

## The Reward of the Righteous

During the ministry of Charles Spurgeon, a controversy broke out that became known as the Downgrade Controversy. Within the Baptist Union of England and in other denominations, ordained pastors were beginning to question and even preach against some of the fundamentals of the Gospel – the virgin birth of Christ, the deity of Christ, the inspiration of Scripture. Spurgeon published an article in his magazine *The Sword and Trowel* written by a friend that spoke of the steady downgrade of theology. So began an enormous controversy in which Spurgeon pointed out that the Baptist Union was allowing doctrinal error. Spurgeon was viciously criticised, and eventually censured by the Union. His health took a huge beating, and he died at 57. But towards the end of his life, he said this:

“Posterity must be considered. I do not look so much at what is to happen to-day, for these things relate to eternity. For my part, I am quite willing to be eaten of dogs for the next fifty years; but the more distant future shall vindicate me. I have dealt honestly before the living God. My brother, do the same.”

Spurgeon was right. In the years that followed, the Baptist Union sank steadily into doctrinal compromise. Its churches weakened, and the Gospel began disappearing from English Baptists. Today, over 100 years later, it is Spurgeon whom we quote and read, his opponents have long since faded into the forgotten file of history.

In the life of a true believer, there will be a day of vindication for the persecutions suffered, the pains endured, the sacrifices made. Since the Christian life contains so much postponing of certain pleasures, denying ourselves certain goods, waiting on God for certain things, there is promised for believers a day of vindication.

For Joseph that day came unexpectedly, one morning, when he was in prison. Joseph has been in Egypt for thirteen years. Most people who end up in places of power get there by a slow and steady promotion from one place to another. But for Joseph, it has been a slow and steady demotion. From being the firstborn in his household in Canaan, he is sold into slavery by his brothers. He ends up working as a slave for Potiphar, but his integrity gets him in trouble with Potiphar's wife, who accuses him of attempted rape when he refuses her adulterous propositions. He lands up in the king's prison. Even there he continues faithfully, as he did in Potiphar's house, to be a Spirit-filled, diligent worker, a faithful steward of all entrusted to him. And when he correctly interprets the dreams of the butler and baker, he asks the butler to remember him and put in a word for him before Pharaoh. But he forgets Joseph, and Joseph languishes in prison for another two years. Joseph has been in prison for eight of his thirteen years. And everything he does right seems to send him lower and lower down the echelon of Egyptian society.

Chapter 41 is the great turnaround. This is that moment in the story when the underdog finally comes back up. It is when we cheer loudest, when the one who seems to have deserved so much better, who has not complained or murmured is finally vaulted to a place of authority. In short, Joseph is vindicated, and more importantly, God's Word is vindicated.

*Genesis 41:1 Then it came to pass, at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh had a dream; and behold, he stood by the river. 2 Suddenly there came up out of the river seven cows, fine looking and fat; and they fed in the meadow. 3 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. 4 And the ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven fine looking and fat cows. So Pharaoh awoke.*

*5 He slept and dreamed a second time; and suddenly seven heads of grain came up on one stalk, plump and good. 6 Then behold, seven thin heads, blighted by the east wind, sprang up after them. 7 And the seven thin heads devoured the seven plump and full heads. So Pharaoh awoke, and indeed, it was a dream.*

Pharaoh has two dreams, very clearly Egyptian dreams, all the imagery is clearly Egyptian, and could not have been written by someone who had not been in Egypt. In some of archaeological digs in Egypt, they have uncovered books for interpreting dreams. But they are almost always about how to interpret something happening to the dreamer. But here, Pharaoh has a dream in which he is not the subject; he is simply an observer. He sees seven cows coming up out of the Nile river, which is accurate, as cows will often stand almost submerged in the Nile to find relief from the heat. These cows are fat, and are feeding on the marsh-grass. But then, out come seven emaciated cows who eat up the fat cows. Carnivorous cows are rather frightening, and cows were sacred symbols of the goddess Isis, and Pharaoh wakes up.

But then, like Joseph has experience two dreams which showed essentially the same thing. In his second dream, we have seven plump heads of grain. Then another seven heads, wilted by the east wind, known as the *khamsin*, which was a furnace-like wind, come up and devour the first seven. You have the herds in sevenfold fullness and then sevenfold leanness. All this devouring imagery is disturbing to Pharaoh.

