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Every Knee Shall Bow

Genesis 41:1-57

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Does your life tell the world that you have faith in a God who is sovereign over his Creation? In other words, do your responses to both the good and bad things in life communicate to the people around you that you believe God is in control and working to bring about his good will? All too often we have a tendency to take credit ourselves when things are going well and, in the midst of trials and tribulations, we often live as if God is not in control or even as if he's abandoned us. Brothers and sisters, Genesis assures that right from the beginning, God has been in control and always will be. The story began with God creating the cosmos as a temple for himself. The Sabbath represented the completion of God's creative work and the beginning of his sustaining work as he took up residence in his temple. In that sense, "Sabbath" isn't about unplugging and doing nothing; it's about sustaining, maintaining, and overseeing what he has made. Through the rest of Genesis—and through the rest of the Bible—we're given story after story as evidence that no matter how bad things may look from our perspective, God is always in his temple—never abandoning his Creation—and always nurturing and providing for its good. This theme comes to a crescendo in the story of Joseph. The storyteller reminds us repeatedly that in the midst of Joseph's suffering and unjust treatment, God was with him. But notice: Joseph knew God was with him and lived his life in such a way that all the people around him, from Potiphar to Pharaoh, couldn't help but notice that God was with him. God had made a promise to Abraham that through his descendants the nations would be blessed. That promise is fulfilled, in part, through Joseph. But notice that because Joseph's faith points everyone around him to God, God's blessings through him were never

anonymous. Joseph's faith gave witness to the one, true God.

As Genesis 41 begins, two years have passed. Joseph is still in prison, having been forgotten by the chief cupbearer. But as the story resumes, it shifts from Joseph's prison cell to Pharaoh's bedroom.

After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. And behold, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke. And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh. (Genesis 41:1-8)

Pharaoh was troubled, because he knew his dream was significant. The storyteller begins by saying two full years had passed. The last events took place on what we're told was Pharaoh's "birthday", or, more likely, the anniversary of his accession to the throne. Remember that the king of Egypt was considered a god and his godhood began when he took the throne. So this dream, coming on either his birthday or his accession day, was naturally seen as addressing something directly relevant to his reign. The dream consists of two parts, the second paralleling the first, which emphasised the certainty of the events of the dream.

The symbolism itself is fairly straightforward. The Nile was the source of Egypt's prosperity. Every year it flooded, leaving behind very

fertile silt in which the Egyptians grew their crops. It was also a dependable source of water for irrigation. Egypt did face famines occasionally, but they were rare. The cows were symbolic of Egypt's gods and especially of Isis. Seven was a common sacred number. And that the cows were first fat and then lean, obviously symbolised plenty and famine. The grain, again, represented Egypt's prosperity. She was the breadbasket of the ancient world. And the plump, good ears and the thin, blighted ears obviously represented prosperity and famine. But Pharaoh's problem lay in to put all these symbols together in a way that made sense.

We know he was troubled because he called in the court wise men to help him with the interpretation. No doubt they were shocked by Pharaoh's request. Pharaoh was divine! Why would he need their help to interpret his own dream? But they have no more success in sorting out the dream's symbolism than he did. Again, the problem wouldn't have been so much in the symbols themselves, but how to put them together in order to decipher the whole message. And what most likely posed the biggest problem for them were the presence of the fat cows and the good ears of grain that preceded the thin cows and the blighted grain. They would have understood this to represent seven years of plenty and seven years of famine, but in their experience and from their understanding of why famines came, this didn't make any sense. They believed that famines came as punishment from the gods. Occasionally, dreams would give advance warning, but only so that the king would know that he and his people were being punished. Now the Pharaoh has a dream telling him that the seven-year famine will be preceded by seven years of plenty. That just didn't "compute". This didn't make any sense in his understanding of the world. Of course, what he doesn't understand is that this has nothing to do with punishment. God is at work to reveal himself through his people.

Seeing that even the authorities on dreams were coming up with nothing, the cupbearer decided to tell Pharaoh

about his experience with Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams.

Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “I remember my offenses today. When Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, we dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation. A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream. And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged.” (Genesis 41:9-13)

“Master, I’ve done something terrible. Two years ago I told a fellow prisoner that I’d bring his case to your attention, but I chose not to. In my defence this man is just a Hebrew slave who tried to rape his master’s wife. He’s a nobody...but...when the chief baker and I were in prison, he accurately interpreted our dreams.” The cupbearer’s emphasis on Joseph as a lowly foreign slave in prison emphasises just what a low position Joseph has in contrast to the position in which he’s about to find himself.

