

God Rewards Obedience

Bible Background • GENESIS 41

Printed Text • GENESIS 41:25–33, 37–40, 50–52 | Devotional Reading • 1 PETER 5:5–11

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will DISCOVER how Joseph’s love for God and faithfulness helped him find success in Egypt, ASPIRE to remain steadfast in love and obedience to God when facing extreme hardships, and CELEBRATE God’s providential care in times of suffering.

In Focus

Robert had been in his new advertising job for more than six months. He enjoyed the job but didn’t really feel like he was making a contribution to his team. All the other team members had talents he could clearly see. Monica was creative; Michelle was a good organizer; Pierce was a good motivator; and Ronald was an excellent long-range planner.

Marvin, their team leader, had given each of them the chance to head an important project. One day his team was discussing the fact that their line of products wasn’t being received well in a particular region of the country. The project had been reassigned to Robert’s team. What could they do that was different?

“What have they already done?” Robert got up the nerve to ask.

Marvin began to explain some advertising campaigns and slogans the other team had tried. Robert spoke up again. “I think I know what part of the problem may be. I’m from around there and that’s just not the way people there make decisions about using a product like ours.” He began to explain some of the differences. “Why don’t you head this project then, Robert?” asked Marvin. “You’re probably our best hope.” Then and there, Robert said a quick prayer, thanking God for this chance, but also asking God to help him do a good job.

How has God provided places for you to use your gifts and skills? How have you seen Him guiding you through those places?

Keep in Mind

“Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has revealed the meaning of the dreams to you, clearly no one else is as intelligent or wise as you are. You will be in charge of my court, and all my people will take orders from you. Only I, sitting on my throne, will have a rank higher than yours’” (Genesis 41:39-40, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Manasseh (v. 50) Menashsheh (Heb.) — Firstborn son of Joseph; the name means “causing to forget”

B. Ephraim (v. 52) ’Ephrayim (Heb.) — Second son of Joseph; the name means “double fruit”

Say It Correctly

Asenath. AH-sen-ath.

Potipherah. PAH-teh-FARE-uh.

Heliopolis. he-lee-OH-poh-liss.

Giza. GEE-zah.

Cairo. KIE-row.

KJV

Genesis 41:25 And Joseph said unto Pharaoh, The dream of Pharaoh is one: God hath shewed Pharaoh what he is about to do.

26 The seven good kine are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years: the dream is one.

27 And the seven thin and ill favoured kine that came up after them are seven years; and the seven empty ears blasted with the east wind shall be seven years of famine.

28 This is the thing which I have spoken unto Pharaoh: What God is about to do he sheweth unto Pharaoh.

29 Behold, there come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt:

30 And there shall arise after them seven years of famine; and all the plenty shall be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine shall consume the land;

31 And the plenty shall not be known in the land by reason of that famine following; for it shall be very grievous.

32 And for that the dream was doubled unto Pharaoh twice; it is because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.

33 Now therefore let Pharaoh look out a man discreet and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt.

37 And the thing was good in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of all his servants.

38 And Pharaoh said unto his servants, Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?

39 And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, Forasmuch as God hath shewed thee all this, there is none so discreet and wise as thou art:

40 Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than thou.

NLT

Genesis 41:25 Joseph responded, "Both of Pharaoh's dreams mean the same thing. God is telling Pharaoh in advance what he is about to do.

26 The seven healthy cows and the seven healthy heads of grain both represent seven years of prosperity.

27 The seven thin, scrawny cows that came up later and the seven thin heads of grain, withered by the east wind, represent seven years of famine.

28 This will happen just as I have described it, for God has revealed to Pharaoh in advance what he is about to do.

29 The next seven years will be a period of great prosperity throughout the land of Egypt.

30 But afterward there will be seven years of famine so great that all the prosperity will be forgotten in Egypt. Famine will destroy the land.

31 This famine will be so severe that even the memory of the good years will be erased.

32 As for having two similar dreams, it means that these events have been decreed by God, and he will soon make them happen.

33 Therefore, Pharaoh should find an intelligent and wise man and put him in charge of the entire land of Egypt."

37 Joseph's suggestions were well received by Pharaoh and his officials.

38 So Pharaoh asked his officials, "Can we find anyone else like this man so obviously filled with the spirit of God?"

39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has revealed the meaning of the dreams to you, clearly no one else is as intelligent or wise as you are.

40 You will be in charge of my court, and all my people will take orders from you. Only I, sitting on my throne, will have a rank higher than yours.”

