

The Thing is Fixed by God (Gen. 41:1–36)

By Jacob Gerber

The previous chapter ended with the redundant statement that the cupbearer not only failed to remember Joseph, but that he also forgot him (Gen. 40:23). Joseph gained a glimmer of hope by having made a connection to someone who could legitimately bring his case before Pharaoh himself—the only one with a high enough ranking to pardon Joseph for a crime committed against one of Pharaoh’s officers. This hope, however, died slowly over the course of “two whole years” as Joseph languished, forgotten in prison. By this long wait, Joseph endured his last, lengthy temptation to turn away from the Lord in despair. Humanly speaking, Joseph has run entirely out of opportunities to hope that his situation will ever change.¹ Remarkably, Joseph’s faith does not waver, in large part because he knows that his destiny is fixed by God, so that what God promised him through his dreams thirteen years earlier cannot be thwarted. In this story, we see that *God alone gives true wisdom*.

Lacking True Wisdom (Gen. 41:1–8)

After these two, long years passed, God gave to Pharaoh a set of two dreams (v. 1–7). In the first dream, Pharaoh sees seven cows that are “attractive and plump” (v. 2) eaten by seven “evil” (ESV: “ugly”; v. 3, 4) cows. Then, when Pharaoh dreams “a second time” (v. 5), Pharaoh sees seven “good” (v. 5) ears of grain swallowed by seven thin ears of grain. The narration conveys the dreams vividly, with six uses of the word “behold” (vv. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7) and seven active participles that convey immediate action (e.g., “dreaming,” “standing”; v. 1; “coming up”; vv. 2, 3).² Pharaoh awakes after dreaming the first time (v. 4), falls back asleep to dream a second time (v. 5), and then wakes up again after dreaming the second time (v. 7). This is more than a night of fitful sleep, for when Pharaoh awakes the next morning, “his spirit was troubled” (v. 8). Later, the same phrase will appear to describe the dreams that troubled Nebuchadnezzar’s spirit in Babylon (Dan. 2:1).³

The troubling of Pharaoh’s spirit is not by accident. We see here God’s providential hand, guiding the heart of the ruler of Egypt to recognize that God has revealed something significant and ominous through these dreams. As Calvin puts it, “A sting was left in Pharaoh’s heart, that he might know that he had to deal with God; for this anxiety was as an inward seal of the Spirit of God, to give authenticity to the dream.”⁴ To address this inward anxiety, Pharaoh called his magicians and wise men; however, “there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh” (v. 8). This does not

¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:317–18.

² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 486.

³ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:756.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:319.

mean, however, that none of Pharaoh’s magicians and wise men attempted to interpret the dream, but only that “none of their ideas satisfied Pharaoh.”⁵ Once again, we see God’s providence in confounding the best dream interpreters of Egypt in order to create an opportunity for the cupbearer to remember Joseph after all this time.

The text may provide a subtle clue to the specific issue that caused Pharaoh to reject the interpretations given by his own magicians and wise men. The ESV translates v. 8 this way: “Pharaoh told them his *dreams*, but there was none who could interpret *them* to Pharaoh.” Many translations follow this pattern (e.g., CSB, NASB, NET, NRSV). Only a few translations, however, accurately reflect that the word “dream” is in the singular, while the word “them” is plural: “and Pharaoh told them his *dream*; but there was none that could interpret *them* unto Pharaoh” (KJV; see also LEB). This incongruity between the number of dream(s) is a key point in its/their interpretation, as Joseph will observe in v. 25: “The dreams of Pharaoh are one.” Mern Sternberg suggests, then, that the language of v. 8 may reflect Pharaoh’s sense that he had only one *dream*, while all his court interpreters attempted to interpret *them* as two dreams.⁶ Remember that when Pharaoh fell back asleep after the dream about the cows, he “dreamed a second *time*,” not that “he dreamed a second *dream*” (v. 5). Later, Pharaoh will explain to Joseph, “I have dreamed *a dream*,” and not, “I have dreamed *two dreams*.” I find Sternberg’s explanation of this textual detail persuasive.

