

## JOSEPH: THE GRAND VIZIER

## COMMENTS ON SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

I need to talk to you a bit before the Scripture Reading. We need to “fast forward” now. Joseph, I suspect, was eight to ten years old when his dreams showed his brothers (and then his father and mother) bowing down before him. I think these dreams troubled Joseph more than anybody, but they also earned him the animosity of his ten older brothers. Joseph was maybe nineteen or twenty when his brothers sold him into slavery to a passing caravan heading for Egypt.

How long after Joseph was sold into slavery before he was put in charge of Potiphar’s household? My guess is six or seven years. And how long after that before Potiphar’s wife accused Joseph of trying to rape her, angry because he had refused to make love to her? I made a passing comment last week that if Potiphar had believed his wife, Joseph would have been dead, not just sent to prison. Why this weird comment? Well, Potiphar is not just any Egyptian; he is Captain of the Guard. That is, he is the soldier in charge of the troops who personally guard the life of Pharaoh himself. That means Potiphar is one of the most accomplished warriors in all Egypt. If Potiphar loves his beautiful wife and thinks Joseph has tried to violate her, guess what? Potiphar merely sends Joseph to a semi-comfortable prison for those out of favor with Pharaoh? That does not add up. Put yourself in Potiphar’s place. Joseph would not have lived to see the sun set. I suspect Potiphar knows his wife better than she thinks he does.

Anyway, Joseph spends the next two years in prison and is finally sent to appear before Pharaoh, who is now very troubled by his own dreams, and none of his advisors or wise men can interpret them. Pharaoh’s cupbearer suddenly remembers that Joseph had interpreted two dreams correctly back when he himself had been in prison. (Genesis 40:1-21) The cupbearer had been released and restored to his office, as Joseph had foretold. The baker, on the other hand, had been hanged – also as Joseph had foretold. I note that Joseph was not people-pleasing; he just told it like he saw it. By that time, Joseph had already been struggling to understand dreams most of his life.

Being ushered into the presence of Pharaoh is not an unmixed blessing, of course. If a Hebrew slave from prison cannot help Pharaoh understand his dreams, guess how long he will last? This is the third

time we know of that Joseph has been on the edge of the abyss. Still he does not claim any wisdom of his own. It is God who gives the interpretation of dreams, he says. (Genesis 41:16) This is not a math problem to be solved by superior human logic. Joseph takes the dreams deep within, then waits for the Lord to speak to him and reveal their meaning.

Pharaoh dreams that he was standing on the bank of the Nile River when there came up from the river seven cows, fat and sleek, and they grazed among the reeds. After them, seven other cows came up that were very gaunt and lean. The gaunt cows devoured the fat cows, but they remained just as gaunt as before. In a second dream, Pharaoh sees seven ears of grain, full and ripe, growing on a single stalk. But after them came seven other ears – blighted, thin, and shriveled by the east wind. The thin ears swallowed up the ripe ears.

Does Joseph know the interpretation instantly, or does he have to go think and pray for a while? We are not told. Eventually Joseph tells Pharaoh that both dreams mean the same thing, and that the dreams are God telling Pharaoh what God is about to do: seven years of plenty followed by seven years of severe famine. Many of us have known this story since we were children in Sunday School. Actually, nobody ever told me that the cows were coming up out of the river because when the Nile flooded, this left good soil for planting and harvesting in the coming year. But if the rains were sparse, then the Nile would not leave enough residue for an abundant harvest. Seven years of drought meant seven years of famine. But if you knew when this was coming, maybe you could get ready.

When Pharaoh asks for counsel, Joseph suggests that somebody should be put in charge of storing the extra grain in the years of plenty so that when the famine comes, Egypt will still have sufficient food. Guess who Pharaoh puts in charge of this project. So Joseph becomes the Grand Vizier of all Egypt, second in authority only to Pharaoh himself. And seven years later, when the famine hits, Joseph's father Jacob eventually sends his ten older sons to Egypt to purchase food.