The People, Places, and Times

Dreams. In the Old Testament, dreams were very important, though not every dream was thought to be from God. Many divine revelations came through the dreams of various kings, prophets, and ordinary people. God would reveal His plans to those who worshiped Him or to pagans in dreams. In ancient times, the dreams of kings and holy people were considered to have national or international significance. Kings often retained several specialists to interpret their dreams for them, and being able to interpret prophetic dreams was a sought-after skill. While dreams were considered significant, God often warned against relying solely on dreams to know and understand His will (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; Jeremiah 29:8-9; Matthew 16:3; 1 Corinthians 13:9).

Potipherah. Pharaoh gave Joseph Asenath, the daughter of Potipherah priest of On, as his wife (Genesis 41:45, 50). The city On was situated north of Cairo, on the Nile Delta, about 17 miles away from the Pyramids in Cairo. Potipherah is believed to be a high-ranking priest of the Egyptian sun-god Ra, their chief deity. Worship of Ra permeated the city, causing the Greeks to give it the name Heliopolis, “City of the Sun.”

What does Joseph’s marriage to the daughter of a pagan priest imply about marrying people outside the faith?

Background

While Joseph languishes in prison on false charges, Pharaoh of Egypt has two disturbing dreams. In the first dream, seven healthy cows that come out to the Nile and begin to graze. But then, seven scrawny cows appear and eat the fat ones. In the second dream, seven choice ears of grain grow on one stalk; then seven skinny ears of grain blossom on that stalk and consume the hearty grain. Pharaoh is extremely troubled and beckons experts to give meaning to the dreams, but none of them provide a suitable analysis. Eventually, these events remind Pharaoh’s cupbearer of the time Joseph had rightly interpreted the cupbearer’s dream. Pharaoh wastes no time, and Joseph is pulled out of jail to stand before the great ruler! Before Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dreams, he announces that it is not he that provides the interpretation but God. Only God can give the correct answer and assure the Pharaoh of its accuracy. Through this event, God provides an opportunity for Joseph to find favor with Pharaoh and to give God credit for the interpretation.

Does God speak through dreams today? What biblical and experiential evidence do you have for your answer?

At-A-Glance

1. Joseph Interprets the Dream (Genesis 41:25-33)
2. Joseph Receives Honor (vv. 37–40)
3. Joseph Establishes Familial Roots with the Egyptians (vv. 50-52)

In Depth

1. Joseph Interprets the Dream (Genesis 41:25-33)

God reveals to Joseph that Pharaoh’s dreams are a warning to prepare for a famine. Pharaoh had two dreams, but Joseph realizes they were the same and that the repetition addresses the urgency with which Pharaoh should act. The nation of Egypt will have seven years of good crops and plenty, but those will be followed by a seven-year famine of equal proportion.

Without this warning, Egypt would have been devastated, and the nation could have dissolved through the death of its people and the vulnerability of its government. Joseph does not stop at just interpreting the dreams, however, he goes on to apply his gifts of administration to suggest a plan of action. Pharaoh will need a discerning man in charge of the land to put aside extra during the years of plenty so that the nation can survive during the famine.

Like Joseph, when we have been misunderstood and oppressively ostracized, we need to continue cultivating a good relationship with the Lord. It is only through such faithfulness that we will be spiritually ready when God's time comes for our deliverance and vindication. In fact, God will use our spiritual gifts to exalt us into the influential positions in life where He designs for us to be.

2. Joseph Receives Honor (vv. 37–40)

Joseph does not ask to be put in charge. Pharaoh, however, recognizes that Joseph does not rely on his own cleverness and wisdom. Instead, Joseph follows God, who has revealed this great truth. Pharaoh, who neither knows nor serves Joseph's God, concludes that Joseph's ability to interpret his dreams serves as evidence that the hand of God rests upon him. Pharaoh decides to make Joseph the prime minister in charge of the palace and the country (v. 40). By elevating Joseph, Pharaoh acknowledges that God is powerful!

The Lord has the supernatural ability to work in the lives of those inside and outside the faith community. When we are faithful to our Lord, God might elevate us to positions where we have favor even with those who do not know Jesus.

In the positions God calls us to serve, we have the ability to make enormous contributions that will impact our society for the good. For God to use us, however, we must commit to acting responsibly. As a result, we also introduce God to others.

When has your faith in Christ drawn others to ask about Him even when you were not “witnessing” aloud?

