
The Rise to Power

Genesis 41

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Through obstacles and advances, the book of Genesis keeps launching and moving the great purposes of God along. Creation is ruined by the fall. Later men and women call upon the name of the Lord. Cain kills Abel, but God appoints Seth. Wickedness prevails until a world-wide judgment in the flood. Then Noah emerges and builds an altar to the Lord. Abraham and Isaac and Jacob all appear, often great in faith and hope and sometimes overtaken in folly and sin. The sons who are to become the tribes of Israel – well, some are murderers and violent. Judah from whom the King will come seems to have totally messed up, sleeping with his daughter-in-law and yet God protects the lineage. Then, in a mighty terrible deed of hatred and jealousy, the clan of brothers sell one of their own into slavery. The flickering candle of God's plan seems at this moment to be fluttering out. But we have come to expect some great turn.

Most all of us can look back over our lives and identify a major turning point...

Eleven long years have passed since that terrible day seared forever in Joseph's memory. I am sure he remembers vividly his brothers binding him and then selling him. The long years in Potiphar's service and then the Pharaoh's prison. Hope had brightened at the release of the cup bearer. But now for two long years, Joseph has been waiting for the knock at the door. It finally comes.

The Occasion of His Rise (v.1-36)

Humble yourself in the eyes of the Lord and in due time He will lift you up.... The lifting up time has come.

In the Troubling Dreams (v.1-8)

Once again, dreams are going to be an important part of Joseph's life.

41 After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, ² and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows, attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. ³ And behold, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. ⁴ And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke.

⁵ And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. ⁶ And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. ⁷ And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. ⁸ So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh.

God moves to begin Joseph's rise to power. He sends two troubling dreams to Pharaoh. The first of these dreams was about seven superb cows devoured by seven ugly, thin cows. The second was about seven full ears of grain devoured by seven blighted ears. He is very disturbed by these dreams, so he called for his dream interpreters and magicians. But none of them could tell him what those dreams meant. In effect, the Pharaoh's religion has failed him. The magicians here are priests and priestess in the pantheon of Egyptian gods and goddesses.

With a Timely Recommendation (v.9-13)

Finally, someone remembers and finally speaks up.

⁹ Finally, the king's chief cup-bearer spoke up. "Today I have been reminded of my failure," he told Pharaoh. ¹⁰ "Some time ago, you were angry with the chief baker and me, and you imprisoned us in the palace of the captain of the guard. ¹¹ One night the chief baker and I each had a dream, and each dream had its own meaning. ¹² There was a young Hebrew man with us in the prison who was a slave of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he told us what each of our dreams meant. ¹³ And everything happened just as he had predicted. I was restored to my position as cup-bearer, and the chief baker was executed and impaled on a pole."

This must have been much discussed at court. The cupbearer sees and hears the distress of his ruler. Suddenly, he is reminded of his own troubling dream and the Hebrew prisoner who rightly interpreted it. He rehearses his story to the Pharaoh. He tells how the Hebrew prisoner was not only able to interpret the dream, but the interpretation came to pass.

Now we begin to see what was going on. Our sovereign God brought three prisoners together, gave two of them dreams and one the ability to interpret. God is moving to bring this Hebrew slave, Joseph, to the Egyptian throne-room.

By a Troubled Report (v.14-24)

So, Joseph is summoned.

¹⁴ Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. ¹⁵ And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." ¹⁶ Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." ¹⁷ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Behold, in my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile. ¹⁸ Seven cows, plump and attractive, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. ¹⁹ Seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and thin, such as I had never seen in all the land of Egypt. ²⁰ And the thin, ugly cows ate up the first seven plump cows, ²¹ but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they were still as ugly as at the beginning. Then I awoke. ²² I also saw in my dream seven ears growing on one stalk, full and good. ²³ Seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them, ²⁴ and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. And I told it to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me."

Pharaoh summons Joseph who prepares himself and appears before him. Here is one of the details in the Bible that rings true. Joseph shaves himself, referring probably to his head. In the Egyptian culture, to appear before the Pharaoh with a shaved head was to honor him and show him respect. The Pharaoh declares that he has heard that Joseph has a talent for interpreting dreams.