Pharaoh is desperate and up for anything at this point, so he sends for Joseph:

Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” Joseph answered Pharaoh, “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.” (Genesis 41:14-16)

Notice how Joseph responds to Pharaoh. Pharaoh tells Joseph’s that he’s heard that he can interpret dreams without having to consult his books—all he needs to do is hear the dream and he

understands. But Joseph doesn’t take any credit. “It’s not me, Sire. This is God’s gift. He’s the one revealing the interpretation. Don’t take anything I say as being my own wisdom. God will give you a favourable answer.” In Hebrew, God will answer Pharaoh’s *šalom*. Even if the news is bad, God will restore Pharaoh’s peace of mind and ultimately has his wellbeing at heart.

Pharaoh then goes on to tell Joseph his dreams. And Joseph interprets. The seven fat cows represent seven years of plenty and the seven lean cows represent seven years of famine that will follow. The same goes for the fat and healthy ears of grain and the blighted grain. Joseph not only interprets the dream, but he goes on in verses 32-36:

The doubling of Pharaoh’s dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years. And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.”

Yes the coming famine is bad news, but God is revealing this in advance so that Pharaoh can prepare and be at peace. This is the striking thing about Pharaoh’s dream. A lot of people oppose the doctrine of God’s sovereignty, because they think it leads to fatalism and inaction. Some Christians oppose the doctrine of election and argue that it will only make us apathetic in our evangelism: If God is sovereign and has elected certain people to salvation, why do we need to bother evangelising them? They’ll find God one way or another without us. Of course, that’s nonsense. In fact,

Christians with a high view of predestination and election were behind the modern missions movement and have been amongst the most active in missions to today. And we see this principle right here in Genesis. Gerhard von Rad writes, “The fact that God has determined the matter, that God hastens to bring it to pass, is precisely the reason for responsible leaders to take measures!”¹ *God’s sovereignty gives us reason to act with faith and certainty.* So God not only speaks through Joseph to warn that a famine is on the way, he also gives instructions through him so that Pharaoh will take advantage of the seven good years. Part of those instructions is the appointment of a wise overseer.

Verse 37 tells us that Pharaoh was pleased with everything Joseph had to say. He agrees that a wise man needs to be put in charge of ensuring Egypt’s welfare in preparation for the famine. And so we might wonder if Pharaoh’s next questions were said tongue in cheek while he looked around the room at all the people gathered there.

And Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?” Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.” (Genesis 41:38-40)

Since the dream came from God and since God has given Joseph the wisdom not only to understand the dream, but also to know what to do about it, Pharaoh makes him his vizier and puts all the preparations in his charge. Just a few verses back, Joseph was a lowly Hebrew slave in prison. Now he’s the second most powerful man in Egypt! This might seem incredible, but Joseph wasn’t the only foreigner to be given this sort of position in Egypt. During the middle of the Second Millennium it

¹ *Genesis*, 2nd ed., Trans. J. H. Marks and J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1972), 376.

was common for Semitic foreigners to be in high positions and to handle Egypt's administration and bureaucracy. In the verses that follow, Joseph's investiture ceremony is described and the details accord very closely with what we see of similar investiture ceremonies in Egyptian paintings. In fact, there's a striking parallel in the case of a man named Tûtu who was given a position of authority similar to Joseph's during the reign of Akhenaten. Tûtu was a Semite, like Joseph, and the wall paintings depicting his investiture show Tûtu in his fine linen, they show Pharaoh putting the golden necklace of his office around his neck, and they show Tûtu riding off in his chariot while the people bow before him.² Genesis doesn't give us enough information to date Joseph's story, but all the details fit precisely with what we know of Egypt at various times during the Second Millennium.

And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt. (Genesis 41:41-45)

No one is sure what the meaning of Joseph's new Egyptian name is. It seems most likely to mean either "God speaks and lives"³ or "the one who

knows"⁴, either way referring to Joseph's God-given prophetic gift. The Egyptians knew that God was with Joseph. Whatever the meaning, the giving of Egyptian names to foreigners in positions like Joseph's is well attested in the period.⁵ The same is true of his marriage to Asenath. The family of the priests of On was one of the most powerful families in Egypt⁶ and Joseph's marriage into it cemented not only his new authority, but his place in Egyptian society.

And Joseph wastes no time in putting his plan into action:

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, and he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it. And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured. (Genesis 41:46-49)

The seven years of plenty come and go just as God had said in Pharaoh's dream and in Joseph's interpretation. Jumping down a few verses to 53-57 we see that the seven years of famine play out exactly as predicted too.

