

## Fruitfulness through Affliction (Gen. 41:37–57)

*By Jacob Gerber*

When Pharaoh's dream troubled his spirit, and when but none of his magicians or wise men could give him a satisfactory answer to interpret the dream (Gen. 41:8), Pharaoh took the desperate step of seeking wisdom from a Hebrew slave who had been imprisoned with the captain of the guard. Now that Pharaoh has informed Joseph of his dream, and Joseph has given Pharaoh the interpretation, we left the story at a critical moment. How will Pharaoh respond? Will his troubled soul find satisfaction in Joseph's answer? After getting the answer he has sought out of Joseph, will he discard Joseph by sending him back to prison? In this story, we see Joseph's exaltation out of his long course of suffering. Here, we see that *God gives fruitfulness through our affliction*.

### Faithful until our Exaltation (Gen. 41:37–45)

In response to everything Joseph has said, we read that “This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants” (v. 37). Literally, this verse says, “And the thing was good in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of all his servants” (my translation). Victor Hamilton points out the sharp contrast between Pharaoh's visual evaluation of Joseph, and the visual evaluation of Joseph from Potiphar's wife: “Joseph as handsome male was good in the eyes of Potiphar's wife. Joseph as administrator is good in the eyes of Pharaoh.”<sup>1</sup> We should recognize, though, that Joseph has been evaluated visually throughout his story. In the beginning, Joseph's brothers hated him because they *saw* that their father loved Joseph more than them (Gen. 37:4), and it was when Joseph's brothers *saw* him coming to them in Dothan that they plotted to murder him (Gen. 37:18). On the other hand, it is not only in *Pharaoh's* eyes that Joseph is good, but Joseph had found favor in the eyes of Potiphar and the keeper of the prison where Joseph had suffered (Gen. 39:4, 21).

Pharaoh, however, gives us more information about why he is pleased with Joseph's plan. He exclaims, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?” (v. 38). The only other reference in the book of Genesis to the Spirit of God was in Genesis 1:2, where we read that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” Elsewhere, though, “God's spirit equips the skilled workman like Bezalel (Exod 31:3; 35:31), the victorious warrior (cf. Judg 6:34; 14:6), and especially the wise ruler (1 Sam 10:6; 16:13; Isa 11:2; cf. Dan 5:14).”<sup>2</sup> Pharaoh's eyes have been opened to discern something beyond human talent; he recognizes that “Joseph is one who has been divinely equipped and gifted.”<sup>3</sup> We should remember that Joseph himself prepared Pharaoh to recognize the work of the Spirit of God in his life by insisting that wisdom to interpret dreams “is

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<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 503.

<sup>2</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 394.

<sup>3</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 503.

not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer” (v. 16).

In light of Pharaoh’s recognition of the work of God’s Spirit with Joseph, Pharaoh appoints Joseph to the role that Joseph himself advised Pharaoh to create in vv. 33–36. Pharaoh acknowledges that since God has made known all this to Joseph, there would be no one so “discerning and wise” as Joseph (v. 39). The phrase words *discerning* and *wise* were the same words Joseph used to describe the qualifications of the administrator who would gather the grain to store up for the years of famine (v. 33).<sup>4</sup> More than even this, Pharaoh goes so far as to appoint Joseph over his whole “house,” so that all Pharaoh’s people will obey Joseph’s command. As Victor Hamilton observes, “This is the third ‘house’ in which Joseph has been placed,” after Potiphar’s house and the prison house (Gen. 39:4, 22).<sup>5</sup> The phrase translated “all my people shall order themselves as you command” is literally, “at your mouth [i.e., the command of your mouth], all my people shall kiss” (v. 40). The word “kiss” is rare to refer to obedience to a ruler, but it appears in at least one other significant passage about obedience to a ruler: “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps. 2:12).<sup>6</sup> Earlier, in the house of Potiphar, Joseph was withheld only Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39:9), and now, in Pharaoh’s house, Joseph is withheld only the throne (v. 40).<sup>7</sup>

