

Genesis 41:1-40, No. 65**“The Essential Man”****September 3, 2017****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

As you remember, it was dreams that got Joseph into the mess he was in, but now it will be dreams that get him out and place him in a position of great favor and power in the land of his captivity.

Text Comment

- v.1 It was two years since Joseph interpreted the cupbearer’s dream, Two more years Joseph had spent in prison with no end in sight.
- v.2 Throughout the ancient world, seven was a sacred number; and the cow was both a symbol of Egypt and of one of their gods. The fact that the cows *came up out of the Nile is not simply a detail*. The Nile was Egypt’s lifeblood, the source of its power and the driver of its entire economy. [Sarna, 281]
- v.4 The grotesque image of cows eating other cows would have awakened anyone.
- v.5 Seven ears on one stalk was an image of great abundance.
- v.6 The east wind was the hot dry wind off the desert.
- v.7 Egypt was the breadbasket of the ancient world, famous for its grain. The Roman Empire would depend upon Egyptian grain for centuries. The dream had been so vivid that Pharaoh had thought it real until he woke up.
- v.8 No doubt the magicians and wise men provided some interpretation – they were not likely to have said to Pharaoh, “Sorry, King, I don’t have a clue what that means” – but the sense is that they couldn’t satisfy Pharaoh. This time he wanted the truth and knew they weren’t giving it to him! [Sarna, 282] Pharaohs attributed abundant harvests to the favor of the grain god and took them to be signs of approval. Absence of famine was a sign of the greatness of a Pharaoh. Famine was thus a humiliation for the king. [Waltke, 530]
- v.14 Egyptians were typically-clean shaven unlike men from Asia, including the Hebrews.
- v.16 Joseph did not hesitate to correct the mistaken opinion of the king. It is God alone who knows the future and can interpret the king’s dream.
- v.24 The repetition was for emphasis, but Pharaoh’s recital of the dreams embellishes them somewhat from what the narrator had first told us. All the embellishments indicate how much the king felt threatened by the dreams. The dreams were darker in his telling.

- v.25 Joseph here is cast in the role of a prophet. That is not surprising. Abraham was called a prophet on one occasion (20:7), both Isaac and Jacob predict the future in the matter of the blessing of their sons. God was with them and revealed to them at some specific points what he intended to bring to pass.
- v.32 The double dream, with a single meaning, confirmed the certainty of the prediction (Joseph, you remember had been given two dreams of his eventual supremacy over his brothers).
- v.33 The officer in question would be the “vizier,” the Egyptian minister of state or prime minister who was the executive of the government. Joseph is here giving advice to Pharaoh, telling him what he ought to do. It was daring to do so, if the advice hadn’t been solicited by Pharaoh himself, but Joseph was in a position that invested his words with great authority.
- v.35 Joseph carefully crafted his recommendations so that no one would fear that Pharaoh’s own authority would be diminished in any way.
- v.36 The fact that the future was certain did not mean that steps could not be taken to ameliorate the effects of the famine.
- v.40 The king knew immediately whom he should choose for this new position of great authority in the land, since none of his wise men had been able to interpret the dream, but we are left to wonder what the other court officials thought of Joseph being placed above them. Joseph’s elevation was remarkable, but it was not unique. Other Semites in the period achieved high office in Egypt. [Waltke, 533] To some extent Egyptian government was a meritocracy.

The account of the elevation of Joseph from slavery to the prime ministry of Egypt is now complete and the stage is set for his reunion with his brothers and the saving of his family from starvation in Canaan.

It is a wonderful account of the providential rule of God. It shows him in control of the fortunes of all the nations of the earth, a point subtly but powerfully emphasized in the narrative. Joseph was thrown into a “pit” when he was kidnapped by his brothers and sold into slavery. That was a literal pit, a cistern dug for the purpose of the storage of water. The same word is used in v. 14 for the prison from which Joseph was brought to Pharaoh. That was only figuratively a pit, but a point is being made by calling it a pit. God put him into the pit and brought him out of it years later to place him in a position to accomplish his will. The narrative is as well, a solemn reminder of how terrible the judgments of God can be. We say the word “famine” in the United States but hardly know what we are talking about. People in the ANE world knew what famines meant, as people in Africa know still today: starving children, a complete breakdown of law and order as people, desperate for food, steal and murder to obtain what little food remains. Property is lost, homes also, and people who survive a famine often remain, as a consequence, in abject poverty for the rest of their lives. But through all of this hardship, God contrived to save the world and, in particular, to save his own people, the people of his covenant.

