

“GOD HAS THE ANSWER”
(Genesis 41:1-40)

How many of you, who are old enough, remember when you first heard of the internet? The first time I heard about it was at a friend’s house in the mid-90s, who told me how he recently got on something called the internet with a program *America On Line*. I had no idea what he was talking about and figured it was something only techie, gadget guys were interested in. Guess I was wrong about that – today 94% of Americans have access to the internet. It’s easy to forget that the internet has only been around less than 30 years, but it’s as common now as having running water in the house.

In 2010 a Google executive said that every two days we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization up until 2003. Think about that – all the accumulated knowledge of the past 4-5 thousand years combined – doubles every two days. Experts now say that information doubles about every 12 hours. Never before in human history have we had access to so much information, and it will only continue to increase.

People have always had a thirst for knowledge to improve the way we live and make sense of the world we live in. In the age of the internet, if you have a problem, you just look it up on Google or ask Siri. This week I asked Siri – the female voice on Apple that answers all your questions – I asked her what the square root of 10,203 was, and she promptly answered 101.01. What time is it in Japan, I asked... she said, “The time in Tokyo, Japan is 12:16 am.” How far is it from Gold Beach to Chicago... “2,278 with light traffic.” Siri knows a lot of stuff.

Then I asked her, “Siri, how are the Oregon Ducks going to do this fall?” “Who will win this year’s presidential election?” “When is Jesus coming back?” Despite the vast knowledge of the internet, it cannot tell us what the future holds – it can guess, it can speculate – but all the knowledge of the world cannot give us answers to what God alone knows.

If I were to ask you: Who knows more? All the accumulated knowledge of humans or God? You’d say, “Well, God of course.” But what if I asked you: Who do you turn to when you have a problem that can’t be solved? Who do you trust to give you an answer? If we’re honest we’d have to confess that we often grab our phones and start searching for an answer. Our passage today in Genesis 41 demonstrates the limits of human knowledge and the all-surpassing knowledge of God.

We’ve been studying the life of Joseph and the previous chapter we find him in prison in Egypt for something he didn’t do. He knew God was going to lift him up and use him in a special way, but each time things seemed to be looking up, there was another setback. But a new ray of hope comes when his two prison-mates – the cupbearer and baker of King Pharaoh – each have a dream which Joseph interprets for them. He tells the cupbearer that in three days he will be restored to his position, and he tells the baker that in three days he will be executed. And that’s exactly what happens.

Before the cupbearer is released from prison, Joseph says, “When you get out and all goes well with you, do me a favor. I did something for you, now you do something for me. Tell Pharaoh that I’m innocent and see if he can get me out of here.” Chapter 40 ends with another setback – the cupbearer forgets Joseph. Joseph’s future depended on the cupbearer, and the cupbearer for whatever reason doesn’t remember to mention Joseph to Pharaoh. Joseph doesn’t know this and waits every day for a guard to walk down the hallway and unlock the door of his cell – but as the days and weeks and months ticked by, it was evident that nothing was going to change.

For two full years he lingers in prison until God’s hand of providence once again begins to move. Through a divine set of circumstances God’s plan for Joseph is fulfilled. I want to first walk through the story, and at the end I want to highlight three important truths this passage teaches us.

In verses 1-4 we read... “When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile, when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. After them, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.”

The word “Pharaoh” is not a name but a title that means “ruler,” and three Pharaoh’s are mentioned in the Bible – the one that Abraham encountered in Genesis 12, the Pharaoh mentioned here, and the Pharaoh in Exodus that Moses confronted. Egypt was the super-power of the ancient world – they were the most technologically advanced – they had the strongest military of the day – they had the lion’s share of the world’s resources – and heading it all was the most powerful man on earth – King Pharaoh. Pharaoh was more than a king – the Egyptians saw him as the mediator between man and all of the Egyptian gods, and when he died, they believed he would become one of the gods.

Pharaoh has a dream, and as we saw last week, dreams were a big deal in the ancient world, especially in Egypt. Egyptians believed that the gods communicated to them through dreams, and revealed important things about the future.

In his dream, Pharaoh is standing by the Nile River. To the Egyptians, the Nile River was their life source – it was a gift from the gods that generated their world-class economy – and without the Nile they would not be the super-power they were. As he’s standing by the Nile, Pharaoh sees seven fat, sleek cows grazing by the river when out of the river come seven ugly, skinny cows that eat up the seven fat, sleek cows. It’s not exactly a pleasant dream, and it causes Pharaoh to bolt up out of bed.

Verses 5-7... “He fell asleep again and had a second dream: Seven heads of grain, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk. After them, seven other heads of grain sprouted—thin and scorched by the east wind. The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads. Then Pharaoh woke up; it had been a dream.”

This time Pharaoh sees a stalk of grain with seven plump and healthy heads of grain swallowed up by the seven thin heads of grain. Once again Pharaoh wakes up. He doesn't have to be Sigmund Freud to notice both dreams have similar themes – both contain the number seven, both have agricultural symbols, and both speak of abundant life followed by devastating death. What does it all mean? Even with all his power and supposed divinity, Pharaoh can't understand his dreams. But he senses that they're not good. Where does he go for answers? He asks Siri – or the ancient equivalent of Siri – he goes to the wisest, most knowledgeable men in his kingdom.

