

Exalted at the Proper Time

Genesis 41:1-40

Humble yourselves, therefore,
under the mighty hand of God
so that at the proper time he may exalt you,
casting all your anxieties on him,
because he cares for you.

1 Pet 5:6-7 ESV

Through many years of discipling men and women, I have seen some very gifted folks blossom using their spiritual gifts. But, following a season of success, many were set aside, their gifts silenced and influence curbed. In a small number of cases this was due to sin, but in most instances it resulted from circumstances outside their control. For some it involved health issues, or having children, an unwanted divorce, injustice, or even the economy. When such times continue endlessly, it's easy to question whether we will ever again know the joy of using our gifts, or whether we were ever gifted at all.

No one felt the force of these questions more acutely than Jacob's son Joseph. Except for one occasion, his gift was locked up and forgotten for twelve years. But, though Joseph was forgotten on a human level, God never forgets and, in our text today, he exalts his servant beyond his *dreams*. Our text speaks not only to God's supreme faithfulness to his promises, it also gives insight into the mystery of what God was doing *in* Joseph while he was painfully waiting for *the proper time*. In hindsight, we are privileged to see what God was doing, which gives us an anchor of hope for our darkest times. It is much easier to endure the darkness when we can see the purposeful hand behind the crucible.

I. Pharaoh's World Invaded by Dreams (41:1-8)

A. Pharaoh's dreams (41:1-8)

1 After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, 2 and **behold**, there came up out of the Nile seven cows, attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. 3 And **behold**, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. 4 And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke. 5 And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And **behold**, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. 6 And **behold**, after them sprouted

seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. 7 And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and **behold**, it was a dream. (41:1-8 ESV)

Two full years have passed since Joseph was been forgotten by the cupbearer. Now God invades Pharaoh's world with two dreams in the night. Bruce Waltke observes that "in the ancient Near East, royal dreams were believed to indicate a special bond between God and the king shaking him to the core."¹ But in this case, as Brueggemann notes,

The dream takes the initiative away from Pharaoh. The king is no longer the subject, but the object. He receives messages. He does not generate them or authorize them. Kings are normally protected and screened from unwelcome messages. They hear mostly good news. But the dream penetrates the royal isolation."²

The dreams strike right at the heart of Egyptian civilization. Egypt's fertility was centered in the Nile basin and all the elements in the dream are symbols of food that speak of Egypt's pride in her ability to feed the world, especially in times of famine (12:10; 26:1). Gordon Wenham notes that "cows were not simply the typical farm animal of ancient Egypt, but they symbolized Egypt, the primordial ocean, and one of the gods, Apis (Happy), among other things."³

In contrast to the butler and the baker's dreams, which had vastly different interpretations, these two dreams are one and the same. In the first dream, Pharaoh, standing by the banks of the Nile, sees seven well-fed cows coming out of the river and grazing among the reed beds. Then seven more cows arise out of the water and stand beside the original seven. In contrast to the first group, these cows look emaciated. To Pharaoh's horror, they become carnivores and they eat the first cows.

This image shocks Pharaoh awake, but he soon slumbers again and has a second dream just as ominous as the first. In this dream, seven plump ears of grain come out of a single stalk, but then seven more ears rise up as thin and "*gaunt*" as the cows of the first dream and swallow up the good ears. So vivid are the dreams that Pharaoh doesn't realize he is dreaming until he wakes in a cold sweat, seized with fear. He is confronted with a reality that he cannot control, one that will bring his empire to its knees. The one who was supposed to be a *god* is now surprisingly weak and fearful.

B. The failure of the empire (41:8)

8 So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh. (41:8)

In response to his dream, Pharaoh calls upon all of Egypt's brightest and best to solve the pressing riddle. But no one in the land can interpret "*them*" for him. The fact that the *dream* is singular indicates that Pharaoh saw the dreams as essentially one dream, while the plural "*them*" suggests that all the magicians interpreted them unsuccessfully as *two* different dreams. Egypt is on the verge of a national disaster. No one is able to break the code and avert the crisis. At this most propitious moment, the cupbearer's memory is jarred, and the *forgotten* Joseph is finally mentioned to the king.

