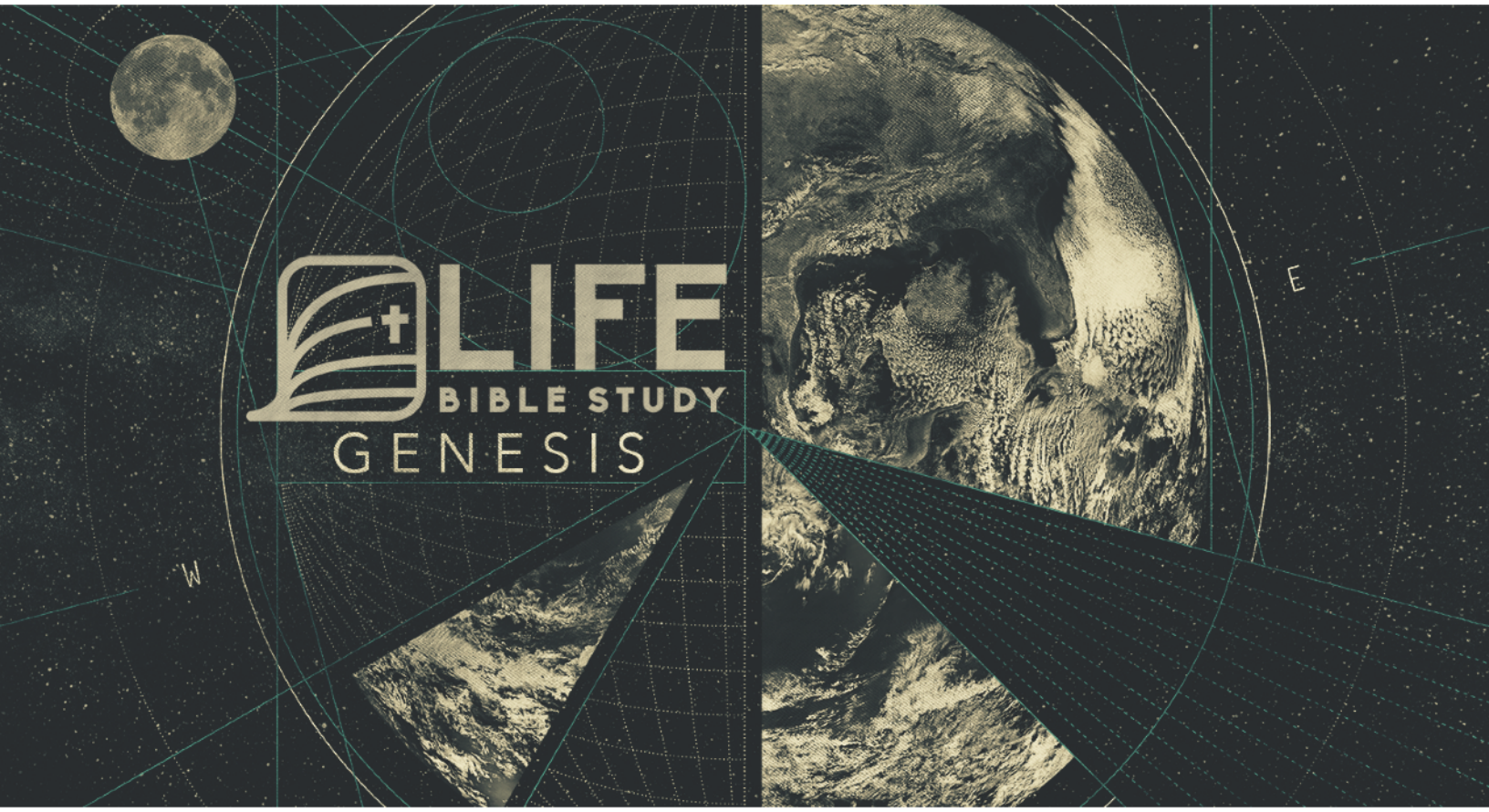

SESSION OBJECTIVE: GENESIS 41:1-57
To learn how Joseph rose to prominence in Pharaoh's service.

The Timeline

One of the most important (and often overlooked) details of a narrative is the timeline. It's important to not only know what happens throughout the narrative of a story, but when all of it takes place relative to itself. When you watch movies that have sequels, understanding how much time has taken place in between movies is a helpful detail. The same is true in written stories. Genesis 41 begins by giving us a timestamp so we can rightly place the following events in the timeline of Genesis: "After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed he was standing by the Nile" (Gen. 41:1). Everything that had taken place in Genesis 40 with Joesph while he was in jail is suddenly two years in the past. We are not told what Joseph was doing in this time. We are not given any details regarding Egypt, Jacob, or Joseph's brothers.

