

## From Prison to Power: When God Opens a Door

Genesis 41

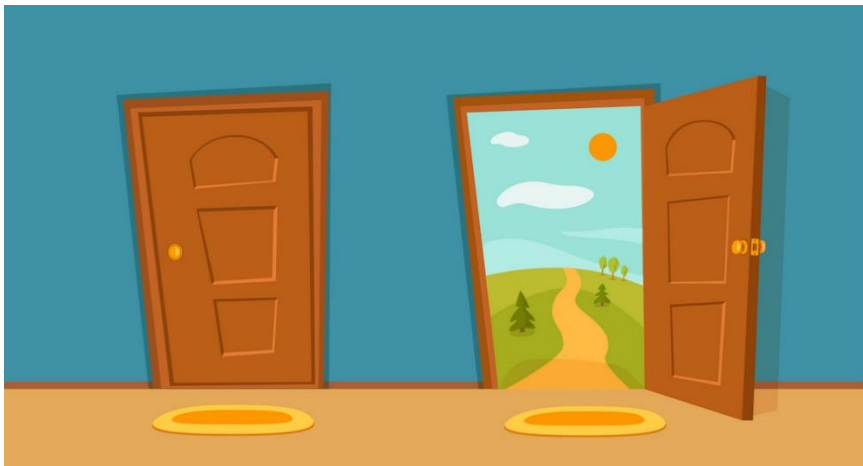
Living as a Christian in the world can feel like a fish out of water! We are *aliens and strangers*, but *greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world!* God is preparing us for service in a hostile environment, we just don't know how or when. So *be ready!*

### Pharaoh dreams, God reveals, Joseph stunningly rises to power

- *Troubling dreams, and man's limited understanding (1-8)*
- *Mature Joseph interprets dreams and counsels Pharaoh (9-36)*
- *Joseph rules wisely without compromising his faith (37-57)*

### When God Opens a Door: Being prepared and staying faithful

- *Trust God in your 'now' – He knows your future.*
- *As you walk in faith, ask for wisdom, and be prepared to act.*
- *Always humbly honor God, who always remembers you!*



Take your Bible, turn to Gen 41, and fasten your seatbelt!

It's November, and if this month is anything like the last few, we're in for quite a ride! If you follow the church and culture, your head is spinning. A few months ago, Josh Harris, a Christian author who spawned a morality movement 20 years ago, denounced his faith, divorced his wife, and wrote, "By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian."

Last month, Jarrid Wilson, well-known pastor at Harvest Christian Fellowship Church in California, committed suicide, leaving his wife and two young children to cope with a huge void in their lives. He also left Christians wondering how someone who declared God's power to overcome addiction and depression, and had everything to live for, could take his own life.

As confounding as those events sound, what happened in the last week may be most bizarre. Kanye West, rap artist and husband of Kim Kardashian, put out an album called "Jesus Is King." Pretty much nothing Kanye West has done in the last 20 years makes you think "Christian," but every song on this album does. For example, here are lyrics from the song "God Is":

*(God is...My light in darkness...  
God is...my all and all (And I'll never turn back)  
Everything that I felt, praise the Lord  
Worship Christ with the best of your portions  
I know I won't forget all He's done  
He's the strength in this race that I run  
Every time I look up, I see God's faithfulness*

*And it shows just how much He is miraculous  
I can't keep it to myself, I can't sit here and be still  
Everybody, I will tell 'til the whole world is healed  
King of Kings, Lord of Lords, all the things He has in  
store  
From the rich to the poor, all are welcome through the  
door  
You won't ever be the same when you call on Jesus'  
name  
Listen to the words I'm sayin', Jesus saved me, now I'm  
sane  
And I know, I know God is the force that picked me up  
I know Christ is the fountain that filled my cup  
I know God is alive, yeah  
He has opened up my vision, Giving me a revelation  
This ain't 'bout a damn religion, Jesus brought a  
revolution  
All the captives are forgiven, Time to break down all the  
prisons,  
Every man, every woman, There is freedom from  
addiction  
Jesus, You have my soul, Sunday Service on a roll  
All my idols, let 'em go, All the demons, let 'em know  
This a mission, not a show, This is my eternal soul...  
This my God-given right, Thank you, Jesus, won the fight  
That's what God is*

I don't like rap music, I've never listened to Kanye West, and I'm not about to pull a Joel Osteen and invite him to perform here at NBBC, but I know this: If Kanye West believes in Jesus as his sin-bearer and Savior, he is saved, and has received the free gift of eternal life. He doesn't have to jump through hoops to prove to me he's sincere,

because God sees his heart, not me. I suspect that he has a long road to travel, and he'll face many struggles along the way to grow as a Christian, but with the Spirit living in him, anything is possible.

