GENESIS

Chapter 41

*Pharaoh’s Dreams*

**When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile, 2 when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. 3 After them, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. 4 And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up. 5 He fell asleep again and had a second dream: Seven heads of grain, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk. 6 After them, seven other heads of grain sprouted—thin and scorched by the east wind. 7 The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads. Then Pharaoh woke up; it had been a dream. 8 In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him. 9 Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “Today I am reminded of my shortcomings. 10 Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard. 11 Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. 12 Now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us, giving each man the interpretation of his dream. 13 And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was hanged.” 14 So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. 15 Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” 16 “I cannot do it,” Joseph replied to Pharaoh, “but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.” 17 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “In my dream I was standing on the bank of the Nile, 18 when out of the river there came up seven cows, fat and sleek, and they grazed among the reeds. 19 After them, seven other cows came up—scrawny and very ugly and lean. I had never seen such ugly cows in all the land of Egypt. 20 The lean, ugly cows ate up the seven fat cows that came up first. 21 But even after they ate them, no one could tell that they had done so; they looked just as ugly as before. Then I woke up. 22 “In my dreams I also saw seven heads of grain, full and good, growing on a single stalk. 23 After them, seven other heads sprouted—withered and thin and scorched by the east wind. 24 The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven good heads. I told this to the magicians, but none could explain it to me.” 25 Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. 26 The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; it is one and the same dream. 27 The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine. 28 “It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. 29 Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, 30 but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. 31 The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe. 32 The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon. 33 “And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. 34 Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. 35 They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. 36 This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine.” 37 The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. 38 So Pharaoh asked them, “Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?” 39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.”**

**41:2** *out of the river there came up seven cows.* Cattle often submerged themselves up to their necks in the Nile to escape sun and insects. (CSB)

Central to Egypt’s agriculture and economy, the Nile River represented Egypt’s power and wealth. (TLSB)

 *fed in the reed grass*. Land flooded by the Nile was used as pastureland after the water receded. (TLSB)

**41:5** The second dream complements the first, as in ch 37. (TLSB)

 *growing*. Same Hbr word as used for the cows that “came up” (vv 2, 3). (TLSB)

 *on one stalk*. Symbol of abundance. Like the cows, the grain depended on the Nile for life. (TLSB)

**41:6** *thin*. Same Hbr word as used for the cows (vv 3, 4). (TLSB)

 *scorched by the east wind.* The Palestinian sirocco (in Egypt the khamsin), which blows in from the desert (see Hos 13:15) in late spring and early fall, often withers vegetation (see Isa 40:7; Eze 17:10). (CSB)

**41:8** *his mind was troubled.* See 40:6–7. (CSB)

 *magicians.* Probably priests who claimed to possess occult knowledge. (CSB)

Term used only for Egyptian and Babylonian men who specialized in occult practices. Cf Dt 18:10–14. *wise men*. In this context, the term refers to pagan diviners skilled in magic and the occult. (TLSB)

 *no one could interpret them.* See Da 2:10–11. (CSB)

**41:12** *young Hebrew*. At the time he interpreted the dreams, Joseph was c 28 years old. Cf v 46. (TLSB)

**41:13** *things turned out exactly as he interpreted them.* Because his words were from the Lord (see Ps 105:19). (CSB)

**41:14** *Pharaoh sent for Joseph.* Effecting his permanent release from prison (see Ps 105:20). (CSB)

 *pit*. Or, “dungeon,” same Hbr word used for the pit Joseph was in before being sold into slavery (37:20). Thus his 13 years of misery began by being thrown into a pit and ended by being brought out of one. (TLSB)

 *shaved.* Egyptians were normally smooth-shaven, while Palestinians wore beards (see 2Sa 10:5; Jer 41:5). (CSB)

Egyptian men shaved their heads and beards. Joseph dressed in appropriate clothing. (TLSB)

