

Genesis 41 — What is the secret to success?

October 9, 2016

We all love a rags-to-riches story. There are many famous ones in the news. One you probably don't know is the story of Howard Schultz. He grew up in the Bayview projects of Brooklyn. His family was destitute. The good news is Howard excelled in sports. After high school, he was awarded a football scholarship to the University of Northern Michigan. He graduated with a degree in communications and began working for Xerox. It was while working for Xerox that a small coffee chain caught his eye. He was eventually able to acquire the job as its CEO. He used his marketing background to sell coffee. That is how Howard turned Starbucks from 60 stores into a business worth more than a billion dollars.¹

While we all love a rags-to-riches story, and even better than hearing one is being one. **This morning we will learn some of the qualities God is searching for in a life that he will lift up and use in great way in this world.**

As a church we are studying our way through the book of Genesis. For the last few weeks, we focused on the life of Joseph. He is a man that faced one hardship after another. His brothers sold him into slavery, a frustrated adulteress framed him for rape because he chose purity instead of adultery, and when he helped out the Pharaoh's cup bearer, by serving him in the dungeon and interpreting his dreams, the cup bearer forgot about Joseph when he was released from prison and left Joseph languishing in the dungeon for crimes he

¹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/rags-to-riches-stories-2011-11#howard-schultz-grew-up-in-the-brooklyn-projects-before-discovering-and-now-leading-starbucks-4>

did not commit. For two years, Joseph rotted in an underground stinking hole — all because of the cup bearer’s amnesia. It would seem like life couldn’t get worse. Today, Joseph’s story turns around and heads in the opposite direction.

Let’s jump into Genesis 41.

After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. And behold, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke. And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh. Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “I remember my offenses today. When Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, we dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation. A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream. And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged.”
Genesis 41:1–13 (ESV)

Last week, Joseph was a young man around the age of 28. Today, he is 30. The cup bearer completely forgot about Joseph for two years while he rotted in prison. That is a long time. From Joseph’s perspective, I am sure it felt like an eternity. It felt like God abandoned him. Nothing could be further from the truth. As we will see in a moment, this was all part of God’s perfect timing.

The reason for this delay in release became apparent after Pharaoh had a dream. It was twin dreams of cows and corn.

Cows in Egypt typically submerged themselves in the Nile to escape from the heat and the flies. Pharaoh dreamt that coming from the Nile were seven

plump cows. These were well-fed cows. Every one should have been a contestant on The Biggest Loser. They were raised on Cheetos and Snicker bars in their feeding troughs. Those are the kinds of cows we want for greasy hamburgers. Behind them, seven skinny cows came from the Nile. Those cows were nothing but skin and bones. Each cow looked like it came off a foreign aide poster. Here is where it gets weird. The skinny cows ate the fat cows, and they didn't gain a pound doing it. I wish I could say the same. I gain a pound just looking at a chocolate bar. Eating an entire cow would put on some serious belly fat, but not for those skinny cows. They didn't gain a pound.

This was not a pleasant dream. It was a nightmare. The skinny cows were cannibal cows. This dream was not like watching a video game where one cow icon ate another cow icon like Pac-Man. This was like watching the National Geographic channel when a lion takes down a buffalo and while the buffalo is still alive it eats it. The difference was the skinny cows took down the fat cows and ate them. That is a nightmare. Cows don't eat other cows. This is why Pharaoh awoke out of his sleep in a cold sweat, completely traumatized by his nightmare.

Pharaoh calmed himself down and went back to sleep only to have a similar nightmare. This time there were seven plump juicy heads of grain on one stalk. That is not normal. Seven heads of grain on one stalk means extreme agriculture fertility and productivity. That rarely happens. After the plump grain, came up seven thin, blighted heads of grain that were dried up. The grain was shriveled and dry. It felt like pebbles. The seven heads of dry grain ate up the juicy and plump heads of grain. We went from cannibal cows to cannibal corn.

That was enough to wake Pharaoh up in another cold sweat. If you have ever had a bad nightmare, you can understand the way Pharaoh felt that morning.

He just had to figure out the meaning of these nightmares because he couldn't get them out of his head. He called all the wise men and magicians in Egypt to interpret his dream. The problem was the wise men and magicians were not so wise. They couldn't earn their paychecks. They had no idea what the dreams meant. Pharaoh was completely frustrated!

