

Genesis 40-41 & Lord's Day 50 >> Joseph 3: When the Economy is in the Toilet

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A number of newsmagazines and blogs have stirred up controversy in recent months in saying that it's our own fault that we're in the economic freefall we find ourselves in. While some put the blame at the feet of bankers who have amassed extraordinary amounts of money while watching the investments of regular Joe and Jane dry up, others say that's too simplistic of an explanation. They contend that for far too long, rich and not-so-rich people have been spending money that they don't have, accumulating debt that becomes nearly impossible to pay off. One American journalist writes: We "have lost the ascetic virtue of self-discipline and have become impatient with the idea of constraints on [our] individual will."¹ It's called short-term gratification, buying something *now* because we want it *now* regardless of whether it's wiser to delay purchasing it or not purchasing it at all considering our current financial resources.

Whether the current economic crisis is our own fault, or the fault of the government or big banks, or the fault of capitalism just in general, our reading today gives us a picture of an economy in the toilet, and how one man – with God's insight – helps an entire nation through it.

Trouble in Peoples' Dreams

For most of the time in Genesis 40 & 41, Joseph is a prisoner, in jail for a crime he did not commit, as we learned last week. There is a glimmer of hope in the dream of the chief cupbearer, but as days turn into weeks and as weeks turn into months, that hope is extinguished.

That glimmer of hope comes on a night when both the chief cupbearer and the chief baker have dreams. These two people have important roles: "Kings often feared being poisoned, so they would trust cupbearers with their lives... As a result, these officers were often wealthy and influential... Both [the cupbearer and the baker] attended to Pharaoh's food: the cupbearer to the wine in his cup, the baker to the bread and cakes on his table, and both could play a sinister role in a conspiracy against him."² And it would seem that Pharaoh suspects as much as both wind up in the same prison as Joseph.

¹ Rod Dreher, "Economic Crisis is Our Own Fault" (www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/columnists/rdreher/stories/033008dnedidreher.1597db91.html). This applies to both huge banks and individual citizens like you and me. We are shocked that a big name CEO walks away with millions of dollars of what looks like other peoples' money, but how many of us carry a balance on our credit card from month to month? Is that really our money we're spending? (As an aside, many financial advisors call credit card debt the worst kind of debt you can have because of the high interest rates. You can phone your credit card company and request that your interest rate be lowered or else you'll take your business elsewhere, and sometimes they'll do so. Another option is to open a line of credit at a much lower interest rate and transfer the balance on your credit card there. After you've done that, many financial advisors advise that you cut up your credit cards, paying for things by Interac, cash, or cheque instead.)

² Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 525. Recall that Nehemiah served as Artaxerxes' cupbearer and that the two had a good relationship (*cf.* Neh 1:11b-2:8).

Their dreams only make them gloomier than before. “Do not interpretations belong to God?” Joseph asks them, “bring[ing] a public witness to God to bear on the situation.”³ “Tell me your dreams” (Gen 40:8). Joseph has problems of his own, yet he is sensitive enough to spot the problems of others, seeing how the cupbearer and baker both look “dejected” (40:6).

So they tell Joseph about their dreams. The cupbearer goes first. His is a dream of presenting to Pharaoh a cup of freshly squeezed grape juice (*cf.* 40:9-11). This is good news! “Pharaoh will lift up your head,” Joseph says to the cupbearer (40:13), informing him that his position and status in Pharaoh’s court is about to be restored.

Only “when the chief baker [sees] that Joseph had given a favourable interpretation” (40:16) does he volunteer details regarding his dream. Maybe there is something that makes him hesitate to hear an interpretation of his dreams, some guilt plaguing him, perhaps?

The baker’s dream is immediately more ominous: He has baked goods for Pharaoh, but birds are snacking on them before he can put them on Pharaoh’s dinner plate (*cf.* 40:16-17). ...Birds! These don’t sound like giant pterodactyls or even eagles with deadly talons. Just birds. The baker “amazingly does nothing to protect [the food]... ‘The baker has neither the strength nor the presence of mind to drive them away...’ Does his unclean conscience render him immobile? Does it symbolize his failure to protect the Pharaoh’s table?”⁴ Perhaps Pharaoh was wise and discerning to put this man behind bars!

