



Joseph Rises to Power Genesis 41-42

Introduction

Joseph's interpretation of the dreams of Pharaoh's butler and the baker were proved true when they were brought out of prison. Precisely according to his interpretation, the baker was hanged and the butler restored to his position. However, the butler failed to remember and show kindness to Joseph as he had requested (Genesis 40:14). Two full years passed as Joseph remained in prison. The passage in Genesis does not disclose anything about Joseph's life during those two years, but it is certain that God was maturing him and preparing him for what was to come next. Psalm 105 reveals that prison was a testing time for Joseph.

OUTLINE of GENESIS 41-42

I. Joseph is Called Out of Prison - Genesis 41:1-36

II. Joseph is Exalted in Egypt - Genesis 41:37-57

III. Joseph Meets His Brothers Again - Genesis 42:1-38

I. Joseph is Called Out of Prison - Genesis 41:1-32

A. Pharaoh Dreams - Genesis 41:1-8

Pharaoh had two dreams on the same night. In the first, he stood by the river, most probably the Nile, the source of Egypt's fertility. Pharaoh saw seven "*fine looking and fat*" cows come up out of the river and go to graze in the meadow. This would not have been surprising because it was common for cows to stand half-submerged in the waters of the Nile as they sought relief from the summer heat and insects. But then Pharaoh saw that seven "*ugly and gaunt*" cows came out of the river and ate the fat cows. Pharaoh's second dream was similar. He saw seven heads of grain on one stalk and they were "*plump and good*". Then seven "*thin heads, blighted by the east wind*" sprung up and devoured the good heads.

These dreams troubled Pharaoh, so in the morning he sent for his magicians and wise men to discern their meaning. Most ancient rulers had sorcerers, dream interpreters and wise men who were adept at magic. They served as priests and counselors to the kings. Pharaoh's counselors were unable to explain the disturbing dreams.

B. The Butler Remembers - Genesis 41:9-13

Pharaoh's distress over the dreams prompted the butler to remember his "*faults*", namely, that he had forgotten Joseph and the skill he had shown in interpreting his own dream. He related to Pharaoh how the "*young Hebrew man*" from the prison had accurately told the meaning of his dream and the baker's.

C. Joseph Comes Out of the Dungeon - Genesis 41:14-16

Joseph had been in prison for over two years, but when Pharaoh heard that this young Hebrew had the ability to interpret dreams, Joseph was "*quickly*" cleaned up and made presentable to go before Pharaoh. Pharaoh told Joseph of his distress in finding no one to interpret his dreams. Humbly, yet boldly, Joseph advised Pharaoh that it was God and not he who would give the answer.

D. God Shows Pharaoh What He Will Do - Genesis 41:17-36

Pharaoh repeated his dreams to Joseph who was careful to let him know that the dreams and their interpretation were from God. Twice Joseph told Pharaoh that in the dreams "*God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do*" (verses 25 and 28). The fact that the dream was repeated twice meant that what God had shown was both inevitable and imminent.

Joseph's statements in verses 25, 28 and 32 present God as sovereign over Pharaoh. The fact that Pharaoh accepted this shows that he was willing to place himself under Joseph's God. The Egyptian's yielded to their Pharaohs as gods, so it is significant that Pharaoh humbled himself under Joseph's God.

1. Joseph interprets the dreams - 41:25-32

Joseph revealed that Pharaoh's two dreams were the same. The seven fat cows and the seven good heads of grain represented seven years of plenty and the seven thin cows and seven blighted heads of grain represented seven years of famine in the land. The fact that the thin cows and blighted heads of grain devoured the fat cows and good heads of grain showed that the famine would be so severe that the years of plenty would be totally forgotten.

2. Joseph advises Pharaoh - 41:33-36

After interpreting the dreams, Joseph gave Pharaoh practical advice on appropriate action to take during the upcoming fourteen years. This included:

- (1) selecting a *“discerning and wise”* man to place in a position of authority over the land;
- (2) appointing officers over the land to collect and store one-fifth of the produce during the years of plenty;
- (3) placing all the stored grain under Pharaoh’s authority as a reserve for the years of famine.

Application

Egypt had been through seasons of severe famine before. But this time God sent Joseph so that measures could be taken in advance and people could survive. Joseph was sold into slavery in a foreign land and thrown into prison so God could bless and care for a foreign people and that through that care, He could provide for His own. We shall see how He does this in future lessons.