It was at that time, after two full years, that the cup bearer's memory finally jogged. "Dreams! Interpretations! I know somebody that can help! That guy named Joe that I left in prison can help." Thankfully, Joseph was just where he needed to be in that moment. He was in prison only a few blocks away, stuck in his hole in the ground feeling forgotten.

I want us to pause and notice something about God's timing. If the cup bearer remembered Joseph to Pharaoh two years earlier, Joseph's case would have been heard. He would have been released and sent back to Canaan. If he was sent back to Canaan, he wouldn't have been around to interpret Pharaoh's dreams in this crucial moment of Egyptian and world history. The extra two years in prison felt like God forgot Joseph. In reality, they were part of God's perfect timing to have Joseph at just the right place and just the right time for this crucial moment in history when God gave Pharaoh dreams about the future so Joseph could interpret them and save the lives of millions.

This is especially important for us to remember when God seems quiet. Sometimes we feel forgotten by God because we are enduring injustice, just like

Joseph. Last week, we saw God allows us to go through hard times to mature our character and to prepare us for the work he gives us to do. Today, we learned that God sometimes leaves us in a hard place because that is the very place he wants us to be for the work he gives us to do. If God answered Joseph's prayers for an early release from the jail, he wouldn't have been available for Pharaoh at this decisive pivotal moment in history. God kept Joseph in jail because that is where Joseph needed to be to do his God-given work.

Let this be an encouragement. Some of you are in a tough work environment. You keep asking God for a different job but it doesn't feel like God is listening. It doesn't feel like he is answering your prayers. Maybe the reason God hasn't answered your prayers for a different job is because the work God plans for you to do is in the very job we want to leave. Maybe you won't understand it for two years, but at just the right time, you will realize why God has you as a light for Jesus in your tough job and just like Joseph, in that moment God will use you to make a crucial life-changing difference.

How can we put ourselves in a position for God to lift us up? Trust God's timing. God's timing is perfect. When he allows you to continue in a tough place in life, trust that God has a good reason for keeping you there. He has work for you to do in that tough location.

Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Behold, in my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile. Seven cows, plump and attractive, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. Seven other cows

came up after them, poor and very ugly and thin, such as I had never seen in all the land of Egypt. And the thin, ugly cows ate up the first seven plump cows, but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they were still as ugly as at the beginning. Then I awoke. I also saw in my dream seven ears growing on one stalk, full and good. Seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them, and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. And I told it to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me.” Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind are also seven years of famine. It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt, but after them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land, and the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of the famine that will follow, for it 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. Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years. And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.” Genesis 41:14–36 (ESV)

I love the picture of Joseph needing a shave before he saw Pharaoh. I picture a 30-year-old guy stuck in a dungeon for three years without a razor. How long do you think his hair grew? The Duck Dynasty guys would be seriously jealous of his beard. He was very furry and very dirty.

The first thing Pharaoh said to Joseph was that he heard Joseph could interpret dreams. I love the way Joseph responded. He told Pharaoh that he couldn’t interpret dreams but God was the one who would give him an answer. This is instructive for us whenever someone wants us to credit ourselves for our skills, talents or gifts. Joseph didn’t take any of the credit and absorb it. Whatever

gifts he had, he acknowledged came from God, not himself. I love this about Joseph. He was so humble. This could have been his big ego moment with Pharaoh, but it wasn't. He wanted to give God all the glory, not himself. This is the way God wants us to live.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. James 1:17 (ESV)

...What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? 1 Corinthians 4:7 (ESV)

In a similar way, when we do something right or we have a skill or talent, like Joseph, we don't want to absorb the glory but to deflect the glory and give it to God. All of us have seen this with professional athletes who are praised for their talents. Some of them give God the glory, others give themselves the glory.

The question we all need to ask ourselves when we face success is, "Who will we make bigger with our success, God or ourselves?" Whenever people give us honor on the football field or on the basketball court, don't let it go to your head. Let it be an opportunity to direct people to God who gave us our abilities.

How can we put ourselves in a position for God to lift us up? Give God the credit for our skills and talents, not ourselves.

