

Prayer

Praise You, Lord Jesus, for everything that make life pleasurable. Thank You for laughter and smiles, for quality entertainment, for good conversation, for the wonders of excellent music and art, and every pleasing experience of life. Your Kingdom, O Lord, reflects all that is good in the world You have made, and we look forward to enjoying its benefits, in Your presence, forever. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Books

Pray for any authors you know who are trying to get their works published. Pray especially for Christian authors who are using fiction in order to promote godliness.

On-going prayers

- *Give thanks for good food, blessed and shared with others*
- *Pray for people you know who are on holiday and need a rest*
- *Pray against the widespread misuse of recycling within the world*

Meditation

(a reflection on Psalm 101)

I will sing a song of loyalty and justice;
A tune that is pure in your ears, O Lord.

I will persist on a path of integrity of heart;
A walk that attains this through You, O Lord.

I will do my work with unstinting loyalty;
An effort that is pure in Your sight, O Lord.

I will guard my heart far from wickedness;
A conscious effort to avoid evil, O Lord.

I will keep a mind that is upright and true;
A life trained for love, not war, O Lord.

*I have set my soul to achieve right not wrong
And walk as I have been taught, O Lord.*

*I have given glory to You for saving my soul;
And will praise Your name forever, O Lord.*

Bible Study - Genesis 41:46-57

⁴⁶ Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Joseph then went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout the land of Egypt. ⁴⁷ During the seven years of plenty, the earth produced copiously. ⁴⁸ He gathered up all the food from the seven years of plenty in the land of Egypt, and stored up food in the cities; in each, he stored up the food from the fields around the city. ⁴⁹ In this way, Joseph stored up great quantities of grain like the sand of the sea. He stopped calculating it because it was beyond measure.

⁵⁰ Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, born to him by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. ⁵¹ Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, meaning 'God has made me forget all my hardship and my father's house.' ⁵² The second he named Ephraim, meaning 'God has made me fruitful in the land of my troubles.'

⁵³ The seven years of plenty enjoyed by the land of Egypt came to an end; ⁵⁴ and the seven years of famine set in, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every other country, but throughout Egypt there was bread. ⁵⁵ Now when Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. He said to all the Egyptians, 'Go to Joseph, and do what he tells

you.’⁵⁶ When the famine had spread across the land, Joseph opened up all the resources, and sold to the Egyptians, since the famine gripped all Egypt.⁵⁷ Moreover, people came from all over the world to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, as the famine took hold of all the world.

Review

Joseph’s story now becomes a bitter-sweet fulfilment of everything that had been predicted. All the way through this passage of Genesis, Scripture has a subtle way of reminding us that God is in control. He gives Pharaoh a dream that turns out to be true, He places Joseph at the right place and at the right time to interpret Pharaoh’s dream, and then by the inspiration of the Lord, proclaim seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Because God is in control, this is exactly what happens, and we are reminded of the famous comment of Amos; ‘Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing His secrets to His servants the prophets’ (Amos 3:7).

This passage gives us the impression of time flying by. It records seven years of plenty in which Joseph did as he had suggested and as Pharaoh had then required of him, storing up a tax of one fifth of the grain (41:34). Then, because of the size of the crops in the years of plenty, the rate of tax became irrelevant as there was more than enough to eat and store ‘in abundance’. There is a small phrase in the midst of this passage, ‘like the sand of the sea’ (41:49). In the book of Genesis, this is used on two other very important occasions relating to the Covenant. Firstly, it is used in God’s promise to Abraham after his ‘sacrifice’ of Isaac (22:17), and secondly in Jacob’s prayer, affirming his belief in the Covenant promises of God on the night before he crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. Because of this connection, there is a simple message here. Just as God could create extravagant crops and wealth ‘like the sand of the sea’ in years of plenty throughout Egypt, He would also abundantly fulfil His Covenant promises through the seemingly impossible circumstances of His divided ‘chosen’ family. At the time, Joseph lived in a different world from the rest of his family back in Canaan; yet nothing is impossible to God.

Just to ensure that we know this is an important theme in Genesis, we are told that in the years of plenty, Joseph also had a family. We will look more closely at the meaning of the names of Manasseh and Ephraim later on. However, the text (41:51,52) gives us a simple starting place to grasp their meaning. The names indicate that Joseph had left behind the hardships of the past (Manasseh) and was looking forward to a fruitful future (Ephraim). For us who live in New Testament times, this is not unlike a simple Gospel message of transformation. Incidentally, when Scripture uses the word ‘forget’ about the past (see verse 51); it does not mean that the past is somehow wiped out. Joseph’s past could never be wiped out; indeed we ‘remember’ it every time we read it is Scripture. When Joseph spoke about ‘forgetting’ the past, he meant that he was able in God’s strength to put it behind him and its power to do harm had been eliminated.

