

GENESIS—WEEK 32

JOSEPH GETS A GREEN LIGHT



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is Pharaoh gives his ring to Joseph by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770) On display at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.

Joseph finally gets his chance to shine, and he seizes the opportunity without flinching. Still, God makes him wait.

Then, at last, things start to work out.

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T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

Thank you.

Genesis 41:9–42:11 — Joseph Gets a Green Light
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1 Genesis 41:9–16 (ESV)

Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “I remember my offenses today. When Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, we dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation. A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream. And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged.”

Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” Joseph answered Pharaoh, “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”

At last, the situation is ripe for Joseph’s gift to be revealed. The cupbearer remembers Joseph’s accurate interpretations, and he’s called forth.

The text briefly notes how dreadful Joseph’s condition was. The jail is called “*the pit*,” and Joseph cleans up before going to see Pharaoh. Note that this clean-up is not like in *The Wizard of Oz*, where Dorothy and her pals go to a boutique. Joseph cleans himself up, making Pharaoh wait. That’s a strategic choice.

Then, astonishingly, Joseph says to Pharaoh, “*It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.*” It’s Elohim, not Joseph, who will interpret Pharaoh’s dream. That’s chutzpah!

Joseph has put all his cards on the table. He doesn’t believe in Pharaoh’s gods; the one true God who created all things will interpret Pharaoh’s dream. The whole scene has suddenly become totally unpredictable. Pharaoh could have Joseph killed for his insolence.

But the dream interpretation is even more of a wild card. Pharaoh’s dream was a nightmare.

To serve God, you almost have to love roller-coasters. Life in Christ can be rough but is rarely boring. One of the keys to serving Christ well is to appreciate the unboringsness of it all.

Do you enjoy the movie *Toy Story*? Everything seems to go wrong (until the end). Is that frustrating or entertaining? Why or why not?

Toy Story is fun because, despite the constant setbacks, we expect everything to work out in the end. Thus, the setbacks aren’t depressing. Christians should have that same attitude. We may not see things work out this side of eternity, but we know they will work out in the end.

We can memorize this doctrine ‘til we’re blue in the face, but feeling that way is something else.

Your heart needs to feel what your head knows.

2 Genesis 41:17–36 (ESV)

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Behold, in my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile. Seven cows, plump and attractive, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. Seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and thin, such as I had never seen in all the land of Egypt. And the thin, ugly cows ate up the first seven plump cows, but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they were still as ugly as at the beginning. Then I awoke. I also saw in my dream seven ears growing on one stalk, full and good. Seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them, and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. And I told it to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me.”

Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind are also seven years of famine. It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt, but after them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land, and the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of the famine that will follow, for it will be very severe. And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years. And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.”

There's a wonderful bit of wisdom taught in, of all places, airplanes.

“In the event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure ... if you're traveling with someone who needs assistance, put on your own mask first before helping them with theirs.”

If you black out, you're useless to everyone else—particularly your kids. Thus, even when your priority is someone other than yourself, a selfish act can be the right thing to do.

Joseph is angling to become the overseer of Egypt. He doesn't want this just to end his misery in jail.

He wants this because he has a job to do, and he needs to be in a position to do it.

Christians are often hesitant to step up to major responsibilities. It feels egotistical to imagine yourself filling big shoes.

But it's not—if you focus on giving God the credit. God can do anything through humble servants.

3 Genesis 41:37–45 (ESV)

This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. And Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?” Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.” And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, “Bow the knee!” Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.” And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt.

Everywhere you see “God” here, it’s “Elohim” in the original Hebrew. Pharaoh uses the word Elohim? Can that be?

Maybe. Pharaoh may not be speaking Hebrew, so that’s not necessarily the word he uses. Still, that’s what he means. Pharaoh may have used an Egyptian word that means the monotheistic creator of everything (if there was one).

More importantly, Pharaoh gives *Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On*, to Joseph in marriage. Notice that Potiphera isn’t in on the transaction; it’s Pharaoh who gives Asenath to Joseph. But Potiphera isn’t just anybody; he’s a high priest of the sun god Ra.

