

Seven Cows and Seven Ears on a Stalk
Pastor Sam Richards
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It was Pharaoh's dream. God was speaking mercifully to a pagan ruler in dreams, showing mercy in two ways: first by the dreams themselves and secondly by the provision of his servant Joseph . . . still in lockdown. What a pestilent lot we are, throwing people away like refuse . . . an innocent man is in prison for doing nothing wrong. He refused the advances of a prominent woman, she accused him of attempted rape and off he went to prison. But, and this was a great comfort to a bewildered man (bewildered by the price of morality, of sexual virtue!!), **God was with him**—God continued to prosper him even in jail and Joseph, rose to leadership even in that setting! **And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners**, treasonous men, traitors and the ambitious—they were “white collar” criminals most likely, because it was a “royal prison” they were in.

But what is a predictive, or warning dream worth if no one can interpret it for us— for the cupbearer, or the baker and, again, later, for Pharaoh?

Job 33:14ff is a very significant passage related to divine communication *through dreams and visions*.

**14 “Indeed God speaks once,
Or twice, yet no one notices it.**

First, dreams and visions, which is followed, secondly, by affliction/suffering.

**15 “In a dream, a vision of the night,
When sound sleep falls on men,**

This is reminiscent of Adam's experience when a rib was removed to shape Eve as well as the state of Abraham when God cut a covenant with him, assuring him of his promises, answering his “How will I know?”

While they slumber in their beds,

In the two instances cited, I cannot affirm that beds were involved at all, so we are no longer speaking of such special cases, but of the more common occurrence of the “ministry of sleep.” The recuperation, or recuperative functions of sleep relate to both the physical and the spiritual sides of man.

**16 Then He opens the ears of men,
And seals their instruction,**

We note that the inhibiting of this work by conscious functioning is overcome as we slumber soundly. There is less noise more clarity. This interaction is part of God's “speaking engagement” with us, his creatures. It occurs on every level of our being, whether we be asleep, or awake.

**17 That He may turn man aside from his conduct,
And [a]keep man from pride;**

The conscience has greater liberty to function in the dream and vision mode. The conscience can make its voice heard, its influence felt through vivid imagery, actions that reveal, or express our emotional state and address our relational health.

**18 He keeps back his soul from the pit,
And his life from [b]passing over into Sheol.**

I think the idea here is that God acts to forestall eternal consequences, unhappy ones. They express potential outcomes, dangers, risks and options.

Footnotes

a. Job 33:17 Lit **hide**

b. Job 33:18 M.T. **perishing by the sword**

Elihu, the only character with a Hebraic name in Job, proceeds to the second theater of interaction: Job's affliction/suffering. Job is in pain, his bones are full of strife and contention (he aches all over). Therefore Elihu is proposing that Job is being warned to change his course. He needs to modify his attitude towards God, stop protesting his innocence (he isn't), cease his scoffing, abandon **traveling in company of evildoers . . . wicked men**. Job is not doing any of these things so they are put forth as propositions! If you are doing any of this, God is using affliction to warn you to cease and desist! However, Elihu declares some very essential truths about wisdom, about how one "test" for wisdom: **Hear my words, you wise men, and give ear to me, you who know . . . for the ear tests words as the palate tastes food. Let us choose what is right** (upon open hearing, and examination orally) and **Let us now among ourselves what is good**. This is the way of wisdom. It is spoken out, tested and confirmed by "the wise." Any interpretation must be subject to examination! Let us remember that as we approach Pharaoh's dream of seven fat and seven lean cows—and the heads of grain. Just what was God warning Pharaoh about? The matter of divine communication was not at stake here! God was speaking, but what was the message?

Twice In Gen. 41 we are told of the inability of the **magicians and wise men of Egypt** (verses 8 & 24) to **interpret the dreams**. This is not the same dynamic as that which befell the cupbearer and the baker—Pharaoh had access to the dream specialists, but his prisoners were cut off from the interpreters *but, tellingly, not from God*. Back in 40:8 Joseph opines: **Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them** (your dreams) **to me**. As a result, the cupbearer tells Joseph his dream and, immediately, Joseph offers the correct interpretation! **This is the interpretation: the three branches are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office** (v.13) . . . a happy picture of exoneration and restoration. So the baker follows the cupbearer's lead: **There were three cake baskets on my head, and in the upper baskets were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head**. (v.17) God alone knows the relationship between three branches with grapes and three days as well as how these things align with three baskets. The things in the first dream are of a natural order, **as soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes**. (v.10) That's as intriguing as a time lapse photo shoot and that rapid sequence is "supernatural." A whole process of growth and development is summarized as it were in a moment. **I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup placed in Pharaoh's hand**. (v.11) There is no occasion for poisoning possible in this quick transaction (dream sequence!). It's between the cupbearer and Pharaoh! Not so with the baker: **the birds were eating, not Pharaoh(!), out of the basket on my head**. The birds mediate between the baker, the food, and the intended recipient. Sounds ominous in comparison. Still, three days is three days in each dream, whether we are speaking of branches, or baskets—and, as it turns out, the interpretation is accurate: **as he interpreted to us, so it came about**. (v.13)

