

Genesis 41:1-41 Provision Before the Famine

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Let's start off with a little recap to remember where we are. We're looking at the life of Joseph – you have Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob (whose name is changed to Israel), then one of his sons is Joseph. Right now, Joseph is sitting in an Egyptian jail because his brothers who wanted to get rid of him sold him into slavery.

He did a great job as a slave though, his boss let him run the show at home, but the boss's wife kept making passes at him. He kept refusing her because he feared God, so she finally accused him of attempted rape, which got him thrown in jail.

While in jail he rises to the top again and basically runs the show. One day Pharaoh gets upset at his chief butler and chief baker and throws them into prison too. They have some dreams that Joseph interprets for them and his interpretation comes to pass – the baker is put to death and the butler is set free. Joseph asks him to try to pull some strings to get him out of jail, but the dude forgets.

At this point Joseph has to be thinking there can't be any more short straws left, because he's got the world's largest collection of them.

But, this morning we're going to see that it was all for a reason, a very good reason, and he's about to get out of jail in a way he would never have imagined.

1 Then it came to pass, at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh had a dream; and behold, he stood by the river. 2 Suddenly there came up out of the river seven cows, fine looking and fat; and they fed in the meadow. 3 Then behold, seven other cows came up after them out of the river, ugly and gaunt, and stood by the *other* cows on the bank of the river. 4 And the ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven fine looking and fat cows. So Pharaoh awoke. 5 He slept and dreamed a second time; and suddenly seven heads of grain came up on one stalk, plump and good. 6 Then behold, seven thin heads, blighted by the east wind, sprang up after them. 7 And the seven thin heads devoured the seven plump and full heads. So Pharaoh awoke, and indeed, *it was* a dream. 8 Now it came to pass in the morning that his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but *there was* no one who could interpret them for Pharaoh.

9 Then the chief butler spoke to Pharaoh, saying: "I remember my faults this day. 10 When Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and put me in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, *both* me and the chief baker, 11 we each had a dream in one night, he and I. Each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his *own* dream. 12 Now there *was* a young Hebrew man with us there, a servant of the captain of the guard. And we told him, and he interpreted our dreams for us; to each man he interpreted according to his *own*

dream. 13 And it came to pass, just as he interpreted for us, so it happened. He restored me to my office, and he hanged him.”

14 Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him quickly out of the dungeon; and he shaved, changed his clothing, and came to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh has a dream but no one can interpret it. Now it's important to remember the status of Egypt at this time. They were the superpower of their day. At this point, the Great Pyramids have already been built. Much of what you see in Egyptian museums and archaeology has already been established at this point.

We tend to make people smaller and less significant when we look back at them through time, as if they were stupid because they didn't have iPhones, but the Egyptians had a very advanced culture at this point. They also had a lot of gods, and Pharaoh was one of them; which is pretty interesting. When you're god, but you can't figure out what is going on, what are the people who worship you supposed to do?

Today we might not think of ourselves, or other men, as gods, but we still face a very similar problem. In most leadership training they teach you that you want to instill confidence in your subordinates, people are looking for a leader they can trust. And some men, and some women, are charging through life telling themselves and others that they've got things under control – they're hard chargers, they can do it, they can find a way or make a way, they can press through and get the job done.

That kind of confidence works for a while, it gets you through a lot of stuff, but sooner or later we all come up against moments like this, moments when we *don't* know what to do. We don't know how to respond, and no one around us seems to have the answers either. What do you do then? This is when worry starts to creep in and suffocate you, you get that constriction in your gut and you wonder, am I really going to make it through this?

Moments like this remind us how fragile we are and they're a gift from God because they make our situation so bad, so bleak, that we finally start to look for something outside ourselves.

Fortunately for Pharaoh, God was ready to provide the answers he was seeking; which brings Joseph back into the picture. Remember, he has spent *thirteen years* as a slave or prisoner *and he was completely innocent*. His late teens and all of his twenties were stripped away in servitude. But now look at the ministry opportunity he has, look at the role God is going to let him play.

I wonder, especially for some of you younger folks, would you be willing to surrender your twenties for the sake of serving God in an enormous way?

And, are you sure you're not doing that now? You never know what God is preparing you for. The only guarantee is this – if you place yourself in His hands, at His disposal, I guarantee you won't be let down. Waiting may press you to the end of your patience and

then stretch you a little more, but when it all comes together, you won't be let down. God doesn't give disappointing gifts.

You also need to notice - it took thirteen years to get to this point, but now that he is here, things are about to move at warp speed - he's going to go from a scraggly beard and raggedy clothes to cleaned, pressed, and shaven and riding in the presidential limousine in the course of a few hours.

