

GOD REWARDS OBEDIENCE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Genesis 41:14–57

VERSES TO REMEMBER

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.” (Gen. 41:39–40)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Sept. 7	Paul and Barnabas Appointed for Ministry	Acts 13:1–5
T	Sept. 8	Joseph, Chief Interpreter of Dreams	Genesis 41:9–13
W	Sept. 9	Dreams of Cows and Corn Explained	Genesis 41:14–24
Th	Sept. 10	Preparing for the Expected Famine	Genesis 41:34–36
F	Sept. 11	Storing Grain for the Future	Genesis 41:41–49
Sa	Sept. 12	Egypt Feeds the Middle East	Genesis 41:53–57

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

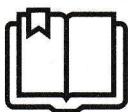
“Rags to riches” stories are always winners! The account of the poor kid raised in a home with little to no opportunity who grows up to become a huge success will always get a hearing. The child born with spina bifida who overcomes the physical limitations imposed at birth is deeply and appropriately admired. There are circumstances that sometimes occur through no one’s particular fault that challenge and sometimes subdue people. To prevail despite the difficulties is indeed laudable.

Joseph’s situation is not exactly like one of those above. He was sold as a slave to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard. Although he was enslaved, his service there was not too oppressive. But then Potiphar’s wife falsely accused Joseph of trying to rape her. As a result, Potiphar had Joseph placed in Pharaoh’s prison. However, through perseverance and good fortune, Joseph finally was released and rose to a high position in Pharaoh’s court.

It is often unclear what particular event or set of events may occur that enable success or bring failure. The most one

can do is be faithful to one's commitment and trust that things will work out. Joseph did maintain his faith in God and worked ^①
② diligently to meet his obligations. He did not let his circumstances dictate his attitude. How can faithfulness be recognized as providing an avenue out of depression or a sense of failure? How does faithfulness provide an appropriate tool for fashioning a life pleasing to God?

Faithful God, guide us and strengthen us as we seek to be faithful to you. Help us to make your way our way and thereby bring glory to you by the manner in which we live our daily lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Genesis 41:25–33, 37–40, 50–52

41:25 Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁶The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. ²⁷The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are seven years of famine. ²⁸It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. ³⁰After 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. ³¹The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous. ³²And the doubling of Pharaoh’s dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. ³³Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. . . .

37 The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. ³⁸Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?” ³⁹So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. ⁴⁰You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.” . . .

50 Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him. ⁵¹Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, “For,” he said, “God has

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." ⁵²The second he named Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes."

JOSEPH AND PHARAOH'S DREAMS

Joseph was imprisoned along with Pharaoh's chief baker and cupbearer. Both the cupbearer and the baker had had troubling dreams that caused them concern. Joseph noticed their discomfort, listened to their dreams, and interpreted the dreams for his fellow prisoners. The cupbearer's dream was understood as a positive sign, but that of the baker was not. Subsequently the cupbearer was restored to his place in Pharaoh's court; the baker was hanged.

Two years later Pharaoh had two dreams that none of his counselors or magicians could interpret. The cupbearer, remembering his experience in the prison and Joseph's request that he be remembered to Pharaoh at an appropriate time, shared his experience with Pharaoh. Joseph was immediately summoned to the court.

Pharaoh explained his dilemma. There was no one in Pharaoh's court who could interpret his two dreams. Joseph agreed to do so but assured Pharaoh that it was God who would provide the answer. Joseph understood the dreams to signal that very prosperous times would be followed by difficult ones. That Pharaoh had had two dreams meant that the period indicated was soon to begin and should receive Pharaoh's immediate attention.

Joseph suggested that someone be appointed to oversee the storing of food during the plentiful time so that the people could survive the time of famine that would surely follow. Pharaoh decided that Joseph was the very one to carry out this excellent plan, so he delegated all authority to do so to Joseph. Moreover, Pharaoh gave Joseph an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah, and an Egyptian wife named Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, a priest of On. All things Joseph commanded were to be done; only with regard to the throne was Pharaoh to be understood as greater. And Joseph's plan worked well. More than enough food was carefully preserved.

During the years before the famine began, Joseph and Asenath had two sons. Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, for he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house" (Gen. 41:51). The second son Joseph named Ephraim,

saying, “God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes” (v. 52). This biographical note was added to emphasize that God was involved in Joseph’s life all along and intended for Joseph to have success and prosperity. Even when things appeared grim, God intended good for Joseph. Years later, Manasseh and Ephraim would emerge as two of the most important tribes of Israel (see Josh. 17) and be understood as equals with the other of Jacob’s sons, the traditional tribes of Israel.

② Why is it noted that Pharaoh gave an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife to Joseph?

