

# **“Joseph: Dealing With Success”**

## **GENESIS 41**

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If you have been with us over the past few weeks, then you know that we have been looking very carefully at the life of Joseph from the Old Testament book of Genesis. We started three weeks ago by learning that even though Joseph grew up in an incredibly messed up family, he did not allow his very unusual and extremely dysfunctional family situation to keep him from serving God. Two weeks ago, we learned that once Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, he faced a powerful and ongoing temptation. He turned away, though, because he knew that to give in to Potiphar’s wife would have been a sin against God. And then last week, we looked together at how Joseph dealt with disappointment. For 13 years, Joseph suffered, even though he was completely innocent. We talked about our own “waiting room” experiences, and we learned from Joseph that we can sometimes use those experiences to help others, and we also learned from Joseph that he did not allow the dream to die. He held onto his belief that God is good.

This morning I would like for us to continue in Genesis 41 as we observe how Joseph dealt with success. Yes, Joseph survived 13 years in slavery and prison, but in some ways we are even more impressed that Joseph survived such a rapid rise through the ranks of Egypt – going from prison to second-in-command of the most powerful nation on the face of the earth at that time. You might be thinking: What do you mean when you talk about “surviving success”? I appreciate what one author wrote on this, “Not every man can carry a full cup. Sudden elevation frequently leads to pride and a fall. The most exacting test of all to survive...is prosperity.” I think we understand what that author was saying. Sometimes success can be dangerous. We succeed and do well, and sometimes we forget where we came from. This morning, then, let us try to learn something from Joseph’s very quick promotion – some lessons that we will hopefully be able to apply to our lives today. Genesis 41,

***<sup>1</sup> Now it happened at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream, and behold, he was standing by the Nile. <sup>2</sup> And lo, from the Nile there came up seven cows, sleek and fat; and they grazed in the marsh grass. <sup>3</sup> Then behold, seven other cows came up after them from the Nile, ugly and gaunt, and they stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. <sup>4</sup> The ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. Then Pharaoh awoke. <sup>5</sup> He fell asleep and dreamed a second time; and behold, seven ears of grain came up on a single stalk, plump and good. <sup>6</sup> Then behold, seven ears, thin and scorched by the east wind, sprouted up after them. <sup>7</sup> The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Then Pharaoh awoke, and behold,***

it was a dream.<sup>8</sup> Now in the morning his spirit was troubled, so 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 to Pharaoh.

<sup>9</sup> Then the chief cupbearer spoke to Pharaoh, saying, "I would make mention today of my own offenses.<sup>10</sup> Pharaoh was furious with his servants, and he put me in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, both me and the chief baker.<sup>11</sup> We had a dream on the same night, he and I; each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his own dream.<sup>12</sup> Now a Hebrew youth was with us there, a servant of the captain of the bodyguard, and we related them to him, and he interpreted our dreams for us. To each one he interpreted according to his own dream.<sup>13</sup> And just as he interpreted for us, so it happened; he restored me in my office, but he hanged him."

<sup>14</sup> Then Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon; and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came to Pharaoh.<sup>15</sup> Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it; and I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."<sup>16</sup> Joseph then answered Pharaoh, saying, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."<sup>17</sup> So Pharaoh spoke to Joseph, "In my dream, behold, I was standing on the bank of the Nile;<sup>18</sup> and behold, seven cows, fat and sleek came up out of the Nile, and they grazed in the marsh grass.<sup>19</sup> Lo, seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and gaunt, such as I had never seen for ugliness in all the land of Egypt;<sup>20</sup> and the lean and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows.<sup>21</sup> Yet when they had devoured them, it could not be detected that they had devoured them, for they were just as ugly as before. Then I awoke.<sup>22</sup> I saw also in my dream, and behold, seven ears, full and good, came up on a single stalk;<sup>23</sup> and lo, seven ears, withered, thin, and scorched by the east wind, sprouted up after them;<sup>24</sup> and the thin ears swallowed the seven good ears. Then I told it to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me."