Joseph confirms the baker’s fate: While Pharaoh will “lift *up*” in honour the head of the chief cupbearer, “Pharaoh will imminently lift *off* [the baker’s] head” (40:19).⁵

In three days, the accurate interpretations – given to Joseph from God – come to pass. “When all goes well with you,” Joseph pleads with the cupbearer, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison” (40:14). Radio preacher Chuck Swindoll says he loves this little part in the story “because it shows us that Joseph [is] a real person, not some plaster saint.”⁶

“The chief cupbearer, however, [does] not remember Joseph.” In fact, “he [forgets] him” (40:23). This isn’t just something that slips from his memory; it’s a “moral lapse.”⁷ Perhaps he’s afraid to ask a favour of Pharaoh on Joseph’s behalf. We’re left the impression of a thankless coward, as Joseph continues to count the days and weeks and years he’s spending in a jail cell. Joseph’s glimmer of hope is extinguished.



Some two years later, Pharaoh’s sleep is disturbed by dreams of his own. First his kitchen staff have two dreams, and now he has two.⁸ Neither of the two dreams bode well for Pharaoh.

³ Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (vol. 1; L.E. Keck, ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 614.

⁴ Waltke, 527. Waltke is quoting N. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 279.

⁵ The *TNIV Study Bible* study note at 40:19 describes “lift off your head” as a “grisly pun based on the same idiom used in 40:13.”

⁶ Charles R. Swindoll, *Joseph: A Man of Integrity and Forgiveness* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 47.

⁷ Waltke, 527.

⁸ For a discussion on the pattern of “twos” in this story, see John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (vol. 2; F.E. Gæbelein, ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 239, who writes how “such

Take the dream about the cows along the Nile (*cf.* 41:1-4, 17-21). In ancient Egypt, the Nile isn't just another river like the Telkwa River or the Bulkley River. No, "this river [is] the source of Egypt's ... power, fertility, and life;"⁹ that means this river is the source of *Pharaoh's* ability to provide for his people. If the Nile suddenly ceases being the source of life for Egypt, the people will look at Pharaoh and begin wondering what he did to offend the god who controls the Nile. If things get bad enough, it could cost Pharaoh his career in politics, if not his life as well!

And just as there's a god of the Nile, the Egyptians also believed in a god that controlled the grain harvests (*cf.* 41:5-7, 22-24). One ancient pharaoh of Egypt once said: "I produced the grain, because I was beloved by the grain god. No one was hungry in my years."¹⁰ A series of good harvests being swallowed up by something bad would have people wondering what Pharaoh had done to offend the grain god. Again, Pharaoh's career – even his life – could be at stake.

Naturally, Pharaoh wants answers. So he halts whatever else is on the calendar for the day and "he [sends] for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh [tells] them his dreams, but no one [can] interpret them for him" (41:8).¹¹

So, partway through Genesis 41, we have a Pharaoh filled with consternation and a Joseph whose life seems to be empty of hope. But soon their lives are going intersect, putting them both on new trajectories.

Trouble in our Lives

But I pause here for a moment.

It's worth pausing: The text says that two years pass between the cupbearer forgetting about Joseph and then remembering him again – "two full years" (41:1). We don't know anything about those two years. "Not even the Genesis account attempts to make those years seem meaningful."¹²

Maybe you feel like you're in a stretch of time like that. Maybe it's a season of disappointment with the present and/or anxiety about the future, thinking again about our current economic climate (which I'll come back to again). Maybe it's a season of feeling abandoned. Reflecting on this part of the story, Chuck Swindoll comments on how thoughts of abandonment resonate with us all:

Wives without husbands, husbands without wives, children without parents,
parents without children, men and women without jobs... Prisoners locked

symmetry in human events is evidence of a divine work."

⁹ Waltke, 530.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 530. Waltke is quoting O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (T.J. Hallett, trans.; New York: Seabury, 1978), 286.