<http://topicalbible.org/p/potiphera.htm>

<http://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Potiphera.html#.US7K21fkqWk>

Remember, Joseph made this all about God, not himself. Pharaoh’s sudden lack of respect for Potiphera (and Ra) is striking. Ra isn’t having a good week—and he’s about to have 14 bad years.

We tend to think of Joseph’s gift as dream interpretation. He’s really a master at glorifying God.

Actually, Joseph has a gift for playing along; God does all the heavy lifting. Joseph isn’t distracted by his suffering, so his response to Pharaoh is cool, calm, and collected. In a way, he just gives the obviously right response—but giving it under that much stress is no small feat. How does he do it?

Faith. Stress doesn’t have to be stressful, if you’re confident enough. But that’s an advanced skill—even an advanced level of faith. This generally takes time and trials (which Joseph had in spades) to develop.

Remember this the next time your whole world seems to be falling apart. God knows what He’s doing, and trials are one of the main ways He trains us.

Big trials mean that God deems you ready for some advanced lessons.

4 Genesis 41:46–57 (ESV)

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, and he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it. And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.

Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore them to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. “For,” he said, “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.” The name of the second he called Ephraim, “For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.”

The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do.”

So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.

Egypt is a totalitarian dictatorship. Joseph has the power to implement his extreme plan, and he stores up a huge amount of grain. When the famine hits, he’s ready—and *Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians*. Then people from *all the earth* start coming to Egypt to buy food. “*All the earth*,” doesn’t mean the whole planet. Biblical references to “*all the earth*” or “*all the world*” don’t translate literally into English. Caesar Augustus’s census of *all the world* didn’t include, for example, the wise men from the east.

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/trade/hd_trade.htm

This is the moment everything has been leading up to: Joseph’s brothers selling him into slavery, the drama with Potiphar’s wife, the baker and cupbearer’s dreams in jail, Pharaoh’s nightmare, the famine, everything. The stage is now set for Joseph’s brothers to come to Egypt.

But Joseph didn’t plan that. He’s just been doing his job and letting God’s plan unfold. Still, it’s essential that he does his job well. His manipulation of an entire nation’s grain supply is making this all work out.

Holy callings don’t always look like holy callings. Like Joseph, we can’t see what’s coming next. Even if we could, we wouldn’t understand it.

Praise God for His amazing plans. Whatever your duties are in the church, do them all for His glory.

5 Genesis 42:1–11 (ESV)

When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you look at one another?” And he said, “Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.” So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him. Thus the sons of Israel came to buy among the others who came, for the famine was in the land of Canaan.

Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. “Where do you come from?” he said. They said, “From the land of Canaan, to buy food.” And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them. And he said to them, “You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land.” They said to him, “No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies.”

The key to understanding today's passage (and the next few chapters) is Gen 42:23.

They did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. (ESV)

Joseph isn't speaking in Hebrew! He's speaking Egyptian through a translator.

<http://www.crystalinks.com/egyptlanguage.html>

The Bible doesn't describe how the scene looked, but it's not hard to imagine. Egyptian architecture is massive. Joseph is doing everything he can to intimidate his brothers. He's presumably sitting on some kind of throne—and keeping his distance. By speaking in Egyptian, he makes everything impersonal and also prevents his brothers from recognizing his voice. The scene is magnificent—and unsettling.

All this intimidation has a purpose. Joseph is setting up his brothers for an attitude adjustment.

Attitude adjustments lie at the heart of Christianity. Conversion is the ultimate attitude adjustment, but it's far from the only one. We are called to be transformed. That's major adjustment.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. — Romans 12:2 (ESV)

This is not advice for unbelievers. Paul wrote this to Christians. They need transformation too.

This is easy to memorize but hard to really get. I like to think that what I need at this stage of my Christian growth is a few tweaks here or there. I couldn't be more wrong.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What are your greatest fears?
2. Have you ever felt that God was calling you to something, but you just weren't up to it?
3. What helps you keep your head under stress?
4. Have you ever seen something unfold so that the events or the timing worked out perfectly for God's glory?
5. Which kinds of transformative attitude adjustments do Christians tend to ignore?