about Abraham making that trip for that very reason. (Genesis 12:10) Cows even fed on the reeds in the water, so coming up out of the Nile was doubly significant.

The cows represented one portion of their diet, livestock. The grain represented that which was grown from the ground. These were the two essentials of the Egyptian diet. The fat cows and healthy grain represented seven years of good grazing and productive agriculture. The seven lean cows and withered grain heads represented seven years of famine. The Nile would have limited or no flooding for that period of time. ³¹ *The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe.*

Joseph taught Pharaoh the principle of double confirmation. 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.* Whew! He heard from God. He spoke the truth. But he's not done. Next he went an extra step and made a recommendation of how to deal with what they had just heard.

³³ *"And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt.* Was Joseph thinking about himself? Did he add this because he saw it as a chance to see the dream come to pass? I believe Joseph has learned to lean on the LORD, and that his words were the words that the LORD laid on his heart. (1 Peter 4:11) If he was trying to manipulate the circumstances, he wouldn't have used such bold language. This suggested solution was part of the LORD giving Pharaoh peace about the dreams.

Commented [notes10]: Genesis 20:3 (NIV)
3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman."

Commented [notes11]: Psalms 29:2 (NIV)
2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.

Commented [notes12]: Genesis 12:10 (NIV)
10 Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.

Commented [notes13]: 1 Peter 4:11 (NIV)
11 If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

What Joseph proposed was a 20% tax. Wouldn't that be great if we could just go to a 20% flat tax? It's not so great when you see how Egypt changed during the famine. But it was a brilliant, or I should say an "inspired" plan. Storehouses would hold the surplus of the abundant years and then dole it out during the lean years.

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?"* Joseph had been given the plan so quickly and laid it out so well, that he was the obvious one to choose. They recognized that the spirit of God was in him. This could be translated as the spirit of the gods. They were not necessarily acknowledging the God of the Hebrews, YHWH. They were saying that Joseph had something special, a connection with another realm. Surely he was the one for the job he just described.

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.* Who could be more discerning and wise than the one to whom God revealed the interpretation of the dream. Here Pharaoh makes a mistake that Joseph tried to get him to avoid. He gives the credit to Joseph. On the other hand, you could say that a wise and discerning person will learn to listen to the LORD. (Proverbs 15:33) That is what he had been learning those last 13 years.

Discernment and wisdom come from learning the voice of the LORD, through His word, and His still small voice in our hearts. (Psalm 111:10; 1 Kings 19:12) God had taken Joseph through all that hardship to prepare him for this moment. (Proverbs 13:12)

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.*" And with that utterance, the prisoner became the second in command of all Egypt. If Joseph thought the cupbearer would surely speak on his behalf shortly after being restored and that would be a step toward seeing the dream fulfilled, I doubt it ever crossed his mind that it would be fulfilled in an instant. Could he ever have imagined that he would go from prison servant to lord of Egypt with a two sentence declaration?

It reminds me of the psalmist words, ³⁴ *Wait for the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land;* Psalms 37:34a (NIV) Is it harder to wait or inherit the land? Most people would prefer the "inherit the land" part. But if you are in Christ, it's all the same wonderful experience. Slavery is hard, and imprisonment probably harder, but think about the pressures that are about to come Joseph's way.

Soon he'll have a wife who is the daughter of priest of a pagan religion. He'll be going against all the financial power players to get them to do what must be done. He'll have temptations many times beyond anything he has yet faced. There will be people to deal with day in and day out, corruption, vice, and intrigue. Power struggles will abound. If it weren't for this one fact, he may have even longed for the days of being a simple servant. The LORD is with him. (Proverbs 15:16)

The LORD is with him in the worst of times and what some would call the best of times. Though if you were in his shoes, you might not consider it the best of times. Here is the main thing. The LORD is with him through it all. The LORD's presence

Commented [notes14]: Proverbs 15:33 (NIV)
33 The fear of the LORD teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor.

Commented [notes15]: Psalms 111:10 (NIV)
10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.

Commented [notes16]: 1 Kings 19:12 (NIV)
12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

Commented [notes17]: Proverbs 13:12 (NIV)
12 Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

Commented [notes18]: Proverbs 15:16 (NIV)
16 Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil.

made slavery bearable. His presence made the pressures of ruling bearable. People strive for what they think is the good life, only to find it is filled with difficulties different from what they faced before. The good life is the life in Jesus, living as His servant with purpose and meaning. (John 10:10) That is the good life. The good life is casting all your care upon Him and finding the purpose for which He created you. (1Peter 5:7; Isaiah 43:7) The good life is being transformed.

Though this broken road of hardship and delay ended with exaltation to power, there is something even more important behind it. Yes, there was the saving of many lives, which we will see in the coming chapters (50:20), but there is something even deeper below the surface of our story. It is the transformation of Joseph into a man of faith and compassion. We've watched him change from a strutting youth, to humble man of integrity. We've seen his faith refined by fire. We've seen him grow in compassion and wisdom. Finally, in our passage today it seems he let go of trying to make things happen on his own and threw himself wholeheartedly into speaking the words of God regardless of the outcome. He had served man with his whole heart, and perhaps there was a bit of self-interest there. Now, he was serving the Lord of all without regard for self-advancement. The hard road the Lord took Joseph down made him a great ruler, but even more, it made him a man of faith, abandoned to God. That is the ultimate purpose of many of our trials as well.

As we look for the types and shadows in the story of Joseph, we see that Joseph was 30 years old when his ministry began. According to the Gospels, Jesus was 30 years old when He began His ministry. (Luke 3:23) Jesus was also unjustly convicted and punished. And Jesus was also exalted from prison to glory at the right hand of the ruling authority, one much greater than that of Pharaoh. (Luke 14:62)

We can relate to Joseph's waiting as our wait until the time we are brought before the King. (Philippians 3:20) We will all stand at the judgment seat of Christ. (2Corinthians 5:10) Remember that when the call came for Joseph, he shaved and changed his clothes. It can be a picture of our translation as we hear the call and come before the King of kings. We will see Him as He is and we will be changed, in a moment in the twinkling of an eye. (1Corinthians 15:52) This life will seem like a dream as we recall our years of servitude. (Genesis 29:10)

Remember how suddenly Joseph was exalted. That is how suddenly we will be exalted at the sound of the last trumpet. Yes, it has been a long journey through a fallen world, but the Lord is with us. With a simple phrase, the King will elevate us. ... *Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!* Matthew 25:21 (NIV) We will go from having our Master's presence with us in a spiritual sense to being in His manifest presence. That is an elevation greater than from a prison to the right hand of a throne. But unlike Joseph, our journey will be complete, God's work in us will be finished and we shall reign with Him for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:6)

Commented [notes19]: John 10:10 (NIV)
10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Commented [notes20]: 1 Peter 5:7 (NIV)
7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Commented [notes21]: Isaiah 43:7 (NIV)
7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Commented [notes22]: Genesis 50:20 (NIV)
20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Commented [notes23]: Luke 3:23 (NIV)
23 Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli,

Commented [notes24]: Mark 14:62 (NIV)
62 "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Commented [notes25]: Philippians 3:20 (NIV)
20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,

Commented [notes26]: 2 Corinthians 5:10 (NIV)
10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Commented [notes27]: 1 Corinthians 15:52 (NIV)
52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

Commented [notes28]: Genesis 29:20 (NIV)
20 So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

Commented [notes29]: Revelation 20:6 (NIV)
6 Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.