

Joseph's Ascendancy


 JOSEPH


Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?” Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are” (Genesis 41:38–39).



DEVOTIONAL

In interpreting the pharaoh’s dream, Joseph shows himself to be a prototype of the later prophets because he not only describes future events, he also gives guidelines for mitigating or averting the troubles ahead (Gen. 41:25–36; Isa. 1:1–20). This combination of warning and wisdom pleases the pharaoh greatly, as we read in today’s passage.

The truth of Joseph’s words is so evident that the king of Egypt recognizes the Holy Spirit’s presence with him (Gen. 41:38). Of course, pagan notions probably color the pharaoh’s conception of Joseph’s anointing since his nation worships many gods. He is speaking with more wisdom than he knows, just like Caiaphas did when he spoke of Jesus’ death as a substitution (John 11:45–53).

Pharaoh immediately heeds the counsel to place a man in charge of famine relief (Gen. 41:34–36) and chooses Joseph for this task. Jacob’s son is invested with more prestige than we might have expected, for he is now second to the pharaoh in command over the land of the Nile (vv. 40, 43). After years of faithfulness in little things – obeying Jacob, serving Potiphar, and managing the prison (37:12–17; 39–40) – Joseph is finally given authority over much (Matt. 25:14–30). John Chrysostom preached: “Joseph bore distress with endurance; endurance gave him character; having such character he acted in hope, and hope did not disappoint him” (*Homilies on Genesis*, 63.17).

Joseph is given all the trappings of royalty – the pharaoh’s signet ring, fine clothing, jewelry, and a chariot (Gen. 41:41–42). As was customary, the king gives this foreigner an Egyptian name, *Zaphenath-paneah*, which means something like “God has spoken, and He lives.” Joseph is further established in his position through his marriage to the daughter of the priest of On, which was the center of the worship of the sun god Ra, one of the chief deities in the Egyptian pantheon (v. 45).

Jacob’s son was granted all this because he relied on the Lord and was empowered by the Holy Spirit, necessary qualifications for the wise, godly ruler (1 Samuel 16:13; Isaiah 11). Thousands of years after Joseph, our Savior was also given this Spirit to reign as David’s greatest son over all those captives He sets free (Luke 4:16–21).

CORAM DEO (In the Presence of God)

The Spirit who gave wisdom to Jacob and empowered Christ to rule over all is the same Holy Spirit whom the Father freely grants to His people today (John 14:15–17). Even now He is writing God’s law on our hearts and slaying the remaining vestiges of sin and death. As we submit to Him, the Spirit’s work to make us holy

becomes more and more evident in our lives. Let us cease resisting His direction and conviction so that we may become more like Him.¹



OPEN IT

1. Describe a time you won a prize. What was it? What did you do with it?



READ IT

Genesis 41



EXPLORE IT

2. What is the time frame between Genesis 40 and 41?
3. How many dreams does Pharaoh have?
4. Who introduces Joseph to Pharaoh?
5. What do the dreams say is going to happen to Egypt?
6. What job does Pharaoh give to Joseph?
7. What does Genesis 41 tell us about Joseph's personal life?

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/josephs-ascendancy/>

APPLY IT



God's Sovereignty

So much of what goes on around us seems to make little sense. I'm thinking of the mysteries of life, how one person gets cancer and dies while another person is spared cancer and yet another person gets the same cancer, goes through chemotherapy and survives. Why does one child live and another die? Why is one family hit with a seemingly endless series of trials? Why did this husband decide to walk away from his marriage? Why did the car wreck leave this man crippled but the man next to him walks away unscathed? The list goes on and on and on.

Why was this person promoted and that one passed over? Why do some people want to get married but never find the right person? God knows what He's doing even when we don't have a clue.

Most of the time we can't see any clear answers to those questions. I ran across something John Piper wrote that really helped me. He says that every day God is doing perhaps 10,000 different things in your life, but you will only be dimly aware of perhaps three of those things. The numbers are arbitrary but the point is absolutely right.

We barely get a glimmer of all that God is doing in us and through us and to us and for us. We're like little kids peering through a keyhole. At best we see a sliver of what lies on the other side of the door. We often mistake that "sliver" for the whole spectrum of reality. God knows what he's doing even when we don't. He's never clueless even when we don't have a clue.

Joseph's experience is a case in point. He's about to discover that his two years in prison were not wasted. They prepared him for a future only God could see.

Although Genesis 41 is a long chapter (57 verses), we can summarize in four key words: Dreams, Interpretation, Plan, Promotion.

