

Prayer

Reveal Yourself afresh, great Lord of All. Give Your people visions of the Kingdom which will excite and encourage them, both in their faith and the doing of Your will. Bring Your people to life again with the zeal and energy to do Your will and proclaim Your Word; and wipe away the dross of indifference which still sits heavily on some within Your church today. Liberate us into action! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Books

Pray this week about the writing and production of books. Writing remains one of the greatest means of communication, so pray that God's people will use it for the Gospel

On-going prayers

- *Pray for people you know who are on holiday and need a rest*
- *Pray against the widespread misuse of recycling within the world*
- *Thanks God for the joy of fellowship and sharing God's good gifts*

Meditation

Glory be to You, Almighty God and Lord of all,
We wonder at Your will, and everything You have done.

The incredible way in which our bodies are made,
And how all creation reveals Your love and power.

The fascinating nature of the relationships we enjoy,
And how essential they are to how our world works.

The staggering breadth of time within which we live,
And the eternal plan of Salvation by which You work.

The amazing detail of Your care for us, body and soul,
Which overflows in healing, peace and deliverance.

The authority with which You fulfil all Your purposes,
And execute Your eternal plan of salvation, through us.

Glory be to You, Almighty God and Lord of all,
We wonder at Your will, and everything You have done.

Bible Study - Genesis 41:17-45

¹⁷ Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'In my dream I was standing on the bank of the Nile; ¹⁸ and seven quality fat cows came up from the Nile and grazed in the reed grass. ¹⁹ Then seven other gaunt and thin cows came up after them, emaciated, ugly, and thin. I have never seen such undernourished cattle in all Egypt. ²⁰ Then the gaunt and thin cows ate up the first seven fat cows, ²¹ but when they had eaten them, no one could tell they had done so, for they were as emaciated as before. Then I awoke. ²² I then saw in my dream seven ears of grain, plump and nutritious, growing on one stalk, ²³ and seven withered and thin ears sprouting after them, blighted by the east wind; ²⁴ and the thin ears consumed the seven good ears. But when I spoke to the magicians, none of them could explain it to me.'

²⁵ Joseph said to Pharaoh, 'Pharaoh's dreams mean the same thing; 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 same in each dream. ²⁷ The seven gaunt and thin cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are 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 abundance throughout all the land of Egypt, ³⁰ and after them there will come seven years of famine. All the abundance in the land of Egypt will

then be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. ³¹ There will be no trace of the abundance in the land because of the famine that follows it, for it will be extreme; ³² furthermore, the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that this is fixed by God, and God will do it soon. ³³ Pharaoh should therefore select a wise and discerning man, and give him authority over the land of Egypt. ³⁴ Pharaoh should take action to appoint taskmasters over the land, to take one-fifth of Egypt's harvest during the seven abundant years. ³⁵ They should gather all the food from the coming good years, and set aside grain to be stored in the cities for food, under Pharaoh's authority. ³⁶ This food will be a reserve for the nation against the seven years of famine that are to befall Egypt. In this way, the land may not be ruined through famine.'

³⁷ The plan pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. ³⁸ 'Can we find any other man like this,' said Pharaoh to his officials, 'someone who has the spirit of God?' ³⁹ So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since God has shown all this to you, no one else is as discerning and wise as you. ⁴⁰ You shall be in charge of my household, and all my people shall do as you command; I will be greater than you only in respect of the throne.' ⁴¹ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I place you in charge of all the land of Egypt.' ⁴² Pharaoh removed his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and he had him dressed in fine linen garments, and put a gold chain around his neck. ⁴³ He had him ride in the second ranking chariot; and they cried out in front of him, 'Bow the knee!' and he set him over all the land of Egypt like this. ⁴⁴ Pharaoh also said to Joseph, 'I am Pharaoh, but without your consent no one will lift up hand or foot throughout the land of Egypt.' ⁴⁵ Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife. This is how Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt.

Review

Today, I have asked you to read a long passage of scripture, but it is difficult to divide this passage into smaller sections without undermining the flow of the message, and it will slow the pace of our studies unnecessarily if we divide this passage up further. The story line is straightforward if a bit repetitive in nature, and because we already know what Pharaoh has dreamed (41:1-16), the importance of the text for us lies in Joseph's interpretation of it (41:25-36) and how it is received by Pharaoh (41:37-45). All the narrative is somewhat drawn out; but this merely indicates the great importance of the passage to the whole story of Joseph. It is very easy to read it through and find it quite predictable, and in many ways it is, but it remains central to Joseph's story because it describes the dramatic circumstances under which Joseph's life was completely changed. Neither is it as entirely predictable as we might think!

Now, if the theory we read yesterday is correct, then the problem with Pharaoh's dream was not that no-one could interpret it, but that its meaning was obvious, and no-one wanted to be the 'fall-guy' who spoke the obvious, and might possibly receive the wrath of Pharaoh as a consequence. In character with all great people of any time or place, Joseph saw the situation not as a threat but as an opportunity. Further, as a man dragged from prison, he had nothing to lose and everything to gain; and so it turned out to be. However, this is not a story of the fortuitous elevation of an intelligent young man to great fame and glory; it is a set of circumstances which are guided by God. Joseph emphasises three times to Pharaoh that God is the one who is in control of events (41:25,28,32).

