

Lesson 5 | October 1, 2023

Joseph and Pharaoh

Study Text: Genesis 41:1–57

Central Truth: God gives wisdom and understanding to His followers.

Key Verse: Genesis 41:52

God hath caused me [Joseph] to be fruitful in the land of my affliction (KJV).
“God has made me [Joseph] fruitful in this land of my grief” (NLT).

Learning Objectives:

- Students will examine how God blessed and rewarded Joseph after he suffered in prison because of his family’s betrayal.
- Students will observe how the presence of the Spirit of God was seen in Joseph’s life and pray that such a testimony might be seen in their lives as well.
- Students will identify how Joseph kept God in focus during his time of challenge and look for ways to do the same today.

Introducing the Study

Say: Most of us can identify someone in our families that we take after, whether in looks, personality, or talents.

Opening Activity—Someone You Take After

Ask: Identify someone that you take after. How do you resemble that person? Examples can include parents, grandparents, and other family members. We might also resemble a non-biological loved one who helped raise us, because of their impact and influence.

Say: Just as there are people whose traits we share, people can also see God’s influence on us as they look at our lives. While this has been true of all the patriarchs we’ve studied, it is especially true of Joseph. Just as we’ve previously seen God’s intervention, today we see God’s blessings on Joseph, as he was faithful to the Lord. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The Old Testament records God repeatedly making some form of this statement to His people: “You will be my people, and I will be your God” (cf. Exodus 6:7; Isaiah 46:4; Jeremiah 30:22). Often this statement is joined by the promise that God would live among them—pointing to the relationship they would share (cf. Exodus 29:45; Leviticus 26:12). This promise recalls the perfect relationship held between God and humanity in the Garden of Eden before the Fall and also looks forward toward salvation coming to the world through Christ (see Zechariah 2:11; Revelation 21:3).

The promise begins to take shape among the patriarchs, especially Joseph. Through this lesson, we will see how God walked with Joseph in Egypt, just as He had preserved Joseph earlier. We will also see how this relationship was accompanied by faithfulness.

Part 1—Pharaoh’s Disturbing Dreams

The Wise Men Were Stumped

Genesis 41:1–8

Say: When we last saw Joseph, he had been taken to Egypt after being sold into enslavement by his brothers. There, Joseph was purchased by Potiphar, an officer in Pharaoh’s palace guard (Genesis 39:1). The Lord blessed Joseph in all he did (verse 3). He soon was put in charge of the entire household (verse 4). However, Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce him and falsely accused him of assault, causing Joseph to be imprisoned for years. (The exact length of his imprisonment is unknown, but it would have been between two and twelve years.) Even in his cell, God was preparing Joseph for a key moment in the history of God’s people. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Resource Packet Item 1: Pharaoh, King of Egypt

Distribute the information sheet and discuss it as a class. The last couple of paragraphs are more pertinent to this particular lesson, but the information as a whole can offer insight into where Egypt and Pharaoh fit within our understanding of the Bible. Students may find it to be an informative study to read in the coming week.

As noted above, Genesis 41 should be understood in light of the preceding chapters. We need to keep in mind that, in Egypt, Pharaoh was the chief lawgiver and judge as well as the supreme authority on religious matters. Most scholars believe the Egyptians viewed Pharaoh as divine himself. Thus, the dilemma posed in Genesis 41:1–8 was especially serious. Dreams were believed to bear evidence of a special connection between a king and the divine. How could the source of divine understanding be struggling to understand a spiritual matter like this? Pharaoh needed answers, but where would he go?

Pharaoh’s two dreams contained some important details (verses 1–7). The Nile River was the source of Egypt’s power, fertility, prosperity, and life. The growth it fostered caused Egypt to later be known as the breadbasket of the Roman Empire. The cow was uniquely a symbol of Egypt itself as well as a representation of at least one of its gods. That means Pharaoh’s dreams focused on two critical symbols of Egyptian life and power. In addition, Egyptians considered the number seven to be significant. It’s not surprising Pharaoh was awakened by each of these ominous dreams.

As soon as he awoke the next morning, Pharaoh called for his key advisors: “magicians and wise men” (verse 8, NLT). These individuals had shown themselves to possess great insight. They had been trained in the mysterious supernatural arts of the day, so Pharaoh hoped that if he could not interpret these dreams, then perhaps these men could offer understanding. Unfortunately for Pharaoh, “not one of them could tell him what they meant” (verse 8, NLT).

Discuss

- ? What sources do unbelievers consult for understanding and direction when they are troubled?
- ? How can you help an unbelieving friend or relative when he or she needs direction or understanding?

Joseph: Forgotten No More

Genesis 41:9–13

Say: During Joseph's time in prison, Pharaoh's cupbearer had personally observed God's grace upon Joseph when he had been able to interpret the cupbearer's dream. Sadly, he had forgotten Joseph after being released from prison, despite having promised to help him (see Genesis 40:12–14,23). But God had not forgotten Joseph. When Pharaoh began to fret over his troubling dreams, Joseph again entered the picture. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Two years had passed since Joseph interpreted the dream for Pharaoh's cupbearer. He had remained in prison, abandoned and forgotten (Genesis 41:1). But with Pharaoh in crisis, the cupbearer suddenly remembered Joseph.

