

COLORING INSIDE THE LINES

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



Catalog No. 20210207
Genesis 41:1-36
Sixth Message
Paul Taylor
February 7, 2021

Genesis 41:1-36

In college, I studied engineering. Everything was neat and tidy. All the answers fit into a nice little box. You always knew if you were right or wrong.

But I had a good friend who was a musician. He told me about an art class he took. At one point, the teacher gave them two different assignments. The first assignment had no boundaries. They were told to create something: any medium, any topic, any size -- whatever they wanted. Those works came back with a lot of variety and expression.

The next assignment was very different because the teacher imposed numerous requirements. They were given a canvas of a specific size and were told which tools they could use. There were instructions regarding color and shape and technique.

The surprising thing was that those assignments came back with an incredible amount of creativity. Even within the strict boundaries, the artists in the class were able to express themselves in powerful ways. My friend concluded that the boundaries of the project actually increased the creativity of the artists.

As followers of Jesus, we believe in two ideas that can sometimes contradict each other. We believe that God is absolutely sovereign. Everything on this planet is under his control. He is not a distant God who set things into motion and sits back to watch. He is actively involved in the ways of this world.

But we also believe that God has given us free will. We can make choices. We can make good choices and bad ones—our actions matter. We are not merely playing out a script that God has written in advance.

God is sovereign, and we are free. Christians have always struggled to put those ideas together.

As we continue our series in the book of Genesis called The Story of Joseph, we're going to see those ideas collide. Joseph begins the story as a lowly prisoner, but

he receives an audience with the most powerful man in Egypt. We'll see him talk about God's unchanging plans while at the same time, he gives a plea for Pharaoh to take action. Joseph will be coloring inside the lines.

This is a really interesting theological issue. As we enter into the story, we're not just thinking about how ideas fit together. We want to encounter the heart of God. We want to know who God is through this story, and we want to see how our lives intersect with his actions.

Should I do this? Should I do that? What is God's will for my life? How much do I really control? These are the kinds of decisions we interact with every day.

We will observe that Pharaoh expects a particular way of thinking through these questions, and Joseph gives him a different approach. That's the perspective that we'd like to apply in our own lives. We want to figure out how living within the will of God is a counter-cultural approach to life. We also want to see how it is the way to truly living our lives with creativity, vision, and true freedom.

A king's dreams

Our story begins with a powerful man having scary dreams. We've already seen two sets of two dreams in the story of Joseph. First, Joseph had two dreams. Then last week, we saw the cupbearer and baker each share their dreams. Now we see the third pair of dreams. As you read this, I want to invite you to imagine experiencing these dreams. Don't just listen. See if you can see the cows and corn for yourself.

Genesis 41:1-8:

After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows, attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. And behold, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of

the Nile. 4 And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke. 5 And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. 6 And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. 7 And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. 8 So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh.

The story begins by pointing out that two “whole” years have passed. Joseph has been waiting in the pit for a long time. We are taken to the bedroom of the Pharaoh and hear about his two dreams. The first one features seven attractive cows and seven thin cows. The second dream is similar but with ears of grain. We are told that Pharaoh’s spirit was troubled after receiving these dreams.

Egyptians often understood that dreams were predictive of the future. We talked last week about how the interpretations of dreams was a valuable and skilled profession. That’s why Pharaoh sent for all the magicians and wise men.

Pharaoh was considered to be divine. People thought he had a special relationship to the god of grain. His first job was to make sure his people could eat. One Egyptian inscription records a Pharaoh claiming, “I produced the grain, because I was beloved by the grain god. No one was hungry in my years.”¹

It may seem crazy to hold the king responsible for the harvest, but we do the same thing today. Despite the complex dynamics that go into our national economy, we tend to hold the President responsible. If the economy does well, we praise the President. If it does poorly, the President takes the blame.

So it could be that Pharaoh wasn’t just troubled because he didn’t understand the dreams. He could have been concerned because he did have some idea of what seven skinny cows and seven diseased ears of corn might mean. Seven years of famine would be disastrous for him. In the same way, it’s possible that all those magicians and wise men weren’t unable to interpret the dreams. They may have been unwilling. Would you want to be the one to tell the king that he will be a terrible failure?

Pharaoh finds himself in a position that’s familiar to many of us. Something important is about to happen, and he doesn’t know what to do about it. He’s desperate to find out what is going to happen and what he should do.

Have you been there? Don’t we try to figure out what God is doing? Maybe it’s not a scary dream, but something happens, and we wonder what God is trying to tell us.

Have you asked what is God is doing?

Don’t you find yourself asking this question? Someone said that one of the most distinct human activities is to try to interpret the events around us. We have this firm belief that things don’t just happen. Even people without any notion of God often think this way.