3. Joseph Establishes Familial Roots with the Egyptians (vv. 50-52)

God not only uses His servants to help people in need, but He enjoys giving personal blessings to those who do His will. Joseph and his Egyptian wife Asenath are blessed with two sons. One is named Manasseh, meaning “forget.” Through the blessings of Joseph's elevation, God brought fulfillment to his life, letting him forget the pain of his enslavement and filling the void caused by the distressing experiences of his past (v. 51). The second son is named Ephraim, meaning “doubly fruitful,” capturing Joseph's glorious prosperity in Egypt (v. 52).

Through Joseph's marriage and family, God provides for perpetuation of His divine presence with Egypt, and with the Hebrews. The Egyptians were kind and welcoming to Joseph's whole extended family, letting them settle in Goshen, partially because of Joseph's Egyptian family. Joseph's Egyptian sons provide him with a lasting heritage within the nation of Israel. There is no tribe named for Joseph as there is for his brothers, but the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, though technically half-tribes, often receive full recognition and blessing comparable to other full tribes, like Levi or Judah.

How have you established roots after a move, whether to a different house, a different job, or a different chapter of life?

Search the Scriptures

1. How does Pharaoh acknowledge God? (vv. 37-39)
2. How is Joseph rewarded for using his gift? (vv. 39-40)
3. What names does Joseph give his children and why (vv. 51–52)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why do you think God allows us to endure trials, tribulation, and hardship prior to elevating us?
2. We sometimes underestimate the power of our gifts and miss opportunities to serve God. How does Joseph overcome the urge to underestimate himself?

Liberating Lesson

Each of us faces circumstances that can lead us to doubt our faith and plunge us into despair. It is important that, like Joseph, we find ways to give godly and practical encouragement to others whose situations seem bleak, even if our own circumstance is equally dire. We would also do well if we, like Joseph, were to see God at work in unlikely places in our own lives. When we seek God's wisdom in solving problems, we should be proactive and prepared for God to act rather than despondent when we face unexpected crises. We should, like Joseph, remain confident that God is working on our behalf as we prepare for His next move in our life.

Application for Activation

During the week, take some time to remember the promises or dreams God has given you, but which have not yet been fulfilled. Have you given up on any of your God-centered dreams? How can you maintain the right kind of attitude that will enable you to be ready if God should suddenly bring your dreams to pass? Share your dreams with trusted friends so you can encourage each other and help each other take steps to see the God-centered dreams come to be.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Genesis 41:25-33, 37-40, 50-52

The Pharaoh of Egypt had two dreams that disturbed him for two reasons: (1) the dreams were strange; and (2) there was no one among his wise men to interpret either one. In both Egypt and Babylon, professional dream interpreters were part of the prevailing religious system. In the meantime, Joseph spent more than two years in prison for a crime that he did not commit. But once again, we see the providential hand of God was with him. No one was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams—until Joseph was allowed access to Pharaoh. While in prison, Joseph met two of Pharaoh's closest aides, the chief baker and the chief butler, who were also in prison. Each had a dream they did not understand, but God gave Joseph spiritual insight to communicate to both men.

The dream told that Pharaoh would restore the cupbearer to a position of honor, while he would hang the chief baker (see Genesis 40).

Pharaoh's counselors and advisors had no idea how to interpret the ruler's dreams. Suddenly, the chief cupbearer remembered his promise to tell Pharaoh of Joseph and his abilities. Pharaoh immediately called for

Joseph to come out of prison, and he had his hair cut and clothing changed, to resemble an Egyptian, rather than a Hebrew. Egyptians were clean-shaven.

25 And Joseph said unto Pharaoh, The dream of Pharaoh is one: God hath shewed Pharaoh what he is about to do.

Although there are two different dreams, Joseph tells Pharaoh they have one meaning. The repetition of the dreams serves as emphasis and establishes the truth and surety of what is to happen (v. 32; Deuteronomy 19:15). Joseph once more points Pharaoh toward God, the source of all wisdom and knowledge and the one who rules the universe, and reveals His plan for the future of Egypt's climate and economy. He directs the king to look to God as the author of the events that would take place in Egypt. Here Joseph indirectly denounces all the gods of Egypt before Pharaoh, implying the many gods Egypt worships are nothing and powerless in the face of the God Joseph knows. Revealing the future to certain people is consistent with God's character. He told Abraham many years before that his offspring would go into a strange land and come out again with great wealth (Genesis 15:12-16), and revealed to Joseph how He would exalt him above his brethren (Genesis 37:5-10). In many instances God makes known His future dealings to pagan rulers whom He uses to carry out the divine plan (Daniel 2:28; 4:25-27; Isaiah 45:1-4). Therefore, Joseph establishes the fact that Pharaoh's dreams are revelations of God's plan. Then he begins to interpret the dreams in detail.

