

Genesis 41 Who is in control of your life?

Introduction

Who is in control of your life? It is easy for us to give the correct answer ‘God’ to this specific question. But in terms of our feelings and the changing moods of our emotions when life is turbulent it is a different matter altogether. When cherished hopes are dashed –like the person I met with some years ago who struggled with the painful reality that the professional career he had trained for, was very well-qualified for, was almost certainly not going to happen. I had nothing to say in context as the story unfolded, probably none was expected. There are times for all of us when simply being there to listen and sympathise with the pain that someone is going through is all that we can do. Quite frankly, we too have difficulty explaining why many things happen in the way they do in life. What is more, when we do understand the ‘what is going on’ question it can simply become a ‘why Lord is this happening’ one. Genesis 41:1 begins: *When two full years had passed...* It feels as if someone was counting the days of those two years and literally marked the passage of two whole years of days in captivity after the release of the Chief cupbearer. Joseph knew he could never get those years back again. He must have viewed them as wasted time, and we too will have those moments, but in the providence of God for Joseph to be released earlier might have prevented the possibility of his having the opportunity that would shortly come his way. We struggle with the passage of time, but to remember that *a day with the Lord is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day* (II Peter 3:8). There are plans God has for His people. Plans they may even be convinced will happen, but not yet, because God’s timing is not ours. Yet God is never late and His purposes are never delayed. Because He is in charge and His will, will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Sometimes we need to reassure ourselves of this fact. Joseph in prison had very raw emotions and almost certainly would have had a significant problem in forgiving and letting go of his anger and passion for justice, maybe even a desire for revenge –who knows? What is important to note in Genesis 41 is that God would bring him to the place of healing and forgiveness. God would enable him to move forward and be released from the heartache he felt at what he had gone through. God’s people in fellowship with their Lord –if they are willing can come to a point of closure of past issues, strengthened by His divine resources to move forward into the next chapter of our lives.

1. An Unexpected Opening (Genesis 41:1-13)

(a) The surprising opportunity (Genesis 41:1-8)

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 river-bank. 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 ears of corn, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk. ⁶ After them, seven other ears of corn sprouted – thin and scorched by the east wind. ⁷ The thin ears of corn swallowed up the seven healthy, full ears. 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. ‘One door after another has closed’ we have all heard people utter these words or similar ones in a variety of situations. In this kind of economic climate many young people in their late teens or twenties will have had this experience when looking for work. Unless they are fortunate to have individual contacts that can provide employment for them, many will struggle due to the unfortunate expectation of prior experience which they could not have obtained. Other people may have health

concerns which haven't got any better, and despite speaking to a number of medical staff somehow cannot get the breakthrough they need or a resolution of the cause of their symptoms. You may have a particular situation in your own mind just now. Joseph will have been pleading with God, but still no breakthrough. Genesis 41:1 states: *When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream.* At the human level we might retort, 'Big deal' or 'So What!' yet God would work in apparently unconnected circumstances to bring to pass His plan for Egypt and for Joseph. On the surface these were random events. Yet in the perfect will of God they were inextricably linked. Today with our natural eyes we see a multitude of apparently random situations going on in the world. Before we confirm our analysis of what is going on, we need to take a mental step back and say: Lord what is it that you are doing in this world? Help me to see what you want to do and assist me in playing my part in fulfilling that small aspect of your purposes that you have assigned to me. Here it would be a dream that God used. In II Kings 4:1-7 there is the heart-rending story of a needy woman and her little children. Here it is the searching question of the prophet Elisha asking her to think hard about what she might possess that could be used to transform her circumstances. Reflect on this amazing situation: *The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, 'Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves.'*² *Elisha replied to her, 'How can I help you? **Tell me, what do you have in your house?**'*³ *'Your servant has nothing there at all,' she said, 'except a small jar of olive oil.'*³ *Elisha said, 'Go round and ask all your neighbours for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few.'*⁴ *Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side.'*⁵ *She left him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring.*⁶ *When all the jars were full, she said to her son, 'Bring me another one.'* *But he replied, 'There is not a jar left.'* *Then the oil stopped flowing.*⁷ *She went and told the man of God, and he said, 'Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left.'* (II Kings 4:1-7). God worked where His people were, utilising the resources available to accomplish far more than they might have asked for or imagined. This is an important lesson for us, to encourage us as we contemplate what significance we might be in the purposes of God. Genesis 41:1 declares: *When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream...*

There was no instant benefit for Joseph when God began to work in this situation. In other words God was in action some time before His servant in the prison knew anything about it. In like manner God begins to answer our prayers some time before we become aware of it. Our conception of time is a problem, because we want everything to happen 'yesterday' when in God's purposes it might be more appropriate for the prayer to be answered 'tomorrow'. At the time Joseph was deeply hurt that his prayers had not been answered. He was almost certainly resentful at the ill treatment he had experienced at the hands of his brothers and then at the hands of Potiphar and his wife. It was not that time per se would be a healer which would have been untrue. Instead, he would come to see later how God had worked for His good and that of other people as well. Yet we must stress that Joseph had endured an agonizing and frustrating wait to find out what God was doing. We too will find on many occasions that what God plans to do will take place on a different timescale to the one we had envisaged.