*8 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. 9 Then the chief butler spoke to Pharaoh, saying: "I remember my faults this day. 10 "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, 11 "we each had a dream in one night, he and I. Each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his own dream. 12 "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. 13 "And it came to pass, just as he interpreted for us, so it happened. He restored me to my office, and he hanged him."*

The words here for magicians is a loan-word from Egyptian. These were the professional priest-soothsayers, who employed a variety of dark arts, rituals, incantation, astrology, foretelling, conjurers. We are going to meet two of them, Jannes and Jambres, years later when Moses stands before Pharaoh, and the two of them counterfeit whatever miracle God does through Moses. The Egyptian culture was permeated with occultic magic. But these men are either unable or unwilling to interpret the dream. If unwilling, it was because they feared to give Pharaoh bad news. If unable, it was that they could not penetrate to its deep meaning.

And suddenly, the chief butler's memory is triggered, and he recalls Joseph's correct interpretation of his dreams, and feels the guilt of having forgotten someone who asked to be remembered. He tells Pharaoh of this young man who had interpreted his and the baker's dreams perfectly.

So, if the professional wise-men, with all their wisdom, and amulets, and incantations cannot interpret the dream, the palace of Egypt will stoop to hear a Hebrew slave sitting in prison.

*14 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. 15 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that you can understand a dream, to interpret it."*

*16 So Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace."*

We have to try to imagine Joseph's face, when once again, he heard keys at the prison door, but by now, he had gotten used to them coming, and no message from the palace. But now, we picture Potiphar coming to him with a look of shock, and perhaps fear in his eyes, and telling him, "Pharaoh has called for you." Potiphar's game of holding Joseph illegally was over, and he probably feared for his own life. Joseph's head must have been spinning, his heart racing as he got ready for

his audience with Pharaoh.

Egyptians, as opposed to Hebrews were clean-shaven, as we see on the hieroglyphs. We don't know if Joseph was required to shave, or if he did so out of deference and respect for Pharaoh. We could imagine him wanting to appear before Pharaoh dirty and dishevelled, just to make the point – this is what I've been through at the hands of your chief bodyguard. But he doesn't. He respects the Egyptian custom and shaves off the beard that Hebrew men wore.

We wonder if when he entered the palace, he caught the eye of the butler standing next to Pharaoh, looking sheepish and embarrassed. Pharaoh tells Joseph his predicament, and says that he has been told that Joseph can interpret dreams. And then look at Joseph's response.

*"It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace."*

Joseph is not trying to gain credit, or exalt himself. He once again brings God into the picture, and gives God the glory in advance. This is fairly bold, since Pharaoh was considered to be a god incarnate, but whether you put Joseph in a pit, with Potiphar, in a prison, or in the palace, he will consistently respond in the Spirit.

Pharaoh now relates the dreams to Joseph.

*17 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph: "Behold, in my dream I stood on the bank of the river. 18 "Suddenly seven cows came up out of the river, fine looking and fat; and they fed in the meadow. 19 "Then behold, seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and gaunt, such ugliness as I have never seen in all the land of Egypt. 20 "And the gaunt and ugly cows ate up the first seven, the fat cows. 21 "When they had eaten them up, no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they were just as ugly as at the beginning. So I awoke. 22 "Also I saw in my dream, and suddenly seven heads came up on one stalk, full and good. 23 "Then behold, seven heads, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprang up after them. 24 "And the thin heads devoured the seven good heads. So I told this to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me."*

Pharaoh is clearly disturbed by the dreams, from the way he adds his description of how ugly the cows were. And we find out from his description that when the thin cows ate up the fat cows, they still remained as thin as before.

*25 Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do: 26 "The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads are seven years; the dreams are one. 27 "And the seven thin and ugly cows which came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty heads blighted by the east wind are seven years of famine. 28 "This is the thing which I have spoken to Pharaoh. God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do. 29 "Indeed seven years of great plenty will come throughout all the land of Egypt; 30 "but after them seven years of famine will arise, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine will deplete the land. 31 "So the plenty will not be known in the land because of the famine following, for it will be very severe. 32 "And the dream was repeated to Pharaoh twice because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.*

Under the enablement of the Holy Spirit, Joseph, like Daniel many years later, can read the meaning of these dreams with ease. In fact, the two dreams are really one dream, repeated to prove that this is a firm prediction that will certainly come to pass. Seven years of superabundance will be followed by seven years of such famine and scarcity that no one will remember the years of plenty.

Now Joseph could have stopped short there. He could have said, "Fine, I'll tell him what's about to happen to him and his wretched land. They are going to suffer, and they deserve it." He could have spoken these words with a sadistic delight, sneering at these pagans and feeling that all the Egyptians who had harmed him were finally going to get it.

Joseph does not do that. Joseph goes beyond what he was asked to do – interpret the dreams – and gives counsel.

