

Life at the Top Genesis 41:41-57

And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." 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. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt.

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, and he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it. And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.

Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore them to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The name of the second he called Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do."

So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.

Introduction — This passage stands in stark contrast to virtually all the previous episodes in Joseph’s life. That’s because there is a distinct absence of either conflict or mistreatment here. In short, everything is finally “coming up roses” for this thirty-year-old Hebrew refugee. But looks can be deceiving. In reality, Joseph now faces the greatest challenge of his entire life. That’s because success can be a greater threat to one’s spiritual wellbeing than either failure or opposition. Nonetheless, Joseph serves as perhaps the best example in the Bible that outstanding achievement and staying true to God need not be mutually exclusive.

I. Looking Good — And so, after receiving Joseph’s interpretation of his dreams and the solution to Egypt’s coming drought, Pharaoh immediately raised him to the second highest position of authority in the nation. With the job went the paraphernalia of power. First, the king removed the signet ring from his own hand and slipped it onto Joseph’s. That ring was used to press Pharaoh’s seal into official documents. It meant that Joseph could now freely act with total royal authority. Next, the new prime minister was decked out in a regal garment of “fine linen;” the clothing worn by court officials. Finally, a gold chain was hung around Joseph’s neck as both a gift and a symbol of highest authority.

Then it was time for an inaugural parade as Joseph rode in a royal chariot just behind Pharaoh’s—with runners preceding him and shouting, “Bow the knee!” In other words, Joseph not only now wielded almost total royal power, but is also had become Egypt’s latest celebrity.

What a rush this must have been for him! For the last thirteen years, Joseph has been either a servant or a prisoner. Now he rides in a royal limousine, through a sea of adoring fans. Then it’s all made official by Pharaoh’s official pronouncement: “I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt” (**v. 44**). Joseph’s word is law. But there’s even more to come.

It’s clear that Pharaoh is intent on Egyptianizing Joseph in every way possible. Therefore, he gives him both a new name and a high-born Egyptian wife. Pharaoh calls Joseph “Zaphenath-paneah” (**v. 45a**), which means “God speaks and lives.” Though the name is Egyptian, it

subtly serves as a testimony to Joseph's witness, by his word and example, to the one true God of Israel and all creation.

As for Joseph's wife, Asenath was of aristocratic blood, "the daughter of Potiphara priest of On" (v. 45b). The city of On lies about ten miles northeast of Cairo and was the worship center of the sun-god Re. As priest of On, Joseph's father-in-law presided over the temple city, officiated at all major festivals, and supervised the other priests. While you and I may be disturbed by this connection of Joseph with paganism, we must realize that Jewish prohibitions against such intermarriage don't appear until much later, with the giving of the law through Moses.

Nonetheless, these pagan-related developments left Joseph extremely vulnerable to spiritual compromise. After all, his clothing was Egyptian, his name was Egyptian, his language was Egyptian, his wife was Egyptian, and his father-in-law was the leading Egyptian sun-worshiper. Literally, everything external to Joseph was steeped in Egyptian paganism!

This means that Joseph's spiritual well-being was now in greater peril than at any other time in his life. Indeed, it's one thing to keep the faith while you are either a slave or in the slammer, but Joseph's new position significantly ups the ante of potential compromise and even eventual defection. And when you are sitting on top of the world—any world—there are many ways and directions one can fall. It's easy to become full of yourself, or fixate on living the "good life" no matter how it eats away at your core values. Today, there are countless examples of prominent Christians taking such a dive in the context of show business, politics, sports, you name it. As Lord Acton once wrote, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely"—and "power" comes in many shapes and sizes. Perhaps even more seductive is our obsession with pleasure.

II. Ever Faithful — But Joseph stands out as a man who, against tremendous odds, kept his core Hebrew values and commitment to God. There are many indications of this. For one thing, he did not assume the indolent lifestyle of the Nile's rich and famous. Instead, he lived according to the dedication that comes from true faith. That is, Joseph believed the God-given interpretation he had received of Pharaoh's dream: that Egypt would have just seven fruitful years to

stockpile sufficient grain for seven years of severe famine. And so, Joseph got right to work and kept at it. His frenetic pace is reflected in **verses 46-49**:

“Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, and he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it. And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.”

Nile agriculture is not based on rainfall in Egypt because there just isn't a whole lot of it. Instead, the growing cycle is based on spring floods that come from rains in the Upper Nile Basin. So Joseph surveyed the nation's present resources and increased storage facilities. Then annually, for seven consecutive years, he saw that 20% of the crops were set aside. The result was a huge cache of grain in every strategic Egyptian city. Joseph's work ethic was apparent to all. But what was not apparent is that it sprang from a deep belief in and commitment to God's word. And Joseph remained faithful to the nth degree.