If we stand back and take a birds-eye view of Genesis 41, we see that it's ultimately about the unlikely path that led Joseph from prison to the palace. If any chapter in Genesis reveals the sovereignty of God, it's this one.²

8. What does sovereignty mean? When the Bible says God is sovereign over all things, what does it mean?

9. Review Genesis 41:1–44. Take note of all the times that you see the hand of God working in the life of Joseph and Pharaoh. What types of things do we see God sovereign over?

10. How does understanding God's sovereignty help us to endure difficult trials and tribulations? How does this understanding help us when we are triumphant?

Of all the doctrines of the Bible none is so offensive to human nature as the doctrine of God's sovereignty (J.C. Ryle).

11. What makes the doctrine of God's sovereignty so offensive to people?

² Sermon by Ray Pritchard found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/how-big-is-your-god/>

No Bible doctrine is more obvious than the sovereignty of God. You can find it on every page. Here are a few examples:

“But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases” (Job 23:13). Job understands that he cannot demand anything from the Lord. In and of himself, he has no power to change his awful condition, and he can’t even demand a hearing to plead his case to the Lord. God does what he wants and Job is powerless to oppose him. He does whatever he pleases.

“I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). This verse introduces the final chapter of Job’s saga. It comes after God has given him a theology lesson and a final exam on creation, which Job flunked miserably. He couldn’t answer a single question. Now thoroughly humbled, he confesses that God is all-powerful, He does what He wants, and no one stands against Him. This confession leads him to deep repentance for his foolish questioning of God’s plan.

“Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him” (Psalm 115:3). That’s pretty clear, isn’t it? The Lord of the universe does whatever he pleases. Whenever I read this verse, I want to say, “Any questions?”

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen” (Romans 11:33–36). This wonderful doxology comes at the end of Paul’s declaration that the gospel is God’s answer to man’s sin, and his presentation of God’s future plans for Israel. No one could have foreseen how God would respond to human rebellion. No one gives God advice. No one can trace his path across the starry skies. God is never in debt to anyone for any reason. Everything is from Him, everything is through Him, and everything is to Him. And He alone gets the glory.³

12. God’s plans for good would bring great distress to the people of Egypt through the means of a severe famine. What do we say to those who say “How can a loving God allow such difficult and painful things to happen in our world”?

The Part We Play

13. Joseph was perfectly set in the right place and time so that he might be used by God. Think about your life and where God has you. What work does he have for you to accomplish in the place he has set you? (See Acts 17:26)

Imagine how Joseph must have felt on this occasion! From a dreary existence in the dungeon, a few minutes later he is standing before the most powerful monarch in the world. I would think it could be a bit threatening! If it were me, I’d probably want to be very polite, not make any waves, and hope like crazy that somehow I could use the opportunity to get out of prison.

These human factors make Joseph’s first recorded words to Pharaoh all the more impressive. When Pharaoh says, “I hear you can interpret dreams,” it would have been easy for Joseph to say, “Aw, shucks, it’s nothing really. Just a little hobby I’ve developed over the years.” But instead Joseph boldly says to this pagan king, ***“It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer”*** (41:16). Joseph was clear on the source of

³ Sermon by Ray Pritchard found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/how-big-is-your-god/>

his success. He didn't let the splendor of Pharaoh and his palace make him forget, "Without God, I'm nothing. He is the source of any ability I have to interpret dreams."⁴

14. In what ways does Joseph's response to Pharaoh teach us about using our gifts in the service of God and others?

Both Joseph and Daniel stand out in the Bible as men who served God in important government jobs in foreign lands. To do that well, without compromising your faith and integrity, is a tough assignment. But both men were faithful and God used both of them greatly. Note also that Joseph wasn't afraid to help a pagan king and a pagan nation to prosper. His plan saved Pharaoh's reign from failure and saved many people from starvation.

Some Christians are so otherworldly that they withdraw from involvement in solving the problems of this world. I have some relatives who belong to a Christian group whose members don't vote or get involved in any constructive way with this world, because they're "citizens of heaven." But for the time being, we're also citizens of earth. The most effective place for Christian witness is when believers get involved in solving some of the problems confronting our world, and yet maintain their purity and integrity.⁵

15. Joseph used the gifts God had given him to serve a pagan leader of a pagan nation. When is it appropriate and right for us to use the gifts God has given us to serve the unbelievers in the world around us?

Joseph was diligent to develop and maintain godly character and to let God take care of promoting him. It's amazing that when he finally gets his chance before Pharaoh, after years in the dungeon, he doesn't even mention his desperate need for freedom, but instead he honors God and then interprets Pharaoh's dream. I can't help but think that if this had been Jacob, the schemer, standing before Pharaoh, he might have said, "I'll interpret your dream if you promise that I'll get out of prison." But Joseph did the right thing and trusted God to take care of his promotion.