When God's will connects with God's timing, you better hang on, because your life can change radically in a moment.

15 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and *there is* no one who can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you *that* you can understand a dream, to interpret it."

16 So Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, "*It is* not in me; **God** will give Pharaoh an answer of peace."

Mark that, because it is important to remember - we need to be sure that we are constantly giving God the glory He deserves.

17 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph: "Behold, in my dream I stood on the bank of the river. 18 Suddenly seven cows came up out of the river, fine looking and fat; and they fed in the meadow. 19 Then behold, seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and gaunt, such ugliness as I have never seen in all the land of Egypt. 20 And the gaunt and ugly cows ate up the first seven, the fat cows. 21 When they had eaten them up, no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they *were* just as ugly as at the beginning. So I awoke. 22 Also I saw in my dream, and suddenly seven heads came up on one stalk, full and good. 23 Then behold, seven heads, withered, thin, *and* blighted by the east wind, sprang up after them. 24 And the thin heads devoured the seven good heads. So I told *this* to the magicians, but *there was* no one who could explain *it* to me."

25 Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh *are* one; God has shown Pharaoh what He *is* about to do:

26 The seven good cows *are* seven years, and the seven good heads *are* seven years; the dreams *are* one. 27 And the seven thin and ugly cows which came up after them *are* seven years, and the seven empty heads blighted by the east wind are seven years of famine. 28 *This is* the thing which I have spoken to Pharaoh. God has shown Pharaoh what He *is* about to do.

The question is often asked, why do bad things happen to good people? But we could just as easily spin the question around and ask, why do good things happen to bad people? The first command is "I am the LORD your God, you shall have no other gods before me" and yet, Pharaoh himself is viewed as a god. He does not love Yahweh, he is not seeking to know, worship, and serve Yahweh; the nation he leads worships all kinds of other false gods who haven't mentioned a word about what is coming upon them, but God does. God sends a warning to Pharaoh, as the leader of this massive nation, about what is coming. That's an act of mercy.

But you know what? It's not an isolated event – several times in Scripture we see God sending messages to leaders of nations – sometimes through dreams, like we see here and with Pilate's wife; remember, she warned Pilate that she had had a dream that troubled her about this man Jesus who was brought before her husband; we also see warnings sent from God through prophets. It would be interesting to know what kind of things Obama dreams about...

But God doesn't just give His warnings to supreme political leaders, He gives it to all of us in the form of His Word. The Bible is a gift from God to all of us so that we can know what is coming, not just in eternity, but here and now. The Bible is full of warnings about how life will turn out if you're a drunk, if you're messing around with pre-marital or extra-marital sex, if you're not wise with your finances, if you don't control your tongue, if you're lazy. Those warnings come in the form of straight up teaching and we also see them played out in the lives of men and women in the pages of the Bible. God gives us this book as a warning about what will come if we live life for ourselves. Fortunately, it also tells us about the Refuge He has provided.

And, to those who have accepted that refuge in Christ, He gives the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. Before I came up here to pastor this church, I was talking with my pastor down in Lynchburg and I was sharing how I was a little apprehensive because I had never done this before, and he shared something with me that sank down deep into my soul and which has been validated by experience. He said, "Jeff, God has called you to take on this role, He will equip you for it, He will give you the perfect wisdom, insight, and discernment to lead and serve His people, and you need to expect it." I'm absolutely confident that God blesses me with insight and ability because He loves you, and if I wasn't serving Him in this way, some of that gifting wouldn't be there anymore.

But the same thing is available to you – most of you serve in some sort of leadership capacity, whether it's in your home or at work. Have you experienced God blessing or directing you for the benefit of those you serve or lead? If not, it might be because you just didn't recognize it, or it might be because you aren't asking for it.

You need to do that – you need to say, "God, you have placed me here, in this place, in this role, and I want to glorify you and be a blessing to those I serve and lead." It doesn't matter if you're leading a department or a division, or if you're changing diapers – you have the opportunity to be the instrument through which God's blessing flows, so ask Him to do it, ask Him to use you. And that applies to all of you – God used Joseph and it blessed the Egyptians, not a bunch of good little church people – He can use you to bless the hedonistic pagan you work with – remember, it's the goodness and kindness of God that leads to repentance.

29 Indeed seven years of great plenty will come throughout all the land of Egypt; 30 but after them seven years of famine will arise, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine will deplete the land. 31 So the plenty will not be known in the land because of the famine following, for it *will be* very severe. 32 And the dream was repeated

to Pharaoh twice because the thing *is* established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.

