

— Year 1 —

Joseph Rises to Power

Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and became a ruler in Egypt.

Lesson Focus

God gave Pharaoh two disturbing dreams that his wise men couldn't interpret. The cupbearer remembered Joseph from the prison and recommended him to Pharaoh. Giving God the credit for his gift, Joseph explained that Pharaoh's dreams were a warning of seven years of famine after seven years of plenty. Pharaoh honored Joseph and gave him a powerful position to prepare Egypt for the famine.

Key Passages

Genesis 41

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe the source of Joseph's ability to interpret dreams.
- Explain how God used Joseph to save many people.

Building Blocks

Join Bryan and Avery as they demonstrate foundational truths from the Bible.

Teaching Tips

- Before beginning this lesson, help students recall what they have learned so far about Joseph's life.
- Challenge older students to find Egypt, the Nile River, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Red Sea on a world map. Consider pairing these lessons with a study of ancient Egypt. Though there is disagreement among scholars, Joseph's account likely occurred during the time of Pharaoh Sesostris 1 during the 12th Dynasty. Interestingly, Egyptians believed their Pharaoh was a god, and yet this Pharaoh was given dreams that he needed interpreted for him and had no power to stop the coming famine. There is only one God, and he is sovereign over all.

Optional Introductory Activity

Have your student close their eyes and sit still until they think a minute has passed. Time them and let them know how close their guess was. For a greater challenge, have the student stand on one leg or do wall sit for a set amount of time (reduce as necessary.) Discuss what makes waiting difficult. It is hard to be patient, especially when you are suffering. But just like Joseph, we can trust that God is in control of everything and his timing is perfect.

Prepare to Share

Scriptural Background

Joseph was imprisoned due to the lies of Potiphar's wife, but God blessed him in prison by giving him favor with the keeper of the prison. In his position of caring for other prisoners, Joseph met and interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker (Genesis 40). He correctly described what these servants' dreams meant, but nearly two years passed before the cupbearer remembered him and recommended him to Pharaoh as an interpreter of dreams. After giving God the credit and the glory (Genesis 41:16), Joseph was able to explain Pharaoh's dreams, declaring that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine in the land. Impressed by Joseph's interpretation and advice, Pharaoh appointed him over all the land of Egypt (Genesis 41:41). Pharaoh gave Joseph authority with his signet ring and honored him with new clothing, a gold chain, and the use of his second chariot. Pharaoh also gave him a wife, Asenath, who came from a noble family.

Joseph was 30 years old when he became a ruler in Egypt (Genesis 41:46), and he immediately set to work preparing for the famine. During the seven good years, he collected grain and stored it in cities all over Egypt. His wife bore two sons: Manasseh and Ephraim. Joseph gave them Hebrew names that showed his gratefulness to God. His new position

and family were blessings that helped him forget his previous betrayals and sorrow (Genesis 41:51–52).

The blessing of God was on Egypt on account of Joseph, which is a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and his descendants that he would "bless those who bless you" (Genesis 12:3). God's supernatural blessing followed Joseph at every step during his time in Egypt. God blessed Potiphar for Joseph's sake. The more that Potiphar entrusted to Joseph, the more God blessed him (Genesis 39:5). Later, the Lord also blessed Joseph's work in the prison (Genesis 39:23). Finally, God blessed Pharaoh by sending him Joseph to prepare for the famine. Pharaoh honored Joseph by giving him power and authority in Egypt, and God blessed Pharaoh during the seven years of plenty to prepare for the famine. In addition, Egypt also benefited from the money and land acquired as payment for their grain.

When the famine hit, it affected not only Egypt but also the surrounding lands, including Canaan (Genesis 41:57). People came from everywhere to buy grain from Egypt. It was the only nation with food during the famine: "There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread" (Genesis 41:54). Without God's sovereign intervention, many people would have perished during the shortage of food.

Historical/Apologetics Background

Many have asked if there is any historical evidence for these seven years of famine. While there is no direct evidence for it, there are several events that may refer to it.

In the cliffs of Beni Hassan, about 230 miles south of Cairo, tombs have been found from the Egyptian 12th Dynasty—about the same time Joseph was in Egypt and Pharaoh had set him over the land (Genesis 41:44). One of the tombs belonged to Ameni, a provincial governor possibly during the time of Sesostris I. On the wall of his tomb he wrote,

No child of the poor did I afflict; no widow did I oppress; no landowner did I displace; no herdsmen did I drive away; from no small farmer did I take away his men for my works. No one was unhappy in my days, not even in the years of famine. For I had tilled all the

fields of the nome of Mah, up to its southern and northern frontiers. Thus I prolonged the life of its inhabitants and preserved the food which it produced. No hungry man was in it. I distributed equally to the widow as to the married woman. I did not prefer the great to the humble in all that I gave away.

The famine mentioned here meets the criteria of Joseph's famine in four major aspects:

- The approximate date of the famine recorded in the tomb corresponds with the time of Joseph's service in Egypt.
- The famine lasted several years.
- Preparations were made in advance to meet the needs of this disaster by gathering food.
- The food was distributed during the years of famine.

