

# Genesis 41: Joseph and the Dream of Pharaoh

By  
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*“Then it came to pass, at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh had a dream; and behold, he stood by the river. Suddenly there came up out of the river seven cows, fine looking and fat; and they fed in the meadow. Then behold, seven other cows came up after them out of the river, ugly and gaunt, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the river. And the ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven fine looking and fat cows. So Pharaoh awoke. He slept and dreamed a second time; and suddenly seven heads of grain came up on one stalk, plump and good. Then behold, seven thin heads, blighted by the east wind, sprang up after them. And the seven thin heads devoured the seven plump and full heads. So Pharaoh awoke, and indeed, it was a dream. Now it came to pass in the morning that his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them for Pharaoh. Then the chief butler spoke to Pharaoh, saying: “I remember my faults this day. “When Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and put me in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, both me and the chief baker, “we each had a dream in one night, he and I. Each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his own dream. “Now there was a young Hebrew man with us there, a servant of the captain of the guard. And we told him, and he interpreted our dreams for us; to each man he interpreted according to his own dream. “And it came to pass, just as he interpreted for us, so it happened. He restored me to my office, and he hanged him.” Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him quickly out of the dungeon; and he shaved, changed his clothing, and came to Pharaoh.”*

*-Genesis 41:1-14*

We now arrive at the most well-known part of Joseph’s story, the interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream. Since it is a lengthier chapter, I thought it would be better to simply quote the beginning of it and then give a brief overview of the rest. After Joseph is brought into the Pharaoh, God inspires Joseph with the correct interpretation of the dreams. Joseph predicts that there will be seven years of prosperity in Egypt that will be followed by seven years of famine. And if Egypt were to conserve grain during the years of prosperity they will be spared the coming famine, but if not, the years of famine would wipe out their nation.

As a result of this interpretation, the Pharaoh imbues Joseph with all his power and allows him to essentially rule over all of Egypt. Joseph then enacts his plan, is married to a wife, and the chapter ends with his plan beginning to save the world from the severe famine. As with every story in the Bible, it is our familiarity with it that can be the greatest obstacle to understanding the deeper meaning.

Many people can get hung up on the supernatural elements of this story and simply use it as a foreshadowing of Christ and an example of God's faithfulness in history. While these take-aways are correct and good, they by no means exhaust the vast riches that are contained in this account. In fact, the intent of God seems to be the opposite of how we approach these stories. When God performs a miracle, He "hides" within His action a vastly more important spiritual inheritance for all His children. Take the well-known instance when God supernaturally feeds His people in the wilderness with "manna" from heaven.

While it would be inappropriate to take away from this story the general teaching that God will always provide literal bread from heaven to all His children who are hungry, it would be equally wrong to assume that this is simply meant to be read as an act of God's faithfulness to His people. Look at how Moses interprets this great act:

*"And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.*

*-Deuteronomy 8:2-3*

The miraculous action of God "hid" a far more important spiritual truth. In the same way, the miraculous way that God preserved Egypt through Joseph is a unique event in history that won't be directly replicated, however it too "hides" a far more important spiritual lesson that we will be exploring today.

## The Soul and the Unconscious

*"A man's steps are of the LORD; How then can a man understand his own way?"*

*-Proverbs 20:24*

In order to understand this point we are going to explore in more detail a concept that we have already touched on in the life of Joseph, the significance of dreams and the unconscious. Ancient people all universally believed in concepts like the soul and fate, and so when the Pharaoh has a dream, it is taken for granted that this dream is prophetic in nature and has something to do with the fate of Egypt. If we think about this concept for a second, it actually makes sense. If man is imbued with a supernatural soul and this soul animates us and unifies us to the supernatural, when would be the time when you could most readily experience the spiritual world directly? The answer for ancient man was simple, in your dreams. After all, your dreams are the only time when you can experience a sequence of events without your body.

While the modern person is less likely to acknowledge the existence of the soul, we are no less intrigued by the phenomena of dreams. As such, we have developed more “scientific” language to describe the same phenomena that the ancients were privy to. After all, most people have had experiences with things like *deja vu*, or even dreams that they retroactively describe as “premonitions”. Because of this, psychologists have come up with a range of definitions and explanations for why these things occur and what they signify for us.

