

Genesis 41:1 – 57

¹ Now it happened at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream, and behold, he was standing by the Nile. ² And lo, from the Nile there came up seven cows, sleek and fat; and they grazed in the marsh grass. ³ Then behold, seven other cows came up after them from the Nile, ugly and gaunt, and they stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. ⁴ The ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. Then Pharaoh awoke. ⁵ He fell asleep and dreamed a second time; and behold, seven ears of grain came up on a single stalk, plump and good. ⁶ Then behold, seven ears, thin and scorched by the east wind, sprouted up after them. ⁷ The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Then Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. ⁸ Now in the morning his spirit was troubled, so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh. ⁹ Then the chief cupbearer spoke to Pharaoh, saying, 'I would make mention today of my own offenses. ¹⁰ Pharaoh was furious with his servants, and he put me in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, both me and the chief baker. ¹¹ We had a dream on the same night, he and I; each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his own dream. ¹² Now a Hebrew youth was with us there, a servant of the captain of the bodyguard, and we related them to him, and he interpreted our dreams for us. To each one he interpreted according to his own dream. ¹³ And just as he interpreted for us, so it happened; he restored me in my office, but he hanged him.' ¹⁴ Then Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon; and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came to Pharaoh. ¹⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it; and I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.' ¹⁶ Joseph then answered Pharaoh, saying, 'It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.' ¹⁷ So Pharaoh spoke to Joseph, 'In my dream, behold, I was standing on the bank of the Nile; ¹⁸ and behold, seven cows, fat and sleek came up out of the Nile, and they grazed in the marsh grass. ¹⁹ Lo, seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and gaunt, such as I had never seen for ugliness in all the land of Egypt; ²⁰ and the lean and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows. ²¹ Yet when they had devoured them, it could not be detected that they had devoured them, for they were just as ugly as before. Then I awoke. ²² I saw also in my dream, and behold, seven ears, full and good, came up on a single stalk; ²³ and lo, seven ears, withered, thin, and scorched by the east wind, sprouted up after them; ²⁴ and the thin ears swallowed the seven good ears. Then I told it to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me.' ²⁵ Now Joseph said to Pharaoh, 'Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do. ²⁶ The seven good cows are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one and the same. ²⁷ The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven thin ears scorched by the east wind will be seven years of famine. ²⁸ It is as I have spoken to Pharaoh: God has shown to Pharaoh what He is about to do. ²⁹ Behold, seven years of great abundance are coming in all the land of Egypt; ³⁰ and after them seven years of famine will come, and all the abundance will be forgotten in the land of Egypt, and the famine will ravage the land. ³¹ So the abundance will be unknown in the land because of that subsequent famine; for it will be very severe. ³² Now as for the repeating of the dream to Pharaoh twice, it means that the matter is determined by God, and God will quickly bring it about. ³³ Now let Pharaoh look for a man discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. ³⁴ Let Pharaoh take action to appoint overseers in charge of the land, and let him exact a fifth of the produce of the land of

Egypt in the seven years of abundance. ³⁵ Then let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and store up the grain for food in the cities under Pharaoh's authority, and let them guard it. ³⁶ Let the food become as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land will not perish during the famine.' ³⁷ Now the proposal seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his servants. ³⁸ Then Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?' ³⁹ So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. ⁴⁰ You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you.' ⁴¹ Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.' ⁴² Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck. ⁴³ He had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, 'Bow the knee!' And he set him over all the land of Egypt. ⁴⁴ Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Though I am Pharaoh, yet without your permission no one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.' ⁴⁵ Then Pharaoh named Joseph Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath, the daughter of Potiphra priest of On, as his wife. And Joseph went forth over the land of Egypt. ⁴⁶ Now Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. ⁴⁷ During the seven years of plenty the land brought forth abundantly. ⁴⁸ So he gathered all the food of these seven years which occurred in the land of Egypt and placed the food in the cities; he placed in every city the food from its own surrounding fields. ⁴⁹ Thus Joseph stored up grain in great abundance like the sand of the sea, until he stopped measuring it, for it was beyond measure. ⁵⁰ Now before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph, whom Asenath, the daughter of Potiphra priest of On, bore to him. ⁵¹ Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, 'For,' he said, 'God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household.' ⁵² He named the second Ephraim, 'For,' he said, 'God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.' ⁵³ When the seven years of plenty which had been in the land of Egypt came to an end, ⁵⁴ and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said, then there was famine in all the lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. ⁵⁵ So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, 'Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, you shall do.' ⁵⁶ When the famine was spread over all the face of the earth, then Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians; and the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. ⁵⁷ The people of all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the earth.

Historical and Cultural Background

- In the Egyptian world, dreams were thought to be a way of predicting the future. Egypt had professional schools (called 'houses of life') that specialized in the interpretation of dreams.¹

¹ Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), p.218

God's People in Power

- Israel as Family:
 - Joseph blessed the world from Egypt (Gen.41:47 – 57; 47:12, 24)
- Israel as Nation in the Garden Land:
 - Egalitarian jubilee laws (Lev.24 – 25; Dt.15; 24) model wisdom for all (Dt.4:8)
 - Moses bans interest rate lending (Ex.22:26 – 27; Lev.25:35 – 38, Dt.23:19; Ps.15:5; Ezk.18:10 – 18, 22:12, Hab.2:6 – 7)
- Israel in Exile living under Gentile Rule:
 - Daniel calls King Nebuchadnezzar to care for the poor (Dan.4:27) throughout the Empire;
 - Esther and Mordecai stop the plot against the vulnerable Jewish minority (Est.8 – 9);
 - Nehemiah as governor bans interest rate lending again (Neh.5:1 – 15)
- Israel as Jesus' Missionaries:
 - Care for the poor and structural injustice among the nations (Lk.3:7 – 14; 19:1 – 10; Acts 19)

Questions

1. What triggers the cupbearer's memory? The two dreams of Pharaoh. The two dreams are very similar to each other.
2. Why might the motifs of two dreams have been a reminder? While in prison, he and the chief baker had two dreams (one each) that were very similar to each other. And Joseph had accurately interpreted those two dreams.
3. When they go get Joseph from prison, how might Joseph be feeling?
 - a. Nervous
 - b. Excited
 - c. Sensing God's work in the two dreams: Joseph had had two dreams that were similar, when he was 17 years old, and then had interpreted the two dreams in prison. This repetition of motifs is confirmation that God is still working in him and for him.
 - d. Exuberant – finally!
4. What is suggested about Joseph in his response to Pharaoh in v.16? His reply is much the same as when he was in prison. God does the interpreting. Joseph is just a messenger of God. This strongly suggests that Joseph has been intimately connected with God throughout his unjust prison sentence.
 - a. Illus: cultivating a relationship with God in hard times
5. Do you think Joseph was nervous when Pharaoh had him interpret?
 - a. It seems like Pharaoh kind of makes it hard for Joseph by being emotional. In the narrative art of the Bible, variations in verbal repetition are very important to notice. When Pharaoh talks about his dreams, he talks about feeling horrified by the emaciated cows: 'such as I had never seen for ugliness in all the land of Egypt.' Pharaoh further elaborates on his revulsion, adding that after these emaciated cows had eaten the sleek and fat cows, they were still just as ugly! Without doubt Pharaoh's dreams have shaken him to the core.
 - b. Robert Alter says Pharaoh's phrase 'in all the land of Egypt' is important because it 'will become a verbal motif to indicate the comprehensiveness of the plenty, of the famine, and of the measures that Joseph adopts.'² Pharaoh is stunned that it affects all the land of Egypt, so Joseph's plan will also affect all the land of Egypt.
 - c. Meir Sternberg comments on a more subtle difference. As Pharaoh retells his dreams, 'he unmakes the symmetry that the narrator has taken such care to make. Within each vision, Pharaoh blurs the contrast between the units; and within the pair of visions as a whole he blurs the similarity.'³ This makes Joseph's ability to accurately interpret the dreams even more impressive, since Pharaoh has presented them as one dream with one interpretation, and the magicians, two dreams with two interpretations. But to the inspired Joseph there are two dreams with only one interpretation.
6. Did Joseph set himself up for a job?
 - a. Maybe Pharaoh was stunned into silence after the interpretation, especially since he said that God was acting quickly to bring it about...
 - b. It was a polite way of suggesting himself, yes!
 - c. Joseph knew that he had the administrative gifts and God's desire to bless a 'household' through him. Joseph had learned this through being in Potiphar's house, and also in Potiphar's jail, where he ran things well and cared for life under him.
7. Why does Pharaoh say that there is a 'divine spirit' in Joseph in v.38?
 - a. It is unclear what exactly Pharaoh meant. Did Egyptians believe that divine spirits could inhabit people? Apparently so. But there are larger issues at stake...
 - b. Joseph the Hebrew robs Egypt of her pride. Joseph is able to interpret dreams that all of the Egyptian magicians could not. And the stakes were really high!
 - c. The language of the 'spirit' in Joseph reminds us of the Spirit of God in Genesis 1, hovering over the waters and bringing forth life (also with Noah and the flood to bring forth life). The Spirit of God now seems to rest on Joseph to use him above Egypt to bring forth life and protect life there.
 - d. This is the first major hint we have that the Spirit of God can use human beings! This pattern will develop and we will see it climax in Jesus, the Son of God, who was conceived into human flesh

² Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), p.237

³ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p.399

by the Spirit of God and was empowered by the Spirit of God. Ultimately, God's goal is to put His Spirit into all who believe.

8. What do you think Joseph's job performance, marriage, and naming of children suggest about him?
 - a. Fruitfulness (v.52) characterizes Joseph. God is working in him, and he is partnering with God, to be fruitful in many ways. Human beings were to be fruitful and multiply (Gen.1). Joseph is now doing that in his marriage and in his job. He is actively working with God. God's activity and human activity were always meant to go together. God intends it that way.
 - b. Joseph could have just sat back and said, 'Finally! I'm outta that prison! I'll just get rich now!' But this way, knowing the God of life who loves all life, Joseph enjoys his stay in Egypt on a deeper level. He can find joy in preserving the life of all in Egypt and around him.
9. When we go through periods of descent and then ascent, what does Joseph's story suggest about what God wants to teach us?
10. How does this descent and ascent reflect patterns we've seen in Genesis?
 - a. Adam and Eve experienced a descent into sin – they started in a good place, with God's intention that they ascend even more spiritually, but instead they descended into sin
 - b. Noah had to go through a descent and then ascent
 - c. Babel was the reverse – an attempt at ascent and then a descent
 - d. Abraham and Sarah – descent (by leaving their home and just being pilgrims) and ascent (by having a child, Isaac)
 - e. Isaac and Rebekah – descent (by going to Gerar) and ascent (by being blessed)
 - f. Jacob, Rachel, Leah – descent (by learning to let go of jealousy and anger) and ascent (being reconciled)
11. Is this descent and ascent necessary in our life with God?
 - a. Not in the sense that we need to be victims of other people's sins. Not *externally* or circumstantially.
 - b. But *yes internally*. Yes in the sense that we need to learn limits and humility. Our internalized jealousy doesn't like limits. Our internalized pride doesn't like humility. Because of the corruption of our human nature, we want to be the ones to define good and evil for ourselves. But God wants to be the one to define good and evil for us. It's vital that we learn to let go, and let Him.
 - c. Illus: C.S. Lewis gave a great picture of this internal transformation, with Eustace Scrubb's transformation in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*:

'Well, anyway, I looked up and saw the very last thing I expected: a huge lion coming slowly towards me. And one queer thing was that there was no moon last night, but there was moonlight where the lion was. So it came nearer and nearer. I was terribly afraid of it. You may think that, being a dragon, I could have knocked any lion out easily enough. But it wasn't that kind of fear. I wasn't afraid of it eating me, I was just afraid of *it*--if you can understand. Well, it came closer up to me and looked straight into my eyes. And I shut my eyes tight. But that wasn't any good because it told me to follow it.'

'You mean it spoke?'

'I don't know. Now that you mention it, I don't think it did. But it told me all the same. And I knew I'd have to do what it told me, so I got up and followed it. And it led me a long way into the mountains. And there was always this moonlight over and round the lion wherever we went. So at last we came to the top of a mountain I'd never seen before and on top of this mountain there was a garden--trees and fruit and everything. In the middle of it there was a well.

'I knew it was a well because you could see the water bubbling up from the bottom of it: but it was a lot bigger than most wells--like a very big, round bath with marble steps going down into it. The water was as clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe it would ease the pain in my leg. But the lion told me I must undress first. Mind you, I don't know if he said any words out loud or not.

'I was just going to say that I couldn't undress because I hadn't had any clothes on when I suddenly thought that dragons are snaky sort of things and snakes can cast their skins. Oh, of course, thought I, that's what the lion means. So I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place. And then I scratched a little deeper and, instead of just scales coming off here and there, my whole skin started peeling off beautifully, like it does after an illness, or as if I was a banana. In a minute or two I just stepped out of it. I could see it lying there beside me, looking rather nasty. It was a most lovely feeling. So I started to go down into the well for my bath.

‘But just as I was going to put my foot into the water I looked down and saw that it was all hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly just as it had been before. Oh, that’s all right, said I, it only means I had another smaller suit on underneath the first one, and I’ll have to get out of it too. So I scratched and tore again and this under skin peeled off beautifully and out I stepped and left it lying beside the other one and went down to the well for my bath.

‘Well, exactly the same thing happened again. And I thought to myself, oh dear, how ever many skins have I got to take off? For I was long to bathe my leg. So I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water I knew it had been no good.

‘Then the lion said--but I don’t know if it spoke--You will have to let me undress you. I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

‘The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know--if you’ve ever picked the scab of a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it is such fun to see it coming away.’

‘I know exactly what you mean,’ said Edmund.

‘Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off--just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt--and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobby looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me--I didn’t like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I’d no skin on--and threw me into the water. I smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I’d turned into a boy again. You’d think me simply phoney if I told you how I felt about my own arms. I know they’ve no muscle and are pretty mouldy compared with Caspian’s but I was so glad to see them.

‘After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me--’

‘Dressed you. With his paws?’

‘Well, I don’t exactly remember that bit. But he did somehow or other: in new clothes--the same I’ve got on now, as a matter of fact. And then suddenly I was back here. Which is what makes me think it must have been a dream.’

‘No. It wasn’t a dream,’ said Edmund.

‘Why not?’

‘Well, there are the clothes, for one thing. And you have been--well, un-dragoned, for another.’

‘What do you think it was, then?’ asked Eustace.

‘I think you’ve seen Aslan,’ said Edmund.

‘Aslan!’ said Eustace. ‘I’ve heard that name mentioned several times since we joined the *Dawn Treader*. And I felt--I don’t know what--I hated it. But I was hating everything then. And by the way, I’d like to apologize. I’m afraid I’ve been pretty beastly.’ (C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*)

- d. Illus: Here is a student’s story about God meeting her in her descent and raising her up in her ascent: I grew up in a household where we went to church, but I never really understood the concept of what it meant to be a Christian and to love Jesus. For the first few years of high school, I went to boarding school in New Hampshire for skiing. In my time at home, I attended church off and on, but never really got involved. I absolutely loved school, but during my junior year I had a bad ski accident, got surgery, and transferred home to a public school in my hometown. Around the same time, my mom had begun treatment for skin cancer. With everything going on, I was depressed and felt like my world was crashing down around me. I was upset about my mom and not being able to ski anymore, and honestly felt as if everything I cared about had been taken away. I started going regularly to a youth group at a nearby church with some of my friends from school, and was struck by how everyone seemed to genuinely love Jesus. They all radiated God’s love – it was something I knew that I wanted in my own life. A transformation...occurred [in me] over a few months. I realized how broken my life was, and knew that I wanted Jesus in my life. God met me in my brokenness and began to heal and transform it. God also began to transform my attitude. He showed me that there was more to life than skiing, and began to open doors for me to pursue other opportunities.
12. Ultimately, this pattern would be true for Jesus
 - a. Descent in incarnation, life, death
 - b. Ascent in resurrection and enthronement

13. So if God Himself experiences descent and ascent because of His love for us, no wonder He calls us to be joined with him. And for us if we are joined to Jesus, this is why the apostle Paul says:

^{2 Cor.4:17} For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.