

Pharaoh's Dreams

41 When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile, ² when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. ³ After them, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. ⁴ And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.

⁵ He fell asleep again and had a second dream: Seven heads of grain, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk. ⁶ After them, seven other heads of grain sprouted—thin and scorched by the east wind. ⁷ The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads. Then Pharaoh woke up; it had been a dream.

⁸ In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him.

⁹ Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "Today I am reminded of my shortcomings. ¹⁰ Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard. ¹¹ Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. ¹² Now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us, giving each man the interpretation of his dream. ¹³ And things turned

out exactly as he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was impaled."

¹⁴ So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh.

¹⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."

¹⁶ "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."

Matthew 10

¹⁶ "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. ¹⁷ Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. ¹⁸ On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, ²⁰ for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

What a long way we've come.

Joseph was the favoured child, spoiled by his Father, hated by his brothers and sold into slavery in faraway Egypt.

Joseph the dreamer, Joseph who believed his brothers would all bow down before him, Joseph who dreamed the Sun and Moon and Stars would bow before him.

He's a long way from home.

In the house of Potiphar, captain of the guard, the work of God begins to manifest itself. Joseph is gifted in administration and organisation. Ch 39 v 2 ² The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.

In fact things go so well for Potiphar that he puts Joseph in charge of everything, and he prospers, prospers, prospers. It's all going so well.

I wonder what Joseph thought about all this. As the 11th son of Jacob his inheritance would have been less than the older brothers and besides which they all hated him. Jacob and his family were still a nomadic tribe and we have no idea if Joseph knew anything about God's ancient promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Perhaps he thought he'd fallen on his feet and all was going to be well. At least he lived in a house.

And it would appear that Joseph is aware of God's blessing and presence in his life...that relationship and awareness is growing – I suspect it is, because Joseph

unfortunately gained the attention of Mrs Potiphar and as Gilly explored last week he ends up falsely accused and in prison having done the right thing to refuse her advances.

Just when things were going so well – it couldn't get much worse. Where is God now?

But as Gilly reminded us last week, the boy who had dreams is now able, by God's gifting to interpret dreams and if you remember your bible story (or the musical) he interprets the dreams of the baker and cup-bearer and his interpretations are correct.

Which brings us to today's story.

Who is Joseph now? Because of what happens next, I suggest he has surrendered to God, and the God is very present to him and Joseph's faith is now front and centre.

He prospers in prison in the same way he did in Potiphar's house, but this is no longer the brash dreamer, it's not either the prospering chief steward, this is Joseph ready and willing to serve God's purpose in prison and he has no idea what's about to happen.

When standing in front of Pharaoh you might well imagine Joseph would think his dreams had come true and this is an absolutely golden chance for freedom and maybe even prosperity.

But look at what he does.

In front of the most powerful man in the world he says

"I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."

He puts God at the centre.

And God's purpose for Joseph is fulfilled, not because he is a pawn on the chessboard of life being moved into the right place at the right time, but because Joseph's faith and character have developed so that he now knows who he is in God and who God is.

Pharaoh has the power of life and death over his subjects – remember the Baker was executed and the cup-bearer was saved – but Joseph stands in the presence of God, who is Pharaoh compared to him?

Through the work of the Spirit, Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream and is elevated from prison orderly to effectively being Prime Minister.

The contrast is shown in the story telling nature of the text

Brought from the dungeon he had to shave and change his clothes – from verse 42 ⁴² Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. ⁴³ He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, ^[b] and people shouted before him, "Make way^[c]!" Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

How many people could handle that kind of transition?
How many people would abuse their position to make up for all the suffering and hardship they had endured?

Not Joseph. He doesn't need to feather his own nest. He's given wealth and status and even a wife!

None of that matters. His situation and circumstance no longer matters. Prison or palace makes no odds – he belongs and lives in the presence of God.

The story reminded me of the Gospel scripture we read.

Jesus speaks about being sheep among wolves. Joseph is a solitary Hebrew among Egyptians. If you sometimes feel different to everyone around you, it maybe because you are. If you put God first and he is at the centre, that makes you different from those who keep themselves in the centre of their own world.

And Jesus promises that we will know what to say when the time comes to speak. We see that in Joseph. I can imagine a court official frantically briefing Joseph before he stood before Pharaoh. Saying "I cannot do it" isn't the answer anyone wanted to hear...but Joseph is marching to a different beat.

So where does the story take us today – what do we learn?

1. When we are right with God and seeking him first and foremost, our situation matters little. Prison or palace, success or failure, appreciated or taken for granted – when we focus on ourselves and our wants and needs we still have a lesson to learn.

Jesus said, ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

2. When required to speak, we can trust in the Holy Spirit to give us the right words to say. At work, in a family situation, speaking to a friend, to someone bereaved, don't worry about being at a loss for what to say, trust that the Holy Spirit will give you the words.

3. Success, or failure for that matter, are of little or no consequence. Joseph was elevated to the highest position possible, and it didn't seem to throw him off balance or disturb his faith in God.

In the daily prayer I sometimes use the phrase that Jesus is our very great reward. The more that realisation grows, the less the trapping of success or owning things or even having a glowing reputation actually matter.

It's not the things that you own, but how much those things own you that can be the trouble.

To respond to Joseph's story and to make his transformation ours – I've chosen the simple song "purify my heart"