**41:16** *I cannot do it … but God will give Pharaoh the answer.* See 40:8; Da 2:27–28, 30; 2Co 3:5. (CSB)

Luther: “He means to say, ‘I am not the one who has interpreted or could interpret the dream. It is God who can do for you as He has done for me.’ He gives glory to God, but nevertheless does not deny his [i.e., Joseph’s] ministry” (WA DB 8:165). *God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer*. Lit, “an answer of peace.” I.e., the interpretation will satisfy Pharaoh. (TLSB)

**41:25** *one*. The dreams have the same meaning. (TLSB)

 *God has revealed*. In Hbr, “the” precedes “God,” emphasizing the one true God. (TLSB)

**41:27** *seven years of famine.* See Ac 7:11. Long famines were rare in Egypt because of the regularity of the annual overflow of the Nile, but not uncommon elsewhere (see 2Ki 8:1). The great famine in the time of Elijah lasted three and a half years (Jas 5:17), thus half of seven years; it had been cut short by Elijah’s intercession (1Ki 18:42; Jas 5:18). (CSB)

Egypt suffered when the flow and flood of the Nile abated, as described in some Egyptian texts. (TLSB)

**41:30** *famine will consume the land*. All the food supplies would be used up. (TLSB)

**41:1–36** Pharaoh’s fortune-tellers and sorcerers cannot help him understand the dreams that God sent. Therefore, Joseph is brought up from the dungeon. Giving all the glory to God, he interprets the dreams and warns of the coming famine. The devil’s tools—fortune-tellers and sorcerers—are powerless in divine matters. Like Joseph, we should praise God for any good thing we have. Let us also not be afraid to share good advice in a spirit of humility when such words would help our neighbor. The best thing we have is God Himself—speaking to us through His Word, redeeming us through His Son, and bringing us to Himself through His Sacraments and Spirit. • O Lord, our times are in Your hands. When the opportunity comes for us to help others, give us wisdom and strength to do so. We praise You for Your mercy, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (TLSB)

**41:38** *in whom is the spirit of God.* See NIV text note. The word “spirit” should probably not be capitalized in such passages, since reference to the Holy Spirit would be out of character in statements by pagan rulers. (CSB)

Pharaoh likely recognized that Joseph’s God had great power. Although Pharaoh may have converted to true faith (AE 7:163), he probably counted the true God as one among many and did not get rid of his idols. (TLSB)

**41:40** *You shall be in charge.* Pharaoh took Joseph’s advice (see v. 33) and decided that Joseph himself should be “ruler over Egypt” (Ac 7:10; see also Ps 105:21). (CSB)

Joseph became the highest ranking official, master not only in the royal palace, but throughout Egypt. (TLSB)

 *as regards the throne*. Supreme authority remained with Pharaoh. (TLSB)

 *all my people are to submit to your orders.* More lit. “at your command all my people are to kiss (you)”—i.e., kiss your hands or feet in an act of homage and submission (see Ps 2:12 and note). (CSB)

*Joseph in Charge of Egypt*

**41 So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.” 42 Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph’s finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. 43 He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, “Make way!” Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. 44 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt.” 45 Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt. 46 Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from Pharaoh’s presence and traveled throughout Egypt. 47 During the seven years of abundance the land produced plentifully. 48 Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it. 49 Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure. 50 Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. 51 Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, “It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.” 52 The second son he named Ephraim and said, “It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.” 53 The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, 54 and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. 55 When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food. Then Pharaoh told all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph and do what he tells you.” 56 When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. 57 And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world.**

**41:42** Three symbols of transfer and/or sharing of royal authority, referred to also in Est 3:10 (signet ring); Est 6:11 (robe); and Da 5:7, 16, 29 (gold chain). (CSB)

With several ceremonial acts, Pharaoh conferred power on Joseph. These gifts well fit the Egyptian context during this era. *signet ring*. Official seal for validating documents. *garments of fine linen*. Clothing of the finest quality. *gold chain*. One of Egypt’s highest distinctions. (TLSB)