As a confirmation of this exaltation, Pharaoh gives Joseph his signet ring, which authorizes Joseph to conduct business in Pharaoh’s name.<sup>8</sup> Then, Pharaoh dresses Joseph in fine linen and puts a gold chain around his neck, clothing Joseph in the fine apparel fit for an exalted Egyptian ruler (v. 42). Pharaoh’s clothing Joseph at Joseph’s exaltation forms a sharp contrast to Joseph’s humiliation, when he was stripped of the fine clothing that his own father had given him (Gen. 37:23). Another contrast between Joseph’s humiliation and his exaltation takes place in the chariot ride that Joseph takes in v. 43: “For a second time Joseph goes for a ride. The first was to Egypt (ch. 37); the second is throughout Egypt. The first was as kidnapped victim; the second is as exalted hero.”<sup>9</sup> From this point forward, Pharaoh insists that he himself will remain Pharaoh, but that nevertheless absolutely nothing will happen in Egypt unless Joseph approves (v. 44).<sup>10</sup> Finally, Pharaoh gives Joseph an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife.

We should pause here to note that much of the imagery in this exaltation of Joseph should remind us of Adam, at the beginning of Genesis.<sup>11</sup> Just as Pharaoh entrusted Joseph with his seal to do business in his name, so God created Adam in his own image, to reflect his glory (Gen. 1:26–27). Just as Joseph has become Pharaoh’s vice-regent to oversee food storage and distribution, so Adam was set as God’s vice-regent on earth, to cultivate and keep the garden where food would grow for humankind (Gen. 2:15). Just as Joseph is exalted because he discerns between the “good” and “evil”

<sup>4</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:765–761.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 503.

<sup>6</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 395.

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 503–504.

<sup>8</sup> Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 676.

<sup>9</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 506.

<sup>10</sup> “The expression ‘hand’ and ‘foot’ is a figure (merism), meaning that every activity must meet with Joseph’s approval.” (Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:763.)

<sup>11</sup> For the material in this paragraph, see Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 215.

in Pharaoh's dream, so God gave Adam responsibilities in relation to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). Just as Pharaoh gives Joseph a wife, so also God gave Adam a wife in the garden (Gen. 2:22). Why all these parallels between the stories of Adam and Joseph? In part, because the whole story of Joseph is written to give a fitting conclusion to Genesis, demonstrating the ideal man that God originally intended in creation.<sup>12</sup> Or, as Sailhamer puts it, "The story of Joseph is a reflection of what might have been, had Adam remained obedient to God and trusted him for the 'good.'"<sup>13</sup> Even more, though, than Joseph's resemblance to the First Adam, we see in a Joseph a foreshadowing of the Second Adam to come.<sup>14</sup>

## Fruitful through our Affliction (Gen. 41:46–52)

The book of Genesis provides us the ages of people at significant moments of their lives. For Joseph, his story of suffering began at age seventeen, and we now read that his exaltation takes place thirteen years later, at age thirty (v. 46).<sup>15</sup> It will take another nine years for Joseph to be reconciled with his brothers (Gen. 45:6; cf. Gen. 41:29–30), for a total of 22 years of estrangement. As Derek Kidner observes, this is "comparable with the length of time for Abraham between promise and fulfilment (12:4; 21:5), and for Jacob in the service of Laban (31:41). Each of these delays was fruitful, but no two were alike in form or purpose."<sup>16</sup>

Thirty-year-old Joseph, then, begins his work, going through all the land of Egypt to do what he had suggested when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream (v. 46; cf. 33–36). During the seven plentiful years, Joseph put the excess food into storage in the nearby cities. The phrase to describe Joseph's gathering of the plentiful grain is interesting: "And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, *like the sand of the sea*..." (v. 49). This is the same phrase used to describe God's promise of fruitfulness in the offspring of Abraham and Jacob (Gen. 22:17; 32:13), and, immediately after we find this phrase about the fruitful grain, we read about the fruitfulness of Joseph's offspring in v. 50.<sup>17</sup>

When Joseph names his firstborn son, Manasseh, he explains the name this way: "For...God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house" (v. 51). This same term for "hardship" will appear later to describe the "hardship" of Israel when they later become slaves in Egypt (Deut. 26:7), so that Joseph's hardship in Egypt foreshadows the hardship of the whole nation of Israel in Egypt.<sup>18</sup> It is surprising to see Joseph speak of forgetting "all my father's house," and, as John Calvin observes, this "can scarcely be altogether excused."<sup>19</sup> Still, the fact that he mentions his father's house proves that he has *not* forgotten his father's house at all.<sup>20</sup> The true test of Joseph's character will come when his brothers arrive in Egypt to buy grain from him.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce T. Dahlberg, "On Recognizing the Unity of Genesis," *Theology Digest* 24, no. 4 (1976): 360–67.

<sup>13</sup> Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 215.

<sup>14</sup> Sailhamer, 215.

<sup>15</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 397.

<sup>16</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 209.

<sup>17</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 397.

<sup>18</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:765–766.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:332.

<sup>20</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 398.

Joseph does not focus exclusively on his hardship, however.<sup>21</sup> When Joseph names his second son, Ephraim's name does not reflect Joseph's suffering, but the blessings that Joseph has received in the midst of his affliction: "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction" (v. 52). By giving Ephraim a name associated with "fruitfulness," Joseph uses a word that appears throughout Genesis in the promise of God's blessing to make his people fruitful (Gen. 1:22, 28; 8:17; 17:6, 20; 26:22; 28:3; 35:11; 48:4).<sup>22</sup> Ephraim's name, then, expresses confidence that God has been, and will continue to be, faithful to fulfill those promises for Joseph. Furthermore, Allen Ross also observes that names both of the children with Hebrew names, which suggest that "his faith in the Lord was as strong as ever, in spite of his suffering and in spite of his success."<sup>23</sup> This is all the more remarkable when we remember that Joseph himself received an Egyptian name, and that these children are born to Joseph's Egyptian wife (v. 45).

### Fortified for our Future (Gen. 41:53–57)

In the narrative, the seven good years pass by quickly, in seven short verses (vv. 47–53). The famine, on the other hand, will stretch much longer in the narrative, across seven long chapters (Gen. 41:54–47:20). Joseph's preparations will prove crucial for sustaining the life of the nation. Pharaoh himself recognizes this, for when the famine comes, he does not take back the reins in the midst of their crisis. Instead, he directs the people to Joseph: "Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do" (v. 55). During this time, Joseph provides food not only for all the people of Egypt (v. 56), but we also read that "all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth" (v. 57).

This last note about "all the earth" kept alive by Joseph makes another important connection to an earlier story from Genesis, especially when paired with the phrase in v. 56 about the severity of the famine "over all the face of the earth" (my translation). In the story of the flood, we read that Noah kept animals alive "on the face of all the earth" (Gen. 7:3) as the floodwaters stretched "over the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 8:9). Furthermore, it was from Noah's three sons that "the whole earth" would again be populated (Gen. 9:19). Bruce Dahlberg observes, then, that "the famine of the Joseph story provides a counterpart to the deluge in the primeval history. In this respect, Joseph is an antitype to Noah, repeating his work; but instead of an ark, Joseph builds storehouses."<sup>24</sup> Joseph is the new Adam and the new Noah. More than this, as the savior of all the earth, he will also resemble the last Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45).

### Discussion Questions

1) What is the significance of Pharaoh's describing Joseph as a man "in whom is the Spirit of God" (v. 38)? How much do we learn about the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (cf. Gen. 1:2; Ex. 31:3; 35:31; Judg. 6:34; 14:6; 1 Sam. 10:6; 16:13; Isa 11:2; Dan. 5:14)? How does the idea that the Spirit

<sup>21</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:765–766.

<sup>22</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Volume 2, 398.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 645.

<sup>24</sup> Dahlberg, "On Recognizing the Unity of Genesis," 364.

gives wisdom expand in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor. 2:10–16)? How much meditation and worship do you give to the Holy Spirit, as one of the three Persons of our one God?

2) How does Joseph's exaltation in this passage contrast against the humiliation he has endured and suffered through during these last thirteen years? Does Joseph's eventual exaltation negate the severity of his suffering, or make the actions of those who have caused his suffering less evil? How, then, do we nevertheless see God working in and through Joseph's suffering for good? How does God still work all things together for our good (Rom. 8:28)?

3) What do the seven years of plenty teach us about God's goodness and generosity, not only to his people, but to the whole world? What do the names that Joseph gives to his children teach us about his faith in God's goodness and generosity in the midst of his affliction (vv. 51–52). What can we learn from Joseph about retaining our faith through times of suffering? What can we learn from Joseph about retaining our faith through times of success ("suffering...success"; Allen Ross)?

4) What can we learn from how Joseph uses the seven good years of plenty to prepare for the seven evil years of famine? How can we make preparations when we typically do not know when times of difficulty are coming, or the nature and extent of suffering that those times will bring? What kinds of preparations are most important for Christians as we think about shoring up our faith for the future? Where in the Bible do we see God encouraging us to do this, by his grace?