Pharaoh rehearses the dreams to Joseph. He faithfully reports what he has dreamed. Moses here records it again in detail. There is a care and attention to getting the elements right. Ah, here stands Joseph at the age of 30 ready to interpret for a Gentile King what God's revelation means. Here, Joseph begins to foreshadow Daniel who also rises to greatness and position in a Gentile court furthering the purposes of God as man who speaks for God and lives for God.

As an Authorized Interpreter (v.25-32)

Joseph is a God-focused man. Before a pagan king, with the power of life in his hands, Joseph affirms that the ability to truly understand dreams comes through Yahweh.

²⁵ Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁶ The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. ²⁷ The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind are also seven years of famine. ²⁸ It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹ There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt, ³⁰ but after them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land, ³¹ and the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of the famine that will follow, for it will be very severe. ³² And the doubling of Pharaoh’s dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.

The first and last words Joseph speaks are “God.” (See v. 25, 32) Even before such a one as the Pharaoh, he will glorify God. He immediately corrects Pharaoh by pointing to God as the source of the dreams and the giver of the interpretations. It is God who is being gracious by revealing to the Pharaoh what is about to take place so that action can be taken.

So, Joseph interprets the dream. The seven good cows and seven good ears of corn represent seven years of plenty. The seven lean cows and seven diseased ears of corn represent seven years of famine. The seven years of famine will bring to ruin the prosperity of the seven bountiful years. It will be a famine so devastating that the years of plenty will be forgotten.

Joseph also announces that the dreams occurring twice in two forms means that the events they indicate will most certainly come to pass (v.32). This is not something to gloss over. These events are not the product of mere chance or idolatrous fictions. They will happen because the God of the universe has determined it to be so. Yahweh has declared it to be so and will certainly do what he has decided.

As a Wise Counselor (v.33-36)

The maturity and ability of Joseph speaks wise counsel to the Pharaoh.

³³ Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. ³⁴ Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years. ³⁵ And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. ³⁶ That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.”

He counsels the Pharaoh. Curiously, he does not seem to hesitate. He stands, prisoner though he be, a wise and accomplished steward and household manager. His credentials and resume’ even in prison seem to stand behind the counsel he is about to give. But I suspect that there is more to it. This is not confidence born of skill but urgency arising from confidence in the reliability of God’s revelation and the reality of what is about to transpire.

His counsel is wise and prudent. The years of plenty must be years of gathering and storing up. When the wasting years of destruction and famine, come then there will be provision. His plan is not a grandiose one. It is elegant in its simplicity and yet profound in its appeal. He

recognizes the need to a detailed program and an able man to lead it. If all were to be spared the devastation of the famine, then they must take heed to the warning God has given.

The Outworking of His Rise (v.37-57)

Pharaoh and his servants are pleased at the proposal. But who will lead this great project?

In the High Appointment (v.37-44)

³⁷ This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. ³⁸ And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?" ³⁹ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. ⁴⁰ You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you." ⁴¹ And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." ⁴² Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. ⁴³ And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. ⁴⁴ Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt."

Who else but Joseph? Who else has the very Spirit of God in him? Now wait, this is quite a surprise. The Pharaoh recognizes that Joseph is full of the Holy Spirit. He is uniquely qualified then, not only as the interpreter of God's revelation, but also as the implementer of the plan. But you have to ask, why is this about the Holy Spirit given here – at this point?

God's people will know how to identify their leaders – they are men who will be able to interpret God's revelation by the power of the Holy Spirit who indwells them. The Word and Spirit are being linked. If the dream to Pharaoh is God's revelation and the interpretation to Joseph is God's work, then the Holy Spirit is the one involved. Why is this important? Because when the greater Joseph, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus comes, He will have the Holy Spirit upon Him without measure. He will do all He does by the Spirit. And if He does, then so must we. The Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit who indwells us now enables the man of God to understand the Word of God and lead the people of God. The Spirit indwelling gives wisdom, discretion, and ability.

