

Prayer

We thank You, Lord Jesus, for the people we meet who help us without asking for anything in return, for those who love us and will always help us come what may, and for those who seek to help us despite their own difficult circumstances. May we see in their generosity a sign of Your Kingdom, and give glory to You Lord Jesus Christ; AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Music

Pray for the copyright industry that seeks to protect the rights of musicians and composers worldwide. Copyright is controversial, particularly in the field of Christian music.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for people whose lives have been ruined by unemployment*
- *Pray for those affected by typhoons and earthquakes in the far East*
- *Give thanks for humour, and everything that makes people laugh*

Meditation

Bring love into the heart of our homes, Lord God.

You who can cure the love-lost-ness
that drives so many marriages apart despite the promises made;

You who can teach a man and woman
to find the joy of love that grows even greater as the years go by;

You who can enable growing children
to find their own way, their own life, and yet still love their parents;

You who can give enduring strength
to those who care for their aged, sacrificing all to do what's 'right';

You who can bind two hearts as one
in life's immeasurable mysteries, with love and grace and passion;

Bring love into the hearts of our homes, Lord God

Bible Study - Genesis 41:1-16

¹ After two years had passed, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile. ² Seven quality fat cows came up from the Nile, and grazed in the reed grass. ³ Then seven other gaunt and thin cows came up from the Nile after them, and stood on the bank of the Nile by the other cows. ⁴ The gaunt and thin cows ate up the seven quality fat cows. Then Pharaoh awoke. ⁵ He fell asleep again and dreamed a second time. He saw seven plump and nutritious ears of grain growing on one stalk; ⁶ and then seven thin ears sprouted after them, scorched by the east wind. ⁷ The thin ears consumed the seven plump and nutritious ears. Then Pharaoh awoke, for it was a dream.

⁸ In the morning Pharaoh's spirit was troubled; so he summoned all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him. ⁹ Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, 'I am reminded today of my past mistakes. ¹⁰ When Pharaoh was angry with his servants, he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard. ¹¹ He and I both dreamed on the same night, and each had a dream with its own meaning. ¹² There was a Hebrew youth with us there, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we recounted them, he interpreted our dreams for us, explaining to each of us the meaning of our dream. ¹³ Moreover, things turned out just as he interpreted them to us, I regained my office, but the other man was hanged.'

¹⁴ Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. ¹⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard a report of you which says that you can interpret a dream as soon as you are told it.' ¹⁶ Joseph answered Pharaoh, 'I do not claim this of myself - but God will give a full response to Pharaoh.'

Review

The story of Pharaoh's dreams heralds a complete change in the direction of Joseph's life. After two more years of rejection and abuse in prison (41:1), making more than a decade of impoverishment (see 41:46 for a reference to Joseph's age at this time - 30), the time came for Joseph's circumstances to change in a quite remarkable way. Looking back upon what happened in chapter 41, we are left in no doubt that God was in control of history and these events. The great Egypt and its Pharaoh merely played out the role God set out for them, for He was more concerned about the future of His people, Joseph and the family of Jacob.

This power and authority of Almighty God was part of the problem for Pharaoh. He did not know God or anything else about the Hebrew peoples, but he did know that according to the people he ruled, he was supposed to be divine himself. The life of all Egypt was wrapped up in what he said and did, so when Pharaoh had a dream that disturbed him, it disturbed all Egypt (41:8f.)! The two dreams in this passage are the third pair of dreams to occur in the Joseph story, and as with the others, it is not too difficult to get a rough idea of their meaning as soon as we read them.

For the Egyptians, the cow was a sacred animal, representing (at different times) the god (and goddess) Isis, the river Nile, Egypt itself, and the fortunes of all Egypt. The idea of cows 'coming up' (41:2,3) from the Nile is straightforward, because to this day, cows feeding in the reed beds of the Nile stand almost up to their heads in water to obtain relief from heat and flies. In the second dream, the corn reminds us that Egypt was the 'bread basket' of the ancient world, being able to produce crops from land irrigated by the Nile even in times of drought. The thin ears of corn are shrivelled 'by the east wind' (41:6), a hot wind from the desert which could still destroy crops even though they had grown in the Nile's irrigated fields.

Frankly, it seems remarkable that no-one could interpret Pharaoh's dreams. We chuckle as we read, because it all seems fairly obvious to us, and we have not yet come to the part of the story where a formal interpretation is given! That may be the point. If Pharaoh recognised the dreams as easily we do, then it was obvious to him that seven years of all-consuming bad would follow seven years of good. He could not announce this to his court; he needed his magicians and interpreters to declare the bad news, and naturally, none were prepared to do it (41:8)! The magicians said they could not interpret the dream simply to avoid the wrath of Pharaoh at the revelation of bad news, something that could easily lead to their death.

