



Faith Pulpit

Joseph's Prophetic Dreams and Their Fulfillment

Genesis 37-50 records the incredible account of Joseph, his dysfunctional family, and God's faithfulness through it all. Joseph's prophetic dreams during his youth sustained him in his making wise choices throughout his life. Joseph had additional opportunities in the narrative to interpret dreams for the baker, the cupbearer, and for the great Pharaoh. But the ones we will focus on concern the dreams of his eventual exaltation above his brothers.

This prophecy of exaltation has several unique features. First, in a narrow sense, it was focused on just one person—Joseph himself. However, the dreams were not specific enough for Joseph to understand exactly what God had in mind. Joseph did not know when, how, or what God would accomplish as a result of his dreams.

Second, the fulfillment of the prophecy contained in his dreams had a wider scope than Joseph could ever have imagined. God's plan for its fulfillment was instrumental in preserving the lives of Joseph's entire family. There was an even greater aspect to this prophecy that I will discuss at the end of this article.

God's faithfulness to Joseph's prophecy reminds believers that His plans and purposes are always best. This is true in spite of the many difficulties Joseph faced waiting for the fulfillment of his dreams. We will examine these difficulties that made waiting such a challenge and the prophecy's fulfillment and implications to us all. But first, we will look closely at the prophetic dreams Joseph had.

Elaboration of the Prophetic Dreams

In Genesis 37, the juvenile Joseph was the clear favorite of his father, the patriarch, Jacob. Jacob demonstrated this favor with a multicolored coat for his favorite son. This situation caused tension in the family, especially so since Joseph had previously given an "evil report" of his brothers to his father

(Gen. 37:2).

Joseph aggravated the problem further when he boasted to his brothers about a recent dream he had. In the harvest fields, Joseph's sheaf of grain prominently arose, while his brothers' sheaves bowed down to it. His brothers' reaction was not positive. They immediately understood that Joseph was picturing himself in a position of authority over them (Gen. 37:7-8).

Whether Joseph had not anticipated the negative reaction in his brothers to his first dream, he had to be aware of the provocation his second dream would cause. But he told them anyway and his father too: the sun, moon, and eleven(!) stars would bow to him. This news earned him a rebuke from his father; no one could miss the implications of priority of Joseph that his dreams described (Gen. 37:9-11).

This set the stage for how Joseph's brothers would respond to their hatred of their favored brother. By the end of the chapter Joseph found himself sold as a slave in Egypt by his own brothers, despite his pleas for help. Unknown to Joseph, his own father thought him dead.

Difficulties of the Prophecy

The surprising element in Joseph's new life was that he still believed in the truth of his prophetic dreams. He had faith that God would somehow, someday, sometime bring to pass this prophecy. Joseph believed in God's faithfulness. But there were at least two major problems that Joseph had to contend with continually about the fulfillment of the prophecy.

First, from Joseph's perspective, the prophecy was worryingly (and perhaps, provokingly) vague. What kind of exaltation could he expect? He knew he was to have some kind of prominence in his family. What would that look like? Would it include authority over anyone else or somewhere else? Also, how would that eminence come about? What was he supposed to do to make it happen? And perhaps most annoyingly, when would it happen? All of these concerns could have festered in Joseph's mind and brought doubts about whether his commitment to God's plan was the best direction he should follow in his life.

Secondly, the uncomfortable, unavoidable reality that faced Joseph every single day was that his new life circumstances did not seem to relate to his prophetic dreams in any way. No doubt Joseph quickly realized that the prophecy was not going to happen in a way he would have planned or preferred. Let us explore this aspect more in depth.

Genesis 39 details Joseph's rise to success as a slave in Potiphar's household. As his responsibilities increased, so did God's blessing. While being a slave was not obviously not a preferred role Joseph would have sought, at least his achievement brought some amount of satisfaction. We learn in Genesis 39:6-10 Joseph's first major temptation from Potiphar's wife to compromise revealed his trust in God's direction for his life. He refused to sin morally and forsake God's plan—even though he did not know

exactly what it was.

