

Genesis 41
Joseph and Pharaoh's Technicolour Nightmares
Christ Church Liverpool

Joseph's story has become one of the most famous in human history. With its themes of rage to riches, sibling rivalry, sexual tension, unjust imprisonment, global famine and, ultimately, reconciliation it is not surprising that it has spawned one of the most successful global musicals of all time; over 20,000 separate productions of *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat* have been registered with the copyright holders.

But for Christian believers there is more to this story than the wonderful tale of a young man making it from prison to the richest palace in the world. This story is about more than a happy ending; this story is a story that points to Jesus Christ.

Now perhaps, if you have been coming along to Christ Church for most of this series in the life of Joseph from the book of Genesis, you might be inclined to feel a little bit fed up with me saying that! After all in sermon after sermon I have laboured the point that Joseph, in all sorts of aspects of his life, is a foreshadowing of the Messiah.

But I am not going to apologise for that. I hope we have managed to bring alive the very real drama and excitement of the story of Joseph as it stands. But if all we see in the Old Testament is a fascinating history lesson or even some moral examples then this book will never change our lives. Because the only truly life-changing power in the universe is that power of God, available to those who come to Jesus Christ.

So in order to unleash the power of the Spirit of God as he works through the Scriptures, God's Word written, we need to see that these stories are, in the end, pointing us to truths about God's King, about Jesus.

Here's how the first Anglican Bishop of this great city, J C Ryle, puts it: *"In direct prophecies, in promises, in... persons, in... ceremonies, the Old Testament Scripture all through testifies of Christ. We read them to very little purpose if we do not discern this."*

Joseph, as he is presented here in Genesis, is the great rescuer of people from many nations. That is the main way in which Joseph points us to Jesus. They are both great saviour. Here in Genesis 41, the writer of Genesis teaches us three vital things about Joseph, God's Saviour that, you and I need to understand about Jesus, God's Saviour.

1 Why we need God's saviour (v1-16)

Two full years after the events of chapter 40, where Joseph explained to the happy cupbearer that on Pharaoh's birthday (or perhaps the anniversary of his coronation – the Hebrew just mean's *Pharaoh's day* so it's not certain which) he would be restored to his position, birthday time has rolled round again.

People often get disturbed sleep when there's a special occasion coming up. But Pharaoh's disturbed nights weren't caused by excitement about what present he was going to get (a new pyramid perhaps? Socks?) or by excessive celebratory partying. Instead, Pharaoh becomes the fourth person in the Joseph story to have significant, and in his case, disturbing dreams.

In the first Pharaoh is standing by the Nile, the river that, literally, kept Egypt alive. The Nile was the source of water for drinking, eating, washing and cooking. It was the ultimate source of Pharaoh's wealth and power. Pharaoh must have been satisfied to see seven, a perfect and complete number in ancient symbolism, fat, sleek healthy cows come up from the river, produced by the lush and fertile land of Egypt, and feast on its abundance.

And he must have been disturbed to see behind them, skinny, malnourished, starving cows walk up the bank and not only displace the fat cows but actually destroy them.

But the dream of the cannibal cows was not the end. After the first dream, and then perhaps some hot milk to calm him down, Pharaoh has a second. This time it's the crops that come into view. Again they are strong and plentiful, as befitted the most important and powerful nation on earth at the time. But, once more, they are destroyed by interior specimens.

It's not surprising that Pharaoh's dream disturbed him. These dreams clearly foretold some calamity for the country. They were filled with images that were absolutely central to Egyptian life; the Nile, cows and grain.

Much like politicians in our own day Egyptian Pharaoh's liked to take the credit for economic success. There are records of them saying that good harvests were a sign the god's were pleased with them personally. It's the same principle that made politicians across the world for most of the last 20 years boast that it was their expertise with the

economy of their own nation that was bringing prosperity and wealth to their people.

But did you notice how, as soon as it all went a bit wrong suddenly this was a “global crisis.” The good decisions, of course, were made in 10 Downing Street. The bad ones, well they were made in bank boardrooms and by hedge fund managers and, pretty much, everybody apart from the Government. And for anybody feeling that is an anti-Labour swipe I can tell you that I’m 100% sure that every other party would have done the same; because that’s what governments of different political colours all over the world did do.