I've started this morning with these events because we sometimes wonder what to do with this whole 'God thing.' Last week we saw how Joseph struggled with his own questions when it seemed like God had forgotten him in prison. But he faced his discouragement, took opportunities God gave him to show his faith, and held on to God when it seemed there was no hope.

When we're in a rut, it seems like we'll never get out. As a result, when God opens a door for us, we're not ready. Genesis 41 is encouragement to anyone wondering just what God is up to in their lives. This chapter shouts that our sovereign God is not a distracted deity off in space: He's with us in the present, He knows our future, and if we walk with Him now, we will be prepared when He opens a door in our lives.

#### Pharaoh dreams, God reveals; Joseph rises to power

- Troubling dreams, and man's limited understanding (1-8)

Our story opens with Joseph in prison – we don't know how many years he's been there, but it's been two years since he interpreted his fellow-inmates' dreams, and he's wondering if he'll ever be free. *Maybe God just wants him to be a faithful inmate and tell other prisoners about the true God.* But that wasn't God's plan. God is about to use dreams for the third time in Joseph's life.

The narrator informs us in vv1-8 that Pharaoh had two dreams – and these were weird. Seven sleek and fat cows are eaten by seven ugly and gaunt cows, and seven plump ears of corn are eaten by seven thin ears (1-7). In the morning, Pharaoh wants an interpretation, but none of his magicians – referring to priests and soothsayers in Egypt, could tell him the meaning. The implication the reader is intended to take is this: *God gave Pharaoh the dream, and only God will reveal the meaning of it.*

- Mature Joseph interprets dreams and counsels Pharaoh (9-36)

At this point – in vv9-13, the cupbearer (he’s the guy whose dream Joseph interpreted and he was restored to his office) suddenly remembers Joseph. He tells Pharaoh about a Hebrew youth who told him the meaning of his dream when he was in prison, and his interpretation came true! Joseph is summoned immediately. We pick up the story in v15-16:

*Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it; and I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” Joseph then answered Pharaoh, saying, “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”*

There’s something subtle here we shouldn’t miss. Joseph has a demeanor about him that reflects spiritual maturity. Pharaoh suggests that Joseph can interpret his dreams, a pretty heady endorsement! This would seem to be a time for Joseph to make the most of his chance. He doesn’t.

Instead, he declares that it is not him, but God (Elohim) who gives the meaning of dreams. This was a brazen and bold statement for Joseph to make to Pharaoh, a man who was viewed as a god by his own people!

Pharaoh then tells Joseph his to dreams, and in vv25-32 Joseph tells him the meaning:

*Now Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one and the same. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven thin ears scorched by the east wind will be seven years of famine. It is as I have spoken to Pharaoh: God has shown to Pharaoh what He is about to do. Behold, seven years of great abundance are coming in all the land of Egypt; and after them seven years of famine will come, and all the abundance will be forgotten in the land of Egypt, and the famine will ravage the land. So the abundance will be unknown in the land because of that subsequent famine; for it will be very severe. Now as for the repeating of the dream to Pharaoh twice, it means that the matter is determined by God, and God will quickly bring it about.”*

At this point, Joseph ‘takes the bull by the horns,’ so-to-speak. He has the floor, so he declares what needs to be done: *Get someone to take charge in the good years, to store food up for the seven years of famine that follow, so people won’t die of starvation.* Pharaoh is impressed. In vv37-41, the narrator tells us what happened:

*Now the proposal seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his servants. Then Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?” So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you.” Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.”*

Pharaoh sensed God’s spirit in Joseph’s extraordinary ability and wisdom. For two years Joseph languished in prison, but God used that time to prepare Joseph for his ‘big day’ – and in one day he went from prison to power.