To make my points a little more clear for the modern person, I will use the language of our current time, but by doing this I will hopefully show how many things have remained the same since Joseph’s time. While modern psychologists don’t tend to use words like “soul” or “destiny”, they instead use the word “unconscious” to explain psychic events. What men like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung theorized was that reality is far too complex for an individual to understand everything *directly*, and so while we are “conscious”, or aware, of many things, there are far more things that we “know” on a certain level, but can’t fully “understand” and so it remains “unconscious” to us.

Think for a second about an iceberg. While we can be “conscious” of the part of the iceberg that is visible above water, we also know that we are “unconscious” of most of it since it is hidden by the water. Since the “unconscious” part of your mind is incapable of directly representing its knowledge to us, it instead uses “symbols” in order to communicate the deeper meaning that it is aware of, but not fully conscious of.

To use a more simple example, think about your physical health. There are so many things happening within your body at any given moment, that doctors spend years of their lives intentionally studying the body, and even after years, they still remain widely ignorant of all that the body can do, and all that can go wrong with it. Because these concepts are too vast for us to understand directly, we settle for using “symbols” in order to understand our bodies.

So, while the average person may not know what exactly is happening to their body when they get sick, they do understand the various “symbols” of illness that appear as “symptoms”, things like fatigue, fever, coughing, aching, and so on. While these symptoms are not the sickness itself (in fact many of these symptoms are actually the body fighting the illness) they do represent the illness to us with a good deal of accuracy. In fact, the average person might even have enough knowledge to be able to correctly “interpret” these symbols and give themselves a diagnosis for their illness and prescribe for themselves a treatment plan.

Another example would be your car. The inner workings of the modern car are actually fairly complicated and go beyond the knowledge of the average person. But even though they are ignorant of the specific knowledge of *how* their car works they are nevertheless capable of driving and maintaining their car. They do this through “symbols”. They become competent with the symbols on the dashboard, and they may even be able to correctly identify other symbols in the form of various noises and “smoothness” of operation to know what the car needs from them to continue running well.

## Shadow Casters

However, since these symbols are so vast and complex, we need “experts” to help us address the more complex workings of our bodies or our vehicles. This class of people are the ones who are tasked with interpreting the more complex “symbols” given to them by the common person. So, while I am not a doctor, I can go into a doctors office and talk through the various symptoms that I am experiencing and hopefully, they can correctly interpret these symbols and give me a diagnosis and treatment plan.

This “expert” class within a given society are what Socrates called the “shadow casters”. In Plato’s most famous work, “The Republic”, he records a conversation of Socrates’ where he describes his ideal society. In Book 7 of this work, Socrates talks about the issue of education and uses the following, strange but profound analogy:

*“AND now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: — Behold! human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along*

*the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.”*

*-Plato - “The Republic”*

The “cave” for Socrates is what the modern psychologist would call “the unconscious”. The average person is raised in a world of “shadows”, they don’t understand reality directly, but are instead given “symbols” to understand reality from their teachers and guardians. The ones who cast these “shadows” on the wall are this class of individuals. They are the ones who are exposing people to the “symbols” of reality without actually helping people understand the reality *behind* these symbols. So, when I talk to my mechanic, they will work on my car through interpreting the symbols I provide them, but they are not going to take the time to actually teach me all that they know so that I can interpret these symbols for myself.

Since there is far too much information out there for us to understand all of reality, this class of people are indispensable to any society. So while the story of Pharaoh and Joseph seem antiquated and foolish to modern sensibilities, not much has changed from then and now.

*“Now it came to pass in the morning that his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them for Pharaoh.”*

*-Genesis 41:8*

The individuals who attend to Pharaoh and attempt to interpret his dream are the very class of people that we have been discussing. They are the ones who are supposed to be able to interpret the complex signs of the soul, or as we would put it today, the symbols of the unconscious, or the signs of mental health. And again, while it may seem weird to us that Joseph is given political power on the basis of his ability to correctly interpret Pharaoh’s dream, this is exactly how modern society functions. The ones who are able to correctly interpret the “signs” of our time are the ones who are given wealth and power.

This might be seen most clearly in politics. What the successful politician is doing is correctly interpreting the dreams of their given community. They see the problems that are facing the society, they understand the “dreams” or the desires of their fellow citizens, and then they are able to interpret and articulate these dreams in the form of a political platform. The politician who does this most successfully is the one who wins the election.

