

Jacob's Descendants

Joseph's Rise to Power in Egypt

Genesis 41:1-57

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February 25, 2018

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Scripture

We are currently in a series of sermons that I am calling “Jacob’s Descendants,” based on Genesis 37-50. Previously, we read about young, seventeen-year old Joseph sold by his brothers to Midianite traders on their way to Egypt. The brothers then deceived their father Jacob into thinking that a fierce animal had devoured Joseph. Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. Because the Lord was with Joseph and caused him to be successful in all that he did, he became the chief overseer in Potiphar’s house. After a while, however, Potiphar’s wife wanted Joseph to lie with her. He refused, and Potiphar’s wife falsely accused him of wanting to molest her. When Potiphar learned of this he had Joseph put in the prison where the king’s prisoners were confined. While Joseph was in prison the Lord was still with him, and Joseph was placed in charge of all the prisoners in the prison. Some time after this, Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker committed an offense against Pharaoh. They were put in the same prison with Joseph. One night they each had a dream, which God enabled Joseph to interpret for them. The cupbearer was restored to his position in the palace of Pharaoh, and the baker was executed. Unfortunately for Joseph, the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Let’s read about Joseph’s rise to power in Egypt in Genesis 41:1-57. However, for the sake of time, I am going to read only Genesis 41:1-16, and invite you to keep your Bibles open so that you can follow the rest of the story in this sermon:

¹After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, ²and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows, attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. ³And 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. ⁴And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke. ⁵And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. ⁶And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. ⁷And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. ⁸So 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.

⁹Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "I remember my offenses today. ¹⁰When Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, ¹¹we dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation. ¹²A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream. ¹³And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged."

¹⁴Then 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. ¹⁵And 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.”

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.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.”

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

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.

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."

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. (Genesis 41:1-57)

Introduction

Dr. A. J. Gordon was a Baptist pastor in Massachusetts in the late 19th century. One Saturday, while preparing his Sunday sermon, he was so tired that he fell asleep in his study. He dreamed that it was the next morning in the pulpit and the church was packed. A stranger walked in and a deacon let him have his seat. The stranger was so commanding yet attentive, and Gordon found himself as if speaking to him alone. He decided to meet this stranger after the worship service.

As the congregation filed out one by one, the pastor (in his dream) looked in vain for the stranger until everyone was gone. “Do you know him?” he asked the deacon. “Why, yes. He is Jesus Christ.” “Oh, how I wished I could have talked with him!” Gordon lamented. “It is alright, pastor,” assured the deacon, “He’ll be back next Sunday.”

Gordon woke up, realizing in a new way that every time he preached and spoke about Christ, Christ is in the midst and hears every word. This dream revived both pastor and church. Gordon preached with a new power. He established “Salvation Centers” in Boston, gave great sums to missions, to weak churches, to the Jews, to the Chinese. He started a school to train missionaries. He died at age 59 with “Victory” on his lips.¹

Our dreams may not be as vivid as the dream of Dr. A. J. Gordon, but all of us have dreams. Dreams played in important role in Joseph’s rise to power in Egypt.

Lesson

Joseph’s rise to power in Egypt in Genesis 41:1-57 teaches us that our sovereign God exalted his suffering servant to rulership in order to save the world.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Elevation of Joseph (41:1-36)
2. The Investiture of Joseph (41:37-45)
3. The Faithfulness of Joseph (41:46-49)
4. The Children of Joseph (41:50-52)
5. The Success of Joseph (41:53-57)

¹ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), 237.

I. The Elevation of Joseph (41:1-36)

First, let's notice the elevation of Joseph.

Joseph was twenty-eight years old when God enabled him to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. By then, he had spent eleven years in Egypt. Eleven years! And even though the Lord was with him the entire time during his adversity and his relative prosperity, he was still a slave and cut off from his family and country. And to make matters worse, the cupbearer had forgotten to mention Joseph to Pharaoh.

But then, after two whole years, God gave Pharaoh two dreams. In the first dream, seven cows, attractive and plump, came up out of the Nile River. Then, seven ugly, thin cows came out of the Nile and ate the seven attractive, plump cows. Pharaoh woke up—startled, I am sure—but fell back to sleep again, and had a second dream. In this dream, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. Then, seven thin ears of grain sprouted and swallowed the seven plump ears of grain. Pharaoh woke up again, and his spirit was troubled. He sent for all of Egypt's magicians and wise men, but there was none who could interpret Pharaoh's dreams to him.