*33 "Now therefore, let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. 34 "Let Pharaoh do this, and let him appoint officers over the land, to collect one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven plentiful years. 35 "And let them gather all the food of those good years that are coming, and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities. 36 "Then that food shall be as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which shall be in the land of Egypt, that the land may not perish during the famine." 37 So the advice was good in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of all his servants.*

The counsel is brilliant. Joseph has been the manager of a household in Canaan, the manager of an estate in Egypt, and the manager of the scarce resources of a prison. Do you think some of that experience is now coming into play? Joseph has known the unpredictable climate of Canaan, and what happens when you don't have surplus in a bad year. Joseph has spent thirteen years learning Egyptian culture, the Egyptian language, and how to behave before Egyptian aristocracy. He has a five-minute interview in front of Pharaoh. Do you think these thirteen years were part of God's plan?

What looks like detours and delays are God's specific training vehicles to get us to the next place in our spiritual development. Warren Wiersbe said, "the speed bumps are what you climb up on" Each of these delays, detours, demotions has prepared Joseph for this moment, and what is coming out of his mouth, his wisdom, his attitude, his social graces is taking their breath away. Not a single day of Joseph's life in the last thirteen years has been wasted. God is not late. Everything was needful, from being in a pit, to being a slave of the king's bodyguard, to being around his wife and family, to ending up in prison. All was part of the plan – Judah's decision to sell him to Ishmaelites, Potiphar's wife's decision to falsely accuse him, Potiphar's decision to illegally imprison him, the butler's decision to forget him, the magicians' inability to decipher the dream.

God's delays are deliberate and for our good. God's delays are necessary for completing our preparation. How often have you looked at your life, and said something like, "By now, I should be in such and such a place. By now I should have been married, or have had children, or be further in my career, or have finished my education, or have understood far more of the faith." We can feel like God needs to catch up, and that He is moving the events of my life way too slowly. But as we live submitted lives, seeking to respond in the Spirit, we can be sure that God is never late, never lost, never adapting, never taking a detour or trying to catch up.

Joseph appeared before Pharaoh on precisely the day he was meant to, not a day sooner or a day later. And on that day, Joseph was precisely as prepared and shaped as God wanted him to be.

His advice shows the tact, shrewdness and forethought of a leader. He has thought of a response before the words are barely out of his mouth. A tax of one-fifth of the produce of the land, and considering that these would be years of plenty, one fifth for seven years would probably be a massive amount of surplus food. Special administrators and officers should be appointed to make this their full-time work in preparation for this time.

Picture the stunned silence after Joseph finished speaking, Pharaoh looking with wonder at this young Hebrew, who had not only penetrated the meaning of the dream, but had given an on-the-spot plan of wise response that would have taken his counselors hours of deliberation to come to.

Perhaps Joseph was ushered out the room for a few moments, while Pharaoh conferred with his closest advisors. He is as impressed with Joseph's interpreting as he is with Joseph's advice. He

knows that here he has before him a man with some kind of Spirit-filled insight, unusual wisdom, compassion for the Egyptian people, foresight and intelligence rolled into one.

*38 And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?" 39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. 40 "You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you."*

*41 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." 42 Then Pharaoh took his signet ring off his hand and put it on Joseph's hand; and he clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. 43 And he had him ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried out before him, "Bow the knee!" So he set him over all the land of Egypt.*

*44 Pharaoh also said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no man may lift his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." 45 And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnath-Paaneah. And he gave him as a wife Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On. So Joseph went out over all the land of Egypt.*

Pharaoh makes three pronouncements to Joseph. Verses 39, 41 and 44. In the first, Pharaoh tells him his intention. Joseph is made overseer of Pharaoh's palace. This is the fourth house that he has been made overseer, the second-in-command. First his father Jacob's house, then Potiphar's house, then the king's prison, and now the king's palace.

Pharaoh's second pronouncement to him in verse 41 is the implementation of how he is making him essentially the prime minister of the land. These were the symbols: his ring, which was likely his scarab ring with the personal seal of Pharaoh. Once again, Joseph's robe is exchanged for another, and every time Joseph's coat changes, something in his life is changing. He receives the gold collar seen in many hieroglyphics that high Egyptian officials wore. He is made to ride in the second chariot, and people are to bow before him as he rides.

And the third pronouncement is verse 44, which is the confirmation. By Pharaoh's authority, Joseph is the grand vizier of Egypt. Pharaoh then essentially grants Joseph Egyptian citizenship on the spot, by giving him an Egyptian name, which probably means "The Sustainer of life". He is given an Egyptian wife, Asenath, and we might wonder if it was wrong for Joseph to take a wife from the Egyptians. First, this takes place before God has forbidden intermarriage with foreigners. Second, the prevention of intermarriage was to prevent idolatry, and Joseph, with his high position, and his integrity, is not going to fall into idolatry. His wife will follow him in the worship of the God of Israel. And it is also interesting that for the rest of his life, Pharaoh still calls him Joseph, and he names his two sons Hebrew names, not Egyptian.

