

# Pharaoh's Dream and Joseph's Rise

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## Prayer of Illumination

Holy and gracious God,  
may your Holy Spirit give us  
a spirit of wisdom and revelation,  
so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened,  
we may know the hope to which Christ has called us,  
the riches of his glorious inheritance among us, and  
the greatness of his power for those who believe. Amen.

## Scripture: Genesis 41:1-16; 25-57 (NRSVue)

After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile,<sup>2</sup> and there came up out of the Nile seven sleek and fat cows, and they grazed in the reed grass.<sup>3</sup> Then 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.<sup>4</sup> The ugly and thin cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. And Pharaoh awoke.<sup>5</sup> Then he fell asleep and dreamed a second time; seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk.<sup>6</sup> Then seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them.<sup>7</sup> The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Pharaoh awoke, and it was a dream.<sup>8</sup> In the

morning his spirit was troubled, so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh.

<sup>9</sup> Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "I remember my faults today. <sup>10</sup> Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard. <sup>11</sup> We dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own meaning. <sup>12</sup> 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 according to his dream. <sup>13</sup> As he interpreted to us, so it turned out; I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged."

<sup>14</sup> Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. <sup>15</sup> And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I 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." <sup>16</sup> Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

<sup>25</sup> Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. <sup>26</sup> The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. <sup>27</sup> The 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. <sup>28</sup> It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. <sup>29</sup> There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. <sup>30</sup> 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. <sup>31</sup> The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous. <sup>32</sup> And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. <sup>33</sup> Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise and set him over the land of Egypt. <sup>34</sup> Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. <sup>35</sup> Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. <sup>36</sup> That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine."

<sup>37</sup> The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. <sup>38</sup> Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find anyone else like this, one in whom is the spirit of God?" <sup>39</sup> So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. <sup>40</sup> 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." <sup>41</sup> And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." <sup>42</sup> Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen

and put a gold chain around his neck. <sup>43</sup> He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command, and they cried out in front of him, "Bow the knee!"<sup>[b]</sup> Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. <sup>44</sup> 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." <sup>45</sup> Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah, and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife. Thus Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt.

<sup>46</sup> 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. <sup>47</sup> During the seven plenteous years the earth produced abundantly. <sup>48</sup> He gathered up all the food of the seven years when there was plenty<sup>[c]</sup> in the land of Egypt and stored up food in the cities; he stored up in every city the food from the fields around it. <sup>49</sup> So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance—like the sand of the sea—that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure.

<sup>50</sup> Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him. <sup>51</sup> Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh,<sup>[d]</sup> "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." <sup>52</sup> The second he named Ephraim,<sup>[e]</sup> "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes."

<sup>53</sup> The seven years of plenty that prevailed in the land of Egypt came to an end, <sup>54</sup> and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every country, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. <sup>55</sup> 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." <sup>56</sup> And since the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses<sup>[f]</sup> and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. <sup>57</sup> Moreover, all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## SERMON – “Pharaoh’s Dream and Joseph’s Rise”



The Joseph story is not just about Joseph—it’s our story too. I like how Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it:

*“Like Joseph, we all live our lives between a known past and an unknown future. What links these two is our present where we are always making choices.”*

As we live our lives, we weigh our different options and seek to faithfully discern what God is leading us to do. And then in faith, we step out into one of the diverging paths before us and see where it leads.

The Great Philosophical and Theological Dane Soren Kierkegaard said that “life is lived forwards, but it is understood backwards.”

It’s when we look backwards and prayerfully reflect on our lives we can begin to craft our story. It may be years later that we see how God’s unseen hand has been guiding us, using our successes and failures to make us who we are, to better us, to lead us into God’s good, perfect, and pleasing will for our lives and for the service of others. This is definitely the case for Joseph.



This story is one of the great reversals in all of Scripture. It’s been a week for us since Joseph was forgotten in prison. But for Joseph it has been *two whole years* of waiting. He had no control, only trust in God. He had spent a total of thirteen years in captivity—he’s thirty now. It was Pharaoh’s dreams and the cupbearer remembering—that brought the plot twist. Nothing that Joseph did.

There are no such things as “coincidences” in the Joseph story—the unseen hand of God is ever working, even through bad decisions. And I don’t believe in “mere coincidences” in our lives as well. God is alive and well in our stories.

And hear the good news Immanuel: your story is not over. Like Joseph, we all face chapters and episodes of waiting that we can’t control. There’s a gap—and the name of this space is “faith.” Trust. All we can do is “mind the gap” through prayer and preparation.

Joseph’s misfortunes begin with dreams and end with dreams. Joseph, the one forgotten, is now remembered.

Pharaoh's dreams were vivid and haunting—more real than life. It's significant and foreboding that the dream setting was the Nile. The Nile is the very lifeblood of the Egyptian economy. A shortfall of just a few inches of rain on the Nile could spell disaster. This would impact how much irrigation water could be provided for other regions to grow grain. And there are records of other seven-year famines in Egypt.

Seven is a very symbolic and important number in Scripture, signifying fullness and totality.