In the later Bible study, we will look further at some of the details of the story, but what stands out in the whole event is the calm bravery of Joseph in handling the situation. Famine was common but deeply feared by ancient peoples, and a Pharaoh would be expected to provide for his land and his people at such times. Seven years of famine was not unheard of (according to ancient records) but the thought of it would have been terrifying. By bringing poise and control to the whole situation through his honest, forthright and highly directive speech (41:25-36), Joseph defused the tense situation. Before anyone had a chance to respond to the terrifying news of a seven year famine fixed by God (41:32), he outlined a specific plan to deal with the famine. It was as good a speech requesting a job that one could make to a Pharaoh!

In comparison to the cowering and humiliated magicians and sorcerers who refrained from being drawn into the interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, the assembled court had no difficulty in accepting that the man who had handled this potentially explosive court situation was a man who could be trusted to run the country. Pharaoh appointed Joseph to a post which is commonly regarded as that of 'Vizier', an all-powerful appointee second only to Pharaoh whose job was to run the country and enable Pharaoh to act with the distance and majesty of his supposedly divine status, without being bogged down with affairs of state. Joseph received clothes to mark his office and the symbols of office, a gold chain, Pharaoh's signet ring, the Vizier's chariot (41:42-43), and also the necessary signs of respectability, an Egyptian name (though we do not know what it means – 41:45) and a wife from a well-connected priestly line.

In a moment, it seems, God had changed everything. God often works in the world like this, even today, and we would be wise to watch out for it. His plan for the world will sometimes break through into human affairs with extraordinary drive and forthright energy, and we can either watch with surprise or be careful to spot the Holy Spirit. God is always at work, and sometimes when we least expect it.

Going Deeper

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

- Pharaoh's dream and the purposes of God
- Joseph's powerful speech
- The elevation of Joseph within Egypt

Going Deeper

Pharaoh told his dream, Joseph delivered his speech and the result was that Joseph's boyhood dreams of greatness were fulfilled. This much is obvious, but we need to know why this was happening, and as we look closer at the story, look carefully at what God was doing. Pharaoh's vision was a prophecy; a word from God, and it required a response that only a true man of God could give.

Pharaoh's dream and the purposes of God

When Pharaoh told his dream to Joseph (41:17-24), he added some details. These are mainly about the manner in which the seven gaunt and thin cattle ate up the fat cows but remained emaciated. It was an ominous sign. Pharaoh was also clear, without saying so directly, that although he had awoken in the middle of it, he regarded the dream as one; the word for 'dream' is in the singular throughout his telling of the dream.

It is quite extraordinary that books have been written by scholars concerning the differences between what Pharaoh said about the dream first time to the magicians and wise men of Egypt, and what he said secondly to Joseph. In addition, theories have been circulated about why Joseph was able to interpret the dreams and the others were not! This is irrelevant, and the differences in the telling of the dream are a natural feature of the way normal people tell stories. The truth is that this dream was a prophecy given by God through Pharaoh; someone who was not one of His chosen people. Although this is something we do not normally notice in the Old Testament, God frequently used people who were not from His own chosen people as the starting point for some significant revelation or deed, and this story is no exception (see also the story of Naaman – 2 Kings 5:1f. the story of Ruth, and the story of Pharaoh Neco at the time of King Josiah 2 Kings 23:29f. etc.). God used Pharaoh's trouble and distress at the prospect of forthcoming drought, as a way of working within human affairs to bring about the salvation of His own people Israel.

Joseph's powerful speech

Joseph's speech is a powerful discourse, as we have already seen. He immediately showed that he had listened to Pharaoh carefully by accepting openly that the dream was a unity, the 'same thing' (41:25). Small features such as these are the real reason why Pharaoh responded so well to Joseph; and remember, the teenage Joseph we met many years previously (37:5f.) was not one who was interested in listening to the members of his family! He had learned to listen through years of suffering and service. In addition, as is now well known in the field of counselling, the fact that Joseph repeated back to Pharaoh a substantial part of his dream whilst explaining it (41:26,27), showed Pharaoh that he had listened and heard Pharaoh's concerns. He showed what is today called 'empathy', by reflecting back to Pharaoh what he had said to him. We may find the repetition boring; but it is significant!

Three times, Joseph emphasised that God was in control (41:25,28,32), and this theme of his speech was certainly effective; Pharaoh picked this up immediately after the speech, talking of Joseph as a man in whom was the 'spirit of God' (41:38). All ancient peoples were religious and 'believed' in gods, but we must not imagine that they believed in God in the same way as the families of Abraham Isaac and Jacob. Nevertheless, God used their belief to further his own command of history and his directing of events according to His plan for the salvation of the world.