II. Joseph is Remembered (41:9-19)

A. The cupbearer confesses his lapse of memory (41:9-13)

9 Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "I remember my offenses today. 10 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, 11 we dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation. 12 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. 13 And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged." (41:9-13)

Pressed against the wall by the prospect of a national crisis, the unappreciative cupbearer finally owns up to his sin of failing to mention Joseph to Pharaoh. He faithfully recounts his time with Joseph in prison, when he and the chief baker were invaded by dreams in the night. His eyewitness testimony convinces Pharaoh that Joseph's resume seems like a perfect fit for the hour.

B. Joseph is summoned (41:14-16)

14 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. 15 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." 16 Joseph answered

**Pharaoh, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."
(41:14-16)**

The fact that Pharaoh responds with immediate action and no words reveals both the depth of his need and the gravity of the situation. The king's servants waste no time making Joseph presentable. He is bathed and shaved (it was Egyptian custom to be clean shaven, including the head) and given a new wardrobe. The Hebrew youth who was once stripped of his robe and thrown into a pit by his brothers, is now clothed with new garments to be presented before the king. The image of putting on new clothes represents Joseph's new social status and is similarly used by Paul in the New Testament as an apt metaphor for clothing ourselves in our new identity in Christ.

The king explains his dilemma to Joseph, adding that he has heard about his ability to interpret dreams. But Joseph is quick to give glory to the One to whom glory is due, explaining that it is God alone who interprets dreams (Dan 2:27-28, 30; 2 Cor 3:5). This is not just a statement of humility on Joseph's part, but a bold declaration that cuts against the dominant Egyptian worldview. In all his years, Joseph never doubted his divine gift, and now he shows no fear in challenging the world's greatest empire to submit to his God. His next statement that "God will give Pharaoh a favorable (Heb. *shalom* = "peace, well-being") answer" is ambiguous. It could mean either that God will answer Pharaoh "favorably," or that he will answer "concerning the well-being" of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh, too desperate to challenge the monotheistic theology of this Hebrew youth, immediately tells him his dreams.

III. Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's Dreams (41:17-32)

A. Pharaoh recounts his dreams (41:17-24)

17 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Behold, in my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile. 18 Seven cows, plump and attractive, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. 19 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. 20 And the thin, ugly cows ate up the first seven plump cows, 21 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. 22 I also saw in my dream seven ears growing on one stalk, full and good. 23 Seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouted

**after them, 24 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.”
(41:17-24)**

In the narrative art of the Bible, variations in verbal repetition are highly significant. In addition to the original report of the dream, Pharaoh describes his feeling of horror upon seeing the emaciated cows, a sight so ugly he had never seen anything like it “*in all the land of Egypt.*” This phrase becomes a repeated refrain ringing out seven times in this chapter “to indicate the comprehensiveness of the plenty, of the famine, and of the measures that Joseph adopts.”⁴ Pharaoh further elaborates on his revulsion, adding that after these emaciated cows had eaten the sleek and fat cows, they were still just as ugly and grotesque. Without a doubt, Pharaoh’s dreams have shaken him to the core.

Meir Sternberg comments on a more subtle difference, suggesting that in Pharaoh’s retelling of his dreams “...he unmakes the symmetry that the narrator has taken such care to make. Within each vision, Pharaoh blurs the contrast between the units; and within the pair of visions as a whole he blurs the similarity.”⁵ This makes Joseph’s ability to accurately interpret the dreams even more astounding, since Pharaoh has presented them as one dream with one interpretation; the magicians, two dreams with two interpretations; but to the inspired Joseph there are two dreams with only one interpretation.

B. Joseph gives the interpretation (41:25-32)

1. The unity of the dreams (41:25-26)

**25 Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; 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 dreams are one.
(41:25-26)**

Joseph first solves the riddle that Pharaoh indeed had two distinct dreams, but they have only one interpretation. In both dreams the number seven signifies seven years. In the three different sets of dreams in the Joseph story, the interpretation of each pair is different, with no set patterns, so apart from divine inspiration there is no possibility of an interpretation. This robs Egypt of her pride and makes her schools of dream technicians illegitimate. Joseph then proceeds to give Pharaoh the interpretation.