The dreams of the cows and the ears of corn were simple to interpret, but Pharaohs traditionally did not want to hear bad news. Therefore, none of their employees who wished to stay in work would be critical of anything the Pharaoh had planned to do. Likewise in terms of these dreams, their actions made it plain that there would be no explanation about a lack of harvests due to extensive and prolonged flooding in the Nile delta area. What is most important was the fact that Pharaoh knew they were playing games with him. It was, though, only after their doubtful claims of ignorance that Pharaoh heard from his forgetful cupbearer. This man had been playing the 'survival of the fittest' and keeping his head down. We must

be careful about any criticism as he had endured a very traumatic ordeal when previously out of favour. However, at last, the pieces of the jigsaw were in place for God's power to be seen at work.

(b) **The important witness** (Genesis 41:9-13) 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 impaled.'* The chances of a foreign slave getting a hearing in the Imperial Court in Egypt would have been zero! Yet God had not only planned for Joseph to get this extraordinary post, but He had also ordained the means whereby it would come to pass. There are times when we have experienced unexpected financial blessings at a time when bills were to be paid and we did not have sufficient money in the bank, or maybe a phone call of encouragement or some other blessing? What matters here is that God had His person in the palace when He needed a message passed to Pharaoh. It didn't matter that the messenger was a worshipper of other Gods. In Isaiah 44:28-45:1, Isaiah prophetically utters this message from God with reference to a pagan Persian ruler: *who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'"* *'This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armour, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:* These descriptive words of Cyrus are truly astonishing. He was a remarkable man whose view of human rights and respect for property and historic cultural sites was astonishing modern and closer to the best attitudes in the western world in the last century. To the best of our knowledge he never put his faith, personally, in the Lord, but his behaviour was better than many of the Kings of Israel and Judah. When God's people pray sometimes His answers come through the genuinely good words and actions of people who make no profession of belief in our Lord and Saviour. I am sure He would have preferred to use one of His followers on earth to carry out this task, but where there are no believers He will use someone else. God is sovereign and ultimately His purposes cannot be thwarted. Be encouraged, when plans which you believe are from God have been stopped or delayed –if your supposition is correct- there is a very real possibility that God will work in a different way. In Joseph's case, a supposedly chance encounter in a prison cell was God's introduction to the man who could ensure his release from prison and provide the connection that would result in the transformation of the lives of the majority of the people in the region at a time of unforeseen humanitarian crisis. None of the actors involved from Pharaoh downwards had a clue about what was in store for them in the next couple of decades. Thank God that He was in control though the human agents of deliverance did not yet know their roles in the drama- before these dreams!

2. **An Unexpected Opportunity** (Genesis 41:14-44)

(a) **A Royal Summons** (Genesis 41:14) *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.* I don't imagine for a moment that Joseph had entertained any notions of a career interpreting dreams. I suspect he had viewed the encounter in the prison not as special guidance from God, but instead as an extraordinary phenomenon that probably would not be replicated in the future. Had we stood in his shoes in that context I suspect we too would have held a similar perspective. Yet this chance scenario, from a purely human perspective, resulted in what looked like a potential job interview with the Pharaoh. It was a bizarre situation. Here

was a prisoner whose personal hygiene, like those of others in the prison probably left a lot to be desired, was now required to wash and shave and receive some new clothes. There was nothing Joseph could do to prepare for this encounter, except pray. Or we might say there were nothing of minor importance Joseph could do in advance, instead he was free to focus on the one major responsibility of praying for it! There is no indication that Joseph had any information about the nature of his summons to meet with Pharaoh. In any case the speed of events would have provided little time for reflection. Yet through it all God's hand was on his life. In our own circumstances, we can struggle to make sense of things that happen and be emotionally numb at times at the way things turn out. However, we need to be reminded as well that God is in control.