Now think of the lump forming in Joseph's throat as Pharaoh says these things to him. All those years of being faithful, of not murmuring, of not becoming hostile with his brothers, or the Ishmaelites, or Potiphar, or Potiphar's wife, or the people in prison, years of resisting temptation, responding in the Spirit, enduring in obedience, even when things kept getting worse, now suddenly, in a few minutes on one morning are being completely reversed. Finally, it is the moment of vindication, of the promises of God emerging after the trial, of the reward of his suffering.

Think of who this foreshadows. Jesus, forgotten, mistreated, unfairly accused, sent down into death and the prison of a tomb. But God did not allow Him to remain there, but as Joseph was raised up to stand before Pharaoh, so Jesus was raised on the third day. All the accusations against Jesus, all the charges of blasphemy were proven false, for if they were true, He would have been a sinner and would have remained in the grave. And as Joseph was exalted to be over Egypt, so at Christ's ascension we read that

*9 Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phi 2:9-11)*

At the resurrection, and then the ascension, all of Satan's taunts about "if you are the Son of God" fell away, and Jesus was proven to be the God-Man.

Jesus has received this position, but it is important to note, He has not yet fully received the kingdom and the recognition. Just like Joseph. Joseph was exalted and vindicated, but has his dream come true yet, in its fullness? No, it awaits a time after some years of Tribulation, when his brothers will recognise that the king is also their brother.

Vindication is promised to God's faithful people, too. God promises that those who wait on Him, who leave vengeance to Him, to labour for His reward, who leave and forsake lands, goods and kin for His sake, will receive back from Him.

*5 Commit your way to the LORD, Trust also in Him, And He shall bring it to pass. 6 He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, And your justice as the noonday. 7 Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him; Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, Because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass. (Psa 37:5-7)*

God will vindicate your faith in Him, your trust in Him, your obedience of Him, your separation from the world. But it is up to Him when and how He will do that vindicating. It may be many years from now. It may be only after you have died. It may be only at the Judgement Seat of Christ. But as surely as God vindicated His Son, so he will vindicate faith in His Son. He will vindicate trust placed in Him, and show that it was right and true to trust in Him.

So what did Joseph do with this new position?

*46 Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt. 47 Now in the seven plentiful years the ground brought forth abundantly. 48 So he gathered up all the food of the seven years which were in the land of Egypt, and laid up the food in the cities; he laid up in every city the food of the fields which surrounded them. 49 Joseph gathered very much grain, as the sand of the sea, until he stopped counting, for it was immeasurable.*

*50 And to Joseph were born two sons before the years of famine came, whom Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On, bore to him. 51 Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh: "For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house." 52 And the name of the second he called Ephraim: "For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction."*

Sometimes the greatest test of a man is not when he is given great weakness, and deep poverty, and the suffering of being maligned and forgotten. The greatest test can be when that man is given power, wealth, honour. So ask yourself, what would your first act have been if the last thirteen years of your life had been years of being oppressed, exploited, harmed and slandered? We might imagine Joseph saying, "My first act is that I summon to appear before me Potiphar, his wife, and the king's butler." And there Joseph could have forced them to beg for mercy, or perhaps refused to grant it and had them executed. He could now have exacted revenge on Potiphar, people who had mistreated him, indeed the whole land of Egypt.

But what does he do? Joseph uses his power to bless the land, forgiving those who had wronged him. Joseph travels throughout the land, as a humble servant-leader, getting to know his people. He diligently stores up the food and protects it.

How do we know he forgave? He names his sons Manasseh and Ephraim, which mean, God has made me forget, God has made me fruitful.

You are not ready to be vindicated if you are still bitter. You are not ready to be vindicated if you will gloat over the shame or humiliation of your enemies. You are not ready to be vindicated if you will become triumphalist and arrogant. You are ready to be vindicated when you will forgive and

even serve those who harmed you. Here is Joseph dispersing bread to a perishing Egypt, just as Jesus offers Himself as the Bread of Life to the world that rejected Him.

*22 Through the LORD'S mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not.*

*23 They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness.*

*24 "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!"*

*25 The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, To the soul who seeks Him.*

*26 It is good that one should hope and wait quietly For the salvation of the LORD.*

*27 It is good for a man to bear The yoke in his youth.*

*28 Let him sit alone and keep silent, Because God has laid it on him;*

*29 Let him put his mouth in the dust-- There may yet be hope.*

*30 Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes him, And be full of reproach.*

*31 For the Lord will not cast off forever.*

*32 Though He causes grief, Yet He will show compassion According to the multitude of His mercies.*

*33 For He does not afflict willingly, Nor grieve the children of men. (Lam 3:22-33)*