This is an important detail for two reasons. For one, it demonstrates the patience that Joseph possessed. Two years is a long time for nothing to happen. He had been wrongly punished because of a false accusation from Potiphar's wife, and he had been faithful to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, and now? Silence. For two years. Secondly, it's important because it reminds us that God's plans sometimes have spaces of silence in our lives. There are seasons that require nothing more out of us than faithfulness in the small things, and it's those seasons that prepare us for the next big thing that He has planned. Joseph is positioned well to be ready for what follows in this chapter. Below is a breakdown of those events.

More Dreams

Chapter 41 presents the reader with two dreams that Pharaoh had. The dreams both puzzle and trouble Pharaoh, and he sends for anyone in his kingdom who might be able to discern the meaning to come to him and give him counsel. He sends for, “all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men,” but, “there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh” (Gen. 41:8). It is at this moment that the cupbearer who had been spared because of Joseph’s interpretation remembers Joseph: “The the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “I remember my offenses today” (Gen. 41:9). He tells Pharaoh that the, “young Hebrew” (Gen. 41:12) rightly interpreted both his dream and the dream of the baker, and exactly what he said would happen, happened. Pharaoh sends for Joseph to listen to the dreams, and interpret them. Below is an outline of the two dreams, as well as Joseph’s interpretation of both of the dreams.

THE FIRST DREAM

In the first dream, Pharaoh dreams he is at the Nile river (likely the Tigris river in the book of Daniel), and from the river he sees seven cows, “attractive and plump” (Gen. 41:2). Both of these Hebrew words together convey the idea that they are pleasing to the eyes. In other words, these are ideal looking cows. They feed on green grass, presumably green because it is being enriched by the water of the river. Suddenly, seven more cows come forth, “ugly and thin,” and eat the first seven cows. Again, the verbiage conveys that these cows are bad or evil looking, and gaunt in figure. When Pharaoh recalls the dream to Joseph, he includes one other detail about the gaunt cows eating the healthy ones: “but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they were still as ugly as at the beginning.” After this, Pharaoh woke up.

THE SECOND DREAM

Pharaoh immediately falls back asleep and dreams a second dream. Again, we find figures of 7 in this dream, a common number in Hebrew theology (representing divine perfection, or God). The number 7 is meant to be taken literally, but it could be meant to convey that these dreams are from God as well. In this dream, seven visibly good looking ears of grain are growing on one stalk, and they are overtaken by another set of seven ears that were, “thin and blighted by the east wind” (Gen. 41:6). The significance of the east wind should be noted. East winds were hot and dry because they blew through the deserts (Ex. 14:21; Hos. 13:15). Apparently these dreams were quite real, because the Hebrew reads in verse 7: “Pharaoh woke up, and look! It was a dream.”

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE DREAMS

Upon being brought out, “from the pit” (Gen. 41:14), Joseph is able to shave and clean himself and put on clean clothes. It was customary to not be able to be in the presence of Pharaoh without being clean and well put together (a tradition that is still very common today with world leaders, and even regional leaders). Joseph listens to Pharaoh’s dreams and immediately responds to Pharaoh: “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.” Joseph tells Pharaoh that the seven healthy cows and the seven healthy ears of corn represent seven good years and the seven gaunt cows and the seven blighted ears represent seven years of famine. That the dreams are doubled means that God has fixed this to happen.

THE RECOMMENDATION OF JOSEPH

After interpreting the dreams, Joseph tells Pharaoh what he ought to do as a result of God’s impending famine coming for Egypt: “Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt” (Gen. 41:33). He tells him that they should, “take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years” (Gen. 41:34), and that this food would be used as a reserve when the famine strikes.

Joseph Restored

Pharaoh determines that because God has given Joseph the interpretation of his dream, “there is none so discerning and wise as you are” (Gen. 41:39). Pharaoh elevates Joseph to the second most powerful person in all of Egypt, only second to himself (Gen. 41:40-41). He establishes this transfer of power by traditional means: “Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck” (Gen. 41:42).

THE SIGNET RING

The use of the signet ring was the predominate means by which a king symbolized his power (Esth. 8:10; Jer. 22:24). The signet ring was used to seal the wax that sealed official letters from the king. A courier would be charged to bring communications from the king to other places and the recipients would know that if was actually from the king if the letter was sealed, unbroken, by the ring of the king. In Haggai, God uses Zerubbabel to bring judgment upon other nations, and calls him, “a signet ring,” signifying his authority placed in Zerubbabel (Hag. 2:23). The ring here, in Genesis 41, is used to demonstrate Pharaoh’s authority being given to Joseph.

FINE LINENS, GOLD CHAIN

Plausible interpretations leading to commendations from the king, fine clothing, jewelry, and authority in the kingdom as a ruler are also remarkably similar to that of Belshazzar’s words to Daniel in Daniel 5:16: “But I personally have heard about you, that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will be clothed with purple and wear a necklace of gold around your neck, and you will have authority as the third ruler in the kingdom.” This practice is not one that should be overlooked. Giving authority and riches is not a typical action of a monarch. It indicates that the actions of Joseph (and Daniel) were incredibly valuable and thus deeply appreciated by the king.