Of course, Joseph recognizes his brothers when they come. But the brothers do not recognize Joseph. It has been about twenty years. Joseph is dressed like an Egyptian, and obviously he is a man of immense authority. He speaks through an interpreter, but he acts gruff and suspicious: "You are spies, come to Egypt to discover its weaknesses in this time of famine." (Genesis 42:9) The brothers are appalled and can only insist that they are honest men – that they

have only come to buy food. But in the process of questioning them, Joseph is able to find out how his father Jacob and his younger brother Benjamin are doing. (Remember, Joseph and Benjamin are the only sons of Rachel.) They even explain that one of their brothers has already been “lost” to Egypt. Of course, they do not have to explain the details to Joseph; he already knows that one.

Eventually Joseph (still unrecognized) insists that to corroborate their story, they must bring Benjamin along with them next time or they will not see his face – meaning, they will not get more food. In addition, they must leave one of the brothers behind in Egypt as surety against their story. So they leave Simeon in custody and head back to Palestine. On the way, they discover that the money they had brought to buy the grain has been put back in their packs – at the instruction of Joseph to his steward, but they do not know that. They are terrified. How will they explain that they did not steal it, especially when the Grand Vizier already seems to suspect them of being evil men?

Meanwhile the famine continues to get worse. Jacob insists that they cannot take Benjamin to Egypt. He has already lost Joseph (he thinks), and the remaining son of Rachel is not to be risked. But they keep getting hungrier. Reuben offers to put his two sons up as surety for Benjamin, but that will not fly. So Judah then puts his own life on the line; if anything should happen to Benjamin, Judah will stand in as the one to blame. So eventually they head back to Egypt a second time, taking double the money because of what happened the last time. And they take pathetic gifts: honey, balm, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, almonds – this to impress the Grand Vizier of all Egypt? Kind of like we take up offerings on Sunday morning to give to the Omniscient God.

So they come to Egypt for the second time, quaking in their boots but desperate to buy food. And they are ushered into the house of the Grand Vizier himself. This is ominous; Egyptians do not eat with Hebrews. Plus they are seated in the correct order of their birth, and Simeon is released to come eat with them. Then Joseph instructs his steward to fill their packs with as much grain as they can carry, but to put their silver back in their packs, both portions. And the steward is to put Joseph’s own silver goblet into Benjamin’s pack. That’s really cruel. I mean, what have the brothers ever done to Joseph to deserve this? True, they almost murdered him and then changed their minds and sold him into slavery instead. But that was then; this is now.

The brothers set off for home but are soon pursued by Joseph's soldiers and accused of theft. They claim their innocence, of course, and agree that if the goblet is found among them, the one in whose pack it is found shall die and the rest of them will become slaves of the Grand Vizier. Of course, the silver chalice is found in Benjamin's pack, and all of them are taken back to Joseph's house. Oy veh!

And so to our Scripture reading, from Genesis, chapters 44 and 45:

*Joseph was still in the house when Judah and his brothers arrived, and they threw themselves on the ground before him. [Are we reminded of a dream that young Joseph had many years ago? And remember, Joseph is speaking through an interpreter.] Joseph said, "What is this you have done? You might have known that a man such as I am uses divination." Judah said, "What can we say, my lord? What can we plead, or how can we clear ourselves? God has uncovered our crime. Here we are, my lord, ready to be made your slaves, we ourselves as well as the one who was found with the goblet." "Heaven forbid that I should do such a thing!" answered Joseph. "Only the one who was found with the goblet shall become my slave; the rest of you can go home to your father safe and sound."*

*Then Judah went up to him and said, "Please listen, my lord, and let your servant speak a word, I beg. Do not be angry with me, for you are as great as Pharaoh himself. My lord, you asked us whether we had a father or a brother. We answered, 'We have an aged father, and he has a young son born in his old age; this boy's full brother is dead, and since he alone is left of his mother's children, his father loves him.' You said to us, your servants, 'Bring him down to me so that I may set eyes on him.'*

