

GENESIS

Lesson 57

Genesis 41:1-40 Joseph and the Pharaoh's Dreams

Pharaoh's Dreams

¹ When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile, ² when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. ³ After them, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. ⁴ And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.

⁵ He fell asleep again and had a second dream: Seven heads of grain, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk. ⁶ After them, seven other heads of grain sprouted—thin and scorched by the east wind. ⁷ The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads. Then Pharaoh woke up; it had been a dream.

⁸ In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for 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, "Today I am reminded of my shortcomings. ¹⁰ Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard. ¹¹ Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. ¹² Now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us, giving each man the interpretation of his dream. ¹³ And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was impaled."

¹⁴ So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh.

¹⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."

¹⁶ "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."

¹⁷ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream I was standing on the bank of the Nile, ¹⁸ when out of the river there came up seven cows, fat and sleek, and they grazed among the reeds. ¹⁹ After them, seven other cows came up—scrawny and very ugly and lean. I had never seen such ugly cows in all the land of Egypt. ²⁰ The lean, ugly cows ate up the seven fat cows that came up first. ²¹ But even after they ate them, no one could tell that they had done so; they looked just as ugly as before. Then I woke up.

²² "In my dream I saw seven heads of grain, full and good, growing on a single stalk. ²³ After them, seven other heads sprouted—withered and thin and scorched by the east wind. ²⁴ The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven good heads. I told this to the magicians, but none of them could explain it to me."

²⁵ Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁶ The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; it is one and the same dream. ²⁷ The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine.

²⁸ "It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹ Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, ³⁰ but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. ³¹ The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe. ³² The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.

³³ "And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. ³⁴ Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. ³⁵ They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. ³⁶ This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine."

³⁷ The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. ³⁸ So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?"

³⁹ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. ⁴⁰ You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."

Genesis 41:1-40 [NIV]

So, it has been "two full years" since Joseph correctly interpreted the dreams of the Cupbearer and the Baker, and now the Pharaoh himself has two dreams which no one can interpret. For us to completely understand the Pharaoh's situation, we need to understand that the Pharaoh had a staff and an organization that was large and consisted of the best minds in Egypt. Egypt was a large and powerful nation, and it was the Pharaoh's duty to lead and protect that nation. Therefore, when the Pharaoh was troubled by his dreams, everyone was troubled.

The leader of the Pharaoh's administration was his vizier. The vizier was responsible for the running of the country; he was in many ways the country's Prime Minister. Under the vizier, organizationally, everyone fell in line. Directly reporting to the vizier were the tax collectors, scribes, and all city and regional administration officials. He was additionally responsible for the collection and storage of supplies, managing surpluses and scarcity, and redistributing goods accordingly. In conjunction with that, he was also responsible for overseeing large contracts and foreign trade agreements. Finally, he was charged with providing palace security and monitoring the comings and goings of all visitors, including being responsible for the security of the Pharaoh himself. The vizier, with the exception of the Pharaoh, was the most powerful man in Egypt.

The other group of influential men in the Pharaoh's court were the magicians and wise men. The magicians in ancient Egypt were not doing magic tricks for the Pharaoh. They were instead seen as keepers of secret knowledge; they were the priests of Egypt. (See Exodus 7:11, for example.)

The existence and use of wise men, magi, etc., in many courts continued many centuries after Joseph. For example, in Daniel 2:27, Daniel refers to them in answering a question the king had asked: "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about."

In fact, Daniel was promoted to high office by the king and became chief of the magi, the wisemen, of Babylon. In Daniel 2:48 we read, "Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men." [NIV]

With this backdrop, you can readily imagine what the Pharaoh's palace was like that morning. His normal staff brought him his food, going over the list of daily administrative matters and visitors, but noticing that the Pharaoh was very unsettled, i.e., "his mind was troubled." Then, into his normal morning mix of people and activity, he summoned the magicians and wise men. Once they were gathered in front of him, he explained his two dreams; however, try as they might, none of the wisest in all of Egypt could interpret them. Then, as noted in Genesis 41:9, another person of influence

spoke to the Pharaoh, his Cupbearer. Isn't it surprising that, with all of the high-level people addressing the Pharaoh, a humble cupbearer now approached him?

Actually, a cupbearer in the Pharaoh's court was one of the Pharaoh's most-trusted subjects—closer to the Pharaoh and more-trusted than anyone else. He was in effect the head butler; he would supervise anyone responsible for serving the Pharaoh in a capacity that could potentially bring harm to the Pharaoh. He was so trusted that he often had the Pharaoh's ear more than any other person. As such, he was constantly at the Pharaoh's side.

Even centuries later, we see this same role in Nehemiah, who became the cupbearer to Artaxerxes as noted in Nehemiah 1:11. Similarly, 1 Kings 10:4-5 provides a good description of King Solomon's court, including the cupbearer, as Solomon entertained the Queen of Sheba: "When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the Lord, she was overwhelmed."

Clearly the Pharaoh's court was full of educated and wise people, all decked out in the court's finest clothing as they filled the court in front of a distressed Pharaoh—and then he summoned a common, dirty, and unsophisticated prisoner to enter this court and address him, the Pharaoh, the ruler of all of Egypt.

With this backdrop, respond to the following question.

1. Referring to Genesis 41:14, what happened next?

One can imagine Joseph's condition, having been imprisoned for at least two or three years, living in the vilest of conditions, and now invited to speak to the Pharaoh. Not only would he want to look his best, the captain of the prison knew he had to ensure that even a lowly prisoner was clean-shaven and dressed appropriately before addressing the Pharaoh.

We should understand that shaving and cleanliness, and even makeup, were important to both men and women in ancient Egypt; men even wore makeup—typically eye makeup. Using tweezers, knives, and razors, made of flint and metal, along with various shaving lotions, they would shave or remove all the hair on their heads. In many cases (especially for the priests), all body hair would be removed; the wealthy would even use wigs made of human hair as appropriate.

Bathing was also important, using a baking soda mixture with sodium carbonate, referred to as natron. Later, in 1500 BC or so, soaps were made from animal or vegetable oils and salt. The queens of Ancient Egypt preferred bathing in milk, as it exfoliated and restored their skin; using linen towels for drying.

Once this process was complete, Joseph was brought into the presence of the Pharaoh's court and the Pharaoh himself. Once again, Joseph was asked to interpret dreams that no one else in all the Pharaoh's court could decipher.

Read Genesis 41:16 and respond to the following question.

2. Joseph told the Pharaoh that he could not interpret the Pharaoh's dreams. Who did Joseph tell him could do it?

As recorded in Genesis 41:17-32, Joseph then interpreted the dreams that God had given Pharaoh. We often hear the expression, "speaking truth to power." Can you imagine telling the Pharaoh that a cataclysmic disaster was coming to his kingdom, and God was the one who would bring it about?

In the next lesson, we will examine how the Pharaoh reacted to this news, what happened to Joseph as a result of "speaking truth to power," and what became of the Pharaoh's kingdom.

Thanks again for studying with us!

In Christ,

Wes