

The Dream Interpreter

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[0 : 00] Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, and the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined.

The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them. After they had been in custody for some time, each of the two men, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were being held in prison, had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh's officials, who were in custody with him in the master's house, Why do you look so sad today?

We both had dreams, they answered, but there is no one to interpret them. Then Joseph said to them, Do not interpretations belong to God?

Tell me your dreams. So the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream. He said to him, In my dream, I saw a vine in front of me, and on the vine were three branches.

[1 : 20] As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and put the cup in his hand.

This is what it means, Joseph said to him. The three branches are three days. Within three days, Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position.

And you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as he used to do when you were his cupbearer. But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness.

Mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon.

When the chief baker saw that Joseph had given a favorable interpretation, he said to Joseph, I too had a dream. On my head were three baskets of bread.

[2 : 25] In the top basket were all kinds of baked goods for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head. This is what it means, Joseph said.

The three baskets are three days. Within three days, Pharaoh will lift off your head. And impale your body on a pole. And the birds will eat away your flesh.

Now the third day was Pharaoh's birthday. And he gave a great feast for all of his officials. He lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker in the presence of his officials.

He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, so that he once again put the cup into Pharaoh's hand. But he impaled the chief baker, Joseph had said to them in his interpretation.

The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph. He forgot him. His head said to them in his head. And now, when out of the river, there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds.

[3 : 30] After them, seven other cows, ugly and goat, came out of the lough and stood beside those on the riverbank. And the cows that were ugly and goat ate up the seven sleek, fat cows.

Then Pharaoh woke up. He fell asleep again and had a second dream. Seven ears of corn, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk.

After them, seven other ears of corn sprouted, thin and scorched by the east wind. The thin ears of corn swaddled up the seven healthy full ears.

Then Pharaoh woke up. It had been a dream. 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. Then the chief caballer said to Pharaoh, Today I am reminded of my shortcomings.

[4 : 33] Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard. Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream has meaning on its own.

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 dreams. And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us. I was restored to my position, and the other man was impaled. 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. Pharaoh said to Joseph, 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.

I cannot do it, Joseph replied to Pharaoh. But God will give Pharaoh the answers he desires. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, Joseph, and very ugly and lean. I've never seen such ugly cows in all the land of Egypt.

[6 : 01] The lean, ugly cows ate up the seven fat cows that came up first. 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. In my dream I saw seven ears of corn, full and good, growing on a single stalk. After them, seven other ears sprouted, withered and thin and scorched by the east wind. The thin ears of corn swaddle up the seven good ears. I told this to the magicians, but none of them could explain it to me. 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. The seven good cows are seven ears, and the seven good ears of corn are seven ears. It is one and the same dream. The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterwards are seven ears. And so there are seven worthless ears of corn scorched by the east wind. There are seven years of famine.

It is just as I said to Pharaoh. God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt. But seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, because the famine will ravage the land. The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that it follows will be so severe. 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. And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance.

Pharaoh. 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 cities for food. These food shall be held and reserved 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. The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So Pharaoh asked them, Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is in the Spirit of God?

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 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.

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger.

[9 : 11] He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain round his neck. He made him ride in a chariot as his second in command, and people shouted before him, Make way! First, he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh said to Egypt, I am Pharaoh, but without your word, no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt.

Pharaoh gave Joseph the name of Joseph the name of Joseph, and gave him Asenath, daughter of Potiphar, priest of On, to be his wife.

And Joseph went out the land of Egypt. When Joseph was 30 years old, when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt, Joseph went out from Pharaoh's presence and traveled throughout Egypt. During the seven years of abundance, the land produced plentifully.

Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city, he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it.

Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea. It was so much that he stopped keeping records, because it was beyond measure.

[10:35] Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath, the daughter of Potiphar, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, It is because God has made me forget all my troubles and all my father's household.

The second son he named Ephraim and said, It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering. The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said.

There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt, there was food. When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food.

Then Pharaoh told all the Egyptians, Go to Joseph and do what he tells you. When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened all storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians.