*"We told you, my lord, that the boy could not leave his father; his father would die if he left him. But you said, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not enter my presence again.' We went back to your servant my father, and reported to him what your lordship had said, so when our father told us to go again and buy food, we answered, 'We cannot go down; for without our youngest brother we cannot enter the man's presence; but if our brother is with us, we will go.'*

*"Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. One left me, and I said, "He must have been torn to pieces." I have not seen him since. If you take this one from me as well,*

*and he comes to any harm, then you will bring down my grey hairs in misery to the grave.’ Now, my lord, if I return to my father without the boy – and remember, his life is bound up with the boy’s – what will happen is this: he will see that the boy is not with us and he will die, and your servants will have brought down our father’s grey hairs in sorrow to the grave.*

*“Indeed, my lord, it was I who went surety for the boy to my father. I said, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, then you can blame me for it all my life.’ Now, my lord, let me remain in place of the boy as my lord’s slave, and let him go with his brothers. How can I return to my father without the boy? I could not bear to see the misery which my father would suffer.”*

*Joseph was no longer able to control his feelings in front of all his attendants, and he called, “Let everyone leave my presence!” There was nobody present when Joseph made himself known to his brothers, but he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and news of it got to Pharaoh’s household.*

*Then Joseph said to his brothers [no longer speaking through an interpreter], “I am Joseph! Can my father be still alive?” They were so dumbfounded at finding themselves face to face with Joseph that they could not answer. Joseph said to them, “Come closer to me,” and when they did so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.*

*“Now do not be distressed or blame yourselves for selling me into slavery here; it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For there have now been two years of famine in the land, and there will be another five years with neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me on ahead of you to ensure that you will have descendants on earth, and to preserve for you a host of survivors. It is clear that it was not you who sent me here, but God, and he has made me Pharaoh’s chief counselor, lord over his whole household and ruler of all Egypt.*

*“Hurry back to my father and give him this message from his son Joseph: ‘God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me without delay. You will live in the land of Goshen and be near me – you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all that you have. I shall provide for you there and see that you and your household and all that you have are not reduced to want; for there are still five years of famine to come.’*

*“You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really Joseph himself who is speaking to you. Tell my father of all the honor which I enjoy in Egypt, tell him all you have seen, and bring him down here with all speed.” He threw his arms round his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin too embraced him weeping. He then kissed each of his brothers and wept over them; after that his brothers were able to talk with him.*

That is the end of our Scripture reading, but I hope not the end of our imagining this scenario between Joseph and his brothers.

Judah, the fourth son of Leah, is very impressive in this story. He is the one who saved Joseph’s life long before by suggesting that the brothers sell him rather than kill him. And now, years later, he begs the Grand Vizier of all Egypt – whom he does not yet know is his brother Joseph – to let Benjamin go back to his father and keep himself as a slave in Benjamin’s place. Redeemer, redemption – do we hear the ancient echoes of a coming theme? Who do we know that comes from the tribe of Judah? King David – and a man called Jesus.

Rodger Whitten has written today’s anthem in honor of Judah, and introducing the theme that is here foreshadowed.

## JOSEPH: THE GRAND VIZIER

I do not know if the story of Joseph seems great or grand to you. It is certainly one of the most dramatic stories I have ever heard. Joseph's long-forgotten dream begins to come true. His brothers bow before him. Whether the brothers realize this at the time we cannot know for certain. What they do know, though they have not admitted it for years, is that they deserve punishment. Keeping things a secret does not make them go away. Beneath the surface, down where it does not show, the brothers carry a guilt that colors everything they think or feel or do. Most days they do not even realize how much it is affecting their lives. They tried to tell themselves they did not really care what happened to Joseph. And after all, didn't the little snot deserve it? They cannot imagine a way to confess; it would kill their father. Nor can they imagine being forgiven. So life is buried under the darkness of their past. And none of them can imagine that healing could ever come. If we cannot repent, we cannot even imagine forgiveness. Therefore the darkness keeps getting darker.