2. The interpretation of the dreams (41:27-31)

27 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. 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 plenty throughout all the land of Egypt, 30 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, 31 and the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of the famine that will follow, for it will be very severe. (41:27-31)

Both dreams speak of seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. The famine will be so severe it will be difficult to even remember the good years when abundance was the norm. Pain will purge their memory of all that was good. This explains Pharaoh's horror at the appearance of the "*thin*" cows after they had eaten the "*fat*" cows. They still looked emaciated. It was as if they had eaten nothing. So much for the interpretation. But why then did Pharaoh receive the revelation in two dreams not one? Joseph gives the answer.

3. The certainty and immediacy of the dreams (41:32)

32 And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. (41:32)

The repetition was to impress upon Pharaoh that God had determined the matter and that it was irrevocable. There is nothing that either Pharaoh or his administration could do to avoid the famine. Secondly, the repetition was to impress upon him the immediacy of the situation. So if Pharaoh was going to act he must do so immediately.

Pharaoh makes no response. He is stunned into silence. At this point (the *turning point* of the text), Joseph makes a bold move, demonstrating his courage and faith.

IV. Joseph's Strategy for Survival (41:33-40)

A. Joseph places his resume on the table (41:33-36)

33 Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. 34 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. 35 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. 36 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.” (41:33-36)

Joseph gives Pharaoh a gift that goes beyond the dream: the gift of practical wisdom that outlines a step-by-step plan to preserve the nation through the crisis. In effect, Joseph is placing his resume on the table, leaving his name blank for Pharaoh to fill it in. In offering unsolicited advice, Joseph runs the risk of appearing presumptuous and incurring the wrath of Pharaoh, but the consequences of doing nothing would have been more severe.

Joseph doesn't just pronounce judgment on a pagan empire and simply walk away. No, he sees a powerful link between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Though imprisoned in Egypt for years, he still cares deeply for the welfare of that society and therefore offers a solution for life. Though God has determined events, this does not mean that the empire is doomed to death. As Brueggemann points out,

The intervention of God does not end royal responsibility but sets it in a context where a new course of action is required. God's purpose is not the end of human planning but the ground for it. That God's 'plan' is above human 'plans' (Isa 55:8-9) does not mean there should not be human planning. It means that it must be responsive and faithful to God's plan.⁶

Joseph's plan is ingenious. Like a good statesman he reminds Pharaoh that severe crises call for severe measures. He proposes to put the whole nation under a strict food-rationing program, storing twenty percent of the food supply in each of the good years. This suggests that the good years will yield such abundance that approximately one and half year's supply from the good years will be enough to feed the nation (and the known world!) through seven years of famine.

Joseph then proposes that the program be administered in a quasi-military fashion,⁷ dividing the land of Egypt into regions, with overseers for each region, all reporting to one supreme vizier. The overseers are charged not only with the task of collecting and distributing the grain, but also with protecting it during the famine years. The goal, Joseph concludes, is **“that the land may not perish during the famine.”**

Here is one who was once the victim of the injustice of royal “power” offering his services to it for the public good. As Brueggemann asserts, “Joseph is the model for those who are born to rule.”⁸ And Roop adds, “For Joseph, royal power is dangerous, but not evil. He lives sometimes as victim and sometimes as agent of that power. Nevertheless, for all its force, royal power does not control the future. The power of dreams exceeds the power of Pharaoh.”⁹

May God make us instruments for **“life”** in times of crisis! So often today Christians view their role in the world as prophets to condemn the immoral actions of the “empire.” So few are like Joseph, who care enough to offer their services **“for life,”** within the very institutions which they condemn.

Pharaoh’s response to Joseph is as surprising as his initial imprisonment. It is difficult to imagine what pent-up emotions Pharaoh’s words released in Joseph that day. How amazing, that the human channel to open prison doors and fulfill Joseph’s dreams wasn’t just the chief cupbearer, but Joseph as well!

