

September 13
Lesson 2 (NIV)

OBEDIENT LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: 1 Peter 5:5b-11
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Genesis 41:14-57

GENESIS 41:25-33, 37-40, 50-52

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.”

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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.”

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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.”

KEY VERSES

Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 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.”—Genesis 41:39–40

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

Unit 1: Struggles with Love

LESSONS 1–4

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. New Life, New God?
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Disturbing Dreams (Genesis 41:25–33)
 - A. Interpretation (vv. 25–32)
Feast or Famine
 - B. Advice (v. 33)
- II. Pharaoh’s Favor (Genesis 41:37–40)
 - A. Praising Joseph (vv. 37–38)
 - B. Promoting Joseph (vv. 39–40)
- III. Foreign Family (Genesis 41:50–52)
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From “Why?” to “What’s Next?”

Conclusion

- A. Firm Faith on Strange Soil
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Asenath *As-e-nath*.

Ephraim *Ee-fray-im*.

Manasseh *Muh-nass-uh*.

Potiphar *Pot-ih-far*.

Potiphera *Pot-i-fee-ruh*.

Zaphenath-Paneah *Zaf-uh-nath Puh-nee-uh*.

Introduction

A. New Life, New God?

Immigrants face a host of difficulties when settling into new countries. Cultural differences can be the biggest hurdles to being accepted in a community, a neighborhood, or by coworkers.

Some immigrants do not invest the time or resources necessary to adopt the cultural mores of their new country. Sometimes it's not about lack of time or resources but about lack of desire; fitting in with cultural expectations of the new country may threaten the identity that a person has come to cherish. Fear of losing that identity can be isolating.

One way self-identity is threatened is by rejecting the religion of the immigrant's country of origin. When a particular religion or faith expression has been integral to personal identity for decades, then challenges to that religion or expression may result in an identity crisis.

Today's lesson features a man who faced a similar challenge: Joseph, sold into slavery in Egypt, adopted various facets of Egyptian culture as his own while being most resistant to changing his "one God" worldview, known as monotheism. Joseph looked, acted, and spoke like an Egyptian most of the time. But he did not lose his sense of dependence on God in a pagan culture. Whether in prison or in power, Joseph remained God's man—obedient, faithful, and willing to give God the credit.

B. Lesson Context

Following the events of last week's lesson, Joseph was sold to an Egyptian official named Potiphar (Genesis 37:36). Joseph quickly found favor in Potiphar's eyes and was promoted to a position of great responsibility within Potiphar's household.

Potiphar's wife, however, constantly pressured Joseph to sleep with her. Joseph refused every time (Genesis 39:9–10). When on one occasion Joseph ran from Potiphar's wife, his cloak was torn from him and left behind; she used it to accuse Joseph falsely of attempted rape. As a result, Potiphar had Joseph thrown in prison (39:11–20).

Here too Joseph proved himself worthy of responsibility (Genesis 39:20–23). Dreams once again enter Joseph's story (compare 37:5–11; see lesson 1) through two fellow prisoners. Joseph's experience had taught him that only God can reveal the true meaning of dreams (40:8; 41:16). The divinely inspired interpretations Joseph provided for each man's dream came true: one man was put to death, and the other man was restored to his position. Joseph requested of the latter that after regaining his position, he would mention Joseph to the Pharaoh. The man, however, forgot about Joseph for two years (40:1–41:1).

Pharaoh had his own incomprehensible dreams. Though the content was easily conveyed, neither Pharaoh nor any of his magicians or wise men understood them (Genesis 41:1–8). In the first dream, seven healthy cows had come forth from the Nile River. They were followed by seven cows "ugly and gaunt" (41:3); Pharaoh said of these cows, "I had never seen such ugly cows in all the land of Egypt" (41:19). Amazingly, the ugly cows devoured the healthy ones.

Much the same occurred in Pharaoh's second dream, though the details differed. Seven heads of grain appeared on a single stalk. Then there appeared seven withered heads of grain that had been scorched by a hot east wind. The thin heads of grain proceeded to eat up the fully grown heads of grain.

When Pharaoh spoke of this conundrum, the forgetful former prisoner remembered Joseph and told Pharaoh of Joseph's ability to interpret dreams accurately. Joseph was quickly taken from the prison, made presentable, and brought before Pharaoh (Genesis 41:9–14).

I. Disturbing Dreams

(GENESIS 41:25–33)

A. Interpretation (vv. 25–32)

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.

Though *Pharaoh* had dreamed two *dreams* (Genesis 41:5; see Lesson Context), they carried *one and the same* message. After Pharaoh recounted his dreams, the first words Joseph spoke tell us something of the heart of this faithful servant of the Lord: “I cannot do it ... but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires” (41:16). God, not Joseph, would set Pharaoh's anxious mind at ease (see Lesson Context; compare Daniel 2:45).

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.