Verses 10–13 recount the events of Genesis 40. Note that in 40:8, Joseph had not only stated what every Egyptian would believe about dreams, but he also clarified that only God would be able to bring the answer: "Do not interpretations belong to God?" (40:8, KJV).

It is hard to imagine how the cupbearer could have forgotten his promise for two long years. Joseph had correctly discerned not only that Pharaoh would release and promote the cupbearer but that the chief baker would be executed because of Pharaoh's wrath (40:9–13,16–19). But this two-year delay proves God was sovereignly working things out in His perfect timing.

By the time he was told about this lowly Hebrew slave languishing in prison, Pharaoh was desperate. He was ready to listen to anyone with divine insight or knowledge, regardless of where the interpreter came from or what he may have been accused of. God had worked things out, so that in this key moment, Joseph could be called on to do what no magician could do.

Resource Packet Item 2: Bitter or Blessed?

Distribute the worksheet and invite students to complete it individually. Then discuss their responses. Reflect upon the difficulty Joseph must have faced in prison, both physically and emotionally. Talk about how challenges can be difficult when we don't know God's timing.

Discuss

- ? Why do you think the cupbearer forgot about Joseph, even after he had interpreted such an important dream?

? How can we remain faithful when we don't understand God's timing?

Part 2—Joseph's God-Given Interpretation and Plan

Joseph Alone Can Answer Pharaoh's Question

Genesis 41:14–32

Say: Most of us can recall a time when God helped us in ways that went far beyond our own abilities. Joseph experienced such a moment in Genesis 41, a key moment in the unfolding history of God's people. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Hearing the cupbearer's story, Pharaoh quickly called for Joseph. The mention of Joseph changing clothes reflected a status change; he was not presented as a prisoner but a free man and an advisor to the king. After Pharaoh explained the situation, Joseph stated that only God could provide the answer. Joseph's implication is clear: His God had given these dreams to Pharaoh, so He alone could tell Pharaoh what they meant (verse 16).

Pharaoh recounted the dreams with a key point of added information. Describing the cows, he stated, "I've never seen such sorry-looking animals in all the land of Egypt" (verse 19, NLT). This indicated Pharaoh was an eyewitness to what was happening in Egypt in his dream. This great king, believed to be connected to the divine if not divine himself, was incapable of intervening. He could only watch as the scrawny cows ate up the healthy cows while remaining as scrawny as before (verse 21) and the shriveled grain devoured the healthy grain (verses 22–24). Is it any wonder the darkness of these dreams so deeply upset the most powerful individual in Egypt?

Joseph was quick and concise in his explanation, conveying a clear sense that God was speaking through him. He spoke as an interpreter, not as a magician like the others. There was no mystery for him to discern here. He simply spoke the words God gave him (verses 25–27). Each dream carried the same message: Fat, rich, and prosperous things would be devoured by lean, withered, and sickly things. Egypt would enjoy seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of famine so severe that the prosperity would quickly fade from memory (verses 28–31). The most sobering news came in verse 32: "As for having two similar dreams, it means that these events have been decreed by God, and he will soon make them happen" (NLT). The God who rules the nations, who is sovereign above kings and Pharaohs, would soon bring His words to pass. Egypt was in crisis and preparations needed to be made without delay.

Discuss

? Why was it important for Pharaoh to understand Joseph's God sent the dreams and would also send the interpretation?

? How can we ensure God gets the credit for the things He does in our lives?

Joseph Instructs Pharaoh

Genesis 41:33–36

Say: As we can see in this passage, God gives His people a wide variety of gifts to bring about His purposes. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Joseph's next statement to Pharaoh displayed a certain amount of bravery (Genesis 41:33–36). He gave unfiltered, unsolicited advice to a ruler with unequalled power and irrefutable authority. But Joseph fearlessly spoke the words of God with the authority they carried.

Joseph's advice displayed unarguable wisdom as the steps he outlined were logical solutions to the problem: Find someone wise to manage the work that needs to be done throughout Egypt. Appoint supervisors to oversee the storage of twenty percent of the crops in each of the good years. Make sure the storage is guarded. This will ensure adequate food for the seven lean years. Note that verse 36 ends on an ominous prophecy: "Otherwise this famine will destroy the land" (NLT). The future existence of this mighty nation rested upon the words of a Hebrew slave.

As we ponder these verses, it is important to note Joseph's courage. He spoke specifically regarding the dreams, then outlined specific steps in response. Following these steps would alter Egypt's economy and no doubt uproot the way society functioned. Had he been wrong, Pharaoh would have ended his life without a second thought. We don't face such high stakes today, of course. But there are times in life when we need courage to surrender to God and trust His plan for us. May we reflect the courage of Joseph as we step out in faith.

Discuss

? Describe a time when you needed to be brave in your faith.

? How can we overcome doubt and the desire to take matters into our own hands when surrendering our needs to God?

Part 3—Joseph's Faithfulness Rewarded

Joseph Is Elevated

Genesis 41:37–46

Say: When God calls and leads us, we can also trust Him to provide what we need in order to accomplish what He has called us to do. This was certainly true for Joseph, so Pharaoh duly appointed him to manage the famine response according to God's plan. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Not only was Pharaoh pleased with Joseph's suggestions, but he recognized something special about Joseph: "Can we find anyone else like this man so obviously filled with the spirit of God?" (Genesis 41:38, NLT). This marks only the second time in Genesis where the Spirit of God is mentioned (see 1:2). In this case, the phrase describes God's

presence and anointing on Joseph's life. Throughout the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is described as being at work in the lives of godly people, gifting them in extraordinary ways for God's purposes (see Exodus 31:1–3; Numbers 11:16–17; Judges 6:34; Micah 3:8). Joel 2:28–29 prophesies of the Spirit being poured out on all of God's people in the Church Age—which includes today (see Acts 2:16–18).

These words are especially surprising here, since an Egyptian pharaoh, himself viewed as deity, observed the Spirit of God in an enslaved Hebrew. Clearly, he saw something special in Joseph that not even his own magicians and counselors had. Pharaoh said to Joseph, “No one else is as intelligent or wise as you are” (Genesis 41:39, NLT). Intelligence here refers to discernment and understanding. Through the enlightenment of the Spirit, Joseph grasped the critical nature of what was going on and knew how to respond.

Joseph was then placed in charge of Pharaoh's court: “All my people will take orders from you” (verse 40, nlt). Only Pharaoh himself would outrank Joseph in all of Egypt. What an incredible turnaround from the prison cell Joseph had lived in until that very morning.

To seal the proclamation, Joseph was dressed in royal attire and given Pharaoh's signet ring, and new clothing and jewelry. The people were instructed to kneel in reverence for him as he rode in his official chariot (verses 41–43). Joseph had received an unsurpassed level of honor and authority in Egypt.

Scripture also records Pharaoh giving Joseph a new name as well as a wife (verse 45). This marriage connected Joseph with the most powerful families in Egypt. His new name, Zaphenath-paneah (likely meaning “God speaks and lives”), would be in keeping with his new identity. Joseph's new name, much like Daniel's new name Belteshazzar in Daniel 1:7, was a pagan name handed down from a pagan king, but it in no way implied an acceptance of pagan religion.

At this time, Joseph was thirty years old (verse 46). He had risen from enslavement to the highest ranks of Egypt in only thirteen years. Such a trajectory was only possible through God's favor—and His miraculous plan for His people.

God also stations us in various roles as He builds His kingdom. Sometimes our role places us in lofty positions that may include status or even wealth. But we must take care not to adopt the pagan values and priorities of the world around us. Like Joseph (and later, Daniel), we must strive to stay free from the stain of this world. As we will see next, Joseph was careful to do that.

Discuss

- ? How do Christians show the world the Spirit of God is working within us?
- ? What role do you believe you fill in the kingdom of God?

Joseph Remembers the Lord

Genesis 41:47–57

Say: What a joy when our prayers are answered after a time of waiting and trusting! We must allow these times of blessing to remind us of the necessity of continual trust and remember that God is the true source of every blessing. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

After inspecting the entire land of Egypt, Joseph went about the work of preparing for the coming famine (Genesis 41:46). During the years of abundance, he put away immense stores of food—so much that “there was too much to measure” (verse 49, NLT). Then, just as Joseph had said, a devastating famine struck Egypt and the surrounding nations. Because of Joseph’s God-given wisdom, he was able to distribute food to the people of Egypt and those of other nations as well (verses 53–57).

Through all of this, Joseph gave glory to God. When he named his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim (verses 50–52), he memorialized God’s blessings and His consolation and compassion. As we move forward in his story, we will see how these blessings given to Joseph ultimately led to God’s great plan to bless all peoples of the world through Israel.

Resource Packet Item 3: Wisdom and Understanding

Encourage students to complete the worksheet this week, identifying ways in which they need godly wisdom.

Discuss

? Read verses 51–52 again. What do the names Manasseh (meaning “cause to forget”) and Ephraim (meaning “fruitful”) tell us about how God blessed Joseph—and how He blesses us?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Sometimes we may wonder how we can make an impact on the world around us and the people who so desperately need Jesus. Joseph reminds us that our faithfulness is a testimony the Lord can use to help us minister to others.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Ask other Christians to talk about the ways God has blessed them, giving them an opportunity to express gratitude and share encouragement.
- Find a loved one or acquaintance who is struggling with a problem or issue, and minister to them by sharing God’s love and offering prayer.
- Pray with one another that God will help you stand strong and faithful when challenged by hard times—and when blessed by good times.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

God Defends Moses' Faithfulness.

Numbers 12:1–9

Tuesday:

Faithfulness Results in Leadership.

Nehemiah 7:1–4

Wednesday:

The Faithful Persecuted.

Daniel 6:1–5

Thursday:

Faithfulness Commended and Rewarded.

Matthew 25:14–23

Friday:

Faithfulness Highlighted.

Colossians 1:1–8

Saturday:

Faithful and True Sayings.

Revelation 22:1–7