

“THE LORD RULES OVER THE NATIONS”

**I. Introduction**

- A. There are many factors that have a bearing on the destinies of nations.
- B. Historical, political, economic, social, and moral considerations come into play.
- C. While our inclination is to assess the things that happen in our world through the lens of earthly variables, there is one other thing we should always keep in mind.
- D. I am referring to the fact that God is the supreme ruler over the nations of the world, and that he orders their fortunes for the good of his church.
- E. This is the message that is conveyed in Genesis 41.
- F. As one commentator puts it, this passage shows us how “God sovereignly controls the destinies of nations to protect and provide for his covenant people.” [Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 645]

**II. The Lord’s Control over Nations (1-32)**

- A. This chapter marks the turning point in the story of Joseph.
  - 1. It tells us how Joseph was brought from being a prisoner in Egypt to being in charge of that great nation’s affairs.
  - 2. Once again, dreams play an important role in the things that unfold in Joseph’s life.
  - 3. There are three sets of dream-pairs in the Joseph story.

4. The third and final pair of dreams are dreamed by Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt.
  5. These dreams greatly disturb Pharaoh, rousing him from his prideful complacency.
  6. When none of Egypt's wise men are able to provide a satisfactory interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, the chief cupbearer's memory is jogged.
  7. He remembers how Joseph had accurately given the meanings of the dreams dreamed by himself and the chief baker when they were in prison with Joseph.
  8. When he tells this to Pharaoh, Pharaoh has Joseph fetched from prison and brought before him.
- B. The failure of the Egyptian wise men to interpret Pharaoh's dream, followed by the summoning of Joseph to do so, sets up a confrontation between the wisdom of Egypt and the wisdom of God.
1. This confrontation is evident as soon as Joseph is brought before Pharaoh.
  2. Pharaoh begins by flattering Joseph, telling him that he has heard of his ability to interpret dreams.
  3. But Joseph responds by correcting Pharaoh's theology.
  4. Joseph makes it clear that it is only God, and no mere man, who has the ability to give the insight that Pharaoh seeks.
  5. The things revealed in Pharaoh's dream are spiritual in nature, and they can only be understood by one who is given spiritual discernment by the Spirit of God himself.

6. Joseph has indeed been given such discernment.
  7. And he will not only provide the interpretation of the dreams, but will also give insight into what policy should be implemented to meet the coming emergency.
- C. The central elements in Pharaoh's dreams were two sets of seven cows in the Nile River and two sets of ears of grain.
1. Egypt was widely known in the ancient world for its agricultural bounty, and the Nile River was central to this fruitfulness.
  2. Egypt relied upon the seasonal flooding of the Nile for the irrigation and fertilization of its crops.
  3. This made it much less susceptible to famine than surrounding nations.
  4. Abraham had gone to Egypt during a time of famine, and God had to tell Isaac not to do so during another famine.
  5. This is not to say that Egypt never experienced famines.
  6. In fact, there are records that tell us of two instances when Egyptian famines were so severe that the people there resorted to cannibalism.
  7. But there was a reason why the people who lived in Canaan would typically go to Egypt when famine struck their land.
  8. Because the Nile flows from the south to the north, its seasonal flooding depends upon rainfall to the south of Egypt, in the area of Sudan.
  9. Canaan, on the other hand, depends upon the rainfall to its north, in the land of Syria.

10. Due to these geographical factors, it is rare for both Egypt and Canaan to experience severe famines at the same time.
  11. But Pharaoh's dreams reveal that this is exactly what is about to happen.
  12. After seven years of agricultural plenty, there will be seven years of famine so severe that it will wipe out all signs of that former abundance.
- D. Notice that in verse 28, Joseph tells Pharaoh, "God has shown to Pharaoh what *he* is about to do."
1. God is the one who is about to do these things.
  2. He brought the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine.
  3. He also provided a man who had the wisdom to guide Egypt safely through this crisis.
  4. But God did not do this principally for Egypt's sake.
  5. By preserving Egypt, he preserved his covenant people and worked repentance and reconciliation among them.
  6. This teaches us that God shapes the course of world events in order to effect the building up and nurture of his church.
  7. The Lord is in sovereign control over the fortunes of all the nations of the earth.
  8. And in one way or another, their individual histories are used of God to advance his plan of redemption.
  9. God works through nations that are steeped in superstitious practices and the worship of false gods, as was the case with Egypt.

10. God works through nations that are significantly influenced by Christianity, as has been the case in the West for much of the past two millennia.
11. And God works through nations that largely spurn the Christianity that shaped them to be what they are, as is the case in the West today.
12. This is why the psalmist says of the Lord, "you... guide the nations upon earth." (Ps. 67:4)
13. The nations truly are in God's hands.
14. He rules over them and works through them to ensure that his kingdom continues to advance.

### III. The Lord's People among the Nations (33-57)

- A. There is nothing in our text that would indicate that the famine that was about to come upon Egypt was sent by God as a form of judgment.
  1. If that had been the case, God would presumably have had Joseph call Pharaoh to repentance.
  2. The fact that Joseph did not do so suggests that God had another purpose in sending such a severe famine upon Egypt and the surrounding region.
  3. As we have already said, that purpose was especially focused on the continued outworking of his plan to redeem a people for himself.
  4. Because of this, this text provides insight into the life God's people live among the nations in this present age.
- B. After Joseph gives the interpretation of the two dreams, he counsels Pharaoh to appoint someone discerning and wise to implement the plan

that he has just laid out.

