

From Prison to Prime Minister

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 41:46-57

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For years now, I've had the same dream. I dream about Sunday morning. Even though I set two alarms, I sleep right through them. Upon awakening, I panic, knowing that I don't have enough time to learn my sermon. I throw on my clothes and race to church. I'm met at the curb by several elders holding my robe. They look really annoyed. I've already missed the 8:00 service and 9:30 worship is already in progress. We're way behind schedule. Every element of worship has taken much too long. For some inexplicable reason, the liturgist decides to dismiss people before the sermon. Maybe he's mad at me for being a no-show at the early service. Everybody is now shuffling for the exits. I try to coax people back to their seats, but it's too late. The morning is ruined. I want to crawl in a hole and hide.

If counselors are right, that reoccurring dreams are an indicator of unresolved stress, you won't have any difficulty understanding what stresses me out.

Today's sermon features two dreams. Fortunately, our hero Joseph is really good at interpreting other people's dreams.

When we left off last Sunday, Joseph has been locked away in prison. He has been falsely accused of rape by his boss's wife. It doesn't look good.

Two members of Pharaoh's kitchen staff happen to be cellmates with Joseph. Both have dreams that Joseph interprets. Joseph interprets the cupbearer's dream to mean he will be released and restored to the king's service. The cupbearer promises to speak up for Joseph if given the chance. But he forgets all about Joseph (40:23).

Two more years pass—two whole years—730 days in this God-forsaken place. Everybody has forgotten about Joseph. Has God forgotten also?

Joseph was 17 when he was sold into slavery by his 11 jealous brothers (37:3). He's now pushing 30 (41:46). He's already logged 13 years of jail time and slavery. Thirteen years seem like an eternity when you are waiting for God to do something!

When we first encounter Joseph in Genesis 37, he is brash and cocksure. He relishes his favored-son status. He enjoys parading around in his amazing technicolor dreamcoat. His brothers resent his arrogance. That's why they sell him into slavery.

But something happens to Joseph in prison. He has time to think; all the time in the world. Pride is now effectively dismantled and in its place is a new confidence in God's power. When it comes time for Joseph to secure a private audience with the king, he exhibits boldness in God's deliverance.

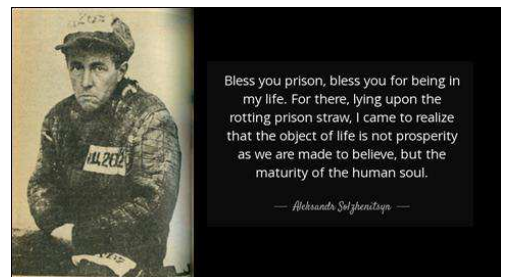
Look at what he says to Pharaoh. God is the one who will provide answers to Pharaoh's dreams (41:16). Two times in quick succession Joseph reminds Pharaoh of what God is about to do (41:25, 28). When everything is said and done, everything will be firmly decided by God and God will make it happen (41:32).

Even the names Joseph chooses for his sons express his emerging trust in God. One son is named Ephraim, meaning fruitful. God has made Joseph fruitful on foreign soil. The other son, Manasseh, is closely aligned with the Hebrew word "forget." God has made it possible for Joseph to forget all the bitterness of his brothers' betrayal.

C.S. Lewis writes in The Great Divorce, "Hell is a place where no one forgets anything." Every single slight and every hurt is remembered in hell. What a curse! Only God's mercy helps Joseph forget what his brothers did to him.

These 13 years of jail time and indentured service turn out to be Joseph's proving ground. Adversity is often God's means to prepare us for the future.

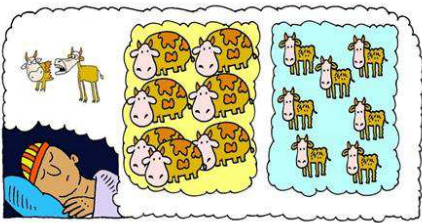
The Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was an outspoken critic of communism. He was arrested in 1945 for making disparaging comments about the Soviet regime. He was sentenced in a mock trial to eight years in a work camp. After enduring eight years in a Soviet labor camp, he wrote these astonishing words, "Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul."



Maybe *you* are experiencing adversity at the moment. You may be in a proverbial pit right now. You may feel as though you are trapped in circumstances beyond your control. It may be a relationship breakdown, a crisis in your marriage or family, the death of someone close to you, a health emergency, a financial setback or a job loss. Something has you in the depths and there seems no way out.