So put yourself in Pharaoh’s shoes. If you and your predecessors have been telling people for decades that economic growth is a sign of the God’s blessing on you what might you be leading people to think if the stock market and the banks go bust?

You can see why the king of Egypt is pretty keen to get a precise interpretation of the meaning of this dream! Fortunately he has all sorts of advisers on hand for this sort of thing. So he calls in the consultants and lays out his problem.

Unfortunately, v8, “no one could interpret it for him.” Now of course we know what the dream is about. And as soon as you know the answer to a problem it doesn’t seem that difficult to solve any more. But let’s not be too hard on the Egyptian wise men. After all I’m sure the general outlines of this dream were clear to them – it was bad! But Pharaoh would have wanted to know what it meant specifically.

Were the cows representing important people in Egypt – his children perhaps or ministers – who would be destroyed? Was the number 7 symbolic of time or of the whole country or both? Was the scorching east wind just that or a metaphor for an invading army from the east? And, perhaps most puzzling of all, was this one dream in two different forms or two dreams foretelling two different sets of events? It seems Pharaoh and his advisers are divided on this question – he regularly refers to it in the original as a single “dream” (v8), the advisers think in the plural “them” (v8).

You can imagine them all sitting round the royal dining table discussing possibilities for interpretation and deciding they are not getting anywhere so calling for some refreshments.

It’s only at this point that a lightbulb comes on inside the cupbearer’s brain and he recalls that he has been in a very similar situation himself. Disturbed by a dream he did not understand the cupbearer was helped out by a nobody. Just a young foreigner, a

slave of the captain of the guard. But boy could he read dreams. In fact, he says, v13, “things turned out **exactly** as he interpreted them to us.”

Well at this point there is an unseemly rush to get Joseph ready to meet the king. They send for him, bring him quickly and give him a quick shave so he is fit to meet Pharaoh. This was common in Egypt in any case and, having been in a dungeon for years, Joseph probably had lice so shaving was a good plan. We know they were in a rush because they changed only his outer garments (what the word clothes means here); all they were trying to do was make him presentable enough to turn up at the palace.

The section reaches its climax in v15-16. Pharaoh bigs up Joseph’s abilities but, just like he was with the baker and the cupbearer. Joseph refuses to be considered a great magician. He is nothing more than a messenger boy, a prophet. He cannot interpret dreams, but he knows that he can be the mouthpiece for God’s explanation of them.

Pharaoh might be the most powerful man in the world. He is surrounded by all the best trained advisers that there are. But faced with this mystery he is completely helpless. The only person who can assist him is God; and the saviour God has sent him.

When you think about it sending for Joseph is a pretty odd thing to do. Here’s the most powerful man in the world, surrounded by the brightest brains in the land, who have no clue what to say and he sends for a man whose only recommendation is that his butler says “there was this guy I was in prison with once...!”

The story reflects, of course, exactly why we need a saviour; because we are desperate. Pharaoh realises that he is in a situation where he cannot help himself. There is nothing he can do to interpret his own dreams.

The future is, in many ways, as close to us as it was to Pharaoh. All sorts of signs of dread appear around us in the world. The Doomsday clock, a visual expression developed by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists to show how close we are to the destruction of the human race stands at just 6 minutes to midnight, as bad as it has been since the end of the cold war. Climate change, as even the few remaining people who say it is nothing to do with human activity admit, threatens thousands of species and millions of lives. Scientists like Craig Venter experiment with artificially created life forms, not knowing what might happen to those species in future.

And the one thing in the future that we, like the ancient Egyptians, are certain of, death, is also, in many ways, the greatest unknown, because people don't come back to tell us what happens.

So, just like Pharaoh we need an interpreter. Someone who can explain the future. Someone who can unveil, or reveal, the things that will happen in the future.

Why do we need God's saviour? Because we are helpless and ignorant. Now of course it's true that we also need a saviour because we are sinners facing God's judgment. The main way in which the Bible presents human need is that we are under his wrath and need an escape.

But wrath is not the only thing we need rescuing from. We also need to be saved from our ignorance. In fact the two things are related. We are ignorant because we are sinners. The future is hidden from us because we are alienated by our sin from God.

Jesus Christ is described by the gospel writers as bringing life, by dying in our place under God's judgment. But he is also described by them as bringing light; dispelling darkness and ignorance, unveiling and revealing God's plans for his people and his world.

As you and I look at our lives this morning we need to be reminded that we need God's saviour because we are ignorant. We are blind to the future, and even the one thing we can all see in our futures, death, needs the work of God's saviour to illuminate it for us.

It's a particular danger for us, in a fairly affluent and capable church family, to think that we have the future all mapped out. This morning Pharaoh's dreams remind us that even the most powerful man in the world is helpless in the face of the mysterious future, which only God's saviour can explain.

2 What God's saviour tells us (v17-36)

As Pharaoh recounts his dream to Joseph we get an even more vivid sense than before of the emotional impact it has on him. This is no cold third person narration; Pharaoh invites us into the dream with him. We get more details - he had never seen in all his life such thin, scrawny cows. Even when they ate the fat, sleek animals the cannibal cows didn't put on any fat. Most of all we hear Pharaoh's despair: "none could explain it to me."

Immediately, it seems, without having to pause for thought Joseph knows exactly what the dream signifies. The first thing he says is that Pharaoh's

instinct was right, this is one dream. A dream about what God is going to do.

For seven years there will be plenty in the land. And then there will be famine so severe that all the bounty of the previous years will be forgotten. As the recession hits the boom years will be such a distant memory that it will be as if they had never happened.

In the last chapter we saw that Joseph, speaking as a prophet of the living God, announced the fates of two men, one who would live and one who would die. That was a picture of the announcement of salvation and judgment that God's servant comes to make.

What this chapter adds is that God's saviour makes more than just an announcement about the fate of individuals. If we emphasised only that aspect of the Bible's teaching we could say that each of us will face death and then the judgment of God for heaven or hell according to whether we have put our trust in Jesus Christ.

But this passage, and many others in the Scriptures, allow us to say more than that. God's judgment is not just for individuals here and there. It is for everyone. Abundance and famine come not just to this man or that woman but to entire families, communities and, here, whole nations.

Joseph is not announcing judgment on Egypt because they are a particularly wicked nation. In fact all the nations in the area will suffer because of the coming famine. In fact to have the judgment of God announced in advance is a great blessing because it enable us to respond to what is coming.

Many religious people tend to emphasise the personal aspect of the coming judgment. You will be judged, they say. You will stand before God and give an account of what you have done with your life, for good or ill. Now that's true. And it's very important. The writer of Hebrews puts it like this: we are all destined to die once and, after that, to face judgment.

Many other philosophies talk a lot about world systems. Communism, neo-conservatism and others talk about "new world orders." They try and interpret, either in political or religious terms, the rise and fall of empires and nations.

If we believe in the God of Joseph we have to believe in both these things. God calls each of us to personal account for our lives. It matters, individually, whether you have responded to the message of God's saviour Jesus Christ. Because you cannot escape God's judgment simply by being associated with other people who have responded to Jesus. Being from a Christian family or part of a Christian church

or a citizen of a so-called Christian nation will not help you one bit if you have not personally responded to Jesus Christ.

But there is a global dimension too. God does not just judge individuals. He is in charge of the whole world. He makes empires rise and fall, he controls grain prices, copper prices, oil prices, economies and governments. We know from Genesis that God had firmly decided that the famine would come on Egypt after a period of plenty. That is just how it is in our own day. Jesus announced that the great day of Judgment will come after a time, the time you and I live in, when the gospel goes out into all the world. God's saviour reveals in advance the judgment that is coming to all the world.

But I wonder if you noticed that Joseph does more than announce the future. He doesn't just tell Pharaoh what is going to happen and go "well you're stuffed then aren't you!" Instead Joseph moves, almost seamlessly, to telling the King what ought to happen now.

Essentially Joseph proposes that they should set up an emergency programme of grain storage. He doesn't suggest taking 20% of the grain – when you think about it that wouldn't be enough in any case to last through seven years of really bad harvests. The world would be better translated "organise". Joseph tells Pharaoh what he has to do in order that he and his people are not destroyed by that which is to come.

Jesus, of course, does so much more than Joseph. Because he not only announces the coming judgment, he also dies to make it possible to escape that judgment. Jesus doesn't just tell people how they can ensure they save enough grain to make life-giving bread. He announces that he is the bread of life, that we may eat and not die.