In what difficult place do you find yourself right now? Has God moved you to a place, either physically or spiritually, far from family and friends? Do you feel that your circumstances are a prison to you? Look up to God and ask Him how He wants to use you in your present situation. Where does He want to use your wise planning, your sharing His love and saving grace, your hard work? Will you submit to God and ask Him to make you fruitful in the land of Your suffering?

II. Joseph is Exalted in Egypt - Genesis 41:37-57

Both Pharaoh and his servants recognized the value of Joseph’s advice. Pharaoh went so far as to proclaim Joseph as the one *“discerning and wise”* enough to be in authority over all Egypt; *“a man in whom is the Spirit of God”*. Although Pharaoh was surely not acquainted with the triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) he recognized that a divine power was at work in Joseph. After all, he had just put to shame the wise men and magicians of Egypt.

A. Pharaoh Honors Joseph -
Genesis 41:37-45

To honor Joseph, Pharaoh:

- (1) gave Joseph his signet ring, a seal used to stamp Pharaoh’s approval on important documents;
- (2) clothed him in fine linen;
- (3) put a gold chain around his neck;
- (4) made him second in command;
- (5) had the people pay him homage;
- (6) changed his name to Zaphnath-Paaneah (the meaning is unknown, possibly, “Nourisher of the Two Lands, the Living One” or “God Speaks and He Lives”);
- (7) gave him Asenath as his wife.

B. God Blesses Joseph - Genesis 41:46-52

As God had revealed in Pharaoh’s dream, the land experienced seven years of abundance. During this time, Joseph was faithful to his task of storing food for the lean years to come. Scripture notes that the amount of grain was so *“immeasurable”* that Joseph stopped counting.

During the seven prosperous years, Asenath bore Joseph two sons whom he named Manasseh and Ephraim, meaning “forgetful” and “fruitful”. God’s blessings had set Joseph free from the memories of harsh treatment by his brothers and the hard work and suffering which had resulted. Furthermore, God had caused Joseph to be fruitful in the foreign land where he had been sold as a slave.

C. Joseph Blesses Egypt and “All Countries” -
Genesis 41:53-57

The seven years of famine came and devastated Egypt and all the surrounding countries. The famished people went to Joseph to buy grain. Times are not always good, but God is. God provided for Egypt and, as we shall see next, in doing so, He provided for His people as well.

Application

It had been over twenty years since Joseph had dreamed his dreams of greatness (Genesis 37). But now those dreams were beginning to be fulfilled. Years of perseverance through trials were bearing fruit in Joseph’s life. From the human viewpoint, Joseph had been treated unjustly time and again and suffered greatly as a result. But God had been using those years to train and equip Joseph for the work He had prepared for Him (Ephesians 2:10). God had been using everything to work for good in Joseph’s life (Romans 8:28). Through those years of slavery and imprisonment, Joseph could not see or understand what God was doing in his life, but he knew God and that made all the difference. Faith made the difference. How is your faith making a difference in your life?

III. Joseph Meets His Brothers Again - Genesis 42:1-38

In Chapter 42, the scene shifts back to Canaan and the dysfunctional family of Jacob. Although the famine was affecting them also, Jacob’s sons were apparently just sitting around looking at each other. For this, Jacob admonished them. There was grain to be had in Egypt, but that may have been a place they preferred not to go. Surely they remembered selling their brother, Joseph, to the caravan of Ishmaelite traders who were on their way to Egypt.

A. Jacob Sends Ten Sons to Egypt -
Genesis 42:1-5

Jacob insisted that ten of his sons travel to Egypt to buy grain. He was still practicing the favoritism he had shown with Joseph, but now his affections were with his youngest son, Benjamin, second child of his beloved Rachel who had died giving birth to him. Jacob clung to Benjamin and would not allow him to accompany his brothers.

B. Joseph Recognizes His Brothers -
Genesis 42:6-20

In his place of preeminence, Joseph personally supervised the distribution of grain to those who came to buy. Imagine his surprise when he saw his brothers in line to purchase grain. Although he recognized them, he did not reveal his identity. It had been many years since they had seen Joseph. He had grown from a Hebrew shepherd boy into an adult whose dress and appearance was Egyptian. He used an interpreter to speak to his brothers. It is no surprise that his brothers failed to recognize him. They had sold him as a slave and may have even presumed that he was dead (Genesis 42:13 and 44:20).