NEW NAME AND MARRIAGE

Joseph is given an Egyptian name by Pharaoh: “Zaphenath-paneah” (Gen. 41:45). This name likely means something like, “the god has said let him live,” although there are various other suggestions that have been made. The difficulty in interpreting the name is that it is an Egyptian name adapted into Hebrew. Because of this, it is unclear precisely what the name meant. He is also given a woman for marriage: “Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of On.” Again, there is trouble in knowing for sure what the name meant, but one detail is clear: she was from a prestigious line. Being the daughter of the priest of On (On was a city, the prestigious religious center of Re and Atum, the Egyptian solar deities), she would have been a prize wife. With the endowment of power, Pharaoh is seeking to make Joseph more Egyptian.

Joseph’s Future

Joseph does exactly what he suggests to Pharaoh, and the results are a success. Because he stored up the grain, when the famine hit Egypt, they were prepared. Beyond that, “all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth” (Gen. 41:57). There is, however, one additional detail that should be mentioned, as it becomes extremely important later in the history of Israel; Joseph has two sons.

While Joseph is blessed by Jacob in Genesis 49:22, the “tribe of Joseph” is typically referenced by Joseph’s sons, the two half-tribes of Joseph, “Manasseh and Ephraim.” In fact, Ephraim eventually becomes synonymous with the northern kingdom of Israel (Is. 7:2). The names of these sons are significant as well.

They are clearly Jewish names, but they remark on the time spent in Egypt. Manasseh's name means, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house" (Gen. 41:51), a clear remark against the earlier trials Joseph faced with his brothers. Ephraim's name means, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction" (Gen. 41:52), and again, it is a remark on the blessing that God has placed on Joseph during his time in Egypt. Both names are significant to the story of Joseph, and both sons thus represent the tribe of Joseph later in Canaan. Joseph, birthed in a Jewish setting, comes to rule in Egypt. Manasseh and Ephraim, birthed in an Egyptian setting, come to rule in Israel.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Genesis 41:1-8. How many years have passed since chapter 40? What happens to Pharaoh? Describe the two dreams that he has.

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2. Read Genesis 41:9-13. What does the chief cupbearer remember? What does he tell Pharaoh regarding his experience with Joseph in prison? Did he tell the truth?

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Day Two

1. Read Genesis 41:14-24. What does Joseph get to do before he talks with Pharaoh, and why? (Hint: See above notes) Does Pharaoh include any additional details to the dreams that weren't covered in the opening verses?

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2. Read Genesis 41:25-36. In your own words, describe how Joseph interprets the dreams. (Hint: See notes above) What does Joseph suggest Pharaoh do?

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Day Three

1. Read Genesis 41:37-45. What does Pharaoh do with Joseph, and why? What does the signet ring signify? What does Pharaoh give to Joseph? What is Joseph's name changed to, and who does he marry?

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2. Read Genesis 41:46-49. How old was Joseph when all of this took place? What plan of action did Joseph take?

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Day Four

1. Read Genesis 41:50-52. What are the two names of the two sons of Joseph, and what do each of their names mean?

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2. Read Genesis 41:53-57. Was Joseph's plan successful? Who all else came to get aid from Egypt as a result of the famine? How widespread was the famine?

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Week 33 Discussion: Don't Get Revenge

Perhaps part of what makes Genesis 41 so remarkable is Joseph's willingness to help Pharaoh after being wrongfully placed in prison for well over 2 years. That time could have allowed Joseph plenty of opportunity to grow bitter towards Pharaoh and Egypt, and to want revenge for the wrongful imprisonment. However, Joseph does not allow this to happen, but rather uses His God-given gifting to interpret Pharaoh's dream when he is finally called on. Romans 12:19 says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" We are never to be overcome with evil thoughts of revenge but rather, "overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:20). Talk as a group about how easy it is to want to take revenge, and how difficult it is to try overcome evil with good.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever wanted revenge for something bad that has happened to you. If you are willing, share with the group the details of your desire for revenge.
2. Does revenge ever work out well for either party?
3. How do you, "overcome evil with good?" Give practical examples.
4. Will every injustice eventually be judged? Why or why not?
5. Why is revenge so tempting? What about it is so desirable?
6. Why is being kind to those who seek to bring you harm so difficult? How does our understanding of American rights influence our thoughts on this?

Takeaways:

1. Joseph rightly interprets the dreams of Pharaoh, regarding seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine.
2. Joseph becomes the second most powerful person in all of Egypt.
3. Joseph has two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, who become pivotal in Jewish history later on.

PRAYER REQUESTS: