

# Average Joes

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Faithful in Spite of Prosperity:  
Genesis 41

## Pharaoh's Dreams

The two dreams of Pharaoh are more transparent than those of the two officials. The sense of the two dreams can be seen in the elements of the dream. Seven good cows and seven good heads of grain are the seven good years. The seven ugly cows and seven blighted heads of grain are the seven bad years to follow. But to show that their simplicity conceals rather than reveals their meaning, the writer tells us that all the king's magicians and wisemen were unable to give their meaning (41:8). The inability of the court officials to interpret the dreams is similar to the powerlessness of Nebuchadnezzar's court officials in the face of the king's mysterious dreams (Daniel 2:4-12). In the latter case, however, they had not only to interpret the dream but, to insure against fraud, they had to recount the dream as well. Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams then was different from that of Daniel. It lay not only in forecasting from the dreams what was to happen, but also, and it appears more importantly, in the advice he gave on how to prepare for what was to come. Thus Joseph's wisdom in dealing with the situation forecast in the dreams is portrayed as equally important to the interpretation of the dreams itself. His wisdom consists more in planning and administration than in a knowledge of secret mysteries (John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch As Narrative*, Zondervan, 214).

Like Solomon and Daniel, Joseph is presented as a wise man whose skills exceed those of his contemporaries. His wisdom is demonstrated in his interpretation of dreams, his eloquent speech, and his insightful plan to deal with crisis. These were all valued skills in Egypt. When he is finally brought before Pharaoh, he is careful to deny that he is a trained expert in dream interpretation. Whatever success he has, he insists, comes from God (41:16).



Digging  
Deeper

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*You intended to harm me,  
but God intended it for  
good to accomplish what is  
now being done, the saving  
of many lives.  
Genesis 50:20*

*Digging Deeper is always  
available for download at  
[www.alpinechurch.org](http://www.alpinechurch.org)*

As Joseph presents the interpretation, he also treats the dream as a message from God (41:25). Often dreams or oracles that were interpreted negatively were associated with some sort of offense. Here there is no suggestion that the deity sending this dream is angry or seeking appeasement. No cause is offered for the coming famine. Indeed, the whole sequence would not have worked that way because the first seven years are years of plenty and therefore typically indicate the pleasure of the gods. It would appear odd for a dream to carry both prosperity and devastating tragedy. What could possibly be motivating any deity to offer such mutually exclusive determinations? At any rate, Joseph neither talks down to Pharaoh, nor does he flatter him to get on Pharaoh's good side by giving him a favorable interpretation. It is not surprising, then, that Pharaoh deems him intrinsically credible and decisively trustworthy (John Walton, *NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, Zondervan, 674-675).

### **Famines in Egypt**

Long famines were a familiar feature of life in the ancient Near East. Inadequate rainfall in southern Sudan would prevent the Nile from flooding for its usual three months in northern Egypt, and without this annual flood, Egyptian agriculture was doomed. Similarly failure of the rains in Palestine and Syria led to poor harvests there. No doubt it was unusual for the rains to fail in both Sudan and Palestine in the same year, but this is what occurred in Joseph's time. However, thanks to his foresight, both Egypt and the surrounding countries escaped the worst effects of the famine (Gordon Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 398).

Seven-year famines were not unknown in Egypt. A later Egyptian text tells of such a famine during King Djoser's reign, showing how tragic such a famine is and how the Egyptians reacted to it: "I was in distress on the Great Throne, and those who are in the palace were in heart's affliction from a very great evil, since the Nile had not come in my time for a space of seven years. Grain was scant, fruits were dried up, and everything which they eat was short. Every man robbed his companion. The infant was wailing; the youth was waiting; the heart of the old men was in sorrow, their legs were bent, crouching on the ground, their arms were folded (John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis*, Baker, 275).