This same phenomenon happens in the arts. The Romantic Poet Percy Shelley once said:

*“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”*  
-Percy Shelley - *“The Defence of Poetry”*

What he meant by this was that the “poet”, or more broadly the artist, is the one who is able to take their own “dreams” and express them to the masses in their unique art form. The level of success that they will achieve is dependent on how resonant their dreams are with other people’s. So when modern people complain about debauchery in the arts, what they don’t understand is that these “expressions”, whether they are movies or music, would not gain popularity unless they resonated with the masses. Every society produces good and bad art, what rises to the top in a given society is itself an indication of the soul of that society.

These are the “shadow casters”. They are the politicians, the intellectuals, the elites, the artists, and the experts of a given culture.

## Corruption at the Top

When you understand this concept, this entire chapter begins to make a lot of sense. In the beginning of the chapter, Pharaoh is given a dream of a coming calamity. Although we know that this dream was indeed given to him by God, that doesn’t mean that this calamity was completely unforeseeable. And what this story is really about is the failure of this class of people and the problem of excess in Egyptian society. We have followed Joseph’s journey throughout the land of Egypt and we have seen that this nation was indeed corrupt.

First, Joseph is callously sold as a slave in Egypt, even though he was literally kidnapped by his brothers and sold against his will. The willingness of the elite class of Egypt to purchase him anyway, instead of seeking justice on his behalf is our first sign that things are not well in the nation. Next, Joseph is sexually harassed by a wealthy and powerful woman, and even though he is innocent, is nevertheless condemned to prison on the word of this woman alone.

While in prison, we are told that the baker of the land and the cup-bearer are thrown into prison for the vague crime of offending their lord. Pharaoh then, seemingly arbitrarily, releases one of them and executes the other. All of these events show that there is indeed something rotten at the top of Egyptian society. This is also manifested in the dreams themselves.

# Self Cannibalism

*“Then it came to pass, at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh had a dream; and behold, he stood by the river. Suddenly there came up out of the river seven cows, fine looking and fat; and they fed in the meadow. Then behold, seven other cows came up after them out of the river, ugly and gaunt, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the river. And the ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven fine looking and fat cows. So Pharaoh awoke. He slept and dreamed a second time; and suddenly seven heads of grain came up on one stalk, plump and good. Then behold, seven thin heads, blighted by the east wind, sprang up after them. And the seven thin heads devoured the seven plump and full heads.”*

*-Genesis 41:1-7*

Even though this dream was given specifically to Pharaoh, there is evidence that this dream is, symbolically, for everyone. The first indication is the repetition of the dream. In the ancient world writing a narrative down was a costly endeavor. As such, superfluous writing was always cut out, and yet in this narrative, the dream is repeated in full detail twice. Beyond that, there is the nature of the dream itself. If God gave Pharaoh this dream, with this relatively simple interpretation, why didn't He do this in a more simple and direct way? Why not give him a dream where an angel just tells him of the coming calamity, or better yet, tells him to go straight to Joseph and receive from him this advice? Why go through the trouble of giving him two obscure, symbolic dreams?

We have talked about this before, but the reason why God uses symbols to express His will is much the same reason why our unconscious uses symbols to express information. It is because the message that is being expressed, in many ways, goes beyond words. This is why we need to be careful with Biblical symbolism, especially symbols like this where we are given an immediate explanation. The mistake is believing that the explanation actually encompasses all the symbol has to teach us. If this was the case, God wouldn't use symbols at all. Take the explanation that Jesus gives to His apostles after He teaches them the famous parable of the sower and the seed:

*“And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” He answered and said to them, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”*

*-Matthew 13:10-11*

What Jesus is trying to teach His apostles could not be rightly put down in words. These are not simple truths that are easily discerned, but truths that are so profound that they can rightly be called: *“...the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven...”* And, even though

Jesus gives them an explanation for this parable in the next verses, it doesn't mean that *all* He was saying to them in the parable is contained in the simple explanation. In the same way, just because Joseph gives the specific interpretation to Pharaoh, doesn't mean that some eternal truth isn't being communicated to Pharaoh through his dream, which is why the dream is preserved for us to this day.