We also have here a window on the biblical concept of government. Here is Joseph, God's man, made an official of a national government, in fact, the government of the most powerful nation on earth. And through Joseph a bond was established between God and Pharaoh, between God and Egypt. The Egyptian king, indeed, bowed to God's word. He didn't reject Joseph's interpretation of his dreams. He believed Joseph and he obeyed him. He accepted the truth and was saved by it with his country. Joseph, we will see, used imperial power wisely. All through the Bible we are given a positive view of government and the power of government, *in and of itself*. There is no repudiation of empire or imperial power in the Bible, only its sinful use, only its use apart from God and contrary to God's law and goodness.

But, there is more here than a demonstration of God's providence or a piece of the biblical doctrine of the state, important as those subjects are.

We have seen already how in the narrative of Genesis the most fundamental gospel themes are taught in and by the history itself. We will see this again, most wonderfully, in the transformation of Judah and his blessing as the ancestor-to-be of the Messiah and the King of Kings.

This "truth revealed in history" is what biblical scholars for a thousand years have called *typology*. Typology is prophecy not in words but in things, in particular persons, in events, in flesh and blood and history. This is not prophecy in a dream or a vision that reveals the future, but rather the future itself portrayed and depicted somehow in the present. A pattern is established in the events that come to pass that prepares us for events to come. Because God is the sovereign ruler of history, he is able to make that history itself a lesson in what he will do in the future.

This is particularly true of the prophecy of the coming Savior and King. The OT history is replete with anticipations of him and of his work as the redeemer of his people. Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th century London preacher, used to speak of how, in England, all roads led to London, and how in the Bible, all roads lead to Christ. Every sermon, he would say, should lead to Jesus Christ. Well, that idea can be taken amiss and often has been. A preacher should preach the sense and the meaning of the text in front of him and sometimes that meaning is not specifically about Christ and redemption. It may concern the law of God or the way of true worship, and so on. But no subject in the Bible is not in some important way related to the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior of the world, and, sooner or later, every subject in the Bible is connected up to this central message and so to the Lord Jesus himself. The meaning of human life itself, the secret of it, the hope for it, is all found in this single event: Christ came into the world to save sinners. Naturally, then, God wanted his people to be able to understand the meaning of his coming when he came, first to anticipate it, then to look back upon it as the foundation of their life.

Jesus was, after all, God the Son. The incarnation – God's appearance in the world as a man – is the very center of human history, it is the pivot around which the whole story of the human race revolves. The destiny of every man is determined by his relationship to Jesus Christ, or the lack of it. No wonder then that from the beginning of the Bible to its end, we are concerned with the

Seed of the Woman, the Seed of Abraham, through whom all the nations of the world will be blessed. No wonder that all through the OT there is a building anticipation of the coming of the one who would redeem his people from their sins and exercise his dominion over all mankind.

Do you know the poem by de la Mare, who, standing lost in wonder before a wild rose in the woods, sees its roots stretching back to the very beginning of things?

Very old are the woods;
 And the birds that break
 Out of the briar boughs
 When March winds wake,
 So old with their beauty are –
 O, no man knows
 Through what wild centuries
 Roves back the rose.

Well, in the same way, no one can compute through what long centuries the Saviorhood, the Kingship of Jesus Christ roves back. He is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God slain before the foundation of the world. The promises of the ancient covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants, the ceremonies and institutions of that worship, the events both joyful and terrible in the history of that people, her prophets, priests, and kings, her heroes and their exploits were so many signposts on the road *to Him*. The ancient Scriptures serve a multitude of uses and we love it for a multitude of reasons, but this is its noblest work, to enable us to understand more adequately, to trust more firmly, and to love more deeply our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. [Alexander Smellie in Gammie, *Preachers I have Heard*, 97]

No wonder, then, the meaning of his life and work and death is woven into the very fabric, the course of human history. No wonder that God provided so many things by which the people of God might learn of their coming Messiah, might form habits of thought congenial to their understanding his life and work when he came into the world.