When the brothers bowed down before Joseph, they unwittingly fulfilled the prophecy of Joseph's dream (Genesis 37:5) which they had sought to thwart. This fact did not escape the notice of Joseph. He decided to test (42:15) his brothers.

1. Joseph accuses his brothers of
being spies - 42:8-15

Speaking harshly, Joseph accused his brothers of coming to spy out the unprotected parts of the land of Egypt. They denied the charge and frantically revealed their true identity: *"twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and in fact, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more"*. What irony that the sons of Jacob were bowing before the man whom they claimed to be dead.

2. Joseph demands that Benjamin
be brought - 42:15-17

Joseph demanded that they bring their younger brother to Egypt to prove their honesty and sincerity. He would keep nine of them in prison while one brother returned to fetch Benjamin.

Joseph put all of his brothers in prison for three days, perhaps giving them time to consider their situation.

C. Joseph's Brothers Confess Their Guilt -
Genesis 42:18-24

By the third day, when the ten brothers were brought before Joseph, he had altered his demand, giving them a life or death offer. He would keep one of the ten in prison while the others carried grain to their homes and brought Benjamin back to Egypt. If they submitted to his plan, they would live and not die.

It did not take Joseph's brothers long to consider their options. As Joseph stood nearby, they recounted to one another their guilt in selling him into slavery, connecting their present trouble with their treatment of Joseph many years before. They remembered their *"sin"* and Joseph's *"anguish of soul"* and *"pleading"* with them while they refused to listen. Perhaps finding themselves in an agonizing situation, they could now relate to the suffering they had caused their brother.

Because they had been speaking through an interpreter, the brothers did not guess that Joseph understood every word they said. What memories and forgotten feelings must have been dredged up in Joseph as he listened to the repentance of his brothers! He turned away and wept.

When Joseph returned, the decision had been made. Simeon was bound as the chosen prisoner and the brothers were sent on their way.

D. Joseph's Brothers Return to Canaan -
Genesis 42:25-38

Joseph gave orders to fill each brother's sack with grain along with the money which they had brought in payment. On the way home, when the brothers discovered money in one of their sacks, they were filled with fear. When they found, upon returning home, that each man's sack had his money in it, they again were afraid. The return of the money, however, was most likely an act of forgiveness and kindness on the part of Joseph. These men were feeling the guilt of what they had done to Joseph and it kept creeping up at every turn.

1. The brothers tell their story to
Jacob - 42:29-35

There were no lies this time as the brothers related the events of their journey to their father, along with the demands of the *"lord of the land"* to deliver Benjamin to him.

2. Jacob responds - 42:36

Jacob was very distressed. He had been bereaved of two sons. Joseph was dead and now Simeon was as good as dead. Jacob feared being bereaved of another son. Everything seemed to be against him, and he would not allow Benjamin to go!

Notice his words to his sons in verse 36, "*You have bereaved me.*" Who had bereaved him? "YOU" -- his sons had done it. In his eyes, these sons of his were responsible for Joseph's death. In spite of their well-documented story (Genesis 37:31-33), Jacob seems to have suspected all along that there had been foul play on the part of his sons against his beloved Joseph. Jacob also held his sons responsible for what he now considered the loss of Simeon.

3. Reuben steps up - 42:37-38

As the eldest, Reuben spoke up and offered to take responsibility, but Jacob would have none of it. In his eyes, Benjamin was all he had left.

Applications

1. Compare the faith of Joseph with that of his father Jacob. In Genesis 39:9, as a slave in Potiphar's household, he refused to sin against God; in Genesis 40:8, as a prisoner, he boldly told the baker and butler that dream interpretations belonged to God; in Genesis 41:16, 25, 28 and 32 he proclaimed to Pharaoh the power and sovereignty of God; and in Genesis 41:51 and 52 he credited God with his blessings and fruitfulness in the land of Egypt. On the other hand, Jacob failed to mention God in his distress. He saw his situation as everything being against him. He gave no indication of faith or hope. Are you more like Joseph or Jacob? How can you be more like Joseph?

2. How do you relate with Jacob's dysfunctional family? If you are grieving over the problems you see in your own family, take heart! The upcoming chapters beautifully display God's sovereign power to restore.