Even the explanation I am about to offer is just one way to understand this dream, I am certainly not claiming total understanding, just a fragment of what can be gleaned from this deep symbolism. Notice in the beginning of the passage that the fat cows, that represent the years of prosperity, specifically emerge from the Nile river. The reason why Egypt was, historically, such a wealthy and prosperous land in the Middle East was largely because of the Nile River. In an agrarian culture that was mostly dependent on rainfall, it was a huge advantage to the Egyptians that they had a dependable fresh water source that they could tap into in order to irrigate their crops, even in a season of drought. We also know that the flow of the Nile River was very stable. It rarely dropped that much, and it rarely flooded.

This type of dependable water source allowed Egypt to accumulate wealth at a rate much higher than their neighbors and allowed them to become the first "superpower" in that region. This symbol is then repeated in the heads of grain that emerge from the ground. In the same way, grain, which was a versatile food source that was easy to mass produce and to preserve for long periods of time, represented this same, stable wealth.

But, from the same river that produced the fat cows, come the lean cows, and from the same stalk that produced the good heads of grain, comes the diseased grain that brings about destruction. In other words, the source of prosperity that we come to rely upon, ultimately brings about our destruction. This is why the cows are cannibals, and the heads of grain are diseased. The system that tries to produce endless prosperity tends to cannibalize itself.

This is how prosperity goes in any given culture. There is a source of prosperity that comes up and provides that culture with a dependable "channel" of revenue that seems as though it could never "dry up". Because of this, people funnel all of their resources into that source and build up systems around it to exploit its luxury. These "systems" then produce an expert class that can "interpret" the movement of this blessing and then to teach others to do the same, maximizing their profits and extending the prosperity. However, over time, this source of revenue eventually dries up, and all the systems that were built around it come crashing down in an instant, bringing about a catastrophe.

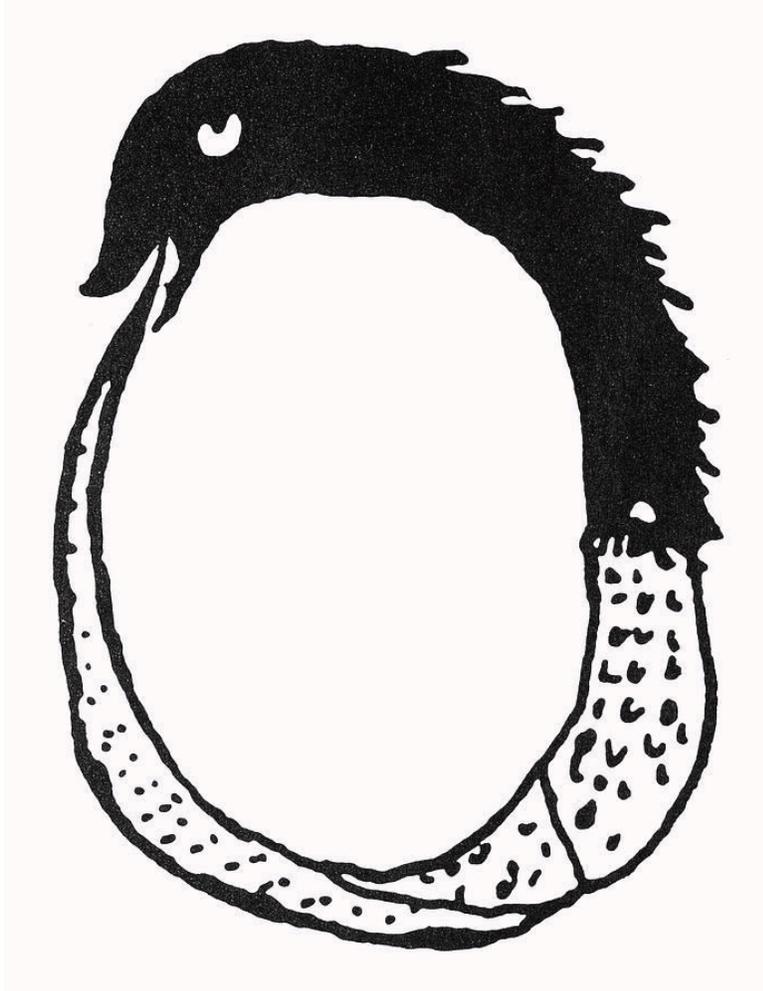
In the 21st century this pattern should be rather obvious to us. Take the automobile industry in the United States in the 1920's. The "miracle" of mass production combined with the genius of the internal combustion engine created a boom in the global economy, the likes of which no one had ever seen before. Fortunes were made and decadence reigned in the elite circles of the globe. This decadence became so extreme though, that the industry over-extended itself, and the stock market became volatile. All this excess, created by a seemingly endless source of revenue, created a system of self-cannibalism that collapsed the global economy.