B. Pharaoh’s praise (41:37-40)

37 This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. 38 And Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?” 39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. 40 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.” (41:37-40)

So impressed is Pharaoh with Joseph’s performance that he lauds him as one who stands far above anyone in his court. Then he acknowledges the God who is behind Joseph’s gifts of divine inspiration, wisdom and understanding (Isa 11:2-3). He is so appreciative of the gifts that Joseph has brought to bear in the present national crisis that he immediately elevates him to second in command. It is always an amazing moment in salvation history when the world pauses to applaud God’s servants as praiseworthy according to its own highest standards.

The stunned Joseph cannot speak, just as Pharaoh was unable to speak following the interpretation of his dreams. So Pharaoh further will further elaborate, which we will examine next week.

V. Insight into the mystery of “waiting”

This story did much to strengthen Israel’s faith in a God who is faithful to his promises and works all things according to his inscrutable will. But in a more subtle fashion, it gives an insight into the divine mystery of what happens to the human soul during the dark days of waiting. Reminding ourselves of Peter’s words—

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. (1 Pet 5:6-7)—

we might well ask, what is that “proper time”? Is it merely the orchestration of world events, or is God also doing something within us? There is evidence in the text that both are true. God was not only having Joseph wait while he organized the stage of international politics, he also was accomplishing a work “*within*” Joseph.

We have seen Joseph engaged in three sets of dreams over a period of some thirteen years. In each case, he exercises his divinely inspired gift with 100% accuracy, so that he never loses confidence in God’s dreams to shape history. Joseph’s gift does not change, but through his imprisonments he casts his anxieties on God and there is a marked change in the “wisdom” that accompanies the gift. When he first broadcasts his dreams to his brothers as a youth of seventeen, he is naïve and socially unaware, “blithely assuming everyone will be fascinated by the details of his dreams.”¹⁰ His immaturity infuriates his brothers and lands him in the pit.

The second time he employs his gift occurs after he was betrayed by Potiphar’s wife and was serving an unjust ten-year prison sentence. There we observe Joseph with a degree of wisdom, serving his prisoners with care and sensitivity. After he accurately interprets their dreams, he humbly appeals to the chief cupbearer for the reciprocal kindness to advocate for his release to Pharaoh after he is delivered. His role as prophet no longer distances him from people. Humiliation has made him gracious and mutually dependent towards others.

The third time Joseph interprets dreams, he has the courage to place his “resume” on the table as the solution for a national crisis. Pharaoh is awestruck and gives equal praise for the divine gift **and** his extraordinary wisdom (41:37-39). It seems that “the proper time” for Joseph’s exaltation was when the wisdom within his heart had equal footing with the divine gift.

In the next scenes no dreams are reported but Joseph functions with uncanny wisdom as he designs tests to prove the hearts of his brothers. On that stage of wisdom Joseph will find his dreams fulfilled. It is striking that in Isaiah's description of the coming Messiah, it is wisdom and the character that flows out of wisdom, rather than a charismatic gift.

**There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. (Isa 11:1-2)**

Perhaps this shows what God is doing in us when we seem to be set aside from using our gifts. Perhaps, like Joseph, he is refining our character with the wisdom that gives us the ability to bring life to all of our relationships. He is transforming our character to match the divine gift.

It is striking that, in the New Testament, divine gifts alone never commend someone for leadership in the church. Even Paul, who had the most amazing prophetic experiences (2 Cor 12:2-4), explains that those experiences did not commend him as a leader. Instead, he commends himself through the suffering he endured as a result (2 Cor 12:5-10). Examining the qualifications for elders and deacons, character shaped through the crucible of humiliation matters more than anything else. The only reference to spiritual gifts is that an elder be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2), a skill that can be honed from a variety of different gifts. As Paul writes, all divine gifts will someday cease (1 Cor 13:8), but "love never fails" and abides forever. This is what God is supremely seeking. Amen.

¹ Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 529.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (INT; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 326.

³ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (WBC 2; Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 390-91.

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary, Volume 1* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 140.

⁵ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 399.

⁶ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 331.

⁷ Alter explains that the verb *himesh* (“exact a fifth”) is also used in military contexts (“muster”) for “the arming or deployment of troops, and the idea here may be that Joseph is putting the whole country on a quasi-military footing in preparation for the extended famine.” Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 159.

⁸ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 295.

⁹ Roop, E. F. *Genesis* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1987), 261.

¹⁰ Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 140.