For the famine was so severe throughout Egypt, and all the world came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was so severe everywhere. This is the word of the Lord.

[11:49] Keep your Bible open in this magnificent story as we look at it together, and let me pray for God's help as we do that. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for this amazing account of how you rescued Egypt and the world.

And we pray please that as we look at it together, you would open our eyes to understand its significance, and you'd give us hope. For we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

I wonder if you ever find it hard to imagine that life might change in any substantial way.

How long do you have to be doing life to begin to grow weary of the relentless sameness of everything in our world?

Governments, they come and they go, and nothing much changes. Dictators rise and fall and are replaced by new ones.

[12:51] New Year's Day comes and resolutions are made, and then they're made again the same time next year. Personal fears are confronted and put to one side, only to creep up on you again at a later date.

Sins are confessed and repented of, and then repented of again, and again. Difficulties come and then they ease off for a bit, and then others come.

And sometimes you wonder if you'll ever recover from them, and then others come. At so many different levels in life, it's easy for human beings to lose hope that anything can ever really be different.

Well, if you're a person here who's begun to lose hope in the possibility of change in your life or in our world, this is a fantastic morning to be in church because this episode, excuse me, concerns possibly the biggest changes you could ever imagine.

Let me just give you a taste of that before we dive into the detail. Think what happens in the span of this story to the two main characters in the story.

[14:00] The first main character is obvious, Joseph. His name is mentioned many times in this story. And so far, his life has not been a happy one.

Sold into slavery by his brothers, despite his faithfulness to his Egyptian master, falsely accused of sexual assault and imprisoned. But there's a glimmer of hope at the beginning of this chapter, isn't there?

Look at verse 14. He says to the cup bearer, Mate, when it goes well with you in three days, as it certainly will, have a word with Pharaoh and get me out of here.

I don't deserve to be here. But, verse 23, nothing changes. The chief cup bearer did not remember Joseph.

He forgot him. And the story continues. When two full years had passed. This is the very lowest point in Joseph's life.

[15:00] An anonymous foreign slave, somewhere in a prison in the vast empire of Egypt, and the last visible thread of hope has just snapped.

Yet, in the space of less than a working day later on, he becomes the functional ruler of that great empire in less than a day.

Huge change. Almost instantaneous. There's another human figure in this drama. Actually, a much neglected human figure in this drama.

And he gets more mentions than Joseph. And he's in view from the very first verse. Just look at the beginning of chapter 40. Some time later, the cup bearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt.

Their master is doubly emphasized right at the beginning of the story. And again, verse 5. The cup bearer and the baker of the king of Egypt. And Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, gets 39 other mentions in this passage.

[16:13] In terms of naming, he's the most prominent human character. And the changes that happened to Pharaoh in this story are no less dramatic than those that happened to Joseph.

Let's just zoom in on that for a moment. Look at verse 33 in chapter 41. Joseph has just told Pharaoh the interpretation of the dream.

And he says this. Now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest and collect all the food of those good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh to be kept in the cities for food.

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.

Just consider for a moment what a bold suggestion this is. Look, I know you've never met me before and I'm a foreign slave and I've just done time in prison.

[17:20] But on the sole basis of my take on your dream, what you really ought to do, Pharaoh, is completely change the economic policy of your vast empire for the next seven years.

And if you don't, it's going to mean total ruin for your country. And by the way, put in place a competent person to manage that, not you. It's a bold pitch, isn't it?

Can you imagine any world leader responding positively to that? And remember, this is the guy who impales his servants if they don't please him. And Pharaoh goes, verse 37, Yeah, alright then.

That sounds like a good idea to me. And you are the guy to do it. And verse 40, I'm still on the throne but you're in charge of everything. Everything to do with government. And in fact, verse 41, everything to do with the whole country.

And verse 44, remember that I'm Pharaoh, but basically you are in total control. And all of these moves happen in less than a working day.

[18:32] Now, is that not dramatic in terms of change? Some explanation needs to be sought for why these huge changes in circumstance for these two men happen.

Nothing normal is going on here. So let me point out two reasons for the changes, two reasons emerging from this passage for why these great changes happen.