You know how large this form of prophecy, this typology, looms in the Old Testament. The offices of prophet, priest, and king are themselves forecasts of the coming One who would be *the* prophet, *the* priest, and *the* king. David is so much a prophecy of the coming Messiah in flesh and blood, that the coming Messiah is simply called “David” in several places in the prophets. The tabernacle and temple are visual realizations of the atonement, of Christ’s redemption of his people. And so on. *And as long as Christians have been reading the Bible, Joseph in Egypt has been also regarded as a type, a prophecy in flesh and blood of the coming Jesus Christ.* And it is not hard to see why!

You have Joseph passing through two states or conditions: humiliation and exaltation, just as Jesus Christ would do. He was rejected by his own as Jesus would be. He brought the saving word of God to the world, just as Jesus would. As the history unfolds, this one descendant of Abraham, would prove to be the Savior of the covenant people and, in a way, of the whole world. It does not surprise us to read, as we will in v. 46, that Joseph was thirty years of age when he entered the service of Pharaoh, which was, Luke tells us, the age when Jesus began his

public ministry. And Joseph, in this high office with which he was entrusted, would now be the means of blessing Egypt and also of preparing Egypt to receive Israel, the people of God. But supremely we find in this history *one man, one faithful man, one utterly unlikely man* who saves his world, who stands between the world and utter ruin. This is a frequent theme in biblical history. As Moses was the one man who saved Israel, as David was the man who saved the people of God at a time of great crisis, as Daniel was the man who stood between Babylon and ruin, who brought truth to those who lived in darkness, so Joseph, one man, one lowly man, one man of seemingly no consequence, brought life to Egypt and then to the people of God.

Do you remember Paul's account of his preaching to the Corinthians when he first came among them? At the beginning of 1 Corinthians 2 he recollected that when he first reached Corinth as a Christian minister he preached nothing but Christ, and him crucified. That is, Paul was convinced that the only thing the world really needed to hear was the news about Jesus Christ, his death, his resurrection, his coming again, and his promise to be the Savior of all who trust in Him. Well, the Egyptians did not know it at first, but what they needed, what they really needed, *all they really needed*, was God's man, Joseph, with the truth that he brought with him. They had no idea that a famine was coming. They certainly had no idea that some Hebrew slave in one of their prisons had the power to deliver them from the death that loomed just over the horizon. Vaunted Egypt! Depending upon some Hebrew slave? The thought was ridiculous.

It is just as ridiculous today to many people – that their hope of life forever can be found only in a Jew executed by the Romans 2,000 years ago. But there are multitudes of people who already experience the famine – for famine can come in many different ways – it can come in every form of misery, despair, and hopelessness. It can come as the direct result of what people themselves have done and have become, and it can come as well from what is done to them by others. Even in the midst of the luxury and prosperity of prosperous Egypt, people can suffer famine. All around us are people like this. And here is the point: there is one man, only one in this world who actually knows what they need to know, has done and can do what they need to have done for them and who can give them what it is they seek. There is nothing else and no one else that they need than the Hebrew man who was first humiliated and then exalted to the Right Hand. He alone can lift them up and give them life, life with a capital "L."

The world is so much the same today as it was long ago. Governments of great nations seem so impressive, so powerful. It seems to many people now as then that the real power and the real hope of mankind lies in the hands of the great men who rule the world, as Pharaoh ruled the world in his day.

But Christians and the wiser sort of person know it is not so. Governments come and go and they have no power whatsoever to end the famine that afflicts the souls of men. They have no authority, in any case, beyond what God gives them and allows them. As Jesus told Pontius Pilate, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." [John 19:11] No, the real power, the real hope, the real future and the real fulfillment of human life and of human longing, that is held alone in the hands of the One who came from God and suffered and died to take away our sins, and who now summons all the world to believe in him and be saved.

I've been reminded of the story of Adoniram Judson of late because Daniel and April Murphree are preparing to do gospel work in Myanmar, what used to be called Burma. But I was reminded of Judson also because he too was imprisoned – for nearly two years – in the squalor of a foreign prison. Adoniram Judson was the first significant English speaking missionary to go to Burma and one of America's first foreign missionaries. He had been a young man at Providence College in Rhode Island in the days of Thomas Paine. Real Christianity was out of vogue then as it is today on America's college campuses. Students took pride in their unbelief and Judson among them. Like those in Egypt, these young men, in the full pride of their youth and youthful country, were sure that Christianity had nothing for them; that no message brought by some Hebrew amateur rabbi, executed as a criminal, was going to prove the secret of *their* life. It was a time to be confident in *human* potential, not a time to feel one's need for God.