Or, you can take the early 2000's housing market crash. The same thing occurred. The big banks realized that they could create unbelievable amounts of wealth through mortgage bonds that were sold on the stock market and were built on countless mortgages. Since mortgages were seen as stable, this seemed to be a system that would create infinite, eternal wealth. But the same thing happened. The banks over-extended themselves, created risky mortgages for people that couldn't afford it, and invented a time bomb that crashed the entire housing market.

## Ouroboros

But let's look at a more modern example to see this phenomenon more clearly. Disney was *the* entertainment giant of the 20th century. Through unparalleled storytelling and an amazing assortment of intellectual property that seemed to be growing by leaps and bounds, the Disney company was able to purchase more intellectual property and entertainment resources than any other Hollywood production company. Because of this, it seemed to be the river that would never go dry. However, due to some creative issues and a problem of vision and misaligned values, the company that seemed untouchable, began to falter in the not too distant past.

However, when the company began to falter, they made a really interesting decision, instead of trying to create new content and course correct, they instead turned on themselves and began to cannibalize their earlier content. They now focus almost exclusively on making sequels, remakes, and adding to their franchises, but they pollute their older material by injecting in the very ideologies that created the problem in the first place. This is what a system of self-cannibalism looks like right before their collapse.



The above image was the ancient symbol called the “Ouroboros”. This symbol, in reality, is the same symbol of Pharaoh’s dream, a system that tries to be everything, but instead ends up devouring itself. But, many people today have misunderstood this symbol and think that it represents eternity. Take this quote by the Christian author and philosopher, G.K. Chesterton:

*“It is amusing to notice that many of the moderns, whether sceptics or mystics, have taken as their sign a certain eastern symbol, which is the very symbol of this ultimate nullity. When they wish to represent eternity, they represent it by a serpent with his tail in his mouth. There is a startling sarcasm in the image of that very unsatisfactory meal. The eternity of the material fatalists, the eternity of the eastern pessimists, the eternity of the supercilious theosophists and higher scientists of to-day is, indeed, very well presented by a serpent eating his tail, a degraded animal who destroys even himself.”*

*-G.K. Chesterton - “Orthodoxy”*

This is how a system fails. It creates massive prosperity that causes people to rely upon it and think that it is the answer to all their problems. This is a way to understand the mark of the Beast in the book of Revelation. His “name” is given to us encoded, and the name is 666. The number 6 is the number of man, since man was created on the 6th day, and this number is repeated 3 times, which tends to be the number of a full system, hence the Trinity. In other words, this mark, whatever it might be, is man attempting to create a system that accounts for everything, a system that can’t fall or change.

But, eventually prosperity begins to wane, and instead of readjusting and seeking some other solution, we instead double down on our mistake and create a “degraded animal who destroys even himself.” This same exact problem can be seen in an individual's life as well. When we enter into a new phase of life, whether it's our time in school, career, marriage, parenting... We develop a system that helps us succeed in that given season. However, eventually the season of life begins to shift, and our system begins to stagnate. As it stagnates, what once gave us life, is now producing decay and we are faced with a choice, will we change, or will we double down?

The person who doubles down is the one who seeks to “recreate” the magic of the beginning, but by doing this, they cannibalize their own past and destroy any hope of future prosperity. Let’s take a marital relationship as an example. So a couple gets married and develops a system that allows them to function as a couple. This system includes modes of communication, methods of conflict resolution, gift giving, trip taking, and the like. This system can be fairly stable for a time, allowing that couple to have a lot of prosperity and happiness within their relationship.

However, as time goes on, let’s say they enter into a new phase of life when they have kids. Now, the same system of conflict resolution is no longer sufficient, the same “date schedule” no longer works, and the same vacations are no longer feasible. If a couple is wise, they will have to reform their system. They will need to change their communication to be more intentional and frequent, and they will have to be more creative when it comes to dates and vacations. Or, they can double down. They can resent their kids for changing their lives, and try to “recapture” the spark of their youth by repeating old trips, dating experiences, and even a vow renewal.

Doing this is an example of an “Ouroboros”, they have begun to feast on their own tail in an attempt to repeat the successes of their past. But, what they will find is that the vacations and the dates are not as satisfying as they once were, and they will question their entire relationship as they slip into despair.

## The Problems of the Rich

As human beings we are masters of adaptation. Whether good comes into our lives or bad, we can quickly adapt to the “new normal” and build up routines around our given reality.

The problem is, when excess becomes common, we become accustomed to luxury. Meaning that when resources are scarce, we have to be wise with what we have lest we starve. But when we are blessed with abundance, even frivolous spending on needless luxury won't affect anything. Understanding this brings clarity to Christ's warnings against wealth:

*“Then Jesus said to His disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. “And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”*

*-Matthew 19:23-24*

When someone is “poor” in a given system, meaning that it doesn't actually benefit them, they are much more open to reform. But when someone is “wealthy” in a given system, it is much harder for them to let go of what once worked, in order to pursue something new. This also means that they will have to sacrifice some of their luxury.

When Jesus gave the above statement, it was in the context of speaking to a ruler in Israel who actually sensed that he lacked something and wanted to follow Jesus. But this is what Jesus says to this man:

*“Jesus said to him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”*

*-Matthew 19:21-22*

It is important to point out that this event happens towards the end of Jesus' ministry. At this point, the ruling class in Israel has been shown to be hopelessly corrupt. This person's wealth and status were built on a system of religious hypocrisy and lies, a system so corrupt that it was actively seeking to murder the Son of God. Jesus tells this man that he has to leave this system in order to follow Him, but the man can't accept the cost and ends up going away dejected.

It is also true that the wealthy are insulated from the problems that are common to others. Because they live in luxury, they can falsely believe that they are immune to any calamity. I love how G.K. Chesterton puts this:

*“You've got that eternal idiotic idea that if anarchy came it would come from the poor. Why should it? The poor have been rebels, but they have never been anarchists; they have more interest than anyone else in there being some decent government. The poor man really has a stake in the country. The rich man hasn't; he can go away to New Guinea in a yacht. The poor have sometimes objected to being governed badly; the rich have always objected to being governed at all. Aristocrats were always anarchists”*  
-G.K. Chesterton - *“The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare”*

Because the wealthy have options, they don't feel the need to repent of their mistakes, but it is the poor who mostly suffer from their decisions. This is the meaning behind Pharaoh pardoning the cup-bearer, but not the baker. The cup-bearer was his personal servant, the one who served only Pharaoh by filling his cup with wine and testing it for poison. The baker served the whole house of Pharaoh. Pharaoh was willing to sacrifice the baker who made food for his home, but not his personal slave who filled his cup with luxury. We are told this in the book of Revelation when poverty is released upon the earth in the form of the black horse:

*“When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come and see.” So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine.”*

*-Revelation 6:5-6*

This is a type of economic depression that makes things as common as wheat and barley more expensive than the common man could even afford. But in the midst of this mass poverty, notice that someone is saying “do not harm the oil and the wine...” While the poor suffer, the rich double down on their system, because they can not admit to limitations or suffer the humility of giving up their luxury.

The “wealthy” in the day of Christ couldn't accept His message because of what it would cost them, but the “poor” accepted the message gladly because they could only gain from what He was telling them. By explaining these stories in this way, I am not trying to degrade these events from their spiritual implications, but to show a different facet of them. Whenever a system of prosperity begins to fade, the cost of reform is really high, but if we are unwilling to pay for it, the calamity that we create will be catastrophic. I think the painter Goya made this point fairly eloquently in an image he made:



The plaque in English says this: "The sleep of reason produces monsters". I'm not too sure, but this might be a reference to Pharaoh's dream. That as the wealthy "sleep" in their unconscious revelry, monsters are forming that will devour those who they are supposed to be ruling. When the elites of a culture, who built up these systems of prosperity, sleep in their luxury, they produce devastation for everyone else.

## Outside Counsel

If all this is true, why was Egypt spared? The answer to that is summed up in one word, humility:

*"Now it came to pass in the morning that his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them for Pharaoh. "*

*-Genesis 41:8*

Even though the “shadow casters” or the experts of that society had failed to incorporate famine into their system, they still had the humility to admit that they didn’t understand the dream of Pharaoh. If they fell to arrogance like the Pharisees or some of the other examples we have gone through, they would have made a reckless attempt to divine the symbols using their own system. The result would have accelerated the problem and caused the destruction that we are talking about. But instead, they had the humility necessary to admit their own ignorance and seek counsel from a stranger.