Verse 8... “In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him.” Pharaoh sends for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt – the very best minds he has. Egyptians believed that the gods worked through magic and the main practitioners of magic were the priests. It was very much a Harry Potter kind of thing where the priests were seen as the guardians of secret knowledge given by the gods to humanity to ward off bad things from happening. Along with the priests were the wise men – the philosophers and scholars of the day, well-versed in the latest knowledge. Pharaoh wants to gather around him all the accumulated knowledge of the day to figure out the solution to his problem.

But this vast pool of knowledge can't unlock the meaning of Pharaoh's dream. The reason they can't is because the dream is from God, and to understand the things of God you had to have a relationship with God. The magicians knew lots of things about a lot of stuff, but when it came to the big questions of life – the things that really mattered – they were clueless. Where is Pharaoh going to find an answer?

Verses 9-14... “Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, ‘Today I am reminded of my shortcomings. Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard. Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. Now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us, giving each man the interpretation of his dream. And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was impaled. So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh.’”

The first question I have is: Where have you been, cupbearer, for the past two years? Why didn't you tell Pharaoh about the man who saved your life when you first got out? The answer is: he forgot. We're not told why he forgot, but I have a feeling that once he was released, he was so absorbed with his own freedom that he forgot all about the guy who got him out. He was like the ten lepers Jesus healed who went on their way rejoicing and forgot to thank Jesus. Only one leper returned to say, “Thank you.” Our natural inclination is that once a problem is solved, when a test result comes back negative, when a check arrives in the mail – our tendency is to forget to thank God. And the same is true in failing to remember those who have helped us – or in the cupbearer's case – someone who saved his life.

God uses this occasion to awaken the cupbearer's memory, and he says, "I know just the guy who can help you interpret your dream. He's a young Hebrew I met in prison. He explained my dream to me and it was fulfilled down to the smallest detail." Pharaoh said, "That's good enough for me – go get him!" Meanwhile, back in his jail cell, Joseph has no idea what was happening in Pharaoh's palace – he had no idea what God was doing behind the scenes – when out of the blue the prison guards walk down the hall, unlock his cell, and say, "Come with us." "Where are we going?" "The king wants to see you." The who?

Instead of taking him straight to Pharaoh, they say, "If you're going to stand before the king, you need a shave and a haircut, not to mention a bath and some new clothes. His change of clothes signaled a change in status – he's going from a prison to a palace – just when we're saved, we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ – and we go from being sinners to saints – from being alienated from God to being brought into His eternal family.

Verses 15-16... "Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.' 'I cannot do it,' Joseph replied to Pharaoh, 'but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.'"

The difference between Joseph and the wise men of Egypt is that Joseph had a relationship with the one true God. He says, "I don't have the answers, but I serve the God who does. If you listen to Him, He'll tell you what you want to know." Centuries later Daniel would tell Nebuchadnezzar the same thing when he found out Daniel could interpret his dream. Daniel said, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries" (Daniel 2:27-28a). So too Joseph says, "No one knows the mind of God unless God reveals it to him, and God's revelation comes to those who have a relationship with Him and whom He chooses to use."

In verses 17-24 Pharaoh recounts how he was standing on the banks of the Nile and saw the skinny cows eat the fat cows, and the thin heads of grain swallow up the good heads of grain. He says in verse 24b... "I told this to the magicians, but none of them could explain it to me." "I turned to my brightest and best, but with all their accumulated knowledge, they let me down – they couldn't come up with an answer." Pharaoh is very pragmatic – "It doesn't matter who interprets my dream – even if it's a Hebrew slave – I just want to know."

Verses 25-32... "Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, 'The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; it is one and the same dream. The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine. It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe."

The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.”

Over and over Joseph mentions God. “Your dreams, Pharaoh, are from God – I’m just His messenger – and in your dream God is revealing to you what He’s about to do – it’s going to happen – and it’s going to happen soon – so get your pen and paper out and take notes. Egypt is going to have seven years of abundance – bumper crops like you’ve never seen will be everywhere. But these seven years of abundance will be followed by seven years of famine – a famine so severe that your people will forget there were ever days of plenty.”

Then Joseph stresses the certainty of his interpretation... “The fact that you had two dreams emphasizes that God has determined to do this and you can take it to the bank that it will happen exactly as I told you.”

But Joseph’s not done – he goes on to give Pharaoh some unsolicited advice. Verses 33-36... “And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine.”

Joseph advises that Pharaoh do two things to prepare for the coming famine. Number one, appoint someone wise and discerning to manage and oversee the seven years of abundance; and number two, take 20% of the harvest from the seven good years and store it away to be used during the seven years of famine.