**41:43** *second-in-command.* The position was probably that of vizier, the highest executive office below that of the king himself. (CSB)

*second chariot*. Beside the royal chariot. (TLSB)

 *Make way!* See NIV text note. The Hebrew here may be an Egyptian imperative of a Semitic loanword, meaning “Bow the knee!” (CSB)

**41:44** *I am Pharaoh*. Stating his authority to confer this power on Joseph. (TLSB)

 *lift up hand or foot*. No one could take any action without Joseph’s permission. (TLSB)

**41:45** *gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah.* As a part of assigning Joseph an official position within his royal administration (see note on 1:5). Pharaoh presumed to use this marvelously endowed servant of the Lord for his own royal purposes—as a later Pharaoh would attempt to use divinely blessed Israel for the enrichment of Egypt (Ex 1). He did not recognize that Joseph served a Higher Power, whose kingdom and redemptive purposes are being advanced. (The meaning of Joseph’s Egyptian name is uncertain.) (CSB)

Possibly means “revealer of hidden things” or, more likely, “the god speaks and he lives.” (TLSB)

 *Asenath.* The name is Egyptian and probably means “She belongs to (the goddess) Neith.” (CSB)

Means “belonging to [the goddess] Neith.” (TLSB)

 *Potiphera.* Not the same person as “Potiphar” (37:36; 39:1); the name (also Egyptian) means “he whom (the sun-god) Ra has given.” (CSB)

Not to be confused with Potiphar. Means “he whom [the sun god] Ra has given.” (TLSB)

 *On.* Located ten miles northeast of modern Cairo, it was called Heliopolis (“city of the sun”) by the Greeks and was an important center for the worship of Ra, who had a temple there. Potiphera therefore bore an appropriate name. (CSB)

May have been the high priest in the worship of Ra (also written Re). The city of On was later called Heliopolis, “city of the sun.” Joseph’s connection with this idol-worshiping family did not mean he was involved in such worship. His role in the kingdom was political and economic. Centuries later, Pharaoh Akhenaton (1379–1362 BC) declared the god Aton, earlier known as Re-Akhenaton, to be the only true god (monotheism). However, the pharaoh after Akhenaton overturned this belief. (TLSB)

**41:46** *thirty years old.* In just 13 years (see 37:2), Joseph had become second-in-command (v. 43) in Egypt. (CSB)

C 13 years had passed since Joseph was sold into slavery (cf 37:2). (TLSB)

 *went through all the land*. To arrange the gathering of grain during the years of plenty (v 47). (TLSB)

**41:48** *put the food in the cities*. In granaries. (TLSB)

**41:49** *like the sand of the sea.* A simile also for the large number of offspring promised to Abraham and Jacob (see 22:17; 32:12). (CSB)

**41:52** *Ephraim.* The meaning of the name (see NIV text note) reflects the fact that God gave Joseph “two” (see v. 50) sons. (CSB)

 *land of my affliction*. Even in his prosperity, Joseph spoke of Egypt in this way, an indication that he longed for the Promised Land. (TLSB)

**41:54** Ancient records refer to seven-year famines, usually because of drought. To affect all Egypt, the drought would have included the Upper Nile, minimizing yearly floods downstream. Grain disease may also have caused the famine, as not all livestock and pastureland were destroyed. (TLSB)

**41:57** *all the world.* The known world from the writer’s perspective (the Middle East). (CSB)

**41:37–57** After years of frustration, Joseph is exalted to oversee the storage and distribution of Egypt’s great harvests. As the years of famine begin to take their toll, there is enough surplus to share with those in need throughout all the earth. In hard times, those who have should share with those who have not. Here is comfort: after long periods of suffering, at just the right time, the Lord will give help to His people, just as He did for Joseph. Through His Son, Jesus, God rules over us and gives us what we need: pardon, provision, and peace. • Heavenly Father, give us this day our daily bread, and deliver us from evil, for Jesus’ sake. Amen. (TLSB)