

Lesson 47

Joseph Rises to Power

Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams and becomes a ruler in Egypt.

Overview

Lesson Focus

God gave Pharaoh two disturbing dreams that his wise men couldn't interpret. The cupbearer remembered Joseph from the prison and recommended him to Pharaoh. Giving God the credit for his gift, Joseph explained that Pharaoh's dreams were a warning of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh honored Joseph and gave him a powerful position to prepare Egypt for the famine.

Key Passages

Genesis 41:1–4, 41:16, 41:41–43

Memory Verse

Proverbs 3:5–6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Prepare to Share

Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

Joseph was imprisoned due to the lies of Potiphar's wife, but God blessed him in prison by giving him favor with the keeper of the prison. In his position of caring for other prisoners, Joseph met and interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker (Genesis 40). He correctly described what these servants' dreams meant, but nearly two years passed before the cupbearer remembered him and recommended him to Pharaoh as an interpreter of dreams. After giving God the credit and the glory (Genesis 41:16), Joseph was able to explain Pharaoh's dreams, declaring that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine in the land. Impressed by Joseph's interpretation and advice, Pharaoh appointed him over all the land of Egypt (Genesis 41:41). Pharaoh gave Joseph authority with his signet ring and honored him with new clothing, a gold chain, and the use of his second chariot. Pharaoh also gave him a wife, Asenath, who came from a noble family.

Joseph was 30 years old when he became a ruler in Egypt (Genesis 41:46), and he immediately set to work preparing for the famine. During the seven good years, he collected grain and stored it in cities all over Egypt. His wife bore two sons: Manasseh and Ephraim. Joseph gave them Hebrew names that showed his gratefulness to God. His new position and family were blessings that helped him forget his previous betrayals and sorrow (Genesis 41:51–52).

The blessing of God was on Egypt on account of Joseph, which is a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and his descendants that he would "bless those who bless you" (Genesis 12:3). God's supernatural blessing followed Joseph at every step during his time in Egypt. God blessed Potiphar for Joseph's sake. The more that Potiphar entrusted to Joseph, the more God blessed him (Genesis 39:5). Later, the Lord also blessed Joseph's work in the prison (Genesis 39:23). Finally, God blessed Pharaoh by sending him Joseph to prepare for the famine. Pharaoh honored Joseph by giving him power and authority in Egypt, and God blessed Pharaoh during the seven years of plenty to prepare for the famine. In addition, Egypt also benefited from the money and land acquired as payment for their grain.

When the famine hit, it affected not only Egypt but also the surrounding lands, including Canaan (Genesis 41:57). People came from everywhere to buy grain from Egypt. It was the only nation with food during the famine: "There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread" (Genesis 41:54). Without God's sovereign intervention, many people would have perished during the shortage of food.

Historical/Apologetics Background

Many have asked if there is any historical evidence for these seven years of famine. While there is no direct evidence for it, there are several events that may refer to it.

In the cliffs of Beni Hassan, about 230 miles south of Cairo, tombs have been found from the Egyptian 12th Dynasty—about the same time Joseph was in Egypt and Pharaoh had set him over the land (Genesis 41:44). One of the tombs belonged to Ameni, a provincial governor possibly during the time of Sesostri I. On the wall of his tomb he wrote,

No child of the poor did I afflict; no widow did I oppress; no landowner did I displace; no herdsmen did I drive away; from no small farmer did I take away his men for my works. No one was unhappy in my days, not even in the years of famine. For I had tilled all the fields of the nome of Mah, up to its southern and northern frontiers. Thus I prolonged the life of its inhabitants and preserved the food which it produced. No hungry man was in it. I distributed equally to the widow as to the married woman. I did not prefer the great to the humble in all that I gave away.

The famine mentioned here meets the criteria of Joseph's famine in four major aspects:

- The approximate date of the famine recorded in the tomb corresponds with the time of Joseph's service in Egypt.

- The famine lasted several years.

- Preparations were made in advance to meet the needs of this disaster by gathering food.

- The food was distributed during the years of famine.

Also, there is a canal that runs from the Nile River to bring water into the Faiyum Oasis. It is known as "Joseph's Canal" and was dug during the 12th

Dynasty, possibly at Joseph's orders in preparation for the expected famine.

More details on Joseph's position are given in Genesis 45:8, in which Joseph identifies himself as "a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt." These three titles provide insight into Joseph's roles as a leader. First, "lord of all Pharaoh's house" was a title for chief steward of the king. The chief steward oversaw the king's agricultural holdings, including the royal granaries. God prepared Joseph for this role when he made Joseph the overseer of Potiphar's household. Second, the title of "father to Pharaoh" was used by Egyptians for officials who provided long-term service or who performed a special favor for the king. By interpreting Pharaoh's dream and recommending a plan for the famine, Joseph performed a special favor for the king. The third title of "ruler over all the land of Egypt" could refer to the position of vizier, or prime minister. The vizier was a record-keeper, supervisor, agricultural overseer, and foreign ambassador. The positions of vizier and chief steward were important government positions, but the names of men who held these positions during this time period have not been discovered. By the time of the Middle Kingdom, there were men who held both positions, so Joseph may have been one of the first to do this.

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