The number *seven* in both dreams represents a number of *years*. Joseph's reassurance that *it is one and the same dream* clarifies that the *good cows* and the *good heads of grain* represent the same 7 years, not 14.

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.

Similarly, *the seven lean, ugly cows* and *the seven worthless heads of grain* represent a new set of *seven years*. These 7 years will be defined by *famine*.

28. “It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do.

Again Joseph emphasized that he himself was not the source of the interpretation (compare Genesis 40:8; 41:25). The significance of insisting on honoring *God* is partially found in ancient beliefs about the way gods ruled. Most people took for granted that multiple gods existed and governed the world. These gods were often associated with a group of people in a specific locale. Whenever a person moved to another nation or people group, it was believed that he or she had left that deity's jurisdiction and come under the reign of another (compare 1 Kings 20:28; 2 Kings 17:26).

Joseph, however, held to a very different view of God, one consistent with what the Bible teaches (Genesis 1; Psalm 47:7; 97:9; etc.). This knowledge about God's character and dominion left Joseph with no doubt that God (1) had sent the dreams, (2) provided the interpretation, and (3) would follow through on what the dreams had revealed. Joseph's God was not a fictitious Egyptian deity; the Lord would show himself able to carry out his will in any country, not just among the people who knew him.

29–30. “Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land.

For the first time, Joseph revealed specifically what the healthy cows and the healthy grain represented (see commentary on Genesis 41:26, above).

31. “The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe.

The Hebrew word translated *severe* describes something too oppressive or “heavy” to bear (example: Numbers 11:14). The phrases are piled up, repeating in stark language that the good years will be forgotten as the *famine* would end up being a nationally devastating event.

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.

Once again repetition serves to emphasize. This time the emphasis is by *the dream* having come to *Pharaoh in two forms*. God was *firmly* committed to the years of plenty and of famine that the dreams predicted (compare Isaiah 46:11). As Joseph spoke to Pharaoh, he might have remembered his own doubled dreams that his family would bow to him (Genesis 37:5–10). Though Joseph didn’t know when, he could be confident that God would bring these things to pass (example: 42:6; see lesson 3).

The twofold format also suggested urgency in heeding the dreams: God would soon fulfill what he had revealed. We do not know exactly how long after these dreams the seven years of plenty began. But the implication of the twice-dreamed dream was clear: Pharaoh had no time to waste in preparing for what lay ahead for his people.

Once more Joseph emphasized God’s work in granting Pharaoh the dreams and giving Joseph their interpretation (see on Genesis 41:28, above). Instead of taking credit for his own wisdom and insight, thus promoting his own interests, Joseph continued to point to God’s work through him.

God may have seemed absent to Joseph, especially when a fellow prisoner forgot him for two years (Genesis 41:1). But God’s continued favor in giving Joseph interpretations undoubtedly reassured the man that the Lord was present with him, even in (or especially in) prison. The Lord had not forgotten his faithful servant. At the beginning of Joseph’s time both in Potiphar’s house and in prison, we are reminded that the Lord was “with Joseph” (39:2, 23). Whether Joseph was aware of it yet or not, God never left his side.

B. Advice (v. 33)

33. “And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt.”

Knowing what the dreams meant was of vital importance. However, that knowledge was worthless without a plan to use the information appropriately. Thus Joseph took the initiative in making the suggestion we see here. Joseph further suggested a plan for the appointed man to put into action (Genesis 41:34–36, not in today’s text).

II. Pharaoh’s Favor

(GENESIS 41:37–40)

A. Praising Joseph (vv. 37–38)

37. The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials.

The phrase *all his officials* likely refers to various administrators in Pharaoh’s government, including the magicians and wise men who had been unable to interpret Pharaoh’s dream (Genesis

41:8). Their unanimous approval may indicate God’s having blessed not only Joseph with understanding but also the bestowal of wisdom on the Egyptians gathered.

38. So Pharaoh asked them, “Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?”

Pharaoh’s words here do not necessarily reflect faith in God (compare acknowledgement of “the spirit of the holy gods” in Daniel 4:18; 5:11–14). There is no indication that he renounced other gods or came to believe in the one true God. He simply acknowledges that a deity (or deities, since the Hebrew can be translated plural) who sent the dream also sent the interpretation to the man of his choosing. In the same way, Pharaoh would likely expect that if an Egyptian god sent a dream, then that same deity would be the one who gave or withheld interpretation (compare Daniel 2:11; 4:8–9).

In any case, the phrasing acknowledged divine favor on Joseph. Though Joseph was a foreigner, a slave, and a prisoner in Egypt, Pharaoh didn’t mention any of this. Of greatest significance to him was that Joseph showed himself to be the man Egypt needed. Perhaps to discourage any questions about Joseph’s loyalty or skill, Pharaoh gave him an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-Paneah, which may mean something like “revealer of secrets” (Genesis 41:45).