1. Such a person would need to possess both insight and integrity.
  2. Otherwise, he would do what corrupt people with power always do: use the crisis for his own benefit.
  3. While Joseph has not explicitly suggested that he is the man who should serve in the capacity he has just outlined, it did not take a genius to see that he was perfectly suited for this task.
  4. Pharaoh was motivated to find a capable and trustworthy man to take on this enormous responsibility.
  5. Egypt took great pride in its reputation as the breadbasket of the ancient world, and Joseph has just explained how Egypt can play that role in the face of this coming crisis.
  6. A floundering Egypt would greatly tarnish Pharaoh's reputation, but a flourishing Egypt would greatly enhance it.
  7. As a result, this man who was not even an Egyptian, who had been brought to Egypt as a slave and was later thrown into prison, is now promoted to the highest position in all the land, aside from Pharaoh himself.
- C. To symbolize Joseph's authority, Pharaoh has him clothed in garments of fine linen.
1. This is not the first time in Genesis that Joseph is clothed in splendor.
  2. Years earlier, his father had given him a beautiful robe of many colors.

3. That robe was lost when Joseph was subjected to the wicked plot hatched by his brothers.
  4. These new garments testify that God has brought Joseph to the place of prominence foretold in the dreams he was given prior to being sold into slavery.
  5. Joseph's rise to prominence foreshadows what God would do with Moses, who was cast into the Nile as an infant but was then rescued and raised in Pharaoh's own household.
  6. It points to how God would raise up Christ from his estate of humiliation and exalt him as ruler of all nations.
  7. And it is a picture of how Christians are called to endure the sufferings of this present time with patient hope in the glory that is to be revealed to us.
- D. Once Joseph was placed in his new office, he was faithful and diligent in carrying out the responsibilities assigned to him.
1. Two times the text tells us that Joseph "went through all the land of Egypt."
  2. He wasted no time.
  3. He got right to work, familiarizing himself with the land so that he could devise the best plans for its welfare.
  4. Joseph did not use his high position for his own ease or benefit, but to seek the good of the Egyptian people.
  5. This testifies to Joseph's character, character that had been forged in the furnace of suffering.

6. Once again, he used whatever opportunities he was given to make himself of service to others.
  7. In doing so, he sets an example for every Christian to follow.
- E. In addition to being raised to this high position, Joseph is given a wife, with whom he has two sons.
1. It is noteworthy that the names Joseph gives to these boys are Hebrew names rather than Egyptian ones.
  2. This reflects Joseph's commitment to maintaining his religious identity during his time away from the covenant people.
  3. Though he lived among the Egyptians, he was not of the Egyptians.
  4. Christians today are to be guided by the same principle.
  5. We are called to live in the world, but we are to do so as those whose ultimate allegiance is to Jesus Christ and his kingdom.
- F. The names Joseph chooses for his sons express his gratitude for how God has overcome his brothers' plots and conferred such great blessings upon him.
1. The name "Manasseh" sounds like the Hebrew word 'forget.'
  2. This son's name testifies to Joseph's refusal to let memories of past injustices fester and make him bitter.
  3. Instead of dwelling on all the evils that have been done to him, he forgets those things and focuses instead upon all the goodness that God has extended to him.
  4. As for the name "Ephraim," it sounds like the Hebrew word 'fruitful.'

5. This son's name testifies to Joseph's acknowledgement that God has completely turned his fortunes around.
6. Though he was once in utter destitution, living as a slave and then as a prisoner, now his life is bearing much good fruit.

#### IV. Conclusion

- A. This passage teaches us that everything that unfolds in our lives and in the world around us, both good and ill, is being used by God to further his gracious program.
- B. God is ruling over everything — every nation, every human action, every event, every part of your life and mine — and he is working through all of it to carry out his redemptive plan, both on a global and individual level.
- C. When we keep this in mind, we will not forget God when things are going well, and we will not lose heart in times of crisis.
- D. No matter what happens, if you trust in Jesus Christ, you can be confident that you and all your fellow saints are always perfectly secure.
- E. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish minister Robert Shaw puts it, "In all past ages, God has watched over his Church with peculiar and unremitting care; he has sometimes permitted her to be reduced to a very low condition, but he has also wrought surprising deliverances in her behalf. The very means which her enemies intended for her destruction and ruin have, by an overruling Providence, been rendered subservient to her edification and enlargement (Acts 8:4). The preservation of the Church, in spite of the craft and malice of hell, and of all the pernicious errors and bloody persecutions which have threatened her ruin, is no less wonderful than the spectacle which Moses beheld — *a bush burning* but not *consumed*. And let us still confide and rejoice in the promise of Christ, that the gates of hell shall never prevail against his Church." [*The Reformed Faith*, 114]
- F. How could anything prevail against Christ's church?

- G. For he has offered up his own life to secure the redemption of every single person he was given to save.