It was in this tense setting that the chief cup-bearer had a good idea. If the young Hebrew who earlier interpreted his dream were to be brought before Pharaoh and do what no-one else was prepared to do, who would be worried if Pharaoh had the young man slaughtered for stating the obvious? It was an ingenious solution to Pharaoh's problem, and if Pharaoh understood the cup-bearer fully, then it could explain why Pharaoh acted so promptly to get Joseph to the palace. Frankly, the story sounds far-fetched unless we perceive it in this way.

However, what happened when Joseph came before Pharaoh was completely unexpected. Even before the dream had been explained to Joseph, he threw the whole situation wide open. He said that he claimed no powers of interpretation himself, but immediately propositioned Pharaoh that Almighty God would give him an interpretation which would be complete; 'God will give a full response to Pharaoh' (41:16). Almost untranslatable in the setting, the word for 'full' is the Hebrew word 'shalom', which meant that God would give Pharaoh an answer which would satisfy his concern, and his restore peace. How could Pharaoh refuse to hear what Joseph had to say next!

The story continues in the next study, but we should have already spotted enough to tell us that by the grace of God, Joseph was more than a match for the court politics of Egypt!

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The dreams and their apparently mysterious meaning!
- The response of the cup-bearer
- Joseph is brought before Pharaoh

Going Deeper

The main study will look at each of the parts of the passage in turn; the dreams themselves, the reaction of Pharaoh and the court, and the critical meeting of Pharaoh and Joseph at the end which sets up everything that follows. Each stage of the story is fascinating!

The dreams and their apparently mysterious meaning!

In reading other scholarly books about this famous passage of scripture, I have found no hint of what I have explained above, though what I have suggested may well have been thought of before by others. All the references I have come across which describe this passage talk about the mysterious world of Egypt and the potent force of the signs and symbols which were supposed to guide Egypt by the divine power of the gods. These signs and symbols are the stuff of mystery and intrigue, investigated by archaeologists who write papers beyond the access of mere mortals. Now it may be that Pharaoh was genuinely mystified by his dream, or certainly mystified by some of the details, but I still maintain that the basic principle was all too easy to see, and I think the story begs us to see what is happening in the way I have suggested above. There may well be some signs and symbols within the story that are lost in the cultural divide between those past times and now; but Pharaoh shortly accept an interpretation from Joseph which says little more than is obvious, just as the dreams which Joseph had as a youngster were obvious to his elder brothers (37:8f. etc.)!

Whatever the meaning of these dreams to people of ancient times, there is no disputing the description of seven fat and 'well-bred' cattle being consumed by seven cannibalistic gaunt animals; it was enough to awake Pharaoh (41:4). The second dream was obviously a reinforcement of the first; and again the nature of the support is obvious. Seven 'plump and nutritious' ears of corn on one stalk are consumed by seven thin ears. It has long been pointed out that in Egypt the hot winds which had this effect came from the south. However, in Canaan, these hot winds came from the east, and because this story was told and repeated in later years in the land of Canaan, it may well be that in order for the story to be understood the south wind of Egypt turned, in the telling of it, into the 'east wind'. All this was obviously the stuff of dreams, however, and the connections between the two dreams make it clear that Pharaoh was aware of what was going on.

These dreams challenged Pharaoh's own strength and authority, for the success of a Pharaoh's reign was often measured by his ability to provide for his people and the great kingdom of Egypt. This was his function as 'god-king'. The problem with these dreams was that they predicted circumstances which could destabilise his authority and power in the kingdom. As soon as any of the courtiers might hear of these dreams, they would have taken it as an omen that this Pharaoh would was not in control of the elements and capable of doing his job. This provided the tense court setting which follows.

The response of the cup-bearer

No wonder Pharaoh was troubled. He was a man looking for a solution to what seemed to be an impossible situation. The magicians and the court interpreters were not ignorant, and they distanced themselves from the dreams, and also from Pharaoh as soon as they heard them (41:8). If you think about it, it would normally have been unthinkable to refuse Pharaoh, but in this moment of insecurity, this is exactly what the important magicians and interpreters did. Was it the first stirrings of trouble?

It was at this moment that the cup-bearer remembered the Hebrew youth, Joseph, whom he had met in prison under the watch of the 'captain of the guard'. Here was a 'scapegoat' (to use a later Hebrew phrase!) who might solve Pharaoh's problem and draw the sting of the whole situation. The story continues with the cup-bearer explaining the circumstances of his own past, recalling the occasion when Pharaoh had imprisoned officials including himself (something everyone feared was about to happen now!) and how the young Hebrew had correctly interpreted dreams. Interestingly, the cup-bearer was at pains to explain that the two dreams on that occasion had two different interpretations (41:11,12). By emphasising this, he was perhaps trying to imply that the obvious connection between Pharaoh's dreams might have another explanation, and thereby diffuse Pharaoh's potential anger at his court officials!

Pharaoh picked up the suggestion of his cup-bearer immediately, and there was an immediate flurry of activity.