This is how Jesus deals with sins on the Cross; he eliminates its power to destroy us, and God’s people are saved when sin loses its power. As we will find in the remaining story of Joseph, the power of sin is destroyed by the love Joseph shows to his brothers, and as a consequence, the ‘chosen’ family of God is healed and re-united.

The last verses of today’s passage tell the story of what happened as the famine began to ‘bite’ (41:53f.), and we are told in graphic terms that the famine was not local to Egypt, but worldwide (from the perspective of Egypt and Canaan!) Ancient records tell us that it was common for Egypt to experience famine in either the upper part of the Nile or the southern part, and sometimes for up to seven years (there are few records of anything longer than this). Even rarer was the phenomenon of famine in both north and south, as was the case at the time of this story. So the fact that the famine was worldwide was out of the ordinary and regarded by all as an ‘act of God’. Everything came about according to the revelation of God.

Going Deeper

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

- The preparations made in years of plenty
- The names and the significance of Joseph’s two sons
- Survival in the years of famine

Going Deeper

Our passage today falls into three easily identifiable parts; firstly, the years of plenty and the provision made by Joseph for the famine. Secondly, the birth of Joseph’s two sons, which some regard as central to the whole story of Joseph. Thirdly, the beginning of the famine, which sets the scene for the rest of Genesis that is set against the backdrop of world drought.

Preparation in the years of plenty

Seven years in really quite a long time to hold office and grow in any work or activity, and Joseph had seven 'years of plenty' to sustain his office and establish his power. Joseph began his employment as Vizier for Pharaoh at the age of thirty (41:46) and began by travelling the length and the breadth of the land in order to enact his plan for the saving of Egypt from catastrophic drought. He had mentioned in his great speech that he would need to appoint 'overseers' (41:34) in order to accomplish the task, and it would have taken some time to establish the strict lines of responsibility and trust which meant that orders were obeyed and the tax on grain crops put into effect.

It appears that God was behind everything, for the 'years of plenty' became years of superabundance. The Hebrew expression for 'copiously' (41:47) is literally 'by handfuls', with the implied idea that a 'head' of corn occupied a 'handful', in other words, an amount which was far more than could be counted. It is interesting that Joseph set up the grain stores based upon local cities. It sounds a simple matter, but wheat for bread was of course produced in the vast extended farmlands along the irrigated banks of the Nile, but the major population centres and places of power and influence were in the cities. There are plenty of records from ancient Egypt of storing wheat for times of famine, but the emphasis here is on gathering it to the main population centres, so that life could be sustained as much as normal during the agricultural troubles. If there is one thing we know about ancient Egypt, it is that it was a civilisation with a primitive 'economy', which had developed well beyond the subsistence level. The rural agriculture supported an extensive numbers of workers and priests, both of which were responsible for the great building projects such as the pyramids and other ancient monuments and tombs. It was Jacob's job to defend this economy, and by God's help, he succeeded so that food was stored 'beyond measure' (41:49).

The names and the significance of Joseph's two sons

You may have noticed that in the classic lists of the tribes of Israel, such as those which allocate land at the time of the invasion of Canaan (Judges 13f.) we do not find 'Joseph' listed. The simple way of understanding what happened is that during the Exodus from Egypt, the Lord took the tribe of Levi 'as His own' to be a tribe of servants and priests. Consequently, Joseph's two sons made up the gap by providing the two 'half tribes' Ephraim and Manasseh, which are usually included in the list of the twelve tribes (where Levi is sometime excluded) after the time of the Exodus. Clearly, the birth of these two tribal leaders was significant for the future of Israel. Even more so because Ephraim became one of the largest of the northern tribes, sometimes so large that it was called 'Israel' (Isaiah 17:3, Jer 31:9 Hosea 5:3 etc).

Through scholarly analysis of the name of his wife and her father, we know that Joseph was married into one of the highest priestly families and castes in Egypt who were worshippers of the sun god 'Re'. There is some interest in this amongst scholars because it is believed that there are similarities between the development of the worship of 'Re' in Egypt and the worship of 'one God' by Moses' father-in-law Reuel (see Exodus 2:18f.), a man who had some influence upon the younger Moses. Whilst this remains a matter for speculation, it is nevertheless clear that the growth of Joseph's family had great religious significance.