Verses 37-38... “The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So Pharaoh asked them, ‘Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?’” Pharaoh looks at his cabinet and says, “This sounds like a great plan to me, how about you?” They all nod their heads in agreement. Then he says, “Can we find anyone better than this guy right here to oversee this plan?” Every one of Pharaoh’s officials was eager to be promoted and here’s a young Hebrew slave, who comes out of nowhere, and is elevated over them. But if Pharaoh wants him, what can they do?

All of Pharaoh’s officials were highly-gifted, brilliant men, but Joseph was different – Pharaoh recognizes that Joseph has the spirit of God within him. Pharaoh doesn’t have a relationship with God, but he recognizes when someone does. He also observes Joseph’s discernment and wisdom in formulating a plan of action.

Verses 39-40... “Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.’”

We love rags-to-riches stories, and this ranks right up there. After 13 agonizing years of waiting, God places Joseph right where he needs to be to fulfill his plan and purpose: to save his family from extinction. The hope of the world depends on the survival of Joseph's family because God chose Joseph's family to be the line through which Jesus comes. If they perish in the worldwide famine to come, there is no Jesus and there is no salvation. Joseph is made the prime minister of Egypt – second-in-command to Pharaoh – and through Joseph God's plan to redeem the world stays right on track.

In this passage we see three main characters: God, Pharaoh, and Joseph – and each one teaches us a valuable truth. First, and most predominant, is God – and the first truth we learn is to **recognize God as the source of all knowledge**. Our trouble today is not a lack of knowledge – we have more information today than we could possibly absorb. The tragedy is that with all that knowledge we have moved farther away from God. Elite, Ivy League Universities like Harvard and Yale were founded by Christians to advance the kingdom of God.

For example, a section of Harvard's original handbook in 1646 said, "Every one shall consider the main end of his life and studies to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life. Seeing the Lord giveth wisdom, every one shall seriously by prayer in secret seek wisdom of Him. Every one shall so exercise himself in reading the Scriptures twice a day that they be ready to give an account of their proficiency therein, both in theoretical observations of languages and logic, and in practical and spiritual truths." In the first several decades, over half of Harvard's graduates became ministers. Today the chaplain of Harvard is an avowed atheist.

The magicians and wise men of Egypt were ever bit as intelligent as Joseph – perhaps even more so – but the big difference is that Joseph had the revelation of God. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-27 Paul says... "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."

God has revealed the knowledge of Himself in three ways. First, through **His creation**. Psalm 19:1-2 says... "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge." Anyone, anywhere in the world, can look up into the sky at night and know there is a creator.

Secondly, God has revealed Himself in **His Son**. John 1:18 says... "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." Jesus came as God in human flesh so that every person could see God.

Third, God reveals Himself to us in **His Word**. In the pages of scripture God tells us what He wants us to know. There are many things we don't know and won't know until heaven – but we know what we need to know to be saved and how to live a life that glorifies God.

When you recognize that God is the source of all knowledge, it leads to the second truth found in this story – a truth we learn through Pharaoh: **When you have a problem, turn first to God for help.** When Pharaoh had a problem, his default reaction was to turn to his human wise men. We often do the same thing. We take our phone out and start doing research, and you can find all kinds of good answers online – you can look up a YouTube video and learn how to change a carburetor, you check out a medical site to diagnose what the pain in your ear might be, and you can check the weather report to plan your day. The internet is an incredible fountain of knowledge – more information than we’ve ever had before – and displays God’s common grace in gifting people with skills and abilities to help creation flourish.

But human knowledge only takes us so far – it can’t answer the big questions of life: Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? The answers we most need are found in the ancient pages of God’s Word and by speaking to the source of all knowledge. The Bible has answers – either directly or by principle – to every problem you encounter. And as believers God invites us to come to Him anytime – 24/7 – and He will help us in our time of need.

Psalm 121:1-2 says... **“I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”** Whatever problem you have – even if it’s minor – turn first to the Lord for help. Before you ever reach for your phone, reach out to God.

The third truth we learn from this story is from Joseph: **Be a conduit of God’s knowledge to the world.** When Pharaoh asked Joseph to interpret his dream, he said, “It is not in me.” In other words, I’m a mere human, but God knows and He will show you. What I love about Joseph is the effect he had on people wherever he went. He’s placed in Potiphar’s house and Potiphar says, “There’s something different about this guy.” When Joseph’s thrown into prison, the warden says, “This is no ordinary prisoner, he’s special.” And when he comes before the most powerful man in the world, Pharaoh says, “This guy has the spirit of God.”

Can people say that about you? People all around you have problems – and you have the answer, not in yourself – but you can point them to God who has the answers. And you can show them by the way you live your life, by how you respond to adversity, by the way you love, by the peace you possess, and by the hope you have.

1 Peter 3:15b says... **“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”** You may be sitting in a jail cell one minute, and standing before the king the next minute – you never know when God will give you an opportunity to reveal His truth to others, but always be ready.

All the wisdom in the world cannot compare to the revelation God has given us in His creation, His Son, and His Word. In a world full of questions, God has the answers. Look to Him and help others to look to Him.

LIFT MY EYES TO THE MAKER