¹¹ Waltke, 530-531, notes how throughout the text in the original Hebrew, Pharaoh actually only refers to his dream, singular, while his wise men and magicians refer to his dreams, plural. Even though he doesn't know the details, it appears that Pharaoh perceives that he's being told the same thing twice, and until his wise men catch on to that, he's not going to buy their interpretations.

¹² Swindoll, 58.

away, haunted by their crimes they committed (or didn't commit!), plagued by loneliness and abandonment.¹³

Another author adds to these reflections:

Maybe you are a forgotten person. Maybe you are counting on someone, anyone, to show you some kindness, but so far no one has come through. You wonder how long it will take before someone remembers you – or if you will be remembered at all.¹⁴

It seems that nothing is happening. Yes, time may be moving on, but nothing is changing.

But I have to tell that it only *seems* that way.

Even in our most hopeless moments, God is at work in the background. God sees you and never forgets you. Growing up, my sister had a poster in her bedroom with these words: "Be patient with me. God isn't finished with me yet." Sometimes we sing the song "Refiner's Fire" written by Brian Doerksen: "Purify my heart, let me be as gold and precious silver. / Purify my heart, let me be as gold, pure gold..." This is not usually a quick process; this takes time.

Again, let me quote Chuck Swindoll:

All whom God uses greatly are first hidden in the secret of His presence, away from the pride of man. It is there our vision clears. It is there the silt drops from the current of our life and our faith begins to grasp His arm. Abraham waited for the birth of Isaac. Moses didn't lead the Exodus until he was 80. Elijah waited beside the brook. Noah waited 120 years for rain. Paul was hidden away for three years in Arabia. The list doesn't end. God is working while His people are waiting, waiting, waiting. Joseph is being shaped for a significant future.¹⁵

If this is a long season of disappointment for you, of anxiety, of waiting, perhaps even of hopelessness, hold on. The day on which Joseph is summoned into Pharaoh's presence began with a sunrise just like every single other day of Joseph's life. One of these sunrises, something will happen.

Until that happens, focus on God. Every time in our chapters today that Joseph is invited to speak, he begins with referring to God: "Do not interpretations belong to God?" (40:8); "God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires (41:16); "God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do" (41:25).

Focus on God, and stick with people who have the same focus. I get a kick out of the part of our text after Joseph explains Pharaoh's dream where Joseph boldly (but respectfully) advises Pharaoh what to do next: "Let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man..." (41:33). With no one in his court ready and able to interpret his dream, "Pharaoh has just realized that he has none."¹⁶ Pharaoh has been surrounding himself with lousy advisors. "There is great danger in seeking spiritual answers in the wrong places," says one writer. "Spiritual hunger and

¹³ Ibid., 50.

¹⁴ Robert M. Brenton, "Remember Me" in *Today* 51.2 (Mar-Apr 2001), 10 Mar.

¹⁵ Swindoll, 58.

¹⁶ Waltke, 532.

a vacuum of spiritual truth can make people easy prey for ... ear-tickling deception ... [that] cannot address true spiritual needs or answer the burning spiritual questions of the human heart.”¹⁷

Hold on, focus on God, and stick with people who have the same focus.

Glimpses of Grace

Obviously at the end of the story, at the end of the disappointment, the waiting, the anxiety, the hopelessness, Joseph is elevated from his low position and given authority and power. The text says that when the cupbearer finally remembers poor Joseph, Pharaoh sends for him, and Joseph is “quickly brought from the dungeon” (41:14). The original Hebrew word for *dungeon* is the same word that is used for *cistern* back when Joseph’s brothers toss him in one before selling him to foreigners (cf. 37:24).¹⁸ In a literary way, the author is telling us that Joseph is finally coming out the pit into which his brothers threw him; the tide is now truly turning.

Also on a literary note, there are a pair of references to clothing in our text today. Before Joseph appears before Pharaoh, he shaves and changes his clothes (cf. 41:14). Then when Pharaoh elevates Joseph to the position of Prime Minister, Pharaoh dresses him “in robes of fine linen” (41:42). We don’t know any further details about Joseph’s new robe, but an ancient text refers to another pharaoh dressing a prominent person “in a garment with multicoloured trimmings.”¹⁹ Does that remind you of anything? Joseph is getting his robe back – not literally the same robe that his brothers stole, tore up and dipped in blood to “prove” Joseph was dead, but a robe of the same sort as before that emphasizes Joseph’s special position. Now it’s a position that Joseph has earned and not just received from a father who plays favourites.