At the College he met a young man in the class above him. He identifies him in his journals only by his initial, "E," but his name was Jacob Eames and he was a religious skeptic. This young man flattered Judson with his friendship. He was one of the student leaders of the new philosophy on campus and coming under his influence, Judson, though he came from a devout Christian home and his father was a Congregationalist minister, also embraced, he thought irretrievably, the modern skepticism and humanism.

One summer holiday, Adoniram Judson set out to make a tour on horseback of the New England states – the kind of thing young men of promise did in those days. One night he came to an inn and the landlord explained apologetically that the only room he had was one that adjoined the room of a young man who was very ill, perhaps even dying. Judson assured the inn-keeper that he was not put off by the prospect of illness and death – such a modern, confident young man as he was. But the wall between the rooms was very thin and all night long he listened to the anguished groans of the dying man next door. The heart-rending sounds powerfully affected him and disturbed his inner peace. But he pulled himself together. What would his college friends say if they saw his weakness, his fear, if they knew of his troubled conscience? Especially, what would Eames say, his witty, confident, clear-thinking college friend? But it was no use. All night long he shuddered at the thought of death, his own death, with death itself, as it were, just on the other side of the wall.

In the morning he asked the inn-keeper about the man in the next room. "He is dead," the inn-keeper replied. "And who was he?" asked Judson. "Oh," replied the inn-keeper, "he was a student from Providence College; a very fine fellow, his name was Jacob Eames." That moment and the few days that followed were Adoniram Judson's famine. Death had drawn near and he had no answer for it. He had had his disturbing dream as Pharaoh had had his!

And so began Judson's turn to Jesus Christ, to the sure word of the gospel of peace. And from that turning, he was to go to Burma and spread the news to an entirely different Egypt about a Hebrew man – a lowly man, Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified by the powerful forces of government – but who rose again and showed himself to be the way to God. Judson would remain in Burma for 37 years, bury his beloved wife and children there; be imprisoned himself, be sick unto death on many occasions; but he would eventually translate the Bible into Burmese, establish churches, and train Burmese young men to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and

salvation to their own people. The Karens, one of the peoples of that land, turned to Christ by the thousands.

There is but one man that the world must meet, one man who can save the world, one man able to end the famine in the souls of men and women. That man is Jesus Christ, whom Judson found in his own famine – he hadn't actually *had* the famine, he'd only had the prospect of it, the promise of it, the threat of it – and then proclaimed to countless others.

That is what must be true of us as well, brothers and sisters, this supreme confidence that all the kingdoms of this world – however impressive they may seem – are nothing, are drops in the bucket before the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone knows how to rescue human beings in the famine of life. Nations come and go, but Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever! Joseph in his life was a picture of Jesus long beforehand. Egypt is a picture of the unbelieving world. And what Joseph did is a picture of how Christ alone can save that world.

This, my brothers and sisters, is the supremely wonderful knowledge that you have, that we have together. It may seem as though the world has no interest in this knowledge – that it is a message that modern men and women will never find plausible. They will think it foolish. So, Paul says, many people thought in his day. The Burmese for years thought Judson's message was foolish. Still today people are no more likely to turn to Christ than the Pharaoh, long ago, was to go looking in his prisons for a Hebrew slave who might have the answer to his fears. But once the disturbing dreams come, and the famine strikes, things that people couldn't see before became brilliantly clear.

And believe me, my brethren, there are folk all around us who are starving to death for want of the peace, love, forgiveness, purpose, and hope that Jesus Christ alone can give, really give, give because of what the Son of God did for man when he was in the world. You and I too can sometimes doubt his power to save the world. But we should not. We know he can save others because he saved us!

Perhaps, there are folk here this morning, who are already suffering from famine in one way or another and are looking here and there, for someone to help them, to provide for them, to give them the answers that they need, to lift the burdens that weigh them down, and to comfort them in the face of an uncertain and threatening future. But there is only one man who can do that. There's always been one man. Unlikely, not obvious, at first, that he should be the man, the only man. But he will prove he can do what no one else can do.

Joseph, as only a type, an enacted prophecy of Jesus Christ, could only help Egypt through a temporary famine. He's a type, a prophecy; he's not the real thing. Christ can give the bread of life to those who trust in him.

I urge you; we who are Christians urge you: trust yourself to him, call upon him. It was Jesus Christ himself who said, "The one who comes to me I will never drive away."