It was then that the cupbearer remembered that Joseph had interpreted his dream in prison. So, he told Pharaoh about Joseph, who immediately sent for him.

Finally! Joseph was going to get an audience with Pharaoh. Joseph must have been thrilled. After getting cleaned up, he appeared before Pharaoh. Commentator Kent Hughes writes the following:

The temptation to humbly moderate his views must have been intense—to say the acceptable thing, to tell Pharaoh what he thought Pharaoh wanted to hear. Charles Colson

in his *Kingdoms in Conflict* describes how during his political career he used the aura of the White House to moderate and pacify visitors. He would begin by hosting his guests in the executive dining room of the West Wing. Colson would escort his guests past saluting guards and down a long corridor lined with dramatic photographs of the President in action. And then at the door of the dining room he would pause and point to the door at the right and say in hushed tones, “That’s the situation room”—conjuring up visions of map-filled walls, computer screens, and busy generals when, in reality, those functions were at the Pentagon.

The ambience of the executive dining room was overwhelming with its rich, hand-rubbed mahogany walls lined with a waiting row of red-jacketed navy stewards and most of the Cabinet and senior staff huddled around the tables. Usually even the staunchest adversaries began to soften. If some needed more prodding, they were treated to a walk upstairs and a reverent tour of the Oval Office. And if the President was in, there was a prearranged impromptu greeting and a gift of gold-plated cuff links with the presidential seal. Colson summarized the effect:

Invariably, the lions of the waiting room became the lambs of the Oval Office. No one ever showed outward hostility. Most, except the labor leaders, forgot their best-rehearsed lines. They nodded when the president spoke, and in those rare instances when they disagreed, they did so apologetically, assuring the president that they personally respected his opinion. Ironically, none were more compliant than the religious leaders. Of all people, they should have been the most aware of the sinful nature of man and the least overwhelmed by pomp and protocol. But theological knowledge sometimes wilts in the face of worldly power.²

² R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 478.

So, how did Joseph fare in Egypt's "oval office," especially when Pharaoh, somewhat flatteringly, said to him, **"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"** (41:15)? Would Joseph melt? Would he moderate his view? Would he say something just to please Pharaoh?

Not at all! **Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer"** (41:16). Don't miss the significance of Joseph's answer. He had been a slave for thirteen years now in Egypt, but his trust was still firmly in God. He said that he could no more interpret Pharaoh's dream than Pharaoh's magicians and wise men. No, only God can give interpretations to dreams. Commentator Gordon Wenham says, "Joseph is as insistent as he was to the cupbearer (40:8) that not his own skill but God will interpret Pharaoh's dream. Though Joseph is thus being humble about himself, he is at the same time offering something better, divine interpretation of the dreams."³ Joseph's thirteen years in slavery had all been preparation for God to use him before Pharaoh.

Pharaoh was not offended by Joseph's "politically incorrect" statement. So, he proceeded to tell Joseph his two dreams. Joseph told Pharaoh that God was going to send seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine. And in the middle of his interpretation, Joseph said to Pharaoh, **"And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about"** (41:32). Joseph made it clear to Pharaoh that this was God's doing.

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 392.

Then, Joseph suggested to Pharaoh a plan for securing the future of Egypt by collecting twenty percent of the produce in the next seven years of plenty to help cover the seven years of severe famine that was to follow.

II. The Investiture of Joseph (41:37-45)

Second, let's examine the investiture of Joseph.

Joseph's **proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants** (41:37). At this point, Joseph would have been pleased with pat on the back and a pardon from prison. However, Pharaoh then made a fascinating statement to his servants, **"Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?"** (41:38). Now Pharaoh did not know Joseph's God. And his comment about the **Spirit of God** was colored by his polytheistic concept of a multitude of gods. Nevertheless, Joseph had repeatedly asserted that "*God* has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do" (41:25) and "*God* has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do" (41:28) and "the thing is fixed by *God*, and *God* will shortly bring it about" (41:32). Joseph's complete God-orientation brought Pharaoh to acknowledge Joseph's God, however ignorantly that may have been.

Then, astonishingly, Pharaoh not only released Joseph from prison, but promoted him to Prime Minister of Egypt! What a sudden turn of events! None of this happened because of Joseph's innate wisdom, wit, or hard work. It happened because God was with Joseph, and Joseph never despaired but always trusted God.

Verse 45 says, **"And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt."** One commentator

notes, “It is evident that Pharaoh was intent on Egyptianizing Joseph because he gave him a new name and a wife.... Now an Egyptian name is one thing, but an Egyptian wife is quite another—because we see how thoroughly Pharaoh intended Joseph to become identified with Egypt.”⁴

How would Joseph react to all of this? He had a new name, a new wife, a new position, and a new power. Would he abandon his faith? Would he forget God?

III. The Faithfulness of Joseph (41:46-49)

Third, notice the faithfulness of Joseph.

Joseph responded well. He did not assume the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Kent Hughes says that Joseph “responded with the obedience that characterizes true faith. That is, he believed that Egypt would have just seven years of plenty to gather up grain for seven years of famine. So we see that his rise to power did not dull his response to God’s word—because he gave himself wholly to hard work.”⁵

Moses said in verses 46-49, **“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. During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, 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. And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could**

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, 486.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, 487–488.

not be measured.”

Joseph's hard work was evident to all. He masterfully stored up grain in great abundance, until it could no longer be measured. Joseph did all this because he believed that God was true to his word. God was sending great abundance now, but it was going to be followed by a terrible drought. And Joseph believed that God had called him to this position of power in order to save many people from a terrible death.

IV. The Children of Joseph (41:50-52)

Fourth, observe the children of Joseph.

Moses said in verses 50-52, **“Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore them to him. 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.’ The name of the second he called Ephraim, ‘For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.’”** Kent Hughes astutely observes:

But here is the great thing (and you must not miss it): Joseph declared his allegiance to God and his faith in God's word by giving his boys *Hebrew* names.... [T]he names of [his] sons...were blatantly Hebrew! Again, when all foreigners sought assimilation and welcomed Egyptianization, Joseph re-asserted his ethnic, spiritual origin. And here, at this moment in history, Joseph not only understood the greatness of God as no other living person, but he also believed as no other person on earth! Significantly this was at the beginning of seven years of famine.⁶

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, 489.

V. The Success of Joseph (41:53-57)

And finally, notice the success of Joseph.

Moses said in verses 53-54, **“The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, 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.”**

Joseph’s plan was wonderfully successful. Verses 56-57 say, **“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. Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.”**

Joseph was the temporal savior of the world.

There are remarkable parallels between Joseph and Jesus, as noted by James Montgomery Boice:

Joseph was rejected by his brethren; Jesus by the Jews, his brethren according to the flesh. Joseph was sold for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites; Jesus was sold by the treachery of Judas for thirty pieces, and then handed over to the Gentiles. Joseph was cast into prison; Jesus abode in the grave. Joseph in the prison was able to preach the gospel of deliverance to the butler; Jesus went and preached the gospel to the spirits in prison. The two malefactors of the cross find their counterpart in Joseph’s fellow-prisoners. Joseph, though a Hebrew by birth and rejected by his own brethren, nevertheless was raised to supreme power in a gentile state, and saved myriads of them from death; Jesus, of Jewish birth and yet disowned by Jews, has nevertheless been exalted to the supreme seat of power and is now enthroned in the hearts of

myriads of Gentiles to whom he has brought salvation from death and spiritual bread for their hunger. The very name that Pharaoh gave to Joseph meant “Savior of the world”—our Savior’s title.... We have now, therefore, to think of Jesus as seated on his throne, prime minister of the universe, the interpreter of his Father’s will, the organ and executor of the divine decrees. On his head are many crowns; on his finger is the ring of sovereignty; on his loins the girdle of power. Glistening robes of light envelop him. And this is the cry which precedes him, “Bow the knee!” Have you ever bowed at his feet? It is of no avail to oppose him.... “At his name every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that he is Lord.” Agree with him quickly. Ground your arms at his feet. “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry.”⁷

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Joseph’s rise to power in Egypt in Genesis 41:1-57, let us be encouraged to entrust ourselves to our sovereign God’s good providence.

If you are not a Christian, bow before Jesus. Repent of your sins. And believe that he is *your* savior!

And if you are a Christian, trust God in all your circumstances. Jesus himself encourages us to trust God, when he said, in Matthew 6:31-33, “Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and *your heavenly Father knows that you need them all*. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and *all these things will be added to you.*” Amen.

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 973.

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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