Joseph's final plea for a man to be found to put into effect the plan of action he himself proposed was a classic 'job request'. There was no point in not taking the risk of doing this, because from Joseph's point of view, if he failed in his speech, then he would probably be executed. The fact that Joseph was still standing before the king of Egypt, who was listening and apparently accepting of what he said, was evidence that he should take advantage of Pharaoh's favour.

The plan Joseph presented was simple and logical, and there are plenty of court records from ancient Egypt which indicate that this kind of scheme was put in place from time to time because of the obvious need to protect the land from famine. In this case and at this time, Pharaoh needed someone who was willing and able to act with authority and to do what everyone knew should be done; moreover, this was God's way of

placing his own servant at a critical position in the court of Egypt. This would eventually guarantee the necessary movement of Jacob and all the brothers of Joseph to Egypt according to God's plans for His people.

The elevation of Joseph within Egypt

The court scene in which Joseph was elevated to the position of Vizier appears a little 'staged' and all too easy, we might say. We, however, are not familiar with the culture and intrigues of ancient Egypt and their ways of doing things. Again, there are plenty of records of ancient Egypt written in Hieroglyphics, which tell tales just as strange, and stranger. Some scholars have found parallels with the story of Joseph and believe they can identify him within the timeline of kings and Pharaohs, but others dispute this. It is interesting, however, that in recent times, the Bible is increasingly being seen by secular scholars as a genuine ancient document which deserves to be treated with as much care and respect as other ancient documents. The search for the identity of Joseph as a genuine figure in Egyptian history is real (see 'A Test of Time' by David Rohl – Century Press).

It may seem odd to us that Pharaoh gave Joseph as much power as he did, and some scholars believe that Joseph was merely put in charge of agricultural land in the north of the country (with little evidence except their natural feeling that they don't believe the story as written in Scripture). The passage itself is unequivocal. Joseph was 'second' in all Egypt to Pharaoh, according to his chariot (41:43), a symbol of military authority, not just agricultural.

In the midst of the grand story of Joseph's newly won favour and authority, there is also the touching description of his receiving 'fine linen garments'. As a teenager he had worn his special 'coat' made by his father; something which marked him out, in his own young mind, as different from his brothers. The same shredded coat was the cause of Jacob's deep anguish, causing him to believe that Joseph was dead, ravaged by an animal. The new fine clothes represent a new phase of the story of Joseph; the symbol of a man who had learned wisdom and patience through suffering and sacrifice. His actions from now on are central to the story of God's people.

Application

Within this passage there are a few helpful points for our consideration. Firstly, it indicates the important point that we have to wait for God's timing, especially if we believe that He has placed a special calling on our lives like that of Joseph. Joseph knew from his teenage years that the Lord had called him to greater things, and having waited, he seized the initiative at the time God gave him and not before, standing before Pharaoh he knew his time had come and he took it. Joseph had to be bold and trust that God's promises for him would be fulfilled. I suspect that many people are called by the Lord in their younger years; however, many people also discount what they have felt or experienced in earlier years and therefore do not reach the maturity of fulfilling the dreams God has given them. If we are to be the Lord's servants, we need to be able to hold closely to the call that God has given us (often early in our Christian experience), and then seize the moment when God provides it. We will only do that if we hold on to the hopes He has first given us.

Secondly, there is a great deal in this story about listening, being honest, stating the obvious and following through what has to be said and done. Too often, we avoid what the Lord has placed before us to do, because it seems uncomfortable or unpalatable; like the seven years of famine after seven good years. It is a sign of our spiritual intelligence and maturity that we face the issues before us and work with God to plan our way through the evils which assail us. Some people bemoan a lack of spiritual growth or insight, but it will only come through dealing with what the Lord places before us. For each of us, our place, our call, our time is unique, and the Lord will use that powerfully if we will let Him, just as He used Joseph.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Read the first paragraph (41:17-24) and discuss the way Pharaoh described his dream to Joseph, and why it is different from what he said previously (41:1-16).
2. Within your group, describe to each other the mental picture you have of the scene.
3. Do you think it was right for Joseph to be given an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife, given that he was related to Abraham?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This passage is the first long speech in the story of Joseph, and there are a number yet to come in the story. How important is it for God's people to be able to and prepared to speak out publicly, without fear, and with confidence. We often describe this as a special gift of God, but there is a good case to be made for all the Lord's people to face the challenge of speaking publicly and in front of others. It helps them face what it means to explain their faith. I well remember the first occasion that I spoke in public and it was fearful! However, it was used by the Lord to break my own inhibitions and enable me to go on to speak in public without fear.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If you have not spoken 'in public' before, consider whether the Lord might wish you to do this some time. Pray about your own feelings to do with speaking in public and place them before the Lord in honesty and with care. Let Him direct you in such matters and not your own feelings about such things.*
- *Pray that God's people will be willing to embrace the gifts of God and use them for His glory. Pray that the church will enable people to use their gifts and not prevent them from doing this through ignorance or through bad example or teaching*

Final Prayer

Call each of us, Lord Jesus, according to Your plans for the world and for the future. May we be prepared to play our part in whatever way you require of us, so that Your Gospel may be proclaimed throughout the world, and to Your glory! Thanks be to God; AMEN