Number one, God reveals his plans through his rescuer. The events of these chapters are built around two double dreams.

The first pair of dreams given to Pharaoh's two officials in prison. And they are not ordinary dreams. They are remarkable enough for both of the individuals concerned to think that there is something going on.

Secondly, they happen on the same night, which is unusual, isn't it? Thirdly, they are both interpreted in similar ways.

[19:38] Did you notice that? Look at Joseph's words in verse 12. The three branches are three days, and within three days, Pharaoh will lift up your head. And now look at verse 18.

The three baskets are three days. Within three days, Pharaoh will lift off your head. Two head elevating dreams. Thirdly, do you notice they both look forward to the same event, the same occasion?

They describe in advance what Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, is going to do on his birthday at his banquet three days later.

And that is precisely what he does on his birthday at his banquet. Joseph's words prove absolutely true. Three days later, heads are elevated.

That's the first pair of dreams. The second pair of dreams is given to the king of Egypt himself in chapter 41. And this pair, well, it's really a nightmare.

[20:43] Our translation slightly undercooks it, because there's a whole bunch of dramatic beholds, which are left out in the NIV translation. I'm going to put them in. Look at the beginning of chapter 41.

When two full years had passed, behold, a dream. A dream. Pharaoh was standing by the Nile. And behold, out of the river, seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds.

After them, behold, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up after the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. And when Pharaoh retells the dream exactly the same, except in slightly more graphic terms, he goes, Look!

Look! Look! unbelievably ugly carnivorous cows! And unsurprisingly, he wakes up at that point. But eventually, he gets back to sleep, and he gets a kind of vegan rerun with cannibalistic corn.

This is a very disturbing dream. Very disturbing. Not least because the river and the cattle and the corn are symbols of Egypt's great sufficiency and prosperity.

[21 : 55] No one thinks these are ordinary dreams. But despite the fact that dream interpretation is a thing that Egyptians are into, no one's able to interpret the dream. Do you notice how at the beginning and the end of Pharaoh's retelling of the dream, his main concern is that none of his guys can tell him what it means.

Verse 15, I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. Verse 24, I told this to the magicians, but none of them could explain it to me. And so desperate is he to know what this dream might mean, that the minute he hears that two years ago there was a guy in prison who foretold what the king would do on his birthday at his banquet, that Joseph is sent for immediately, and rushed up to the palace, and given a quick shave and a change of clothes, and straight from the prison to the palace, and right into the presence of the world leader.

I've heard it said that you can interpret dreams, to which the answer is a straightforward and emphatic, no, verse 15.

I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires, which is pretty much the same as he said to the two officials two years before. Do not interpretations belong to God?

Tell me your dream. Now these are indeed momentous dreams, aren't they? Why? Because they are God-given dreams, and only God can explain them.

[23 : 30] Which is precisely what Joseph says in verse 28. God has shown Pharaoh what he's about to do. And then verse 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.

Double dreams. God has decided. He's gonna do it. So why does Pharaoh do what he does in this story? Why does he hand over the rule of his kingdom to this man?

Well, I think the answer is straightforward. God has spoken to him in extraordinary ways. And Joseph is God's mouthpiece. And Pharaoh recognizes this as God's voice to him.

Look at verse 38 of chapter 41. Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the Spirit of God?

[24 : 34] Now, striking that this is Pentecost Sunday, for this is only the second mention of God's Spirit in the whole of the book of Genesis. And the first one was right back in chapter one, when God's Spirit was involved in the creation of the world.

Here, in this extraordinary moment, the ruler of the known world recognizes the Spirit of God at work in Joseph's words.

And he gives Joseph a name that reflects this. Now, folks, in the book of Genesis, name changes and the naming of children are loaded with theological freight all the way through the book.

Look at verse 45. This is the name Pharaoh gives Joseph, Zaphonath-Paneah, which probably means God speaks and lives.

The living God speaks, and he speaks so that people will live. And Pharaoh's willingness to submit to the one who speaks and lives leads to the salvation of his people.