Having interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams by God’s enabling, Prime Minister Joseph is put in charge of storing up food during the good years. He becomes an administrator. That sounds so much more boring than an interpreter of dreams. But “his ability to plan and manage matters [is] equally God-given.”²⁰ He creates ways for people to save their grain for a rainy day, or, in this case, for a wind-scorched day (cf. 41:27), a wind-scorched stretch of 2,555 days (7 years).

As we rely on God’s provision in the present, we are wise to think about those provisions both in the short term and long term.²¹ It’s a hard question to ask in an uncertain economy, but are you continuing to save for the future? When you see something (even something on sale), do you just have to buy it immediately, or do you have the self-discipline to intentionally keep expenses less than your income, and wisely investing the remainder, even if it means less short-term gratification?

¹⁷ Crowder, 51.

¹⁸ As discussed by Waltke, 527.

¹⁹ Waltke, 534.

²⁰ Harvey A. Smit in *The Genesis Message: A New Look at the Old Stories* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1999), 83.

²¹ In his Bible study guide entitled *Joseph: How God Builds Character* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 31, Paul Borthwick asks, “How does a follower of Jesus strike a balance between living in the moment – in response to the events that God brings into our lives – and planning ahead?”

And even in a recession, don't leave out the tithing factor. I know it sounds illogical, but when you give back to God from all He's given you, He'll bless you even more, as many people in this church have experienced.

I said a moment ago that unlike the one he received from his father who played favourites, Joseph earned his new coat from Pharaoh. That's actually not entirely precise. Yes, Joseph uses his gifts and talents well, but throughout the story, it's God who gets the credit. "The story depends not on the [power] of people, but on the presence of God, Immanuel."²² Joseph says that repeatedly when interpreting dreams.

And look again at Joseph's growing family. He marries Asenath, who comes from a prominent family of the day. Jewish legend has it that Asenath comes to believe in the God of Joseph, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham.²³ Together they have two children, and each is given a Hebrew name – Manasseh and Ephraim.

The footnotes in your Bible reveal that the meanings of these names express God's goodness to Joseph and Asenath. God's goodness has enabled Joseph to forget about all his trouble as revealed in the name Manasseh (*cf.* 41:51). Joseph has not necessarily forgotten all the details of his past, but he is not embittered or trapped by those details. God's goodness has helped Joseph forgive those who have hurt him.

And Joseph recognizes God's goodness even in the difficult times as revealed in the name Ephraim (*cf.* 41:52). Joseph credits God for blessing him even in the most unpromising of places, for taking care of his physical needs to allude to the catechism (*cf.* Lord's Day 50 Q&A 125). Looking back, Joseph sees God being faithful to His promises.²⁴

And that's the Good News for today as we hold on and trust in God alone even in tough times. God remains faithful to His promises, even when the economy is in the toilet. In Jesus – who died on the cross to forgive our sins and heal our brokenness – we have the promise, "Surely, I am with you always" – whether we're in a bull market or a bear market, whether the economy is humming along or when layoffs are imminent, whether our bank accounts are in the black or when we're seeing red. "Surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:20). Jesus is our Immanuel.

...And that is something, as they say, you can take to the bank!

Sung response: "Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread" (*Psalter Hymnal* 290)

²² Waltke, 537.

²³ According to Fretheim, 624. Interestingly, Asenath is the daughter of the pagan priest of On (*cf.* 41:45) and undoubtedly part of that pagan religion when Joseph marries her. What continues to unfold following this marriage is a rare thing in Scripture, namely, that a man takes a pagan wife but also keeps his faith and dedication to God, perhaps even sharing that faith with those near him.

²⁴ These reflections on the names of Joseph's children come from Brenton, "Manasseh and Ephraim," 13 Mar, as well as Fretheim, 624.