

# BaptistWay: Joseph using abilities to serve others

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- *The BaptistWay lesson for July 14 focuses on Genesis 41:25-27; 45:4-8.*

The last time we saw Joseph, he was imprisoned on false charges. In this week's lesson, he breaks out of prison and rises to prominence as Pharaoh's second-hand man. This is quite a miraculous rags-to-riches story, and it includes the climactic moment of forgiveness in Joseph's life.

Of course, Joseph didn't really break out of prison. He interpreted the dreams of his fellow inmates—a cupbearer and a baker—and when Pharaoh had some dreams of his own that needed interpreting, the cupbearer remembered Joseph (41:1-13). Joseph was brought before Pharaoh, who recounted his dreams about emaciated cows swallowing up fat cows and skinny heads of grain swallowing up fat heads of grain (vv. 14-24). This isn't the sort of thing most of us have nightmares about, but Pharaoh awoke in a sweat both times.

## **Interpreting Pharaoh's dreams**

In any case, Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams. "The land will have seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine" (vv. 25-32). Joseph suggested Pharaoh appoint one man as leader and several overseers of the storehouses to store up food during the years of plenty so there would be food during the years of famine (vv. 33-36).

Pharaoh, delighted with Joseph's response, appointed the former slave and prisoner as second-in-charge over all Egypt (vv. 37-42). When Joseph rode in his chariot, everyone had to bow down to him (v. 43). This definitely was a change of status. Joseph was given a new name, Zaphenath-paneah,

which means something like “The god speaks, and he lives.” And he was given an Egyptian wife, Asenath. These acts gave Joseph authority over the land of Egypt (v. 45).

In the chapters that follow, Joseph carried out his plan. During the years of plenty, he made certain grain was stored up in copious amounts so food would be available during the years of famine (vv. 46-49). When the famine arrived and the people cried out to Pharaoh, he sent them to Joseph. Joseph distributed the food to the Egyptians from the storehouses (vv. 55-56) and even to the “world” because the famine was so severe (v. 57).

### **Mixed motives**

Of course, the “world” included Canaan, and this is when Joseph’s brothers enter the story. Unfortunately, the events in chapters 42-45 are complex and a full discussion cannot be included here. However, I would suggest Joseph’s intentions in these chapters were not as pure-hearted as some think.

Indeed, when the brothers first arrived in Egypt, they came without their father and without their brother, Benjamin. Joseph was suspicious about this and questioned them thoroughly about the welfare of his father and full-brother (42:7-16). Then, to ensure they brought Benjamin to him, Joseph accused them of being spies and forced them to leave Simeon as collateral (42:16, 42). I believe Joseph planned to liberate Benjamin from his brothers, because Joseph did not trust them.

When the brothers returned, this time with Benjamin. Joseph concocted elaborate plans to see how the brothers would respond. He gave Benjamin five extra portions at the meal he served them (probably to see if the brothers would be jealous like they were of Joseph’s cloak) (43:34). Then, he hid his diviner’s cup in Benjamin’s sack so he could accuse his brother of stealing (44:1-5).

Likely, his plan was to save Benjamin from the brothers by accusing him and then “enslaving” him. After the brothers were gone, I suspect Joseph planned to reveal himself to Benjamin and bless his full-brother with riches and safety.

### **An altered plan**

But something altered Joseph’s plans. The brothers had changed. They rejoiced at the meal and no one complained about Benjamin getting extra portions (43:34). When Benjamin was accused of being a thief and Joseph planned to enslave him, all the brothers returned (44:6-13), and Judah made a heartfelt plea, asking that Joseph imprison him instead of Benjamin (44:18-34).

These were not the brothers of Joseph’s youth. These were men who truly cared for one another, especially for their father and for Benjamin. And when he saw this, Joseph revealed himself (45:1-3) and made his famous claim: “But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt” (45:7-8).

And so, the story has a happy ending. Joseph brings his father and the entire family down to Egypt where they live secure in the land of Goshen and blessed by Pharaoh (45:17—46:34).

### **An insight from Harry Potter**

My daughter and I are reading the Harry Potter series together (probably for the seventh time) this summer. Both of us adore the books, and I get to read them aloud in my best British accent. I do a terrific Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall and Dobby, if I do say so myself, though I absolutely bungle Hagrid.

One section in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets always has spoken to me. Harry and Dumbledore are conversing about whether or not Harry should have been in Slytherin House or Gryffindor (don't worry if you haven't read the books, it's the quote below that matters).

"Voldemort put a bit of himself in me?" Harry said, thunderstruck.

"It certainly seems so."

"So I should be in Slytherin," Harry said, looking desperately into Dumbledore's face. "The Sorting Hat could see Slytherin's power in me, and it—"

"Put you in Gryffindor," said Dumbledore calmly. "Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. His own very rare gift, Parseltongue—resourcefulness—determination—a certain disregard for rules," he added, his mustache quivering again. "Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think."

"It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry in a defeated voice, "because I asked not to go in Slytherin ..."

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, beaming once more. "Which makes you very different from Tom Riddle. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

## **Choices reveal who we are**

It is our choices ... that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.

It wasn't really Joseph's abilities that made him who he was. Yes, he was talented, a natural administrator, honest and courageous. But many people are. What sets Joseph apart is he made the right choices.

He demonstrated his honesty and self-control by refusing Potiphar's wife. That was a choice. He helpfully interpreted his fellow prisoners' dreams as a favor to them. That was a choice. He administered Pharaoh's storehouses and probably had to make many difficult choices during his administration. And, most importantly, he chose to forgive his brothers for what they had done to him.

All of us have abilities and talents and gifts. Ultimately, though, it is our choices, not our abilities, that demonstrate who we truly are.