[25 : 38] And indeed, the salvation of the world. Look at verse 54. When God did what he said he would do, and the famine came, the whole land of Egypt had food.

Seven years of famine, and Egypt was fine. And verse 57, all the world came to Egypt for food. At the human level, there are loads of ups and downs in this story.

At the human level. Difficulty in prison, anxiety in the palace, no one can work out what's going on, times of plenty, times of real hardship.

And in Joseph's life, there have been so many random-looking bad things that happened. But running all the way through this story in a straight line behind the scenes is God's saving plan.

God's plan to be merciful to the world in those days. And so he gives these startling dreams to the king of the superpower and providentially places an interpreter in the prison of the king of the

superpower.

[26 : 56] Just imagine what would have happened if Joseph had not been sold into slavery and had not been falsely accused of sexual assault and had not been forgotten in prison for a couple of years but set free.

Just imagine what would have happened. Well, Egypt would have starved and so would the world. You see, God is completely in control and kindly in control and organizes everything so as to make himself known to the king as the God who saves the world.

So let me say, believer, if you despair of change, this passage reassures us that though hidden, God is supremely in control of human affairs and completely in control of every single detail in your life, every detail without exception, no matter how random looking.

And he's in control of that for your ultimate good and the world's ultimate good. And he discloses what his fixed plans are so that people can get in line with them and be safe.

Here, God says what he's certainly going to do so that it will go well for Egypt. Let me give you a New Testament example of the same thing.

[28 : 31] Just keep your finger in these chapters and flip over to page 1114, Acts chapter 17, verse 31. Page 1114. Here's a very similar idea.

Paul is talking to Greeks in Athens and he comes to the end of a longish sermon, Acts chapter 17. And I'm going to drop in at verse 30.

In the past, God overlooked people being ignorant about him, but now he commands people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he's appointed and has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.

You see, once again, God has intervened dramatically in the world through Jesus' life and his death for sins and his resurrection. And his resurrection, says Paul, serves notice that the God who is completely in control has fixed a certain day when judgment will come.

And he's done all of this now so that people now will be ready for that day when it comes. God discloses his fixed plans so that people can prepare.

[29 : 54] God has not revealed himself to our world through Jesus in order that you and I can be fatalistic and sing, whatever will be, will be.

We'll just carry on and wait to see what happens. No, he's done it so we can stop being the way that we have been and be ready for the judgment when it comes as it certainly will.

Well, flip back to Genesis 41. God's complete control, you see, God's complete control is meant to lead to action, not fatalism in the lives of his people. Back in Genesis, nobody is singing, in Pharaoh's palace.

They're all planning for the future that God has revealed. So what accounts for the change in Pharaoh? Well, God has really revealed his plans through his rescuer. And Pharaoh has taken it seriously, which is always the right thing to do.

God's plans through his rescuer. Let me give you another reason for the changes in this passage. Secondly, God establishes a pattern for his rescuer in these events.

[31 : 09] God establishes a pattern. What accounts for the change in Joseph's circumstances? Well, at one level, Joseph's change in circumstances is because Pharaoh believes him and thinks that he'll be a good guy to do the job.

But there's something deeper than that going on, I think. Something more far-reaching. Something more ultimate than that going on in this passage. Just consider for a moment the pattern of Joseph's life.

Betrayed by his own people. Delivered into the hands of foreigners. Falsely accused. Forgotten in a place of suffering. Seemingly without hope.

And then in the course of one day, raised to the position of absolute rule. Given all authority to determine the fate of his nation and the world.

Remind you of anyone? It ought to. He becomes the world ruler. And the world flocks to him for safety. Look at verse 55.

[32 : 18] When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food. And Pharaoh told the Egyptians, Go to Joseph. Go to him.

He's the guy. I'm Pharaoh, but he's the one to go to. And look at verse 57. All the world came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph. He's the guy.

Joseph became the ruler and rescuer of Egypt. And the savior of the world. But here's the thing. He came to that position through intense suffering.

And perhaps more dramatically than any other story in the Bible. The events of Joseph's life in this passage foreshadow how God himself saves people.