Looking for True Wisdom (Gen. 41:9–24)

It is at this point, when the magicians and wise men cannot satisfy Pharaoh, that the cupbearer speaks up. He begins by saying, “I remember my offenses today,” where the word “remember” is the same word used earlier in Genesis 40:23: “Yet the chief cupbearer *did not remember* Joseph...”⁷ This would be a risky, delicate subject for the cupbearer to bring up, which may be reflected in his avoidance of explicitly identifying the people he is talking about in v. 13: “He [i.e., Pharaoh] restored me to my office, but him [i.e., the baker] he [i.e., Pharaoh] hanged” (my translation).⁸ Nevertheless, as John Sailhamer observes, “even the cupbearer’s forgetfulness works in Joseph’s favor, since just at the opportune moment he remembered Joseph and recounted his wisdom before the king.”⁹ Pharaoh learns about Joseph’s gift for interpreting dreams at the precise moment that Pharaoh is desperate for answers about his own dream that no one else in his court has been able to explain satisfactorily. God commonly leads unbelievers to faith by first destroying the satisfaction of every human pursuit: “Wherefore it was necessary that the obstinacy of Pharaoh should be first subdued, in order that he might send for Joseph, and accept him as his master and instructor. The same kind of preparation is also necessary even for the elect; because they never become docile until the pride of the flesh is laid low.”¹⁰

⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 391.

⁶ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 5. Dr., *Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature* 453 (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana Univ. Pr, 1996), 398–400.

⁷ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 490.

⁸ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:758.

⁹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 214.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:321.

So, Pharaoh summons Joseph to come into his presence, and Joseph arrives as quickly as possible after a hasty shave and change of clothing (v. 14). Pharaoh gets directly to the reason for Joseph's summons: "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" (v. 15). Again, notice that Pharaoh speaks of his dream(s) as *a* dream, not as multiple dreams. Notice although, though, that Pharaoh is looking to Joseph for the wisdom he is seeking. Joseph's response is "slightly confrontational."¹¹ Echoing the encouragement he gave two years earlier to the cupbearer and the baker to trust their interpretations to God (Gen. 40:8), Joseph immediately rejects the idea that this wisdom is something he possesses by himself. Instead, Joseph points to God as the One who possesses such understanding so as to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. On Joseph's response, Allen Ross writes, "Those whom God calls to special service must make it a point to inform the unbelieving world that any success or ability that they have comes from God. When they explain God's revelation to the world, they must confront the world with God. The servants are not greater than the master."¹² Specifically, Joseph says that God will answer the "peace" (שְׁלוֹמִים; *shēlôm*) of Pharaoh—that is, that the "answer will be about Pharaoh's peace or prosperity."¹³

Just as the cupbearer had responded to Joseph's encouragement to entrust his interpretation to God, Pharaoh responds to Joseph's answer that God will be able to give Pharaoh an answer about his dream. So, Pharaoh recounts his "dream" ("in my *dream*," singular; v. 17, 22), following largely the details that we learned when the dream was first narrated. We only encounter two slight differences:¹⁴ in v. 19b, Joseph adds Pharaoh's comment about the thin cows: "I had never seen such as these in all the land of Egypt for evil [רַע; *ra'*]" (my translation). Then, almost all of verse 21 is new information that was not related in the original narration: "And they went into the bellies, and it would not be known that they went into the bellies, and their appearance was evil [רַע; *ra'*], just as at the beginning" (my translation). This word "evil" often means moral evil (e.g., Gen. 37:2; 38:7, 10), but it may also mean something like a disaster (e.g., Gen. 37:20, 33), especially as these words relate to the coming famine. Nevertheless, we should recognize that this dream contrasts "good" years (טוֹב; *tôb*; v. 5, 22, 24, 26, 35) vs. "evil" (רַע; *ra'*; v. 3, 4, 19, 20, 21, 27) years. These are the same words for "good" and "evil" that appeared at the beginning of Genesis, to describe the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil," and they will also appear at the end of Genesis in the words of Joseph himself: "As for you, you meant evil [רַע; *ra'*] against me, but God meant it for good [טוֹב; *tôb*], to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20). Joseph, therefore, is being portrayed as "the embodiment of the ideal that true wisdom, the ability to discern between 'good and evil,' comes only from God."¹⁵ Where the original sin (and all subsequent sin) arises from the prideful belief that we can *see* what is *good* for ourselves (Gen. 3:6), Joseph demonstrates true wisdom: "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Ps. 111:10; cf. Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7; 9:10).

¹¹ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 392.

¹² Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 642.

¹³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 492.

¹⁴ For these differences, and the connections drawn from the differences in this paragraph, see Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 214–15.

¹⁵ Sailhamer, 215.

Learning True Wisdom (Gen. 41:25–36)

When Joseph responds, we hear the Joseph speak on an extended basis for the first time.¹⁶ Until now, Joseph has largely remained silent and obedient, but at this moment, he rises to the occasion to speak extensive wisdom into what has been revealed through Pharaoh’s dreams. Joseph opens his interpretation with the key that we discussed earlier: “The dreams of Pharaoh are one” (v. 25a). First, Joseph explains how, in these dreams, “God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do” in the future (v. 25b). The seven good cows/ears of grain represent seven good years of plenty, while the seven evil cows/ears of grain represent seven disastrous years of famine. Joseph recognizes that the good years are self-explanatory, so he only gives one sentence to them (v. 29), in contrast to five sentences of explanation about the years of famine (v. 30–31).¹⁷

After Joseph has finished explaining what these dreams represent about the future, he unveils a plan for managing the crisis wisely. Joseph is not only a prophet, but he is a *true* wise man in a way that exceeds the human wisdom of Pharaoh’s so-called wise men.¹⁸ As Victor Hamilton observes, “Joseph is both a foreteller (vv. 25–32) and a forthteller (vv. 33–36). He speaks to the future and to the present.”¹⁹ So, Joseph advises Pharaoh to select a wise and discerning man to set aside one-fifth of the produce from the land, storing it up in order to feed Egypt during the seven years of famine. It is not difficult to see that Joseph is the only wise man for the job.

Importantly, this famine is not cast as a judgment, but as “one of life’s irregularities, and Joseph points out that a wise manager will insure against them, taking extra measures if he can see extra hazards.”²⁰ On the other hand, Joseph warns that that this reserve of grain must be established “so that the land may not be cut off in the famine” (v. 36; my translation). The language of being “cut off” is the language of judgment for those who violate either God’s moral law (Gen. 9:11) or God’s ceremonial law (Gen. 17:14).²¹ In this case, Joseph is not merely offering an interesting idea, or prudent advice (cf. Prov. 6:6–11; 20:4). Rather, Joseph is the one through whom God will reveal himself through the world by this dream and by Joseph’s prophetic and wise interpretation of the dream.²²

Discussion Questions

1) What do you make of the “two whole years” that have passed since Joseph interpreted the cupbearer’s dream (v. 1)? How does this description of time enhance our understanding of the depth

¹⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 393.

¹⁷ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 497.

¹⁸ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 214.

¹⁹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 499.

²⁰ Kidner, *Genesis*, 207.

²¹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 500.

²² “Wisdom literature advises that people should store up in times of plenty for times of need, which is just practical living (Prov. 6:6–11; 20:4). But here the entire event was part of God’s way of making himself known to the world. Because of the dreams and because of their clear interpretation, Pharaoh and his courtiers were convinced that it would happen.” (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 642.)

of Joseph's suffering? Are there areas of your own suffering that have plagued you for an extended length of time? How have you coped with the ongoing suffering? What does Joseph's story teach us to help us to remain faithful through long periods of suffering?

2) How does the Lord impress upon Pharaoh his need for wisdom? How does the Lord bring Pharaoh to the end of his own resources for wisdom? To what degree does this lack of wisdom create an opening for Pharaoh to take Joseph seriously, even though he is (from all outward appearances) only a Hebrew slave who has been in prison for a sex crime? What circumstances has the Lord used in your own life to bring you to the end of your confidence in own wisdom?

3) Where do the words "good" and "evil" (ESV: "ugly") appear throughout the narration of this dream? How does the contrast of good and evil connect back to the beginning of Genesis (e.g., Gen. 2:17) and the end of Genesis (Gen. 50:20)? Where does Joseph fit into this ongoing theme of discerning between good and evil? How does Joseph's role as a faithful prophet and wise man point those around him to God? How does he foreshadow our Lord Jesus Christ?

4) What does Joseph's wisdom in the management of the coming famine teach us about prudent living in our own lives? Even if we do not have infallible prophecy about the precise nature of the suffering we will face, how might we prepare for the disastrous "evil" that we will face as we live in a fallen world? How does Joseph's example give us a pattern for living with wisdom, thrift, and preparation in the midst of the "good" times of our lives?