<sup>25</sup> Now Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has told 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 and the same.<sup>27</sup> The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven thin ears scorched by the east wind will be seven years of famine.<sup>28</sup> It is as I have spoken to Pharaoh: God has shown to Pharaoh what He is about to do.<sup>29</sup> Behold, seven years of great abundance are coming in all the land of Egypt;<sup>30</sup> and after them seven years of famine will come, and all the abundance will be forgotten in the land of Egypt, and the famine will ravage the land.<sup>31</sup> So the abundance will be unknown in the land because of that subsequent famine; for it will be very severe.<sup>32</sup> Now as for the repeating of the dream to Pharaoh twice, it means that the matter is determined by God, and God will quickly bring it about.<sup>33</sup> Now let Pharaoh look for a man discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt.<sup>34</sup> Let Pharaoh take action to appoint overseers in charge of the land, and let him exact a fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven years of abundance.<sup>35</sup> Then let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and store up the grain for food in the cities under Pharaoh's authority, and let them guard it.<sup>36</sup> Let the food become as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land will not perish during the famine."<sup>37</sup> Now the proposal seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his servants.

<sup>38</sup> *Then Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?"*

<sup>39</sup> *So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. <sup>40</sup> You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you." <sup>41</sup> Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." <sup>42</sup> Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck. <sup>43</sup> He had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, "Bow the knee!" And he set him over all the land of Egypt. <sup>44</sup> Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Though I am Pharaoh, yet without your permission no one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." <sup>45</sup> Then Pharaoh named Joseph Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, as his wife. And Joseph went forth over the land of Egypt.*

<sup>46</sup> *Now Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before 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 years of plenty the land brought forth abundantly. <sup>48</sup> So he gathered all the food of these seven years which occurred in the land of Egypt and placed the food in the cities; he placed in every city the food from its own surrounding fields. <sup>49</sup> Thus Joseph stored up grain in great abundance like the sand of the sea, until he stopped measuring it, for it was beyond measure.*

<sup>50</sup> *Now before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph, whom Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore to him. <sup>51</sup> Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." <sup>52</sup> He named the second Ephraim, "For," he said, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."*

<sup>53</sup> *When the seven years of plenty which had been 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, then there was famine in all the lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. <sup>55</sup> So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, you shall do." <sup>56</sup> When the famine was spread over all the face of the earth, then Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians; and the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. <sup>57</sup> The people of all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the earth.*

As we focus our thoughts on this chapter, I would like to take the next 20 minutes or so to consider some lessons from Joseph's very rapid promotion to the leadership of the world's only superpower at that time in world history.

- I. **And as we look back over the chapter, we find first of all, that Joseph GAVE GOD THE CREDIT FOR EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED.**

As the chapter opens, Pharaoh has a series of dreams. He dreams about cows and grain, and he dreams that the skinny cows eat the fat cows and that the skinny ears of grain swallow the good ears of grain, and we find in this passage that none of Pharaoh's magicians could figure out what those dreams meant. Now I know that

when we think about a *“magician,”* in our culture we tend to think of a man in a tuxedo pulling a rabbit out of a hat, but that is not what we are talking about here. What we are talking about are the most highly educated leaders in Egypt – the priests of the various gods. These men were highly educated in the interpretation of dreams. We know from history that the Egyptians had a book of dreams. The book had been written over many years, and the book described various interpretations of various dreams. They had it down to a science. But we find here in this passage that the experts were completely baffled by these two dreams that Pharaoh had.

At this point, of course, the cupbearer suddenly remembers Joseph! The cupbearer, of course, does not mention that he forgot Joseph for two years, but he mentions Joseph’s accurate interpretation of the two dreams, and Pharaoh sends for Joseph. I want to make just a brief note here concerning an example of how NOT to interpret the Bible. I would invite you to look very carefully at verse 14. I have seen entire sermons using nothing but verse 14 to “prove” that you must wear your best clothes to worship on Sunday morning. I would invite you to look at verse 14 again and let that sink in just a little bit. Do you see it? According to some, verse 14 proves that wearing jeans and a t-shirt to worship is a sin. The reasoning is: Since Joseph got himself cleaned up and changed his clothes to go see Pharaoh, then we must do nothing less to see God every Sunday morning. But if we could just back away from this verse just a little bit and consider it in context, I would say: NO! That is not what this verse is teaching! This verse has absolutely nothing to do with what we wear to worship. In context, we need to realize that when Joseph was called from the dungeon where he had been for the past 13 years, he shaved and changed his clothes out of respect for Pharaoh. This has nothing to do with the theory that you need to wear a suit and tie to worship God today. I did want to give a little warning about how some people have taken verse 14 out of context. But enough of that little rant.