Also, there is a canal that runs from the Nile River to bring water into the Faiyum Oasis. It is known as “Joseph’s Canal” and was dug during the 12th Dynasty, possibly at Joseph’s orders in preparation for the expected famine.

More details on Joseph’s position are given in Genesis 45:8, in which Joseph identifies himself as “a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.” These three titles provide insight into Joseph’s roles as a leader. First, “lord of all Pharaoh’s house” was a title for chief steward of the king. The chief steward oversaw the king’s agricultural holdings, including the royal granaries. God prepared Joseph for this role when he made Joseph the overseer of Potiphar’s household. Second, the title of “father to Pharaoh” was used by Egyptians for officials who provided long-term

service or who performed a special favor for the king. By interpreting Pharaoh’s dream and recommending a plan for the famine, Joseph performed a special favor for the king. The third title of “ruler over all the land of Egypt” could refer to the position of vizier, or prime minister. The vizier was a record-keeper, supervisor, agricultural overseer, and foreign ambassador. The positions of vizier and chief steward were important government positions, but the names of men who held these positions during this time period have not been discovered. By the time of the Middle Kingdom, there were men who held both positions, so Joseph may have been one of the first to do this.¹

1. See biblearchaeology.org/post/2010/04/05/Joseph-in-Egypt-Part-V.aspx.

Joseph Rises to Power

Joseph went through a lot of ups and downs in his life. He started life as a favored son of his father and was given special gifts, like his coat of many colors. Then he had dreams of one day ruling over his family. But things didn’t seem to be going right for him when his jealous brothers sold him as a slave to Egypt. He became successful in Potiphar’s house until Potiphar’s wife lied about him and he was thrown into prison.

But through the life of Joseph we see God’s faithfulness and steadfast love in each step of Joseph’s journey.

Joseph kept trusting God through some tough times. He also had to be patient to wait for God’s timing. Today we’ll see how God rewarded Joseph’s faithfulness and patience.

Joseph Interprets Pharaoh’s Dreams

Two years passed after Joseph interpreted the cupbearer’s dreams. Those years must have been hard for Joseph as he waited there in the prison. That’s a long time to be patient!

Has there been a time when you had to wait a long time for something?

Joseph probably wondered what God was doing. But God was waiting for the perfect timing to accomplish his plan. God was about to do something amazing for Joseph, and it all started with two disturbing dreams God gave to Pharaoh.

Read Genesis 41:1–8

God was about to do something amazing for Joseph, and it all started with two disturbing dreams God gave to Pharaoh.

In Pharaoh’s first dream, he was standing by the Nile River, which was extremely important to the Egyptians because it watered their farmland, provided food, and was used for travel by boat.

Pharaoh saw seven healthy, fat cows come out of the river and graze in the meadow. Then seven ugly, skinny cows came up out of the river and devoured the fat cows! Later on in the chapter, Pharaoh says that the skinny cows didn’t get any fatter after they ate the other cows. They stayed ugly and thin.

In Pharaoh's second dream, seven ears of good grain were swallowed up by seven thin ears of grain.

Pharaoh was upset about these dreams. Verse 8 says that his spirit was troubled. He called for his magicians and wise men and told them his dreams, but none of them could tell him what they meant.

But, after two years, the cupbearer remembered Joseph! This was no accident; God was at work. The cupbearer told Pharaoh how Joseph, a Hebrew prisoner, had interpreted his dream and the baker's, and everything happened just as Joseph said.

Pharaoh immediately called for Joseph to be brought to him. So Pharaoh's servants ran to get Joseph. Joseph had to get cleaned up before he could appear before Pharaoh.

Read Genesis 41:15–16

Joseph didn't say that he was the one who would interpret the dreams. He was humble and gave God the credit for his ability. He said that God would give Pharaoh the meaning of his dreams and that God would give him a favorable answer.

Pharaoh described his dreams to Joseph, and Joseph said that God had shown Pharaoh what was going to happen soon. The two dreams meant the same thing. The seven fat cows and the seven healthy ears of grain represented seven years of plenty in Egypt. During these seven years, the farmland would produce a lot of grain. But the seven skinny cows and seven thin ears of grain represented seven years of famine. **A famine is a severe shortage of food.** It's a time when there isn't enough food and people go hungry. Many things can cause a famine. Crops may be eaten by insects, or crops may not grow because there isn't enough rain. A famine isn't just a minor thing like missing a few meals. It means that there is so little food that people can starve or even die.

Joseph Becomes a Ruler

Joseph didn't just deliver the bad news about the coming famine; he also gave Pharaoh a solution. He said that Pharaoh should appoint a wise man over the land of Egypt who would collect one-fifth of the food during the seven good years of farming. They could store the grain in cities and then use it during the seven years of famine.

Read Genesis 41:39–43

Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Only Pharaoh would be more powerful than Joseph, which made Joseph the second most powerful man in all of Egypt!

Have you ever been given an important responsibility?

Pharaoh gave Joseph gifts to honor him—his signet ring, garments of fine linen, a gold chain, and a chariot.