Livestock were also a vital component to the economy. The first sturdy cows graze on grass, but the second emaciated cows graze not on grass, but on cows! And they still look gaunt after their cannibalistic feast.

Then there's the dream of the two seven ears of grain—once again the scrawny ears consume the plump ones. Pharaoh woke from his dreams in a cold sweat. Literally translated, "his spirit was pounding." It was a panic attack, if you're unfortunate enough to know personally.

The dream interpretations of the magicians and wise men just didn't cut it for Pharaoh. Then the restored cupbearer REMEMBERED his FAULTS—he FORGOT JOSEPH. It takes courage and character to own up to our oversights. None of us should live in "Da Nile" of our shortcomings.

Pharaoh wasted no time and hurriedly sent for Joseph. Like a good Egyptian, Joseph got out his Bic razor and shaved not only his beard, but his head as well.



With his new garment (his fourth so far), the Dream Interpreter came before the presence of the king. "I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."

"It is not I;" said Joseph, "God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

God is acting. God is speaking. God is revealing, God is establishing things. Pharaoh can only listen and obey.

Joseph doesn't beat around the bush: he mentions the famine first—that's the most significant part. The seven years of plenty will be forgotten because of the devastating years of famine that will follow. Pharaoh, the seven-year cycle of abundance has begun—the sand timer has been turned over. Time is of the essence.



Joseph then does something fascinating here. He takes off his Dream Interpreter Cap and replaces it with his Problem Solver Cap. It is his moment to seize the day. Maybe Pharaoh's double dreams reminded Joseph of his double dreams seventeen years ago. *Do you remember the dreams he shared with his family?* The grain and the stars and moon and sun bowing to Joseph. Looking back, he now saw what God had prepared for him all these years.

Pharaoh, your dream is not ultimately about doom. Destruction is not the last word, the end of the story. There is a solution. This dream is for us too Immanuel. God has a dream for us, not a nightmare. As we experience natural transitions and the ravages of the pandemic, there is hope for us. A way forward for us to choose. We can't be passive. We can be proactive. We can be a part of the solution, not the problem.

So on the fly, Joseph lays out a blueprint for action. Good leadership isn't being a doomsayer. It's recognizing the problem, and then identifying solutions and responses to alleviate suffering. Strong leadership finds the silver lining in the cloud. God is giving time and a heads up, a way forward. Like Elvis, Joseph knows how to TCB: take care of business. How to "get 'er done." He was a man of action and practicality: Select a national commissioner, appoint regular overseers, solidify storage vats. Save in the time of plenty to be ready for the time of famine.



At the same time he was deferential and aware of Pharaoh's authority—not presumptive or arrogant. This man, "in whom is the Spirit of God."

The Spirit of God falls on individuals for key moments: When we're embarking on a mission or task. The Spirit gives us energy, drive, and creativity. Keen intelligence and practical wisdom to act, rather than standing on the sidelines.

Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. This is the FIFTH time Joseph's clothes are changed. Once again, he wears royal robes. As Joseph rode the chariot, the masses cried out in front of him. "Bow the knee...Make way for Joseph." His dream came true. Stars and sheaves bowing to him. But it didn't stop with that. In reality, this was the beginning of his calling: to save lives. Joseph immediately began gathering the grain that was "like the sand of the sea." It was too much to even measure. But every spoonful would be needed.

Joseph's new life began as an Egyptian. The shepherd boy has now become the Minister of Agriculture. Yet he remained true to himself, to God, in the midst of all this fame and attention. He was given a new name that meant "Creator/Sustainer of Life." He married into royalty. Children followed: An heir and a spare. These two sons would be two of the twelve tribes of Israel. His sons helped deepen his faith in God's healing hand: Resolving his painful family experiences. Restoration of being fruitful in a land of misfortune.

We see further Joseph's leadership: his resilience and his ability to learn and move forward. He finally experienced physical, social, and psychological security. Why? To be a blessing, as God promised to Abraham. Joseph's rule is rooted not in absolute power, but in care for the less fortunate. This wasn't a selfish amassing of worldly goods. It was saving...to save lives.

Joseph also shows us the wisdom of Planning. Plan carefully and prayerfully. Planning and praying go hand in hand. The hand of God folded together with the human hand. All the world came to Joseph for food. And the stage is now set for Joseph to be reunited with his brothers and father.



You see, Joseph is a foreshadowing of Jesus. God delivered Jesus from the prison of the tomb and declared him Son of God through the resurrection.

Joseph was raised from the pits to be at the right hand of Pharaoh; Jesus at the right hand of the Father.

All were commanded to bow before Joseph. So also before Jesus, "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Joseph saved countless lives with the bread he provided. Jesus, the living bread, declares "whoever eats of this bread will live forever."

Amen.

Sermon Art: Page from "Genesis", *Koberger Bible*, Nuremberg, 1483; verso: colored woodcut illustrating Pharaoh's dream of the seven kine, [artmuseum.princeton.edu](http://artmuseum.princeton.edu)

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