Clearly it does not take much to bring the fears of these brothers to the surface. They wonder: Does God think it's payback time? Everything they see, they see through the veil of their past sins: the hatred they had for Joseph and what they had done about it. So under the surface they expect evil, and they can no longer imagine any other outcome.

The grief of Jacob seems unabated after all these many years. Jacob's fear that he might lose Benjamin is now obsessive – because he still mourns for Joseph. He has spent his declining years in mourning and pity. But in the end, having no choice, he tries to trust again. “Take Benjamin and twice the money you are accused of stealing, go back to Egypt for food or we will starve, and may El Shaddai grant you mercy.” (God of the mountain, God of the storm.) And Jacob, having no choice, comes to terms with his life: *“If I am bereaved, I am bereaved.”* (Genesis 43:11-14)

Then the drama of the brothers and the reunion of the family begins to come to the fore, as the dream begins to take shape and turn into reality. The outward struggle is subtle but crucial: a tug-of-war over Benjamin – the twelfth son, second son of Rachel, and Joseph's younger brother. Father Jacob wants to keep Benjamin close, and brother Joseph wants to see him. Why this focus, or is it just natural

to the story? In any case, it is a tussle that shapes the plot and takes several years to resolve. Only, because of the famine and because he now rules all Egypt, Joseph holds all the high cards. And Joseph has recognized his brothers, but they have not recognized him. It turns into a delicious story.

Since I cannot mimic a full Hollywood studio, I can only remind you of the story itself. It would make one of the great movies of all time. So far it has only inspired insipid and mediocre efforts. Nevertheless, we must also skip quickly over the highlights.

- The dead one is alive! The abandoned one has returned in power! The dreams have had their way. *“I am Joseph.”* Put the past behind and come live in Egypt. The dreams you hated now give you new life and security in abundance. What you did not understand about my dreams was that they were also for your benefit.
- Do not fear. Do not be dismayed. Do not be angry with yourselves.
- *“God sent me before you to preserve life .... God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant .... It was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father ... and lord ... and ruler ... of all Egypt.”*

This is the key speech in the entire narrative. (Genesis 45:4-8)  
*“You meant it for ill, but God has used it for good.”* (Genesis 50:20)

The whole clan now begins to realize (with all the subtlety of a thunderbolt) that behind the surface of life, a divine purpose has been at work. Joseph’s dreams were bigger and stronger than any of them had realized. Each one of the brothers has their own individual life, but they are also part of a much larger destiny. This realization brings everybody to a new moment and a new future. God has been behind it all – all the time. The brothers need the full dimension of a forgiveness that only comes in Jesus the Christ. It is too early for that, but Joseph does the best he can, and it is enough to transform all expectations.

The story of Joseph makes me ask myself: What would I have to do or become or accomplish in order to die happy?

I understand that there are various levels of happiness, and that in some instances a happiness sweeps over us that has little to do with anything we do or become or accomplish. Happiness is perhaps



too small a word. A peacefulness – a satisfaction – sweeps over us, and it is in direct proportion to how much gratitude we feel toward God. Gratitude for being included, accepted, forgiven; gratitude for finding ourselves part of something greater than ourselves. Does anyone ever feel accepted or acceptable if they do not also feel forgiven? Those eerie words of Jesus: “*He who has been forgiven little, loves little.*”

In many ways, this awareness is more important than the mundane and feeble questions I have asked. Having found a certain trust toward God; having experienced the wonders and realities of grace and forgiveness; having discovered, at least in part, the wings of an awareness and a thankfulness toward God for what God is doing – I am content to go on with my own tiny life. Its size no longer matters. It is part of God’s plan, and God’s plan is what matters. That brings all things into new perspective.

What would I have to do or become or accomplish to feel that my life had been fulfilled; to feel like I had finished my assignment here; to know that I could report back to the home office without too much embarrassment or apology or chagrin? That’s what I mean by “die happy.”