The other thing I want us to notice is God's sovereignty over everything. God declared exactly what would happen to Egypt for the next 14 years. God is large and in charge over everything. He was in charge of the government of Egypt and the government in our country today. He was in charge of the prosperity of Egypt or the lack of prosperity in Egypt and the natural disaster of drought that caused it. In the same way, God is in charge of our country's

prosperity or the lack of prosperity. God was in charge of moving Joseph to Egypt as a slave. He was in charge of him getting thrown into prison. He was in charge of the wealth in Egypt and the scarcity in Egypt. God was even in charge of Pharaoh's dreams. There is nothing God doesn't control. I don't know how big God is in your mind but here we see there is nothing that is out of his control, even the future.

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. Proverbs 16:33 (ESV)

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will. Proverbs 21:1 (ESV)

Here is what I love. Even though God is in charge of everything, it didn't lead to a spirit of fatalism. Fatalism says, "Why do anything? Why try? What will be will be. God is in charge of things and he will do what he wants so why try and make a difference in the world?" God was fully in charge of the future of Egypt but he told Pharaoh about the future of Egypt so Pharaoh could do something about it and save lives. While God is fully in charge of our lives and our world, this should inspire us to meet the disasters and challenges of life, that God sovereignly brought across our path, rather than throwing up our hands and using God's sovereignty as a fatalistic excuse to walk away.

A young mother finds herself divorced, facing financial disaster — a fatalist would say, "Why do anything about it? What will be will be. God is in charge of her life, not me." A biblical Christian says, "God sovereignly orchestrated these circumstances to bring this single mother into my life so I can be the one to do something about it and meet her need."

I hope this helps you wrestle through some of the misapplications of God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty doesn't mean we don't meet the needs of people or work hard to help people or fail to share the gospel with people. God is the one who sovereignly brought the needs into our lives so we can meet them.

How do we put ourselves in a position to be lifted up by God? While we trust in God's sovereignty, we are not fatalists. When we see a need, we meet the need because God sovereignly made us aware of it.

This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?" Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you." And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt. Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, and he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it. And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured. Genesis 41:37-49 (ESV)

Here is the shocker. Joseph went from the pit to the prison in one day. It doesn't say it in the text but I think that Potiphar may have been part of this moment. Remember, Potiphar was the head of the Secret Service in Egypt. Joseph worked for him 11 years in his house. Joseph moved up the corporate ladder in Potiphar's home until he was in charge over everything. Joseph was a

wise and successful manager. We also learned that when Joseph was thrown in prison for a rape he didn't commit, the prison he went to was the same prison Potiphar ran. Joseph was also a great worker in prison. I think Potiphar vouched for Joseph's character and leadership to Pharaoh. I am confident that in some of their water cooler conversations Potiphar told Pharaoh about the amazing employee called Joseph. The way Joseph lived his life in the good times and the tough times was noticed by Potiphar and told to Pharaoh. Joseph's reputation preceded him. I think that is one of the unwritten truths in this passage. Who we are in the little things in life and who we are in the hard times of life, is noticed by people. This is one of the things that opens the door to success. What we do when nobody is watching determines what we do when everybody is watching.

One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. Luke 16:10 (ESV)

How do we put ourselves in a position to be lifted up by God? We work hard in the little things when nobody is looking, not just at the big things everyone will see.

In shocking news, Pharaoh put Joseph second in command of all of Egypt. He was clothed in fine linen and put in an inaugural parade right behind Pharaoh himself. This was incredibly heady exaltation.

Pharaoh even changed Joseph's name to an Egyptian name. He gave him an Egyptian wife that came from a high-profile family. Joseph instantly became well-connected and everyone bowed the knee to Joseph. Imagine going from the dungeon — where you didn't see the light of day for years, you had serious body odor and more hair than an ape — to clean shaven in fine clothing in a mega-

nation where everybody bowed to you except for Pharaoh himself. All this started after breakfast and was done before dinner.

Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On, bore them to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The name of the second he called Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do." So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth. Genesis 41:50–57 (ESV)

The first question I found myself asking was about Asenath. What kind of a woman was she? If she didn't love the one true God of the universe, why did Joseph marry her? We don't have any definitive answer. There are a few things we know. Just before the time of Jesus, there was a non-biblical book written called Joseph and Asenath. The book describes Asenath's conversion to follow the one true God of the universe before marrying Joseph. Nobody knows if this book is true. There is no way to determine the line between truth and fiction in a book written thousands of years after the historical event.