Joseph becomes the vice-regent in Egypt. All that transpires here is the granting of this power to Joseph. Only in matters that the Pharaoh reserves to himself and his throne will he be greater than Joseph. He was given the signet ring to authorize his orders, the golden chain as a sign of his office and very expensive clothes as is befitting his place. This is a magnificent elevation. In one day, Joseph rises from the pit in the prison to having all Egypt bow before him as rides in his chariot. He has gone from utter powerlessness to almost unlimited authority. He has risen from the poverty of prison to the wealth of the throne.

With his Egyptian Status (v.45)

⁴⁵ And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt.

The Pharaoh also gives him an Egyptian name and grants him an Egyptian bride. The giving of this name is important to his being able to disguise himself in later years. The brothers will never hear him addressed by his Hebrew name until nearly the end of the story.

By the Wise Implementation (v.46-49)

God's man, shaped by trouble and trials, is seasoned and steady and skilled for this moment.

⁴⁶ Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. ⁴⁷ During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, ⁴⁸ and he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it. ⁴⁹ And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.

Joseph implements the plan he had proposed. God blessed in the years of plenty so much that all that Joseph gathered could not be measured. He built granaries near the cities so that the food would be easily accessible. Through the long years of prosperity he sustained the project and kept it going. His faithfulness during fruitfulness would later be the salvation of all during famine.

With the Delights of Family (v.50-52)

⁵⁰ Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore them to him. ⁵¹ Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." ⁵² The name of the second he called Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

In the last year of the good years, just before the famine began, Joseph became the father of two boys. The fact that they are named with Hebrew names likely indicates that Asenath is bowing to Yahweh. In the long tradition of his family, he now has twin boys. He names them Manasseh and Ephraim.

We must not miss why Joseph named them as he did. Over Manasseh he exclaims, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The pain of terrible memories is washed away in the joy of God's evident goodness. To make his life full and complete, here is his first-born son.

Over Ephraim, he says, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." Here I believe is one of the secrets to the faithfulness of Joseph. He sees whatever reward he has as coming from the hand of God. He has determined to be faithful in whatever he is to do. But the fruit, the results that come from that are all God's doing. Egypt is still a land of affliction. But here God has made him fruitful.

Until the Devastating Famine (v.53-57)

⁵³ The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, ⁵⁴ and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. ⁵⁵ When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do."

⁵⁶ So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. ⁵⁷ Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.

Just as God has said and Joseph had planned for, the famine came. It did not take long for the people to be in dire straits. They cried out to the Pharaoh for help. He sent them to Joseph who opened the storehouses and sold them the grain.

The final sentence is the road sign along the path of God's sovereign purposes. The mighty, terrible famine is not just in Egypt, but covers the whole world. Ah, the long crook of the sovereign Shepherd reaches out to bring Jacob and his family down to Egypt.

Reflect and Respond

We are reminded that the sovereign God is ever and always pursuing the outworking of His purposes and plans. Though it took two long years of waiting, God sends the dreams to Pharaoh at just the right time.

In the shadows Joseph casts across this text, we can hope to see the ever richer and fuller realities of Jesus Christ. This story of away from home, down into servanthood, cast into prison when falsely accused and an elevation to the throne as the Spirit-filled interpreter of God's revelation enriches our understanding of Jesus. He left his home for us. He was falsely accused and eventually executed. Three days later, the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead and forty days later ascended into heaven. Unlike Joseph, He did not do all this for Himself. He did it for those who will believe in them. Unlike Joseph who brings about a physical salvation, Jesus brings about a spiritual salvation. Joseph delivers from famine; Jesus delivers from sin.

Whether we are experiencing the hard and good providences of God, let us be bouncing Manasseh and Ephraim on our knees. May we forget all our hardships as we see the provisions and purposes of God. May we be fruitful in the land of our afflictions. May the sweet providences of God sustain faithfulness, forgetfulness and fruitfulness until our Redeemer and Ruler comes.