Getting back to the main point in the first part of this chapter, though, please notice Joseph’s attitude in all of this: At every point along the way, at every possible opportunity, Joseph gave God the credit. And here he was as a foreign prisoner standing before some powerful officials whose own experts could not provide an explanation. In spite of the pressure, in spite of the temptation to present his own résumé to the most powerful man on the face of the earth at that time, in spite of how easy it would have been to make himself look good, Joseph spoke up and gave God the credit.

Notice the humility in verse 16, with the very first words spoken to Pharaoh, *“It is not in me,”* or as some translations say, *“I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”* Oh how easy it would have been to say, “Yes, I am the one who accurately interprets dreams, and if you let me go I will give you the answer.” But Joseph did not say that. Instead, Joseph shifted the focus to God and Joseph gave God the credit, *“I cannot do it, but God will set your mind at ease. I cannot do it, but God is able”* [paraphrased].

This morning, then, we are talking about “Dealing With Success,” and it seems that Joseph dealt with success in his life by keeping the focus on God. I remember talking with Amy Bessire shortly before she passed away several years ago. Amy, of course, was a friend of this congregation. She’s the one who wrote the song, “The Steadfast Love of the Lord Never Ceases.” As you might remember, she was here on the Sunday that I preached on that passage, the basis of the song, Lamentations 3:22-24. Before worship that morning, I pulled her aside and asked her a little bit about the song, how the song came about, and sister Amy said, “It was all God.” That is the attitude Joseph had before Pharaoh, *“I cannot do it, it is not in me, but God can give you an answer”* [paraphrase]. And with that, Joseph very calmly and methodically explains the two dreams – seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. But over and over again, Joseph gives God the credit. Notice verse 25, *“Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do.”* And then in verse 28, *“It is as I have spoken to Pharaoh: God has shown to Pharaoh what He is about to do.”*

Notice verse 32, ***“...the matter is determined by God, and God will quickly bring it about.”*** At every possible opportunity, Joseph turned the discussion back to God.

For just a moment, then, let us imagine how our lives could be different if we would only give God the credit for every good thing. It takes us away from being arrogant and allows us to be thankful and not boastful. When we give God the credit, our constant joy is in the Lord and not in His blessings. Yes, we are thankful for the good things, but God is the focus of every good thing that happens to us. It is tempting to attribute our success to our own hard work, it is tempting to accept the praise for ourselves, it is tempting to attribute our success to chance. We remember the man driving through level after level of the crowded parking garage, “Dear God, please let me find a place to park,” and then a spot opens up, and the man says, “Oh, never mind, God, somebody just pulled out.” Not good at all! Joseph, though, dealt with his own personal success by giving God the credit.

**II. There is a second idea I’d like for us to consider this morning, and that is: ONCE PHARAOH PUT HIM IN CHARGE OF THE SITUATION, JOSEPH SERVED WITH GOD’S WISDOM AND THEREBY FULFILLED GOD’S PROVIDENTIAL PLAN.**

So, not only did Joseph give God the credit, but he also offers a solution to the problem proposed by the dream. Back up in verse 33, Joseph has a suggestion based on God’s wisdom: You need to find a very wise man and put that man in charge of preparing for what is about to happen, and you need to do it immediately. As far as the text itself is concerned, it doesn’t seem as if Joseph had any idea that he was about to be that man, but that is exactly what happens. The proposal sounds good, and Pharaoh turns to Joseph and basically says, “You are the man!” [paraphrased]. And really, although Joseph probably couldn’t see it at the time, all of this was fitting together perfectly! In those 13 years as a slave and as a prisoner, God had been preparing Joseph for this day. As I look at Joseph’s life, it appears that Joseph has matured quite a bit. He grew from that teenager who was always sharing his dreams and sticking his nose in his brothers’ business, he has been tested by temptation, and he has certainly learned some very practical skills – in prison, he has learned the Egyptian language, he has rubbed shoulders with some very influential people, he has learned how to manage various projects, and he has also learned a few lessons on humility. Over those 13 years, Joseph has learned how to serve as a leader, and that is exactly what he steps up to do. We remember what Peter wrote in 1 Peter 5:6, ***“Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.”*** Like Joseph, Peter also grew and matured into a position of leadership.