There's a reason why we have many stories, both in the Bible and outside of it, where a stranger enters a land to save it. In the Bible, this would be the prophets. From men like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Elijah, Amos, Joseph, and even Jonah we see this play out. The system becomes corrupt, and so God sends a prophet from outside the system in order to give the people a different solution. This is also in many films and stories. Movies like “Die Hard”, “Harry Potter”, “Dune”, and many old westerns, depict the stranger, someone who comes from outside the system in order to establish order in the lawless world.

This pattern is ultimately fulfilled in Christ, for no system of man could save us from our sins. And so we needed the ultimate outsider, God Himself, to come into the world to become the Savior, Teacher, Lord, and ultimate example of the Kingdom of Heaven. While the ultimate fulfillment is in Christ, this same principle applies across the board. When you realize that the system that you are following isn’t working, you can either repent and seek a different form of wisdom, or you can turn in on yourself and devour your own prosperity.

Let’s take a marital example again to see this point. Let’s say one, or both, members of a marriage see that their marriage isn’t going well. Now, they aren’t wise enough to understand what specifically is going wrong, but they do experience these various “symbols” that tell them that something is indeed wrong. These symbols might be as subtle as a feeling, literal persistent dreams of adultery or divorce, lack of romance, lack of intimacy, bad communication... While they “see” all these symbols, they don’t know how to “interpret”, and so they now need the humility to seek out a voice from the outside.

By acknowledging that they don’t have the answer to their problem, what they are supposed to pursue is someone who will give them a brand new perspective that goes outside of their given prejudices. But we have to be careful, because even if we are seeking outside counsel, it doesn’t actually mean that we are seeking new wisdom:

*“A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; He rages against all wise judgment. A fool has no delight in understanding, But in expressing his own heart.”*

*-Proverbs 18:1-2*

Sometimes, we trick ourselves into believing that we have the kind of humility that saved Egypt, when in reality, we have the kind of pride that doomed the Pharisees. While we might be seeking “interpreters”, be they books, podcasts, friends, or counselors, what we might be doing is listening intently for our own voice instead of hearing the voice of rebuke. Meaning that we are already dead set on seeing things the way that we have always seen them, and we are only looking for validation for our own perspective.

However, if someone seeks the outside voice, it means that they are humble enough to listen to a voice that doesn't sound like their own. The voice who gives them a completely different interpretation of their circumstances, which usually takes the form of gracious, yet firm rebuke. This voice will also give advice that is destructive to your current system. Joseph's advice was not subtle or small. It represented an entire shift in how Egypt conducted their tax system.

Even if we say that we really want to be corrected, oftentimes that principle only goes so far. The wealthy in a society might be willing to make minor changes, but massive changes that require real sacrifice might be too much for them. Take the current economic policies of the Trump administration.

While I don't have the wisdom necessary to either endorse or condemn the current strategy, what I can say is that the majority of people agree that the U.S. economy is in deep trouble. We have far too much debt, and the current spending programs don't seem to have any measurable off ramp. Beyond that, the current system of global trade allows for unfair regulations and an empowering of antagonistic forces like China that is made possible through American prosperity and excellence. Whether the current policies being pursued will work or not is something that we simply don't know yet, but it does represent a plan that requires real sacrifice. As such, it is being met with real scrutiny and animosity.

While I don't know exactly what I think about the given situation, my gut tells me that if pretty much everyone, on both sides, admit that there are real problems with the American economy, like our massive debt and growing global threats, and yet the one plan that is aimed at addressing these problems, that has real costs, is being attacked without alternative solutions being offered, it makes me think we are in real trouble. In order for something that is broken to be made right it requires genuine sacrifice. But when we are unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices, calamity is all we will get. It reminds me of a moment in Jeremiah's ministry when he was preaching the need for

deep rooted repentance, there were many prophets who were instead telling everyone that things were basically fine:

*“They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, Saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ When there is no peace.”*

*-Jeremiah 6:14*

When calamity is looming, the only thing that will set us free is the truth of God. For that reason, bad counsel can be even more deadly than no counsel at all. This is why, as we have talked about through the life of Joseph, we need to be people who can discern the voice of God in our lives. The more obedient we become to the voice of conscience, and the more willing we become to heed the voice that calls us to sacrifice and repent, the more adept we will become at discerning the voice of truth from the voice that is leading us towards our own selfish ends:

*“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”*

*-2 Timothy 4:3-4*

## Being the Outside Voice

*“In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.”*

*-1 Peter 4:4*

When we learn, like Joseph, to listen to that voice of conscience for ourselves, this is what enables us to speak that same voice to others. In the west we have become accustomed to having a message that isn't widely rejected by culture. Even though we have had some cultural moments when that was less true, and even though there are certainly pockets of our culture where this is less true, on the whole, the Christian message can be spoken without fear of real consequences.

But, within that Christian message, there will always be a cultural issue in which the gospel speaks against the “flood of dissipation” happening within. In the recent past, this could be Christians who spoke out against segregation in the south, abortion, or even some of the unjust Covid restrictions, especially those to the church. To be a Christian means being the person who can speak the unpopular truth to others regardless of the consequences. This is not just true on a societal level, this is true amongst our families and our loved ones.

*“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.”*

*-Proverbs 27:6*

To speak the truth to someone means that we will wound them, but this is what it means to be a friend. To speak deceitful half truths to someone, merely to preserve their feelings, is actually offering the deceitful “kisses” of an enemy. It is hard to learn the virtue of meekness, which is the ability to humbly, yet assertively, express truth. We usually either struggle with expressing truth forcefully, or not at all, but this is what God has called His people to do.

By saying what he did, Joseph risked upsetting the most powerful man in the world, and yet he did this boldly because, as always, he was more afraid of sinning against God than offending men. This virtue that Joseph possesses is the one that we as Christians need to learn. To be willing to live in a way that welcomes hatred, but to do this for the sake of what is right. This helps us understand a great problem that many people have in a corrupted culture. How do I find purpose in serving a culture that has gone bad?

When we recognize that the society that we are in is corrupt and heading for calamity, whether this society is as small as a singular relationship or as big as a nation, we can feel as though all our work is meaningless. To put it another way, why would we work hard in a relationship, or for a business, or even for a nation, who we think is mistreating us? Joseph’s life answers that question. While, up until this point, all of Joseph’s correct actions have been met with animosity and violence, he continued to do the right thing because his behavior had eternal meaning in worshiping God and not man.

Of course it is easier to simply complain about a bad relationship than it would be to lovingly confront the problems of your relationship with your spouse, it would be easier to slack off at work because you resent your boss than it would be to behave correctly and seek positive change, and it is always easier to rant on social media about the direction of our country, than it is to pray for our country and to still remain a good citizen of this country, pursuant of a better future. I believe after Covid, many Christians have come to resent the corrupt systems of our culture. While this hatred and distrust is well founded, just as Joseph could have easily hated Egypt for what it had done to him, he doesn’t allow that hatred to prevent him from seeking the good of Egypt, we must find the courage to do the same.

If our aim is not the pleasing of God, then we can not take the contempt of man, or the feeling of futility built around resentment. But if God is our aim, then even when people hate us for our words or our behavior, we will still love them enough to tell them the truth and behave correctly, and we will also resist the urge to become like Jonah, so

embittered at others that we genuinely don't want to help them. But Joseph shows us the right heart, the one that is not made silent by fear or bitterness, but the one that speaks out with boldness in order to please the God who he loved. And you never know, perhaps people will respond to your faithfulness, though it might take time:

*"Then the seven years of plenty which were in the land of Egypt ended, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. The famine was in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Then Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, do." The famine was over all the face of the earth, and Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians. And the famine became severe in the land of Egypt. So all countries came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine was severe in all lands."*

*-Genesis 41:53-57*

While the reward for Joseph in pleasing God was sufficient for him, he was granted more. His faithfulness not only saved all of Egypt and the surrounding area, he also was able to save his family. And through his faithfulness, he is able to reconcile his entire family and bring them into prosperity. Though this is not always the case, it was for Joseph and we should always hope that God can do a similar work of salvation in our lives as opposed to finding comfort in pessimistically assuming the worst. One can never predict the impact of a single person who chooses simply to live their life in obedience to God.

*"Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him."*

*-2 Corinthians 5:9*

*"Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, But a good word makes it glad."*

*-Proverbs 12:25*

*"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."*

*-Romans 12:2*