That decision came at quite a cost for Joseph. No matter how to you look at it, a move from being a slave in Genesis 39 to a prisoner in chapter 40 is not a move upward. Joseph still persevered and his descent into the dungeon became his path to the power and authority beyond his wildest imagination as the trusted premier of Pharaoh who ruled one of the greatest kingdoms in the world at that time (Gen. 41).

The Timeline of the Prophecy

Joseph's "quick" ascent in Genesis 41 does not adequately reflect the waiting he had to go through. When did the doubts come to him that he might not see his family again? The timeline shows the years going by. One of the most difficult tasks in life is waiting for something to happen, compounded by not knowing how long you have to wait. And Joseph did not even have certainty about what he was even waiting for.

Joseph's Life Chronology¹

Historical year	Ref. in Genesis	Joseph's Age	Event
1915 B.C.	--	0	Joseph is born.
1909 B.C.	31:17-21	6	Jacob and his family move to Canaan.
1898 B.C.	37:2	17	Joseph is sold into Egypt.
1886 B.C.	40:14-15, 23	28	<i>The text indicates at the time of Joseph's interpreting of the dreams of the two prisoners, he was two years from exaltation by Pharaoh.</i>
1884 B.C.	41:39-46	30	Pharaoh exalts Joseph to second in command of Egypt.
1878 B.C.	--	37	<i>The seven good years of plenty ends.</i>
1877 B.C.	47:13-17	38	<i>During the first year of famine, the Egyptians used up all their money & animals to buy bread.</i>
1876 B.C.	47:18-21	39	<i>During the second year of famine, Joseph bought land from the people.</i>
1876 B.C.	45:1-8	39	<i>Joseph's brothers visit and he reveals himself.</i>
1876 B.C.	47:9	39	Jacob arrives in Egypt and has an interview with Pharaoh. Jacob's stated age is 130 years.
1870 B.C.	--	45	<i>The normal harvests resume.</i>
1859 B.C.	47:28	56	Jacob dies at age 147.
1805 B.C.	50:26	110	Joseph dies.

Italics indicates estimations by the author.

Observations:

-Joseph worked 13 years as a slave and prisoner without knowing how long it would last or what it was God was preparing him for.

-Joseph had to wait until he was 30 years old to get married and start a family.

-Joseph had to wait 22 years to see his brothers, father, and family: from the time he was 17 years old until he was 39.

-Joseph's father Jacob died when Joseph was about 56 years old. That meant he would have lived nearly half his life (54 years) in harmony with his brothers without the protection of their father. If Joseph intended to do them harm, he had the power to do so.

Fulfillment of the Prophecy

God used Joseph's position to preserve the lives of those who would become His beloved and chosen people, the Israelites. Joseph's steadfastness to God's plan meant that Joseph believed God would fulfill the prophecy his dreams had indicated. Joseph understood that God had a personal interest in him and had guided him through all those lonely years.

Joseph's response to God's provision was to extend grace to those who had previously caused him pain. This was true when his father Jacob was living. Genesis 45:4-8 records him giving comfort to his brothers. Imagine that if you were in his place! But Joseph's view of God's provision and faithfulness to him extended also after Jacob died. Genesis 50:15-21 reveals Joseph having no animosity toward his brothers despite their ill treatment of him. The pain he experienced was part of God's greater purpose.

Joseph also saw God's greater good (Genesis 48:3-5) in the wider fulfillment of the prophecy that would allow God's blessing of the future nation of Israel and their eventual possession of the Holy Land. What Joseph might not have fully understood was that this nation would provide the blessing by which all the nations of the world would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3)—the eventual coming of the Messiah!

What does the fulfillment of Joseph's prophetic dreams mean to us? My guess is that Joseph's testimony to us would be something like:

"We can trust God to keep His Word to us; especially so when life circumstances do not seem to reflect our expectations or understandings of what God is doing in our life. God's plan is always worth waiting for."

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Works Cited

1. The dates are adapted from John H. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 15. The dates assume Joseph lived from 1915-1805 B.C. Other conservative scholars use slightly different dates but differ by only a year or two.

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