The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in

all the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do."

So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.

But I want to close with some verses that fall between the reports of the years of plenty and the years of famine. Look at verses 50-52:

Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On, bore them to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The name of the second he called Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

Manasseh means "making forget". This is the sort of name parents would give to a child after the loss of an older sibling. Here Joseph chooses it to give praise to God for raising him from his slavery and imprisonment to being the vizier of Egypt. Ephraim is connected with the word meaning to "be fruitful". There may be a prophetic element in the name; Ephraim would eventually become one of the largest tribes. But in that name, Joseph again gives God the glory for the blessings in his life. It's a nod to the fulfillment of God's promises in the life of his people. From the time of Adam, God has given the command to his people to be fruitful and multiply. His specific blessing on Abraham was that his descendants would be fruitful, and here Joseph acknowledges God's sovereign hand at work. In his commentary on these two names, Claus Westermann writes, "In one God is praised as the one who preserves, in the other as the one who blesses; both

² John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2000), p. 73; Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel* (London: Darton, 1978), vol. 1, p. 299; Joseph Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte* (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1959), pp. 98-121.

³ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids:

Zondervan, 2001), p. 534; cf. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 396.

⁴ Joseph Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte* (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1959), p. 145; John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2000), p. 73.

⁵ Joseph Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte* (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1959), p. 141.

⁶ Joseph Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte* (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1959), p. 147-148.

confirm the promise 'I am with you'.⁷ In naming his sons, Joseph declares his faith in the promises of God and acknowledges that despite all of his hardships, God has been with him.

We can take a lot of lessons from Joseph's story. We can learn from Joseph's examples of patience, of faith, and his loyalty to God even when things looked terrible for him, but ultimately the story isn't about Joseph; *it's about God's sovereignty and covenant faithfulness*. Again, Genesis establishes what should be the worldview of God's people: That he is the Creator and that the cosmos is his temple. He's not a distant God. He's not the divine clockmaker of the deists who created the universe, set things in motion, and is now standing at a distance to watch. He's intimately connected to his creation. He takes an active part in it. He sustains it down to the smallest sub-atomic particle. Humanity has rebelled, but Genesis assures us that God is working set things to right—to restore us to his friendship and his fellowship. And Genesis establishes God's covenantal pattern and then shows us his faithfulness. Genesis assures us: God is with us.

It was the knowledge of these facts that lay behind Joseph's faith. But consider what a powerful witness Joseph's faith was to the Egyptians. Because he lived confident that God was with him, the Egyptians couldn't mistake God's presence for anything else. When they received blessings through Joseph, they knew that the blessings came ultimately from God. Potiphar saw that God was with Joseph; the prison warden saw that God was with Joseph; Pharaoh saw that God was with Joseph; and now the whole of Egypt sees that God is with Joseph, and as a result all Egypt had to acknowledge the God of Israel. Through Joseph, God made good on the promise he'd made to Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to the nations. But it was Joseph's faithfulness that pointed the Egyptians to the source

of their blessing. And it's this witness, played out over and over through the course of Old Testament history that prepared the nations for the culmination of God's promise of blessing in the sending of the Messiah. Even though Israel herself rejected the Messiah, her witness to God's faithfulness had been established. But, brothers and sisters, consider what this means for us. We—the Church—are now the bearers of God's good news, called to carry the message of Jesus' lordship to the world. But we declare it not only in the proclamation of the Word. Dear friends, we witness the life-giving power of that good news as we live our lives in the conviction that God is with us, just as he was with Joseph. We proclaim the Gospel message that Jesus is Lord so that the world will know the source of the blessing it has received through his people.

Picture Joseph, riding through the land in Pharaoh's chariot as the Egyptians bow before him and thank him for the blessings he's brought them. Heralds went before him, blowing trumpets to let the people know that their saviour was coming. Now consider the image that St. Paul gives us of Jesus in Philippians:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
(Philippians 2:9-11)

Brothers and sisters, you and I are the heralds now, proclaiming the coming of the king. We proclaim the good news in our preaching, but it's just as important that the world see in our day-to-day living that God is with us and the Jesus is Lord in our lives, in our families, and in our church.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, thank you that you are always with us. Thank you for that you sustain not only the cosmos, but each of us every day. Teach us to live our lives in such a way, that as the Egyptians saw that you were with

Joseph, people today will see you are with us. Let us declare the lordship of your Son in all we say and in all we do. We ask this through him who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

⁷ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37-50: A Commentary*. J.J. Scullion, trans. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), p. 97.