The cupbearer's testimony (following his memory lapse!) is both a recommendation and a statement of credentials. Now Pharaoh has exhausted his resources of

magicians and wise men, so he is pleased to hear about Joseph. He sends for Joseph. **And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes**—as custom of the times dictated—**he came in before Pharaoh.** (v.14) He was probably squinting in the unaccustomed light, enjoying the air, and they get right down to business. **I have had a dream and no one can interpret it for me. I have heard it said of you what when you hear a dream, you can interpret it.** (v. 15) The cupbearer had left out the God piece! Nevertheless, Joseph testifies: **It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.** I take this to mean, an interpretation—for not all the news in Pharaoh's dreams is good news. But Pharaoh wants the truth, and not just what he wants to hear which is a good trait. Pharaoh shares his dream of seven plump and lovely cows, which are then devoured by seven **poor and very ugly. . . thin cows**—which devoured the plump critters and showed no signs of having consumed anything at all! **Still ugly.** Then, came the grain sequel: seven **full and good** heads on a single stalk come first, then seven **withered, thin and blighted ears . . .** which **swallowed up the seven good ears.** (vv.17-24) Seven cows eating cows and seven heads of grain consuming seven other heads of grain must be symbolic of something, but what could it be. What did these dreams mean?

Joseph simplifies the matter by asserting, the cows and heads of grain are one vision of what is to come: seven good cows/ears means **seven years of fruitfulness and plenty** to be followed by **seven years of famine.** Years of plenty followed by years of want and famine **and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land . . . the famine will be very severe. And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God and God will shortly bring it about.** (vv. 29-32) The dream is predictive, just like the dreams of the cupbearer and baker—only the scale has moved from days, to years and the fall-out from the dream is not personal, but international in scope. We add this because Egypt was the bread basket for the ancient Near East. So, in view of the mercy of advanced notice, Joseph proceeds to recommend that Pharaoh find a wise and discerning man (a thirty year old!) **and set him over the land of Egypt.** (v.33) Talk about writing your own job description!! **And let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land of Egypt and take one fifth of the produce of the land** (taxation?) **during the seven plentiful years. And let them gather all the food from theirs of plenty and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it** (governmental control of the food supply while there's starvation in the land). The state will have the stockpile needed to survive the catastrophe.

This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. . . . “Can we find such a man as this, in whom is the Spirit of God? Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house.”

Now our eyes are opened to a pattern: Joseph was appointed over his brothers, to supervise them; then he was placed over the house of Potiphar, and, subsequently, over the royal prison! God was with his servant leader and in governing others Joseph found fulfillment—and the validation of his dreams from childhood.

Thus is detailed for us Joseph's rise to power—from outcast, exile and slave to the governor's mansion. God exalted him. And Pharaoh communicated acceptance and approval (the signet ring, fine clothing, absolute authority over all the people (**Bow before him!**)). And, in Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On, an acceptable wife, assimilation into nobility and his court. She bore him two sons who later became

heads of two tribes—a double portion in Israel! Joseph was both happy and fulfilled at last. What he did with this position and power will have to await another time. But God will use the famine to bring father and son together again—the famine will bring Jacob to his long lost son, the one he presumed to be dead would turn out to be very much alive! All of this is wonderful, a planned famine prevention program, headed up by the man of the hour, the man of God's own choosing. And, all of this whets our appetite for the One who is to come—even the Messiah of God, the anointed Son of God.

With every catastrophe God prepares crisis leadership—thus mitigating the disastrous outcomes that would result if God were not involved. engaged. God did so with the Flood. He did so with the Roman oppression as he had before with the Babylonians, Chaldeans, Assyrians in the tussles of empires and imperial expansion and contractions. And, on the scientific and medical front, God has lifted the curse so toe speak embodied in innumerable plagues and diseases through researcher and doctors— through hygiene and pure water provisions. Relief efforts a huge feats of merciful intervention. But few rival the intervention brought through the faith of a single son of a shepherd named Joseph. Who knows but the team to rein in COVID-19 has already put together; between treatment and prevention, God may be delivering us once again.

Amen.