DIVINE GUIDANCE AND LIVING HOPE

A dominant theme in the Joseph novella from beginning to end is that God is behind the drama. At the story’s outset Joseph received dreams that he and his family understood to indicate that Joseph would come to have dominion over them. This had terrible consequences and provides the context for this lesson. Again, in chapters 40–41, dreams play a critical role in the story. Joseph’s ability to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker (and then those of Pharaoh) are the basis on which Pharaoh bestowed great authority on Joseph.

Several things are noteworthy in this account. First, those to whom dreams are provided are not all Hebrews. Joseph is, but Pharaoh and his slaves are not! As Joseph indicates, God is the source of the dreams and their interpretation. The dreams come at divine initiative and are not restricted to believers. The interpretation is provided through Joseph, but God’s revealing power is displayed to persons outside the Hebrew family.

God guides history through the dreams experienced by humans. Another Joseph, the father of Jesus, is directed in a dream to flee from Herod’s reach (Matt. 2:14) and then alerted in a dream when it was safe to return (v. 16). God intervenes to offer protective assistance.

Human participation is also crucial in the unfolding of the story. Joseph may provide interpretation, but the one who dreamed must make an appropriate response. The cupbearer did not at first ascribe his good fortune to God. It was two years later when Pharaoh had two disturbing dreams that the cupbearer remembered his earlier experience and shared it with Pharaoh. With respect to the baker and his bad fortune, one can only

speculate. Regardless, Pharaoh had to act on what Joseph told him for things to happen as the dreams suggested. Divine revelation requires human reception for it to achieve God's desire.

Finally, the story points to a positive outcome. God's grace continues to be a source of hope for all who will receive it. Joseph had two sons whom he named Manasseh and Ephraim. With these names, God's blessing is claimed to be on Joseph even during hard times. Joseph has been able to look past his brother's actions and flourish amidst all his misfortunes.

② **Divine grace is often recognized in retrospect, but it is actually active at all times. What is the difference between "guiding" and "directing"?**

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Part of Joseph's experience is all too familiar to us. Infighting among relatives is common, particularly at the death of an important family member. Bickering, plotting, maneuvering, unhealthy competition, envy—such behaviors plague us as they did Joseph and his family. Joseph's story spells out the disaster that attends such counter-productive behavior. Considering this story serves as a warning to us and, hopefully, will lead us to critically review our attitudes in such situations.

We live in a world in which nations seem prone to act out their differences in ways all too similar to the behavior of Joseph's brothers. Discord, conflict, and brutality tear at the fabric of human community. We need to be reminded repeatedly that they are not what God intends for us. Such situations are to be resisted even at the risk of personal harm. Resistance may take a public, political form, or it may be more private and individual, but resistance is necessary. There are still Josephs being abused and abandoned. In order for systems and laws to change, those who honor God's way must join together to challenge and transform the status quo.

The story of Joseph provides us encouragement. Nearly killed by his siblings, sold into slavery, and wrongly imprisoned, Joseph had every reason to consider himself forsaken by God. But God showed Joseph steadfast love and brought the favor of the chief jailor to him. Joseph maintained his own values and was eventually delivered by God.

In prison, Joseph had to exercise great patience and look for success where he could find it. The challenges before us are also great. The mess the world is in cannot be easily or quickly fixed. But as the old saying goes, “Rome was not built in a day.” Joseph can be a role model for us as we strive to right the wrongs all around us. As he didn’t quit, neither should we.

There is one other way that this story may help us deal with our world. Joseph conveyed a grand project to Pharaoh to deal with a crisis that was on the horizon: the possibility of a great seven-year-long famine. Joseph’s wise word to him was to plan ahead, get ready, and not hide from what was to come. We face similar challenges today. For whatever reasons, our climate is changing, and its life-changing effects loom ahead of us. Just like Joseph, we need God’s encouragement as we face the difficulties climate change may bring, remembering that it is not our world. It is God’s world, and God cares about it.

② Is it more important to face an issue or to try to assign blame to all the parties responsible for the situation?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture that may be helpful for your study.

1. Joseph’s rise can be charted by the times those in authority recognized that God was with him (Gen. 39:3, 20–21; 41:38).
2. In those same instances, those in power yielded a large part of their authority to Joseph (39:6a, 22–23; 41:40).
3. Manasseh and Ephraim would each be given an allotment of land (Josh. 16–17), putting them on an equal basis with their uncles. Although Joseph was not Jacob’s firstborn, this gave him the double portion of inheritance prescribed for the firstborn (Deut. 21:17; 1 Chron. 5:1).
4. A delicious irony can be associated with Joseph’s dreams. His first dreams caused him to boast of an exalted position, and as a result, he lost everything (Gen. 37). In interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams, Joseph rose from a subservient position to one of great authority.