So many times, we may think we are putting up with a dead-end job, but then it seems to make sense later that perhaps God might have been using that experience to prepare us for another much more important opportunity that comes along later. Or maybe during a time of your life that doesn’t make sense, somebody might come to you for advice, and maybe in that circumstance you are able to give them some encouragement or practical wisdom on God’s behalf. To me, it is amazing how some very worldly people might cut on us for our faith here and there, but when things start falling apart, they have a way of coming to us for advice. I can think of a situation at a place where my wife used to work a number of years ago, some of the young women were going in and having abortions basically as a form of birth control – one after the other. But in the middle of some of those situations, they would sometimes go to her for advice, and sometimes that advice did a lot of good. As I see it, that is what Joseph did here. He saw the problem, he proposed a solution, and then he set out to do whatever needed to be done. He served with God’s wisdom and thereby fulfilled God’s plan for his life.

And by the way, did you notice how Joseph's plan was simple and yet exactly what Pharaoh needed? Someone has pointed out that he used what is sometimes referred to as the SAM method (S-A-M). First of all, the plan was SPECIFIC. He didn't just say, "Hey, somebody needs to store some grain," but he had a specific plan – 20% per year for seven years. Secondly, the plan was ATTAINABLE. In other words, it was realistic. He could have suggested 40 or 50%, but that would have been unreasonable. Any more than 20% might have caused a revolt. So, the plan was attainable. And then finally, the plan was MEASURABLE. In other words, this was a plan that could be evaluated. Since there was a specific percentage for a specific length of time, Pharaoh could evaluate how the plan was going. So, it was SPECIFIC, ATTAINABLE, AND MEASURABLE. Or, as we might also say, the plan was wise, because Joseph was serving with God's wisdom.

And with that, Joseph was put in charge. He was given Pharaoh's signet ring (which was incredibly important – it allowed him to basically sign Pharaoh's name on official documents), and he was also given (in addition to his own personal chariot) *"garments of fine linen."* Remember: Joseph has already lost two coats – one to his brothers and one to Potiphar's wife. At this point, then, clothing is no longer a concern for Joseph. He is given all kinds of authority and basically made the manager of Egypt. Joseph is a living example of what the Lord said in Luke 16:10, *"He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much."* Joseph passed the test in Potiphar's house and also in prison and was promoted by God. He served with God's wisdom and fulfilled God's plan for his life.

**III. Before we close, there is something else I should point out here, and that is: As he served, JOSEPH USED HIS TALENTS AS A BLESSING TO OTHERS.**

We find (in verses 48-49) that Joseph collected so much grain during the first seven years that they stopped measuring it – the Bible says that it was *"beyond measure."* And then in those last few verses we find that when the famine finally came there was *"famine in all the lands, but in the land of Egypt there was bread"* (verse 54). And then beyond that, we find in the last two verses of this chapter that as the famine continued to spread, people from all over the earth traveled to Egypt to purchase grain from Joseph. By using his talents, then, Joseph served as a blessing to others. We remember God's statement to Joseph's father Jacob many years earlier, *"Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed."* Joseph used his skills as a blessing to others.

We remember Peter's words in 1 Peter 4:10-11 (the passage that was read as our Scripture reading this morning), *"As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."* Joseph lived this passage many years before it was ever written.

Today, we can also serve God no matter what we might do for a living. Whether you are a teacher, or an installer, or a technician, or some kind of manager, some kind of service position, no matter what we do for a living, all of us can serve God by being a blessing to others.

**Conclusion:**

As we close our thoughts on this chapter, I would point out something else that hit me this week, and that is: there are some amazing similarities between Joseph and Jesus. Both were loved by their fathers. Both served

as shepherds in at least one sense. Both were hated by their brothers. Both were taken to Egypt. Both were tempted. Both were sold for the price of a slave. Both had robes taken from them. Both were falsely accused. Both were tied up or chained at some point. Both were placed with two other prisoners – one of whom was saved and one of whom was lost. Both were 30 years old at the time their public service began. Both were lifted up after a time of suffering. Both forgave those who had sinned against them. Both ended up saving their people. Joseph provided bread. Jesus referred to Himself as the ***“Bread of Life.”*** Joseph found favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The Roman centurion said of Jesus, ***“Truly, this was the Son of God.”*** And finally, what other people did to hurt both of them, God turned into good. I am sure there are more, but these are certainly some very interesting parallels to me.

This morning, then, we can be thankful for Joseph. But we can certainly be so much thankful for Jesus. Jesus took our place on the cross. We accept His free offer of salvation through faithful obedience. The Lord has commanded that we repent and be baptized. If you have any questions, let us know. If you have a concern that we need to pray about, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front so we can share it with the congregation. On the other hand, if you know what you need to do and you are ready to do it right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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