### **Elevation of Joseph**

The chapter goes into significant detail concerning the elevation of Joseph to high office. Similar scenes are depicted in every detail in Egyptian tomb paintings. This section contains the most information that can be checked against Egyptian practice and history. The first step for Pharaoh is to give Joseph his signet ring. This ring was necessary for Joseph to do business in Pharaoh's name since it was used to seal official documents. The design of the signet featured the name of the pharaoh in its traditional crest. The linen robes and the gold chain are part of the investiture that signifies rank, status, and office. Chariots were the limousines of the day, so it is arranged that Joseph will ride in style. The men going before him clearing the way are the equivalent of the Secret Service protection that is offered to important dignitaries and officers in America (Walton, 676).

It's obvious why the author includes the account of Joseph being promoted by Pharaoh. Joseph must be elevated to high office for the plot to reach its conclusion. But we might wonder why the story slows down to include all the titles, regalia, and instructions of how Joseph is to be treated. The details contribute an important irony in the story that is theologically significant.

On the surface, Joseph is being “promoted” by Pharaoh. Everything he is given comes from Pharaoh's hand: his office, status, privilege, name, wife- everything. He is “reborn” as a servant of Pharaoh. The irony is that from the standpoint of Genesis, it is not the hand of Pharaoh that has remade Joseph but the hand of God. For all that Pharaoh did, God brought Joseph to the recognition of Pharaoh, and God gave Joseph wisdom and success. In the end, Joseph is not first and foremost Pharaoh's man, but God's man. He is not Pharaoh's instrument of economic survival; he is God's instrument of salvation. So Pharaoh too is an instrument (as is often the case with kings and emperors in the Bible), with no choice but unwittingly to carry out God's plan (Walton, 691).

### **Joseph's Character**

The central theme of chapter 41 is expressed clearly and forthrightly within the narrative itself by Joseph in verse 32: “The matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.” As the narratives of this chapter show, the assurance that God would surely bring future events to pass comes from the fact that the dreams relating those events are repeated twice. Two dreams with the same meaning show that God would certainly bring about that which was foreseen in the dreams. Throughout the narrative this theme is kept alive by a continuous return to the pattern of twos. The point of the narrative is that such symmetry in human events is evidence of a divine work. The writer, along with Joseph, is able to see the handiwork of God in the events which he recounts, and he passes them along to the readers in these subtle interplays within the text itself (Sailhamer, 213).

Thirteen bitter years of slavery and imprisonment in a foreign land come to an abrupt and sudden end. Joseph is summoned from the prison into the very presence of the Pharaoh. The external change in Joseph's circumstances is astonishing, but his character has undergone a remarkable transformation as well. He is no longer the brash teenager whose careless chatter annoyed everyone. Now Joseph is intelligent and wise without peer in Egypt. The times of trial and waiting have built Joseph's character and taught him to trust in God.

In Joseph's experience of release from slavery, we have foreshadowed for us the release of Joseph's descendants who were released from Egyptian bondage. Yet again Christians have seen in Joseph a type or foreshadowing of Jesus Christ. He too, like Joseph, experienced humiliation before exaltation. As all were commanded to bow before Joseph (41:43), so “at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow” (Phil. 2:10). And the experience of Joseph and our Lord is a pattern for all Christians, as Peter says, “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you” (1 Pet. 5:6).

But in the immediate context of Genesis, this episode is another vital step in the chain of events leading to the fulfillment of Joseph's own pair of dreams that he had dreamed thirteen years earlier, in which he had seen his brothers bowing down to him. They had tried to frustrate his dreams by selling him into Egypt. But in Egypt Joseph told Pharaoh, “Because the dream had been repeated, the thing is established from God, and God is in a hurry to do it” (41:32). Very quickly the truth of Pharaoh's dream was demonstrated, but what about Joseph's? The last verse, “the whole world came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain,” hints at the next act in the drama (Wenham, 400).

### **Home Group Questions**

1. What makes prosperity dangerous?
2. What clues do we get from chapter 41 that Joseph understood that his prosperity came from God?
3. Why is it important to realize that God is the source of the prosperity we have in life?
4. What different ways can we experience prosperity in life?
5. Read Luke 12:47-49. What does Jesus expect from those who he has prospered?
6. Why does God bless us? What does this tell us about how we are to respond to his blessing?

### **Questions for Personal Application**

7. How are you handling the prosperity that God is giving you? Are you using it for God's purposes or your own?