- Joseph rules wisely without compromising his faith (37-57)

The rest of the chapter gives a quick overview of events that followed: Joseph has absolute authority in the land. Pharaoh gives Joseph a new name, Zaphenathpaneah – which in Egyptian meant something like “God speaks and lives.” Joseph is given a wife of nobility. He is just 30 years old, but he shows remarkable maturity.

His power doesn’t go to his head. He sticks with the plan. Grain is stored for seven good years, and during those years, Joseph has two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, who both will one day become tribes of Israel. At the end of the seven years, the famine struck, and there was no food. When the people cried out, Pharaoh sent them to Joseph. People were coming from everywhere, including Canaan, but that’s a story for next week.

*Sometimes, it’s harder to remember God when things are going well than when they are bad. When life is going well – you’ve got a good job, your family is going well, the Spurs are winning – life is good, who needs God? Joseph suddenly has it all: What’s impressive is that he could have left God in the past, and he wouldn’t have fulfilled the purpose God had for him – preserving the nation of Israel, God’s people. Joseph ruled wisely without compromising his faith.*

So what are the lessons of this story? We must be careful, because God is not a ‘cookie-cutter’ God. What He does for one person is not what He may do for another. But there are some timeless truths – about us, and about God, in this chapter.

#### When God Opens a Door: Be prepared and stay faithful

- *Trust God in your ‘now’ – He knows your future.*

This is a lesson you can only learn in one place: The classroom of real life...the ‘school of hard knocks.’ It’s one thing to read a Bible story and see how God used Joseph’s thirteen years as a slave and a prisoner in Egypt to prepare him to be the leader who would save God’s chosen people from famine; it’s another thing to look at our lives today and trust that God will use whatever we go through to develop us into a person He knows we *can be* and who He *wants us to be*. It’s especially hard in our culture, not known for its patience. We want what we want, and we want it now! If God won’t deliver, we’ll do it our own way. (Sadly, this describes most church growth today; we grow megachurches, but experience less of the power of God in changing lives.)

Listen to what Scripture says:

*Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!* (Ps 46.10)

The Lord is my strength and my shield; *in him my heart trusts*, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him. (Ps 28.7)

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for *the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.*” (Josh 1.9)

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, *because he trusts in you.* (Isa 26.3)

Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. *Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.* He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. (Ps 37.4-6)

*Do not be anxious about anything*, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4.6-7)

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart*, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (Prov 3.5-6)

Wherever you are, *trust God now; He knows your future.*

- *As you walk in faith, ask for wisdom, and be prepared to act.*

The most revealing moment in this story is when Joseph is brought before Pharaoh, and the most powerful man in Egypt heaps some heavy praise on him:

*Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it; and I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.”* (41.15)

God had revealed the meaning of dreams to Joseph before, so there is no reason to doubt that He will do it again. This was his chance, his opportunity to shine, on a silver platter! He could make himself indispensable. His name would be in lights! Then he blows it. His next words in response to Pharaoh in Gen. 41.16 are:

*“It is not in me...”*

The most respected Hebrew lexicon suggest translating this, “I claim nothing,” or “Not at all!” *You have praised me as one who can interpret dreams; that is not true at all!* Joseph then gives God full credit: *God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.*

Joseph came out of prison trusting in God, and he didn’t stop when he stood before Pharaoh. After Pharaoh retells his dreams, Joseph again says, *God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do* (25).

With the confidence that comes from knowing God's will, Joseph acts. He doesn't just report God's revelation, he counsels the king on what he should do in light of God's truth.

I love Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, one of the greatest fictional characters in all literature. Holmes is always trying to get his side-kick Dr. Watson to practice the art of deduction: *You see, but you do not observe... You are too timid!*

Christians are like that sometimes. Scripture tells us that *if we lack wisdom, we can ask God, and He will give it to us, but we must ask with faith, not wavering* (James 1.5-6). In other words, ask God for wisdom, then act! If you ask for wisdom, trust in God to give it, and act on it.

- *Always humbly honor God, who always remembers you!*

There's nothing worse than an arrogant Christian, a power-happy pastor, pharisaical religious leader, a self-absorbed tele-evangelist, or a self-righteous preacher. Hollywood just about always depicts pastors this way, but sadly, it's often the truth. Back in the first century, Christians were following their favorite leaders, and claiming to be better than others based on their leader.