We saw that God provides the warning regarding what is going to come, but notice that He also provides the way to endure it. Yes, seven years of famine are coming, but first, seven years of plenty will come. God is going to give them what is necessary to survive the upcoming trial, the question is: how will they use it?

Oh boy, there is so much I could say right here about our present economic crisis. Before all of our current troubles happened, what was going on? We had the Real Estate boom, and before that, the Tech Boom – people were rolling in money. The question is: what did they do with it?

Now, I know this is a very delicate issue because a lot of people we know and love have been deeply impacted by these events, but still, we need to sit down and look at the issue and see what we can learn.

One of the big things I learned is that times of prosperity should be used to secure your current position, *not* to take a bold leap forward. People thought our prosperity was just going to go on and on forever, so some of them made some foolish or frivolous choices. They moved into bigger homes, they took out loans on their existing home and bought new cars or put in marble counter-tops. Now, new cars and marble countertops aren't bad, but what did they put aside for the future? How did they use their prosperity to prepare for the lean times that would come?

Throughout Scripture we see a pattern of God providing His people with what they need before a trial comes. The Israelites were loaded down with gifts by their Egyptian neighbors before they left on the Exodus. The wise men brought Joseph and Mary gifts that paid for their escape from Herod. God gave the members of the early church in Acts what they needed to support each other after Pentecost.

And it's not just true on a financial or material level, He prepares us for emotional and spiritual trials by leading us through smaller trials first and giving us insight into His Word so that we know how to respond when the larger trials come.

God doesn't always protect us from the storms of life, but He almost always offers us swimming lessons or a life vest before they come – the question, once again, is: do we use it as He intended or do we squander it on our own pleasure?

33 “Now therefore, let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. 34 Let Pharaoh do *this*, and let him appoint officers over the land, to collect one-fifth *of the produce* of the land of Egypt in the seven plentiful years. 35 And let them gather all the food of those good years that are coming, and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities. 36 Then that food shall be as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which shall be in the land of Egypt, that the land may not perish during the famine.”

37 So the advice was good in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of all his servants.
38 And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find *such a one* as this, a man in whom *is* the Spirit of God?"

39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, *there is* no one as discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you."

41 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt."

So, God has provided the warning, He promises to provide the way, and now we see He has provided the wisdom as well. Joseph sees what God is going to do and what to do about it. As a result, he is going to become the second most powerful man in the nation.

Now, tell me God is not patient, loving, and kind.

The problem is, we resist Him. He sends us warnings – all of us have the general warnings contained in Scripture, that judgment is coming, that it is a horrible thing, and that it lasts forever. And the Bible tells us that He sends that message not just to the earth in general, but to you and me in particular – the Holy Spirit comes to us and convicts us sin, righteousness, and judgment. But do we receive the warning? Pharaoh got the answer because he didn't ignore the warning, but many people today, including some of us, have warning lights going off on the dashboard of life and you're ignoring it.

I don't want the pilot of the plane I'm flying in ignoring warning lights, and I don't want you doing it either – if God is trying to get your attention about something, turn to Him today, because He's not *just* trying to give you a warning, He *also* wants to show you the way that He made.

That "way" is Jesus first and foremost. He said in John 14:6 "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." You don't need to ignore that warning light and hope it goes away, you don't need to acknowledge the warning and try to handle it yourself, you need to bring it to Jesus and let Him be the answer. You're not alone, you don't have to 'man up' and make it through on your own, you need to come to Him – not just for your sake, but for the sake of everyone else you can influence as well.

And then finally, as you live cognizant of His warnings and relying on His way, He will fill you with the wisdom you need. James 1:5 "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him." You don't need to enroll in another class or pursue another degree in order to please God, you just need to come to Him for direction. He may direct you to go school or pursue knowledge, but without His wisdom, knowledge on it's own lacks power.

We'll go more into God's provision of wisdom next week as we finish out this chapter, but for today, I want you to see what a kind, merciful, generous God we serve. He reaches out to a people who have turned their backs on Him, who don't even know that He exists, and He says, "I'm going to help them. I'm going to save them from this disaster if they will just listen to Me." And then, eventually He will move Joseph's people down there too and the family of Jacob will grow into the nation of Israel. And it will all happen because two men, Pharaoh and Joseph, responded when God sent a warning, provided the way, and gave the wisdom...after what seemed like a very long wait.

Now what about you? What is God trying to tell you and how does He want to use you to bless others? Let's pray and ask Him.