It has often crossed my mind that we do not know ourselves any better, or at least not much better, than we know God. Both are unfathomable mysteries. The road toward knowing one is the same road as the one toward knowing the other, at least for major portions of the journey. Jesus has told us that we would have to lose ourselves for His sake in order to find our true selves. So I am not stepping forward with some new or unusual teaching.

Nevertheless, in contemplating the story of Joseph, it seems appropriate to ask: Do we know what we are trying to do with our lives? Do you know what you like, what fulfills you, what really matters to you on the inside? What would be the ingredients of a formula that would allow you to die happy?

1.) If you could save your clan or your tribe or your family in some way, like Joseph did, would that do it for you? I have often wondered if there was some longing in me somewhere to be part of such a story. It would not have to be an exact replica; Grand Vizier of almost *anything* would be nice. But that is not the most crucial part, of course. That is just a means to an end.

To have our clan realize that in some way we had “amounted to something” – that would be nice. To feel that we had done something to improve or save those we consider “family” – that maybe is closer. Joseph’s greatest joy, I think, was to see that his brothers had changed. He had done well; he was in a position to do almost anything he wanted to. But his brothers had changed almost more than he had. They had come into a true sorrow for what they had done to him. Clearly Joseph *needed* to know this, and it was good to know.

I do not really know about Benjamin. He is the pivot point, yet we are not told anything about him. But Judah emerges as a man very different from when we left him. He is something else! He is almost worthy of the tradition that springs from him. It is not perfect yet or anything like that, but you can smell some of it coming in the wind: “*Greater love hath no man than this ....*”

Is that what it would take to let us die happy?

2.) Or maybe you just want to live a good, American life. I have a friend who keeps trying to tell me that we are closer to God if we get simpler and less religious. He thinks I do not know what he is talking about, and I always pretend not to know because it lets him enjoy explaining it to me so much more. But I hear him:

Enjoy the ball games. Do some sports. Work hard. Put bread on the table. Raise kids. Retire. Be nice to friends and relatives – within reason, of course. Watch some television. And let it go at that. Do not get grandiose. Do not think about eternal life unless or until you get there. Make little plans. Duck promotions. Try not to get overly enthusiastic about anything that requires more than ten or twelve minutes of thought. This friend keeps telling me my sermons would be much better if they were only ten or twelve minutes long. I tell him that if I had his level of concerns and questions, three-minute sermons would be sufficient.

Anyway, he would say: It is *not* necessary for us as Christians to pray every day or to study some portion of the Bible every day. Better not to read the newspapers or serious books with any regularity. People who start tithing – money or time or conversation – always start getting too serious. What the world needs now is more Taoism and less Christianity. That’s what this friend says.

Is that a formula that could maybe help us to die happy?

3.) Lots of people dream of writing, or they dream of discovering or inventing something, or they would like to lead something, or they would like to help others in some reasonably dramatic way. Should we be teaching or maybe fighting – that is, fighting injustice or corruption? Is something along those lines more likely to be what any of us would call “fulfilling”? Would knowing we had done that help us to die happy?

4.) What about riding a colt into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday? And having a handful of true friends, healing a few people, and talking about some deep but simple truths? And then going to die a hard and cruel death, when it would have been easy to disappear or run away? Can you imagine anybody thinking this was a way to die happy? That thinking this would be a life of fulfillment, peace, gratitude, or joy?

It keeps fuzzing out and coming back into different focus, as time and life go by. Do you find that happening too? What Jesus did really was not grandiose. It seems very grand to some of us, but it was never grandiose. What *we* did to Him, *that* was grandiose. And incredibly terrible.

Yet His own pattern sometimes looks quite simple: to serve your God on a daily basis – no matter what that means, no matter what that costs you. That is what He did. Things around Him kept changing. But at the core of His life, this was the part that never changed.

Would that allow any of *us* to die happy? More and more I am convinced that this is the *only* thing that might allow me to die happy.