This much we do know. Even though she grew up in a pagan home, we don't find Asenath pulling Joseph away from the one true God of the universe. Joseph finished well, holding on to his faith and holding on to God. That is probably because his wife supported him in his faith and didn't undermine his faith. A woman undermining the faith of her husband can be a potent thing. Solomon, who had God appear to him twice, walked away from God at the end of

his life because of the influence of his foreign wives. We don't see that with Asenath. Second, both of her children were given Hebrew names, not Egyptian names. Asenath and Joseph both planned for their sons to be part of the family of God. Her two sons were incorporated into the 12 tribes of Israel. This is good news. The clear path of the patriarch had always been to take great effort to marry inside the covenant family. We saw that with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and now we see that is what apparently happened with Joseph.

The first child born to them was named Manasseh. Manasseh means "caused to forget." Joseph chose to forget. What he chose to forget was not the one true God of the universe because he was too busy living life. He chose to forget all the bitter pain he went through before he came to power. If you have been deeply wronged and deeply hurt, you understand what Joseph experienced. Those kinds of deep wounds do not go away. It is very easy to stay bitter toward people. It is easy to keep replaying the tapes of how the people hurt you over and over again in your mind. You end up stuck in a pit of self-pity. I know a number of us do that. Some of us have rough pasts. It is easy to let our past control our present. Joseph drew a line and said, "The past is past. God gave me a rough past for a good reason. God used it to mature me. He used it to shape me into the man I needed to be to manage Egypt. God used my hard times to prepare me for the work he gave me to do. God used the wrongs done to me to cut out my pride and teach me humility." Joseph decided to learn from those hard times but not keep reliving them and walking around like a wounded puppy dog. Just like Joseph, we need to let the wrongs done to us in our past go.

We need to learn from them and trust God's wisdom in allowing them but then choose to move on from them and not nurse grudges.

How do we put ourselves in a position to be lifted up by God? Let the wounds of our pasts go and refuse to live in them. If you keep living in the past, instead of learning from the past, it is very hard for God to lift you up in the future.

The story of Joseph's trip from the pit to the palace is inspiring. It is a storyline all of us would wish our lives could follow. There is one additional piece I want us to learn from Joseph's rags-to-riches story that we need to apply to our lives. It is best articulated not in Genesis but in the book of 1 Peter.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you... 1 Peter 5:6 (ESV)

The secret of being used by God in a great way for his kingdom is to be a man or woman who strives to humble yourself and serve other people. Then we let God lift us up if he wants to and when he wants to. We just focus on serving God and loving people. Think of it this way: Before God can raise us up, we need to bow ourselves down. Willful humiliation always comes before exaltation.

Joseph started out as a prideful brat. Look at his humility. He worked as a slave in Potiphar's house and didn't get paid for it, yet the quality of his work was top notch. He humbled himself to care for Potiphar when he got nothing out of it. In prison, Joseph learned more humility. Rather than moping in the corner, he continued serving Potiphar by serving people even though he didn't get a paycheck. Remember the cup bearer and the baker? He looked out for the interests of other prisoners before his own.

If you want God to lift you up, humble yourself down and serve other people. Be generous with your time and your life. For example, humble yourself today and go out of your way to meet somebody new after service. Humble yourself and invite people in the church you don't know over for dinner. Humble yourself and love on those who can never pay you back, just like Joseph did when he was a slave and in prison.

If we want to put ourselves in a position to be lifted up by God, it begins with humility.

Conclusion

We see this even more clearly with Jesus. Joseph was used by God to save millions from earthly starvation, but Jesus because of his humility, was used by God to save billions from eternal damnation. Jesus followed the same pattern. He humbled himself by taking on a human body and dying a death he didn't deserve on a cross. The whole time he trusted God the Father to lift him up at the proper time. Jesus didn't lift himself up. God the Father raised him from the dead.

What is the secret of success? More than anything else it is to humble ourselves and live a generous life that is willing to make great sacrifices for others that could never pay you back. We don't lift ourselves up but trust God to lift us up in his time and in his way.



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