(b) **A humble servant** (Genesis 41:15-16) ¹⁵Pharaoh 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.' Within the shortest of times scales Joseph is standing before Pharaoh. The journey out of prison being taken possibly by chariot the relatively short journey to the palace must have been a shock in itself. The walk into the room where the Pharaoh was seated on his throne, surrounded by his courtiers, would have been amazing. I would doubt that anyone in Joseph's position could have walked the length of that hall without an emotional mix of excitement and fear. The man in whose presence he stood could honour him or order his execution in minutes. The latter possibility was unlikely because an order to that effect could have been delivered to the prison without any visits to the palace. However, Joseph must have wondered in what way he a slave could assist the Pharaoh. He was helpless and powerless and had nothing to bring. The silence was broken as the most powerful man in the land made an astonishing statement in Genesis 41:15: *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.'* Here was a ruler of a nation, viewed in the royal ideology of that nation as a god, who was admitting his powerlessness to an enslaved man. What is more, that in the particular circumstances in which he found himself he was implying that Joseph had a greater ability than he did. This observation in the twenty-first century is merely a statement of the obvious, but in that context it was a most remarkable admission. I have a suspicion that the Pharaoh had a pretty good idea what his dreams meant or at least that he suspected bad news was on the horizon. Genesis 41:8 gives a good idea of his state of mind. *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.* I am fairly confident that with respect to other dreams the court advisers had given some kind of positive spin to whatever message they had delivered. Pharaoh would know that their unwillingness to offer any advice on this occasion could only mean seriously bad news. This was the social context in which Joseph's opportunity had arisen. Likewise today for many people it is only when life takes a difficult turn, or during a time of a major transition, that they may begin to ask themselves such questions as: why am I here? Or what is the purpose of my life? We need to pray expectantly in coming months and years that God will give us opportunities to share our faith and testimonies in such times as these. God had provided this opportunity for Joseph because He was in control. *'I cannot do it,' Joseph replied to Pharaoh, 'but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires'* (Genesis 41:16). It was a humble and appropriate response, drawing the attention of all the people present to the One who alone could provide the information Pharaoh required. The choice of words was incredibly powerful to an audience used to referring to the one sitting on the throne as a god. There are many people today who equally need to hear, at an appropriate moment, that there is a God in heaven who is in control of His world.

(c) **A God-inspired explanation** (Genesis 41:17-32) 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 dream I saw seven ears of corn, full and good, growing on a single stalk. ²³ After them, seven other ears sprouted – withered and thin and scorched by the east wind. ²⁴ The thin ears of corn swallowed up the seven good ears. I told this to the magicians, but none of them 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 ears of corn are seven years; it is one and the same dream. ²⁷ The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterwards are seven years, and so are the seven worthless ears of corn 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. God assured Joseph of the explanation of his words which made plain to Pharaoh that seven years of abundant harvests would be followed by seven years of famine. The latter were caused by extensive flooding in the Nile delta which prevented sufficient time for crops to be planted and harvested. Professor Barbara Bell from Harvard University in America was able to work out the cause of the famine that so exercised the mind of Pharaoh at that time. Controlling the weather was part of the job description of Pharaoh and in the light of what was due to happen he knew that handling this assignment was beyond his capabilities. Obstacles in life, though, can also provide opportunities for advancing God's purposes. However, the solution is often far from obvious to the people involved at the time. This is no different in our generation. We face challenges at a personal or collective level at times and struggle to find solutions. Yet in the midst of these difficulties God has a way forward for us as His people.

(d) **An unintended job interview** (Genesis 41:33-44) 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 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 round his neck. ⁴³ He made him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people 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.' I do not think that Joseph in setting out the case for what needed to be done was expecting to be employed in the post he had outlined. I have no doubt that he probably did hope that he would benefit in some way, not least gaining his personal emancipation from slavery. God alone knows whether he had any higher expectations. The response from the Pharaoh which to Joseph at that moment must have been astonishing was not out of character of the particular Pharaoh of the African dynasty on the throne at that time. He had been happy to employ foreigners of ability to serve

in his kingdom. The Arab, northern Egyptian, dynasty that arose centuries later in the time of Moses had an altogether different policy. They declined to allow anyone of a different ethnic identity to serve in a prominent position in the Government. This was an astonishing transformation of the circumstances. The life and words of Joseph were a witness to his faith and this was acknowledged by Pharaoh in Genesis 41:38-39. Joseph had been ill-treated, falsely accused, imprisoned and now made Prime Minister of Egypt! In I Samuel 2:30 God declared to Eli the prophet of Israel these words: *Those who honour Me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained.* We have sought to honour the Lord as a church over the years, but at times have faced setbacks and disappointments. God's Word through His promises, and through stories like that of Joseph, remind us that He is in control and in His time will honour and bless us as we go forward with Him.

3. **An Unbelievable Blessing** (Genesis 41:45-57)

(a) **In Government** (Genesis 41:45b-49, 53-57) *...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 travelled 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 The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end,⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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.'⁵² When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt.⁵³ And all the world came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe everywhere.* It was an extraordinary reorganisation of the state into collective farms in each region with extensive warehouses built to contain the grain collected during the good years. When the famine hit the resources were available to feed the thousands of starving people. God was in control. He knew what was best and had taken control of their future through His servant Joseph. No human could have written such a script and been believed, but God's perfect plan for Joseph would come to fruition in that nation. God too is at work in Scotland whether we can see it in our Government or nation –it is a call to prayer that His will is done here as it is in heaven.

(b) **For his family** (Genesis 41:45a, 50-52) *⁴⁵ Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be his wife 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.'* It took until the birth of Manasseh for the heartache and pain to go away of what he had endured. The hurts and heartaches we have endured also take time. In that special moment of holding his young son in his arms Joseph knew in his heart as well as in his head that God was in control. May God enable us also to come to that place in our own lives to acknowledge His sovereign rule in our lives, for Jesus' sake, Amen.