Each of these gifts was special. The signet ring was used by Pharaoh to make laws and decisions, so Joseph was given that power. Then he was given fine linen clothing befitting a ruler. The gold chain was a gift to honor people who did a special service for Pharaoh. Then Joseph was made to ride in Pharaoh's chariot! During this time period, chariots were fairly new technology, and there weren't many around yet in Egypt—probably only a few in the whole country! A chariot would be like someone today being given a bulletproof limo or a private jet.

Next, Pharaoh gave Joseph a wife named Asenath. She was the daughter of a priest in an important Egyptian city.

Can you imagine this? In one day, Joseph went from being a forgotten prisoner in filthy clothes to being the second most powerful ruler in Egypt. God blessed Joseph for his faith and his patience. **God is sovereign—in control of all things.** When God says its time for something to

happen, it happens just as God intends. Joseph had been waiting a long time, but now that the

right time had come, everything changed quickly. God's plan for Joseph was coming to pass.

Joseph Prepares for the Famine

Joseph was 30 years old when he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and became a ruler. Now he had a job to do. He had to prepare for the coming seven years of famine!

Read Genesis 41:48–49

Joseph worked hard to prepare for the famine. In every city, he collected the food from the nearby fields and stored it.

Another good thing happened during those years. Joseph's wife, Asenath, bore two sons named Manasseh and Ephraim. Their names are important because they show how Joseph was grateful to God. Manasseh's name means forgetting, and Joseph made a choice to forget all the bad things that had happened to him. Ephraim's name means fruitfulness. Joseph recognized that God blessed him with children in a foreign land.

Eventually, the seven years of plenty were over, and the seven years of famine came, just as Joseph had said. The famine was so bad that it affected all the lands, and no one could grow

their own food any more. People got hungry and needed help, so Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians and to people from other countries.

God used Joseph to save many people. God waited until just the right time to give Pharaoh the dreams, to remind the cupbearer about Joseph, and to give Joseph the interpretation of the dreams. In the meantime, God had been preparing Joseph for his new position as a ruler of Egypt. Joseph learned about Egyptian farming and customs, and God gave him a gift for organizing big tasks—like getting ready for a famine. But Joseph wasn't proud or boastful about his gifts. He knew his abilities were from God.

The reason God allowed all the hardships in Joseph's life was because God was preparing Joseph to accomplish his purposes. Thirteen years is a long time of preparation, isn't it? But Joseph worked hard, trusted God, and waited for God's timing. Then God made him a powerful ruler! That's a pretty great reward!

Application

God changed Joseph's life in a single day! He gave Pharaoh dreams that upset him then used the cupbearer at just the right time and place to bring Joseph before Pharaoh. God gave Joseph the ability to understand the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams and to suggest a plan to prepare for the famine. Pharaoh was impressed with Joseph and made him a powerful ruler. Joseph would prepare for the famine and make important decisions. But God had prepared him for this important job.

God's timing was perfect. It was important that Joseph was patient and trusted God. When Joseph was 17, he knew his dreams meant he would do something special. But it wasn't until 13 years later,

after being a slave, an overseer, and a prisoner, that Joseph was ready for the job God had for him. By this time, at age 30, Joseph was humble and recognized God as the source of his gifts.

- 1 Do you think God speaks to people in dreams today?
- 2 Joseph had a gift for interpreting dreams and a gift for organizing large tasks. What are some other gifts and abilities that God gives people?
- 3 Joseph didn't use his gifts to get honor for himself; he gave God the glory and worked to help others. What are some ways you can use your gifts to help or serve others?

Possible answers: 1) God doesn't need to use dreams today because we have his Word, the Bible. But God can use any method he wants to communicate with us. 2) Playing an instrument, having a good memory,

getting good grades, serving others, teaching others, showing compassion, etc. 3) Write a thank-you note to someone, sing a song for church, help a friend with homework, etc.

Comprehension Questions

1. How long was Joseph left in prison before the cupbearer remembered him?
Two years.
2. What quality did Joseph show as he waited for God's timing? *Patience.*
3. What attribute of God means that he is in control of everything? *God is sovereign.*
4. What was Pharaoh's first dream about?
Seven fat cows being eaten by seven skinny cows.
5. What happened in Pharaoh's second dream? *Seven healthy ears of grain were swallowed by seven thin ears of grain.*
6. Who did Joseph tell Pharaoh would give him the meaning of his dream? *God.*
7. What was the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams? *Seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine.*
8. What is a famine? *Severe shortage of food.*
9. What plan did Joseph suggest to prepare for the famine? *Collect and store food during the seven good years so there would be food during the seven years of famine.*
10. What position did Pharaoh give Joseph?
Ruler of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh.
11. Name a gift Pharaoh gave Joseph to honor him. *Signet ring, new (linen) clothes, gold chain, chariot, wife.*
12. What was the name of Joseph's wife?
Asenath.
13. God also blessed Joseph with two sons. Which son's name means forgetting?
Manasseh.
14. Which son's name means fruitfulness?
Ephraim.
15. How did Joseph save people when the famine came? *He sold them grain he had stored.*
16. What special abilities did God give Joseph, which he used to help people?
Interpreting dreams. Organizing tasks.