Firstly, he gave his children Hebrew names, not Egyptian names, even though he had taken an Egyptian name himself at the behest of Pharaoh (41:45). Manasseh comes from a Hebrew word which means 'making forget'. The meaning stated in Scripture indicates that Joseph had not exactly forgotten his hardship either in the past or in 'my father's house' (which presumably means the troubles of his youth). Despite this, these past events now held no power over Joseph and he was free from their power by the grace of God. The name of 'Ephraim' originally meant 'fertile land', and the meaning of his name given in our passage looks forward; though it is uncertain what 'land of my troubles' means. Certainly God had made Joseph fruitful in Egypt where he had endured many troubles. Prophetically, however, this could point forward to a time when Joseph's actions would be seen as part of God's work to make His people 'fruitful' first in Egypt, but then after the Exodus, back in Canaan again; the land where Joseph had first endured trouble at the hand of his brothers.

Survival in the years of famine

The universal nature of the famine which set in after seven years of plenty in Egypt is emphasised throughout the final verses of this chapter (41:53-57). Everything unfolded exactly as planned. The people came to Pharaoh to help them; after all, he was their 'god'. Pharaoh pointed the people to Joseph and was happy to stand back and allow his Vizier to take the heat of organising the situation as it developed. We will discover that the whole situation becomes much worse, leading to the key feature of the whole story, the journey of Joseph's brothers to seek food in Egypt. But this passage merely drives home the message that God is in control of events even though we are talking about the terror of drought.

Joseph's power lay in his ability to control the supply of grain now that drought had come. He was ideally placed to do whatever God required of him, and at one level he did just that, supplying people not just from Egypt but from all over the world. We will read more about this in tomorrow's passage, as the story line accelerates towards that important conclusion of Joseph's meeting with his brothers. The 'happy ending' of

this story is not salvation from drought, but God's control of history and His management of His own people who had to grow into a nation in Egypt if they were to become the people He would have them be.

Application

This whole passage of Scripture covers fourteen years of time, with a small cameo picture of the birth of Joseph's sons in the middle. In comparison to this, the incident in which Joseph became Vizier (as in yesterday's text) and the incidents in the reunion of Joseph and his brother's (which come shortly) are very brief, taking only a few hours or days at the most. The story shows that faithfulness is something that has to be demonstrated over a considerable period of time, indeed, this is how Joseph proves to God that he has fulfilled his call. From his teenage years, Joseph had known that he would lead, but fourteen years of high level leadership was a tough test for anyone, especially after a similar number of years of prison and deprivation.

If God has given us a vision of what He wants to do with us and we are prepared to follow that vision, then we should be prepared to follow the long path of service that proves our faithfulness to this call. Such an approach to ministry and service within God's church is at odds with the way that the world works today, in which instant results are required of people of any age, and anyone with two years in an office can claim 'extensive' management experience, possibly even significant 'bonuses' on commission. God's people today must be prepared to follow Him without compromising their basic call to faithfulness over long periods of time, including periods of spiritual drought and famine as well as years of plenty.

It is my belief that God is judging His church now, and His people must endure this with faith before they can again rejoice in the wonders of renewal. If that is what we must do, then we must faithfully do it, accept the judgement and anticipate the future glory; but it will not help to try and make God's wonders happen before He has brought His people to their knees in full submission again. The great things we see happen today in some parts of the world are but glimpses that the Lord gives us of the wonders to come (like the birth of Joseph's sons in this story). They are interesting, but should not distract us from the bigger picture of His judgement upon us and His plans.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Have you ever known what drought is like? Discuss what your country would be like without the water supplies we take for granted!
2. Read the passage about Joseph's sons (41:50-52) and discuss the significance of the names of Joseph's sons
3. Can good things can come out of bad, can you give examples from your own experience?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

In this passage, Joseph faithfully does what he has been called to do, and the future depends on him doing this work well. I have been reminded a number of times in my life that it is important that I continue to do what God has called me to do, and to do it to the best of my ability. It can be hard to keep something going for several years especially when it seems mundane and boring, but with a vision of where this will lead, such work is bearable and even exciting.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Take time to consider what you think about the last paragraph of the main study. Consider whether you agree with me about the judgement of God which is upon the church at this time. In what ways might this be evident, or would you dispute this analysis?*
- *Pray for any individuals who are known to you who are finding life hard in the middle of a spiritual 'drought', for example, or in the midst of other difficult times. Pray for a release from such difficulties and for times of blessing to return.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, be gentle with us when we are bruised by the stresses and difficulties of this world. Give us patience, determination, character, and the power to keep going through the toughest of times. In this way, may we prove that we are the people of faith we claim to be. Thank You Jesus: AMEN