When he does what he does. When he steps into the world in person. Not to save the world from famine this time, but from the judgment to come.

[33 : 23] This episode is a picture of how God himself does things when he steps into the world. Jesus' life and sufferings and death and resurrection are so central to God's plans for our world.

That they kind of magnetically attract the whole story towards them all the way through. So that all the way through the story, you get little glimpses, little foreshadowings of the big thing that's to come.

And this is one of the biggest ones. For Joseph goes from lowest to highest in less than a working day. And one of the most poignant ways in which the story points forwards to Jesus.

Is the names Joseph gives to his children. Do you remember that names are important in the book of Genesis? Well, given what he's been through, Joseph calls his children the most extraordinary things.

Verse 51. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, It's because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household.

[34 : 38] Manasseh. Forgotten. Forgetfulness. Which is a remarkable name, isn't it? Think of all that he suffered through his family and in all his subsequent troubles.

He's not pretending that those things didn't happen. But I think the point is that he's so aware of what God has been doing behind the scenes. And has now done.

That those terrible injustices are not crippling him. He's not eaten up by bitterness from those past hurts. Look at verse 52.

Here's another surprising name. Ephraim. Ephraim. Joseph said, It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering. Again, he's not pretending the suffering didn't happen.

But God has made him fruitful in the land in which he suffered. Forgetful and fruitful. That's what my family names are going to be.

[35 : 39] Is that not remarkable? It's a remarkable testimony to God's power at work in him, don't you think? And God's ability to intervene in a person's life so that they are not crippled by bitterness about what's happened to them in the past.

Many people live lives that are crippled by the bitterness of things that happened decades ago. So can I say, folks, there are very likely, very likely to be times in your life when you may well wonder whether you will ever escape the feelings of bitterness arising from things that have happened to you.

And you'll wonder if you will ever get past that sense of frustration and regret and anger.

You may well find yourself having to deal with feelings like that today. Can I encourage you not to lose heart? And to cry out to God for his help with those things.

It may take a long time. And it may have all sorts of fits and starts on the way and steps backwards. But God is able to make hurt lives healthily, forgetful, and fruitful in the end.

[37 : 02] It's a wonderful thing. But I wonder if this passage doesn't do something even more profound than this. We've already said that there's a pattern established here that foreshadows what God has done through Jesus' sufferings and death and resurrection.

So let me ask you, what kind of person do you think Jesus is? I mean, he suffered such tremendous injustice, didn't he? And hatred and blatant false accusation and physical abuse and public humiliation being stripped and nailed up and ridiculed while he was dying to bear the sins of the world.

Let me ask you a question. Do you think he's bitter about that? He could so easily be, couldn't he? Do you think he's all eaten up with resentment that gnaws away at his insides while he sits at the right hand of God? Do you think?

What's the King of Kings and Lord of Lords like? Is he dutifully kind? Good to you through gritted teeth? Grudging and restrained in his welcome?

[38 : 20] Do you think he thinks of you as you're the kind of family member he really wished he didn't have to relate to and he'd rather never talk to again but he just has to? Do you think he's constantly calling to mind all your faults and disloyalties and rebellions and ingritudes?

This passage gives us a very suggestive angle on the mindset of God's world rescuer. Forgetful. Fruitful. Let me just read a few of the Bible's words about the sufferings of Jesus.

Isaiah looks forward to him. Isaiah looks forward to him. It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, making his life an offering for sin. But he will see his offspring and prolong his days and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

After he has suffered, says Isaiah, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. Jesus, is he consumed with bitterness?

No. Satisfied with everything that has been done. Or listen to these New Testament words about Jesus.

[39 : 44] For the joy that was set before him. He endured the cross, despising the shame. Is he all gnawed up by past hurts?

No. Full of joy. Or listen to his own words. Father, I desire that those you've given may be with me to see my glory that you've given me because you love me.

Is he resentful about his people's sins? No. No. He just deeply desires that they will be with him forever. That's why he came.

Joseph. Fruitful. Forgetful. Just a little glimpse of the mindset of God's ultimate rescuer.

Let's pray together, shall we?