But Jesus is like Joseph in that both men not only announce the coming judgment but tell people what they have to do in order to be saved. So the question is – what will we do about it?

3 How we should respond to God's saviour (v37-57)

If you've been brought up reading Bible stories the chances are that your dominant impression of Pharaoh is that he's a bad guy. The word "Pharaoh" in the Bible reminds us of the Pharaoh in the time of Moses who hardened his heart, would not listen to God and ended up destroying his family and his country as God judged him and freed the people of Israel.

But Pharaoh is just the Egyptian word for King. And, as in any other nations, the Egyptians had good kings and bad kings over the years. Here in Genesis 41 Pharaoh turns out to be a model of faith. A man who responds in exactly the right way to the words from God Joseph has spoken.

Just look at what he does:

- He recognises the divine origin of Joseph's words, v38, that the Spirit of God is in him.
- He honours Joseph, v41, with the recognition that he is a great and wise ruler by making him the Prime Minister of the nation.
- He implements exactly what Joseph suggests, v48, and obeys Joseph's words to the letter.

As Joseph explained Pharaoh's dream to him there was no proof that what he said was true. Pharaoh had to take it on trust, based on the power of Joseph's words and the testimony of one other person that Joseph was gifted by God to interpret dreams.

Make no mistake Pharaoh exercised great faith in Joseph. It was not blind faith, for there was evidence that Joseph was God's saviour for Egypt. But Pharaoh still exercised great faith in taking this man, who just a few hours earlier had seemed to be a nobody, worse a common criminal, and exalting him to the highest position in the land that Pharaoh could give.

But of course this was the end of the story. And there are a number of things in the passage that make that very clear. Firstly we are told about the birth of Joseph's sons Manasseh and Ephraim. Manasseh, which sounds like he Hebrew for forget, is so named because God has made Joseph forget his troubles and his Father's house. Which is ironic. Because you can't talk about something you have forgotten without recalling. "I have forgotten that terrible experience which really upset me," means, by definition, that you have remembered it! Joseph may not be bitter; but he has not forgotten his family. That's shown too by the fact that despite marrying an Egyptian (for which the narrator attaches no blame to Joseph – she came with the job), and being given an Egyptian name himself, Joseph gives his sons Hebrew names; he knows where he truly belongs.

And the passage ends with the people of all nations coming to buy grain because the famine is severe in other nations too; which directs our attention back to the rest of the family who we last heard about back in chapter 38.

It is quite remarkable that this one man is responsible for providing food for the whole known world at that time. But as great a saviour as Joseph is, he is not the end of the story. The one to whom we

all have to respond is not Joseph but another descendent of Jacob, Jesus Christ.

And the challenge for us this morning is whether or not we will be like Pharaoh. Will we recognise the divine origin of Jesus' words and see that the Spirit of God is in him? Will we honour Jesus with the recognition that he is a great and wise ruler by making him the ruler of our lives? Will we implement exactly what Jesus says and obey his words?

For some people here this morning that means responding to Jesus in a way that you never have before. You may have respected him as a great moral teacher and enjoyed the company of Christian people. Perhaps you even call yourself a Christian but what that means to you is keeping a set of rules in the expectation that God will bless you if you do. Well if that's you this morning Genesis 41 is a call to change your life. To stop seeing Jesus Christ as anything other than what he really is: God's saviour, before whom you need to admit your spiritual ignorance. God's saviour, who need to make the ruler of your life. God's saviour whose words, commanding you to put your trust in him for life and death, you need to obey.

Most here this morning though, like me, are Christians. People who have bowed before Christ and made him king. We know that the great day of judgment is coming. The trouble is that it's so easy to not listen to Jesus' practical advice about how to live in the light of that. We believe in the general concept of Christ's return but don't implement his plan to be ready for when it happens. That challenge for us this morning, for every Christian here, is to respond to what we know to be true with belief.

Here's how the apostle Peter puts it as he considers the implications of the truth that judgment is coming: "Therefore prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy so be holy in all you do."

This week, as we go to the office, to the hospital, to school, to visit friends and family, let's live by faith in the words of God's saviour and in the light of the coming judgment.

*Andrew Evans
May 2010*