B. Promoting Joseph (vv. 39–40)

39. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this know to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you.

No one else had Joseph’s divinely given insight. The *God* who had sent the dreams had also provided a particular man to interpret them. *Pharaoh* agreed with *Joseph* completely in that the dreams and their interpretation were not of human origin. Since the man Joseph obviously had been given a divine stamp of approval, Pharaoh followed suit.

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.”

To Pharaoh it seemed only right that someone with the insight and intelligence that Joseph clearly possessed should be the one to administer the plan he suggested. Joseph’s responsibilities were very similar to what they had been in Potiphar’s house (Genesis 39:4–6) and the prison (39:20–23). The key difference was that the only person in a higher position was Pharaoh himself (see Psalm 105:16–22; Acts 7:10).

Hindsight tells us that God had been preparing Joseph for this position ever since he arrived in Egypt. What an amazing change of status for someone who, just 24 hours earlier, had been a forgotten prisoner! Joseph went from pit to power.

Genesis 41:41–45 (not in our printed text) records the actions taken by Pharaoh to confirm Joseph’s new position in Egypt. Joseph diligently carried out the task of amassing grain in preparation for the coming famine (41:48–49).

III. Foreign Family (GENESIS 41:50–52)

A. Sons Born (v. 50)

50a. Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph

Though this is a normal relational progression (marriage, then children), this note also shows the depth of Joseph's trust in God. *Joseph* was preparing for the *famine* that he firmly believed was coming. Yet he was so confident that God had provided for those lean *years* that he was not hesitant about introducing new mouths to Egypt. This may foreshadow his care for other nations and especially his estranged family (Genesis 45:10–11; see lesson 4).

50b. by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On.

On was a city in Egypt, located just northeast of modern Cairo. On was the location of a temple devoted to the worship of the Egyptian sun god Ra (the Greeks later called the city Heliopolis, meaning “city of the sun”). The name *Potiphera* (not to be confused with Potiphar) means “he whom Ra has given.”

Joseph's marriage to *Asenath daughter of a pagan priest* raises eyebrows. After all, her family was devoted to idolatry, and pagan wives had a way of introducing compromise into a husband's devotion to the Lord (example: 1 Kings 11:1–6). Yet there is no suggestion here or elsewhere that Asenath ever influenced Joseph toward idolatry. Even in marriage to an Egyptian bride, Joseph relied on the one true God only.

B. Sons Named (vv. 51–52)

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.”

Manasseh sounds like the Hebrew word meaning “forget” (example: Isaiah 44:21). *God* caused Joseph to *forget* the hard times that had characterized his life for the previous 13 years (compare Joseph's age in Genesis 37:2 with that recorded in 41:46). In relation to his *father's household*, this probably means that Joseph no longer held any grudges or ill will toward his brothers since he could begin to see those circumstances in a new light (see 45:4–8).

At the same time, it is clear that Joseph had not forgotten God, nor had God forgotten him. Though the name of *his firstborn* emphasizes forgetting, the name would also remind Joseph of what had been “forgotten” and ensure that it was not *really* lost to his memory.

52. The second son he named Ephraim and said, “It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.”

Ephraim sounds like a Hebrew word meaning “twice fruitful” (compare Genesis 17:6). It probably reflects the fact that God had given Joseph two sons. The name likely praised God for the blessing that Joseph was experiencing in Egypt. Furthermore, the name may have celebrated the abundance of a *land* about to be hit by famine. This suggests once again that Joseph confidently trusted in God's provision during the lean times. Just as God has brought Joseph through *suffering* before, Joseph came to anticipate that God would bring him, his family, and all Egypt through a great famine.

The name Ephraim also seems to foreshadow the story of Jacob's family in Egypt for generations to come (see Genesis 47:27; Exodus 1:8–11; 3:7–10). God would not forget Jacob (Israel), just as God had not forgotten Joseph.

Joseph himself was given a new Egyptian name (Genesis 41:45; see commentary on 41:38) and, by implication, an Egyptian identity (compare Daniel 1:1–16). But he gave both of his sons

Hebrew names (Genesis 41:51–52). Doing so acknowledged the presence and provision of the God of his (Hebrew) family in his life. It also emphasized that Joseph still thought about the family of his youth, apparently fondly enough to choose names in his native tongue.

Conclusion

A. Firm Faith on Strange Soil

The God whom Joseph served and honored is the God we serve and honor today. No matter the circumstance, he does not change (Malachi 3:6). He remains in control. Whether we find ourselves in a pit or a palace, he is there.

Joseph demonstrated radical faith in his God. Even though God might have seemed far away during the 13 years of slavery, God continued to give Joseph evidence that he had not forgotten the imprisoned man. How does your life witness to the same truth?

B. Prayer

Father, help us be mindful that as you were with Joseph, so you are with us! Strengthen us to greater faithfulness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Change is constant, but so is God's faithfulness.¹