Let me be blunt: The greatest threat to pastors and other church leaders is not sexual temptation, financial greed, or bad theology. It is pride. When you are praised for your teaching or leadership, when the church you pastor is filled with people hanging on your every word, the tug

of pride is strong. Anyone who has done something for the Lord and been praised for it knows the feeling.

You start to think *God's pretty lucky to have someone like you on His team!* And here's the catch: We can quietly slip from living for God because of all He's done for us into living for ourselves, and forgetting God. Millions of Christians have forgotten God – or at least put Him on the back shelf. It's easy to do when things are going well. And they were going real well for Joseph!

But Joseph never forgot God, who brought him from Canaan to Egypt as a slave, let him sit for years in prison, then gave him wisdom to interpret dreams and counsel a king, who made him one of the most powerful people in the world. *Joseph didn't do that; God did.*

When he had two sons, he announced his faith in God in the names he gave them. The older was Manasseh, which means something like 'made me forget,' and Joseph says, *God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household* (51) – better: "God has made me forget all the trouble associated with my father's household" (Waltke, 535). He named his second son Ephraim, which means "made me fruitful;" Joseph says, *God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction* (52). He didn't forget God.

Years later, when his father dies and his brothers are afraid that he will get his revenge on them for selling him into slavery, he tells them, *You meant it for evil...but God meant it for good* (50.20).

Has something bad happened in your life – perhaps someone was dishonest with you, or turned their back on you when you needed them the most, or said something unkind about you behind your back, or treated you shabbily for no reason. In *those moments* your faith in God will be tested: Can you see what God wants to do in *your life*, or will you just focus on what others have done to you? If you trust God in those moments, an awesome, life-changing miracle can happen.

Instead of heaping up hatred and anger toward others, you begin to see behind the curtain to God's providence, and recognize that *yes, perhaps they meant it for evil – maybe they wanted to ruin my life, they wanted me to be miserable, they wanted to crush me in despair – but God meant it for me good*. When you can look at persecution, injustice, and other's attacks, and say that, then you will know you have learned the lesson of faith in God.

God is a God of endless opportunities. If the doors are shut for you now, that's His prerogative. God is working in your life. Trust Him during this time, and you'll be ready when He opens a new door of opportunity.

## Digging Deeper

1. Genesis 41 is an account of stupendous change in the life of Joseph. In one stunning day, he goes from being an imprisoned slave, to being arguably the second-most powerful man in the world! In terms of life change, only Acts 9, the conversion of Saul from rabid persecutor of Christians to believer in Christ as Savior, comes close! Both stories have one thing in common: The providential intervention of God! How many times can you identify the ‘divine hand’ guiding the action in Gen. 41?
2. The theme of *faith* runs through the Joseph story. Hebrews 11.1 gives a definition of faith: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* We know Joseph maintained his faith during years of slavery and imprisonment, but Pharaoh also shows faith in God. Nothing Joseph said could be proven, so what convinced Pharaoh to literally turn over his empire to Joseph? What had God developed in Joseph during years of suffering? How does the Spirit of God prepare us and use us today to convince people to believe His Word?
3. We may never interpret dreams, but there is a principle at work in Joseph’s life that is still true today: Believers have wisdom that comes from God. In 1 Cor. 2.13-14, what is the source of our wisdom? Why doesn’t the world receive it? In Matt. 13.11-13, why did Jesus speak in parables? Who was His truth hidden from? In Rom. 1.18-22; what causes those who have ‘wisdom of this world’ to be ‘fools’? In 1 Cor. 1.18-25, what is God’s wisdom, and how does one receive it? How does having God’s wisdom residing in you affect the way you live your life?
4. Perhaps a *big* lesson Joseph learned in 13 years of slavery and prison was *humility*. If you contrast Joseph as a youth bragging about his dreams of ruling his family, with Joseph as the ruler of Egypt, you see this. Humility before exaltation is always the pattern in Scripture. See James 4.10 and 1 Peter 5.6. How can we humble ourselves – what does that *look like* – so that God can exalt us?