This faithfulness was seen in other ways as well. For one thing, Joseph was faithful to his wife and remained monogamous for the rest of his life. This is easily missed, but shouldn't be—especially given the polygamous record of every male member of his extended family, as well as the Egyptian culture itself. In short, Joseph was a one woman man, and that speaks volumes about his character!

Another striking sign of faithfulness relates to the birth of Joseph's two sons.

“Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On, bore them to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. “For,” he said, “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house.” The name of the second he called Ephraim, “For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction”” (**vs. 50-52**).

The names are a big tip-off. *Manasseh* means “he who causes to forget”—and, indeed, the boy's birth helped Joseph forget the terrible

hardships he had been forced to endure for the past fourteen years. It also eased his longing for his biological family, in spite of what his brothers had done to him. The name *Ephraim* means “fertile” and celebrated not only the child’s birth but also the bounty Joseph was now experiencing throughout his life.

Here’s the perhaps the greatest sign of Joseph’s faithfulness: he overtly declared his allegiance to God by giving his boys, not Egyptian, but *Hebrew* names! Remember, Pharaoh had renamed Joseph with an Egyptian name—Zaphenath-paneah. His wife was named Asenath, which means “she who belongs to the goddess Neit,” referring to her idolatrous Egyptian culture. But Joseph’s two sons bore Hebrew names their entire lives and in the context of Egyptian paganism!

Joseph’s faithfulness drives home some very important truths. First, that it’s entirely possible to remain true to God even if you are caught in an ungodly environment. Second, this will happen *only* if you keep a steady focus on the Lord. Third, along with that focus you have to erect and maintain strong and appropriate boundaries. Fourth, while it will never be easy, if you do observe these steps, it is possible for God’s people to succeed. But that will require a high degree of excellence in how you live and what you produce. But it can happen.

III. Joseph Succeeds — And so, after the seven years of plenty and storage, the monstrous cows and seven bad ears of grain of Pharaoh’s dream began their attack. And those seven years of famine were as just severe as the seven bountiful years had been wonderful:

“The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, ‘Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do.’

“So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth” (**vs. 53-57**).

Whenever the Nile failed to rise, misery ensued. In fact, Egyptian records twice indicate that some cyclical famines got so bad that the

people resorted to cannibalism. This time the famine was even worse because of the lack of rainfall up in Palestine and the surrounding lands. And had it not been for God's plan given to Joseph through Pharaoh, death by starvation would have been widespread.

Joseph's success was of monumental proportions! Not only did he engineer the rescue of Egypt, but "all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was so severe over all the earth" (**v. 57**). Money poured into Egypt's coffers like a river, so that not only did the people have plenty to eat, but the country prospered while their surrounding neighbors went begging. And, though he cared little about personal fame, Joseph became the hero of the Nile—the savior of an entire nation!

There are some big-picture issues foreshadowed here. They include God's original word to Abraham: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (**Gen. 12:3**). And who can't help but see in the fulfillment of Joseph's dreams a prefiguring of Jesus himself, the world's ultimate Savior? Then there's the fact that everything is now in place for Joseph to be reunited with his father and brothers and there move down to Egypt—which will serve to develop Israel as a nation before they set out for their promised land. That next crucial phase begins in Genesis 42.

IV. Lessons Learned — But for now, let's note two sets of lessons you and I should learn and apply from this part of Joseph's life. The first set rests on the foundation of Joseph as a faithful man of God:

* First, his faithfulness was rooted in an all-encompassing belief in the Lord's greatness. All other things—fame, fortune, problems, pain, his own ideas—paled in comparison to who God is and his vast superiority to everything else.

* Next, Joseph believed that God was not silent, but had revealed himself objectively and uniquely through his covenant with Abraham. In other words, God is not whomever or whatever you want him to be. There is but one God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who is the Creator of the universe—and he has revealed himself verbally and propositionally.

* On a personal level, Joseph believed that God was not just "up there" or "out there," but with him in any and all circumstances. This

is what kept Joseph going in spite of the setbacks and abuse he had suffered and now in his many years of success and prosperity.

Upon this foundation rest the following applications which are to be made by all of God's people:

* *Lengthy afflictions need not destroy us.* That's because there is often much more going on than meets the eye. Often our definitions of what is harmful or beneficial are faulty, while only God truly understands what's going on or where things are headed. And besides, our eternal destiny is secure in Christ no matter what happens *if* we have committed ourselves to him.

* *Bad memories need not defeat us.* In Christ, we can both rise above and learn from the past, then move on to new experiences of growth and service that may even seem impossible right now.

* *Great success should not keep us from great service.* As noted at the beginning of this sermon, there are inherent dangers related to success. So we must take pains to keep our accomplishments from drawing our attention away from God. That will not happen if we apply the following countermeasures: With *authority* comes the need for *accountability*. With *popularity* comes the need for *humility*. With *prosperity* comes the need for *integrity*. Joseph passed all three tests with flying colors, and so can we.