Joseph is brought before Pharaoh

Before Joseph could be presented to Pharaoh, he had to be extracted from the prison, though the Hebrew text makes fascinating reading at this point. Although it makes more sense in this context to translate; 'they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon', the Hebrew is rendered more literally 'they extracted him from the pit'. The word for 'dungeon' or 'pit' is the same as that for the 'pit' into which Joseph's brothers had first thrown him (37:24). The meaning is clear; Joseph was now being removed from the 'pit' of suffering which he had endured since his teenage years. This was the real time of liberation, and the story signals this to us very clearly. There had been false dawns before when Joseph rose to power in Potiphar's house (39:1-6), and then briefly in the prison (39:19-23), but this would now be the real thing.

Interestingly, Joseph was required to shave and change his clothes (41:14), an indication of special preparation required before an audience was allowed with the sacred Pharaoh, even in the tension of the times as described. Scripture leaves us breathless as Joseph appears before Pharaoh. We long to know more about what happened and something descriptive about this meeting of crucial importance for Pharaoh, for Joseph and for all Egypt and also the people of Israel. It was one of those pivotal moments of history, and God was in control.

God's authority in this setting is shown by the extraordinary brief conversation which begins at the end of our passage today. Pharaoh addressed Joseph first, and presents to him the same report that he had already given to the magicians and wise men around him in the court. One can imagine the tension around as everyone waited with baited breath to hear what Joseph would say!

Extraordinarily, the first thing Joseph said was a colloquial expression of denial which can mean 'not at all', or 'nothing to do with me!' For a split second, it seems that Joseph may fall foul of the desperate Pharaoh, because Joseph apparently denied the ability of interpreting dreams for which he has been summoned! But before anything could be said, Joseph made a promise to Pharaoh and it was obvious he intended to keep it; saying 'God' would give the full answer Pharaoh required, and an answer that would give him 'peace' (see above).

Application

If you have followed the sequence of events as I have explained them, then you will find that what follows in the coming days will become much clearer. If you prefer to believe that Pharaoh was genuinely ignorant of what the dreams might mean, then by all means read the text in this way, but you will find that the whole story becomes much less meaningful. There is, I believe, a genuine subtlety to these stories, which if you spot it and follow it, this will lead to a far greater understanding of how God was in control of the all the events that happened in Egypt. Without doubt, our story tells us that God was in control of the 'god-king' Pharaoh and therefore in ultimate control of Egypt. As we read or hear this story, we are encouraged to believe that God is also in control of all history, and that although things may seem otherwise, He can use even the peculiar circumstances of our lives, like dreams, to achieve His will.

The other great theme that begins to emerge in this passage today is the timing of God's control over Joseph's life. He had many years of suffering to endure, but we are told nothing about the awfulness of those times. They are hinted at in words such as 'dungeon' or 'pit' and the earlier details of the injustices that had befallen the young man. However, Joseph had emerged from this period of suffering as wise and astute. Impressively, he was capable of coming into the court of Pharaoh at a moment's notice, assessing a dangerous situation and disarming it with a few words. Such wisdom was not attained casually; it was the honed wisdom of one who had learned from the accumulated experiences of a hard life.

The Joseph we meet in our passage today is a new man, and one whom God has changed. We do not know the inner and spiritual nature of what happened in Joseph's soul during the dark years, but in the stories to come in Genesis, we will discover the reality of a spiritual change wrought through the suffering of his soul, and it is crucial to our understanding of how he successfully rebuilds his own family. There is no doubt therefore that from our point of view, whilst suffering can never be less than terrible, it is nearly always the anvil on which the hardest of diamonds are formed, in terms of spiritual men and women of God.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss the dreams seen by Pharaoh, and look at them carefully. Do they say anything other than what we all think we know about them?
2. Discuss whether the chief cup-bearer was acting in self interest, or whether he was acting in the interests of Pharaoh, and of Egypt?
3. How is God's control over the world shown today, and is this obvious to all or hidden?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Sometimes we have to look at Scripture with new eyes to see what is really going on. I found it amazing that no commentary I read picked up on the idea that Pharaoh might have known the meaning of the dreams right from the beginning – just as we do quite naturally when we hear them. Yet this approach to understanding the text opens the door to a deeper understanding of what it says. There is much talk today about 'originality' and thinking 'outside the box', but the real need is for each of us to feel that what God has

given us is of value. In God's eyes it is, but each of us appreciates it when other people accept what we have observed as well!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Reflect on what has happened to you over the last few days. Is God saying anything obvious to you within these events, and what will you do about it? It is important to ask such questions from time to time because it is too easy to let time pass without perceiving what the Lord is doing within our lives.*
- *Pray for the world in which we live today, and ask the Lord to reveal what He is doing with us now, and what His purposes are for the future.*

Final Prayer

Forgive us, Lord, when we do not demonstrate the Kingdom of God through what we do and say. Give us grace to accept our failing and lift us above the mediocrity into which, too often, we settle. May we follow Your example in all things and demonstrate the faith You have planted within us; AMEN