26 The seven good kine are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years: the dream is one. 27 And the seven thin and ill favoured kine that came up after them are seven years; and the seven empty ears blasted with the east wind shall be seven years of famine. 28 This is the thing which I have spoken unto Pharaoh: What God is about to do he sheweth unto Pharaoh.

Once again, Joseph tells the king that the two dreams are really one. The seven good kine (i.e., cows or cattle, emblems of Egyptian agriculture and prosperity) and the seven good ears (of corn, i.e. grain, rather than the New World plant known today as "corn") both represent seven years of good harvest in Egypt (v. 29). There would be plenty of food on the land for seven years. These would be followed by seven years of famine, which are symbolized by "the seven thin and ill favoured" cattle and "the seven empty ears." Joseph takes care to humbly and responsibly interpret this dream and report it to Pharaoh. Joseph's content and tone tell of the urgency and calamity forthcoming.

29 Behold, there come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt: 30 And there shall arise after them seven years of famine; and all the plenty shall be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine shall consume the land; 31 And the plenty shall not be known in the land by reason of that famine following; for it shall be very grievous. 32 And for that the dream was doubled unto Pharaoh twice; it is because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.

Joseph interpreted the "plenty" as a season of prosperity and abundance throughout the land and for all of Egypt's inhabitants. Conversely, these seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine so severe and devastating that the prosperity would be "forgotten" (Heb. shakach, shaw-KAKH, "forget, to cease to care"). The people would not care to reminisce about the good old days as the severity of the seven years of famine would indeed "consume" (Heb. kalah, kaw-LAW, "be complete") or completely destroy life, cattle, and crop. The repetition of a dream indicated its urgency. Therefore, Pharaoh's dream was "doubled... twice" in a dream sequence that happened over and over, this proved that indeed these were prophetic dreams from God about the things He had established to occur shortly or bring to pass soon. Joseph himself had a doubled dream of ruling over his brothers and family. This showed God would certainly accomplish what the dream foretold.

33 Now therefore let Pharaoh look out a man discreet and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt.

Pharaoh only needed an interpretation of the dreams, but Joseph gives advice on what to do to save the country during the years of famine (vv. 32-33). Pharaoh is to appoint a man full of wisdom and set him over the land of Egypt, Joseph advises. In preparation for these seasons of feast and famine, the pharaoh is instructed to

participate in God's plan for Joseph's liberation and Israel's preservation. Pharaoh must watch for a "discreet" (Heb. bin, BEEN, understanding), a wise man to set over these affairs during the feast and the famine. Such a man would be one who could see disaster and remedy. Joseph was one such man.

37 And the thing was good in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of all of his servants. 38 And Pharaoh said unto his servants, Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?

As he stood before Pharaoh, the first admonition that Joseph gave him before sharing the dreams' interpretations was that the answer to Pharaoh's dreams was not "in [him]: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace" (Genesis 41:16). Following this introduction to Joseph, Pharaoh was given the strategic plan and vision that would save his land and people, and he was impressed with Joseph, using the word "good" to affirm Pharaoh's appreciation (v. 37). The Hebrew word for "good" is yatab (yaw-TAB), and it means to be pleasing, cheerful, and glad.

Pharaoh declared to his royal court that indeed Joseph must be the one because he had the "Spirit of God" (v. 38). Even though Egyptian culture had no knowledge of the Holy Spirit or His work, Pharaoh believed in God's power. Joseph's advice impressed Pharaoh and his council. The phrase "the thing was good in the eyes" means that Pharaoh was pleased with Joseph's insight and wisdom. The interpretation of the dreams and the advice both sound so good that Pharaoh wastes no time in implementing them. Consulting his council, he asks rhetorically "Can we find such a one as this is?" The answer is obvious since no one was able to give Pharaoh the answer to his dream, let alone follow it up with such wise advice. Pharaoh and his servants realize the power and the wisdom of God. Although they recognize the divine power and wisdom, we have no evidence in Scriptures that they renounced their idolatry to worship the living God Joseph professed before them.

39 And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, Forasmuch as God hath showed thee all this, there is none so discreet and wise as thou art: 40 Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than thou.