Even when he proposed that Pharaoh find a discerning and wise man to oversee the storage and distribution of grain, Joseph never dreamed that he would be picked for the spot. He was a foreigner, a slave, and a prisoner at that. He probably hoped he would be set free, but the thought of being promoted to second in Egypt was far from him.

There are people who go through life hoping for a lucky break, where suddenly their fortunes will be reversed. But Joseph's promotion was no lucky break. His godly character, forged through his consistent walk with God and his submitting to God in difficult trials, where it would have been easy to have grown bitter, was at the core of why he was promoted in Potiphar's house, why he was able to resist Potiphar's wife's advances, why he was promoted in the prison, and why he was able to interpret the cupbearer's, the baker's and, later, Pharaoh's dreams. All these things were built on years of diligence in walking with God and developing godly character qualities.⁶

Are you doing that right now where you are?

⁴ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <http://media.sermonaudio.com/mediapdf/99225162257350.pdf?download=true&filename=1997%2E06%2E22%2EA+Coping+With+Success+-+Steven+Cole+-+99225162257350%2Epdf>

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

16. How does understanding God's sovereignty move us to pursue faithfulness over self-promotion? When is it appropriate to showcase our abilities to others?

Joseph was not only godly, he was good at what he did. He proposed a wise plan of action and he had the skill to carry it out. His plan involved collecting a fifth of the harvest each year for seven years, so that they had enough surplus not only for Egypt, but also for surrounding countries hit by this famine. It would have taken skillful administration and a lot of discipline to make this happen on a national scale. No doubt Joseph caught a lot of flak from people who wanted to use all the harvest and not save it for the future. But he was good enough as a leader to pull it off.

A lot of Christians think that character is enough on the job. They expect that God will get them the promotion because they've been faithful to have morning devotions. They sit around praying for the promotion instead of developing competence on the job to go with their Christian character. **You need both.** As a Christian, you need to be godly, but you also need to be good in doing what you do.⁷

17. In what areas can you grow in your effectiveness when it comes to your vocation? What steps do you need to take this week to accomplish this?

Letting Go of Bitterness to Grab God's Blessing

Finally, there is a wonderful note of hope in this story: ***"Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph" (Genesis 41:50).***

Note that Manasseh and Ephraim are Hebrew names. Even though he was living in Egypt and even though he married an Egyptian woman who was the daughter of a pagan priest, Joseph gave his two sons names that would remind them forever of their true heritage. It tells us that though he appeared to be Egyptian on the outside, on the inside he still worshiped the God of his fathers.

He named his firstborn son Manasseh, which sounds like the Hebrew word "forget." He even spelled out the meaning so no one could mistake it. "God has made me forget all my hardship and my father's house." He didn't mean he had forgotten his family. As we will see later in the story, they remained always close to his heart. But it means that God had enabled him to forget the pain of the rejection and betrayal by his brothers.

Manasseh must come before Ephraim

Recently I ran across this quote: "We can move on from things we will never get over." That strikes me as profoundly wise. Sometimes people glibly say, "Just get over it." How do you "get over" hatred, envy, conspiracy, attempted murder, betrayal, and being sold into slavery? You don't ever really "get over" things like that. They mark you for life. Some things that happen to us leave scars on the soul that time does not erase. Joseph would never forget what his brothers had done, but he would forgive them.

It is a great advance spiritually to say, "God has made me forget the pain of my past."

The second child he called Ephraim, which means made fruitful. The Hebrew is a form that means something like "super-fruitful." The "land of my affliction" refers to all that he suffered in Egypt—the false accusation, the unjust imprisonment, and the years of total abandonment. Yet in that place where he had suffered so much, he now experiences untold blessing.

⁷ ibid

The order of these names is important. **Manasseh must come before Ephraim.**

First we are set free from bitterness, then we experience God's blessing. That too was because of God's sovereignty. When a man believes in a sovereign God, he can let go and move on.

I have often mentioned the First Law of Spiritual Progress, which is really a series of three statements:

I can't go back.

I can't stay here.

I must go forward.

There is no going back for any of us. There was no going back for Joseph, no way to undo what his brothers had done to him, no way to undo the lies of Potiphar's wife. Likewise, there is no going back for any of us. We can't stay where we are because life is a river that flows ever onward. The only thing left is to go forward with God's help and by God's grace.⁸

18. When has God allowed you to forget past hurts and pains? How did God empower you to accomplish this?

19. Why is it so important for us to release the bitterness that comes from past hurts?

20. In what specific ways has God shown you His blessing over the past couple years? How can you share these blessings with those around you?

⁸ Sermon by Ray Pritchard found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/how-big-is-your-god/>