If we believe in Jesus, then we are convinced of this, that nothing is random. There are no coincidences. We’re always trying to figure out what is happening and what it means. That’s often very difficult to do. How many times has something happened—good or bad—and you ask “what is God doing?”

Pharaoh is desperate for an answer to this question. Someone in his court finally comes up with a suggestion.

A prisoner remembered

Two years earlier, Joseph had interpreted the dream of the cupbearer and asked to be remembered. Finally, the cupbearer does just that.

Genesis 41:9-16:

Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “I remember my offenses today. 10 When Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, 11 we dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation. 12 A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream. 13 And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged.”

14 Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit.

And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. 15 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." 16 Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

After the cupbearer remembers Joseph, he recounts his story to Pharaoh. Pharaoh jumps into action. The narrative's verbs come quickly: Pharaoh sent, called, they promptly brought him, he shaved and changed his clothes, and came in. No time is wasted in solving this problem.

Pharaoh meets Joseph and tells him that he heard Joseph can interpret dreams. But Joseph corrects him. Think about that for a moment. Joseph corrects the king of Egypt. His first words to the most powerful man in the world are to say, "It is not in me." Joseph takes the focus off himself and puts it on God.

Joseph doesn't just say that God is the source of his ability. He tells Pharaoh that God will interact directly with him. The language is very curious. It literally reads, "God will answer concerning the peace (or shalom) of Pharaoh."

This is the first way that we see how different Joseph's worldview is from the Egyptians.

Pharaoh only wants to know what's going to happen. He wants a solution to his problem. He's saying to Joseph, "I had a dream; I think it might make me look bad; help me to fix it."

But Joseph does something incredible. He doesn't give Pharaoh the answer he wants. He doesn't promise an interpretation. He says something even more significant: "God will answer concerning your shalom."

How often do we come to God and want him to fix our problems? We ask, "What are you doing? What am I supposed to do? I have this problem - can you solve it?"

For me, it comes down to control. I want answers to my problems. I want to know what's going to happen, but I want to stay in control. I want the magicians to interpret God for me. But for the magicians to interact with him directly—that means I lose control, and I'm not sure I want that.

What about you? Do you want a fix or faith?

I was talking to someone recently who has been going through a very difficult time. I asked them how they might be encountering God during their struggle. They responded, "I don't want to encounter God. I just want it to stop hurting."

I resonate with that. Sometimes we're so afraid or confused or hurting that we just want a fix. But in his mercy, God offers us more. He offers us himself.

I think Joseph learned that in the pit. Somewhere in the midst of being thrown into the pit three different times, he was transformed. Now he offers that different kind of perspective to the most powerful man in Egypt.

But it doesn't stop there. In the next scene, we see another way that Joseph brings a new perspective to the king. And it just might put him in danger.

The future predicted

First, Pharaoh recounts his dreams to Joseph. We won't read all of that it's a repetition of the earlier passage. The only difference is that Pharaoh adds more detail. All of the extra detail has to do with how terrible things are. He says that he had never seen cows so thin and that after they ate the fat cows, you couldn't even tell they had eaten anything.

It's clear that Pharaoh is mostly concerned with what bad news this dream might hold for him and his land. That fits with our speculation that those other interpreters might not want to be the bearer of that bad news. But Joseph is willing.

Genesis 41:25-32:

Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed 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. 27 The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind are also seven years of famine. 28 It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. 29 There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt, 30 but after them there

will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land, 31 and the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of the famine that will follow, for it will be very severe. 32 And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.

Do you know that feeling you get when you're around someone really important or famous? The first thing we notice about Joseph's response is that he doesn't seem fazed by talking to Pharaoh. He isn't trying to flatter the king by telling him only the good news. But he also doesn't try to be a doomsday prophet by exaggerating the bad news. He just tells it like it is: seven years of feast, then seven years of famine.

What really stands out about Joseph's prediction is that there is nothing that can be done to avert it. When the magicians would make predictions, the purpose would be to find a way to avert disaster. The predictions were often something like, "There will be a famine unless you do such and such." Remember that Pharaoh's job was to control the future.

Joseph's interpretation is different. He says that God is in control, and nothing can change it. This will happen. The double dream means that God's mind will not be changed. It will happen soon.

Not only is Joseph willing to be the bearer of bad news, but he is also willing to tell the king that he can't avoid the situation. That takes courage. He is speaking to the most powerful man in Egypt and saying, "You can't control what people expect you to control. You think you should be able to ensure a good grain harvest, but you can't. Your ability is limited."

Joseph puts God above Pharaoh. Pharaoh brings Joseph up out of the pit, gives him a chance, and what does Joseph do? He puts Pharaoh in his place. Or more accurately, he puts God in his place. He proclaims the sovereignty of God to the King of Egypt.

What about us? Do we expect to be able to control things that we simply can't control? Do others expect us to control things that are out of our hands? It's a simple truth, but sometimes we need to remember: There is a God, and we're not him. Put God in his place.

This is where we see the boundaries of God's will. This isn't always the case in the Old Testament—sometimes

God's plans can be changed. But in this case, God is set on a plan, and he will not be moved. The text is clear: nothing can change God's plan.

Our God is absolutely sovereign. We can't control him; we can't offer him anything; we can't persuade him; we can't manipulate him or negotiate with him. God is, simply: God.

And maybe, just maybe this is a good thing. Maybe we want a God who is absolutely sovereign, even if it means that he is sovereign over the disasters in our lives.

When terrible things happen, isn't it better to trust in a good God who still has control? It's hard to understand a God who allows terrible things to happen, but isn't it harder to go through terrible things without any faith at all?

Joseph has given Pharaoh terrible news, but then he offers him a path to walk through the tragedy.

Planning for disaster

Genesis 41:33-36:

Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. 34 Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years. 35 And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. 36 That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine."

There are nine verbs in quick succession in this one paragraph. Most of them are in what grammarians call the "jussive sense." That's like saying "Let's go." It's a suggestion or an invitation to do something. Joseph says, "Let Pharaoh select.", "[Let Pharaoh] set him over.", "Let Pharaoh appoint.", "[Let Pharaoh] take one fifth.", etc.

It's incredible to me how quickly Joseph thinks on his feet. He's just interpreted this dream predicting the next fourteen years of economic activity. Immediately following that, he presents his nine-point plan for a stable Egyptian economy. If I were Joseph, I'd call it "J.E.E.P.": Joseph's Egypt Escape Plan.

This action is impetuous and ambitious, and it is not what the magicians would have done. They would have given the king suggestions on how he could escape the famine. Instead, Joseph gives Pharaoh a roadmap not to control the crisis, but to navigate through it.

This situation will go one of two directions for Joseph. Either Pharaoh will be incredibly impressed, or he will be extremely angry with Joseph and execute him. This is Joseph going "all-in". He puts all his cards on the table. We're going to wait until next week to see how Pharaoh responds.

Now we see these two truths. God has plans that cannot be changed. Pharaoh can't control him, but he can make plans of his own. God is absolutely in control of everything. My choices matter and I can take significant action.

On the surface, it can seem like if we put God in his place, then there is no place left for us. If he controls everything, how can our actions have meaning? But this story shows us that isn't the case. Over and over again, the Scriptures affirm that our choices matter. We put God in his place and then we find our place.

Think again about that art class. Think about the creativity of artists who are given boundaries within which to express their ideas. God's will gives us clear boundaries. There are things we can't do because we aren't able to do them. There are things we shouldn't do because God didn't design us to work that way.

Living within the will of God actually gives us the most possibilities for the creativity of life. Instead of focusing on the boundaries, we can focus on the space within them.

Maybe you feel like circumstances are too difficult. You desperately want to avoid the famine. But maybe you can't. Instead, God can help you to find a way through it.

Or maybe you feel like God's will is too restrictive. You want to live differently with your sexuality or your finances or your decisions. You want the freedom to do whatever you want. But maybe the real freedom is to live within the sovereignty of God. Perhaps that's how you can truly thrive.

The Egyptian mindset was a lot like ours: figure out how to control everything. But Joseph's mindset is different. First, put God in his place. Then find our place within that. We'll see what happens next week. We're going to find out that his way not only saves himself, but it also ends up saving everyone else as well.

Conclusion

Joseph has given Pharaoh a different way to approach the world. Where Pharaoh wanted control, Joseph offered wisdom. Where Pharaoh wanted to avert disaster, Joseph offered the courage to face it. How do you relate to this ancient king of Egypt? How do you need God to answer you regarding your shalom.

Our God is absolutely sovereign. Everything is under his control. But within that is incredible freedom to live out our lives in creative and expressive and exciting ways.

Ultimately, the purpose of all of this is not to master your life or even make the best decision. What happens when we color within the lines is that we have the opportunity to encounter Christ in a meaningful way.

God is infinite and eternal, but he submitted himself to the boundaries of human existence. Jesus came to earth and lived here. His life becomes the model for what a life of freedom and expression and obedience can be. Because of his death and resurrection, we are given the power to follow him.

Look around your life and ask what God is doing. Remember that he is sovereign—put God in his place. Then find your place within that.

Endnotes

¹ Bruce K Waltke and Cathi J Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001). 530.