Once Joseph had interpreted the dreams and divine plans to Pharaoh, Pharaoh immediately honored the young man with favor. Pharaoh recognized that Joseph's wisdom and understanding came from God (v. 39). Therefore, he avowed that the young Hebrew would be rewarded handsomely for his discernment and wisdom. Joseph's was a unique rags-to-riches story. In a short period of his life, he went from the pit to the palace, from obscurity to influence, all because of the favor and blessings of God. We must keep in mind that we do not need to try to selfishly promote ourselves. Joseph's interpretation was honest and not self-promoting.

God is the One who gives us favor with our superiors, relatives, and others. If we are faithful and committed to the Lord, He will bless us as well (see Psalm 75:6-7). The first area where Joseph would have tremendous influence would be in the house of Pharaoh. Just as he was influential over Potiphar's house (see Genesis 39:4), so, too, would Joseph reign over Pharaoh's palace (Genesis 41:40). In fact, Pharaoh declared that Joseph's reign and responsibility would be so vast that the only person with greater responsibility and power than Joseph would be Pharaoh himself. All of Pharaoh's people would submit to Joseph's authority and commands.

Thus, Joseph becomes the prime minister of Egypt, second in command to his throne. Pharaoh would serve as the ceremonial president while Joseph is given the charge to run the country. This is made clear in Pharaoh's words "only in the throne will I be greater than thou" (v. 40) and his actions (vv. 41-44). This is the work of God and a fulfillment of God words and revelation to Joseph. It is a true example of how God exalts people from rags to riches, for "by humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, and honour, and life" (Proverbs 22:4). God never fails in His promises. His Word never changes, and His faithfulness is as certain as night and day.

50 And unto Joseph were born two sons before the years of the famine came, which Asenath the daughter of Potipherah priest of On bare unto him. 51 And Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasse: For

God, said he, hath made me forget all my toil, and all my father's house. 52 And the name of the second called he Ephraim: for God hath caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction.

Pharaoh takes care to alter Joseph's Hebrew name, from Joseph to Zaphnath-Paaneah (v. 48). Then Pharaoh gives Joseph an Egyptian wife named Asenath. Her name means "one who belongs to the goddess Neith." The goddess Neith had dominion over war and weaving and is the mother of Ra in some stories. Asenath was the daughter of Potiphera, a priest of On (v. 45). The name Potiphera in Egyptian means "he whom Ra has given." Potiphera was probably a very important figure in an Egyptian cult. On, which was also called Heliopolis, was one of four great Egyptian cities and was the place where they worshiped the sun god Ra. The priests of On often engaged in widely varied commercial, political, and cultic responsibilities. Thus, Joseph was enveloped in Egyptian culture, but never lost his faith and commitment to Jehovah God. Joseph is now an "Egyptian" ruler and the prime minister of Pharaoh's entire kingdom. He settles in Egypt and begins a family before the famine engulfed the land. Though thoroughly Egyptian now, Joseph gives his two sons Hebrew names. The first is named Manasseh (Heb. Menashsheh, men-ash-SHEH), which means in Hebrew "cause to forget" or "forgetful." The second son is called Ephraim, which translates to "double fruit" or "very fruitful." Joseph's experience was tragic, from the time he left his father's home, until his ascendancy to the prime minister. From a human perspective, the young man does not want to remember all he endured. His son Manasseh would affirm that Joseph had turned the corner on his oppression and difficulties because he had put his trust in the Lord. Consequently, his son Ephraim would always remind Joseph, that only through God's grace and favor, had Joseph been promoted in Egypt and received increase (was "fruitful") and influence as a result of his faithfulness to the Lord. Even in "the land of [his] affliction," Joseph recognized the centrality of God's compassion and grace. Separation from his father and all that he held dear has not diminished Joseph's perspective that he is still in the hands of God.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Paul and Barnabas Appointed for Ministry
(Acts 13:1-5)

TUESDAY

Joseph, Chief Interpreter of Dreams
(Genesis 41:9-13)

WEDNESDAY

Dreams of Cows and Corn Explained
(Genesis 41:14-24)

THURSDAY

Preparing for the Expected Famine
(Genesis 41:34-36)

FRIDAY

Storing Grain for the Future
(Genesis 41:41-49)

SATURDAY

Egypt Feeds the Middle East
(Genesis 41:53-57)

SUNDAY

Leadership During Crisis
(Genesis 41:25-33, 37-40, 50-52)