There is in Scripture a silver lining to adversity. Paul writes in Romans, “We glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character and character produces hope” (5:3-4). James says much the same thing: “Consider it pure joy, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance” (1:2-3).

I wish I could make all the necessary changes when life is tranquil and serene. But usually the only way I’m willing to entertain change is when there is disequilibrium in my life. Adversity is what gets my attention. Adversity is the catalyst God uses to awaken my attention and transform bad things into good things. Adversity builds character in me.



Pharaoh has two disturbing dreams in our story. In the first dream, Pharaoh imagines two lean cows coming out of the Nile to swallow seven fat cows. What is really strange is that the seven lean cows don’t gorge after dining on seven fat cows.

The second dream is much like the first. Seven blighted ears of grain consume seven lush ears of grain. Go figure!

The Pharaoh calls upon his magician advisers to interpret his dreams. These are people with advanced degrees in dream interpretation. They are all stymied. But Pharaoh’s cupbearer remembers a Hebrew slave who successfully interpreted his dream. Finally, two years after the fact, the cupbearer remembers Joseph.

Pharaoh sends for Joseph and recounts his strange dreams. “I’ve heard you are really good at interpreting dreams,” Pharaoh tells Joseph. “I can’t do it,” Joseph insists. This is a remarkable admission given Joseph’s earlier struggle with pride. “But,” Joseph goes on, “God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires” (41:16).

Joseph wastes no time interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams. It’s a good news-bad news interpretation. The good news is there will be seven years of plenty in Egypt. The bad news is it will be followed by seven years of famine.

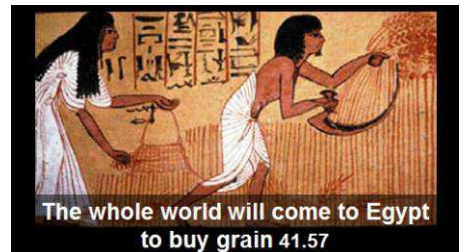
Joseph tells the king, in no uncertain terms, that Pharaoh must immediately appoint a director of famine relief. He must put aside 20 percent of the grain harvest over the next three years to avert this future calamity.

Pharaoh appoints Joseph to be his new Prime Minister. Joseph is now second in command over the mighty Egyptian Empire. Pharaoh lavishes on Joseph his signet ring of authority. He bestows on Joseph an Egyptian name and presents him with a wife from a prominent Egyptian family. Joseph is now one-of-the-family.

What an incredible reversal of fortune—from prison to Prime Minister in no time. At the outset of chapter 41, Joseph was locked away in prison with no prospect of parole. Now, at the end of the chapter, he's the one clearly in charge.

The once mighty Pharaoh is powerless to interpret his own dreams. Joseph has the power to do what Pharaoh can never do. Joseph's new power is expressed by the little adverb "all" that occurs 11 times in verses 46-57. Joseph collects *all* the food in Egypt in advance of this coming famine (41:48). He opens *all* the storehouses to feed people when the famine begins in earnest (41:56). In the end, *all* the world comes to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph (41:48). Nobody else exhibits this kind of power.

The last verse in chapter 41 tips us off that something momentous is about to happen: "The whole world came to Egypt to buy grain" (41:57). This chapter represents a major turning point in our story. Come back next Sunday.



You're not going to believe who shows up next to buy grain from Joseph.

Some of you asked my reaction to Pope Francis' visit to Washington last month. I loved it! DC is a city intoxicated with political ambition. Everybody is jockeying for political power. Pope Francis exhibits a different kind of power. This power is not achieved by military might or brute force. Spiritual power has its own kind of moral authority. It was almost comical watching politicians on both sides of the aisle swooning over the pope. I've never seen anything like it before in my 36 years in Washington.

It's ironic that Chinese President Xi Jinping visited DC the same week as Pope Francis. One relies on military power, the other eschews political power. One uses coercion for his advantage, the other understands that loyalty must be earned. One is strong because he's in charge, the other is strong because he's humble.

As I watched the American public fawn over Pope Francis, I couldn't help think that if you like this Pope, you're going to love the one he follows. Francis is merely following in the footsteps of Jesus. Pope Francis didn't write the book on mercy and humility. Jesus did!

Learn about Jesus. Love Jesus. Follow him.

