

How Big Is Your God? Genesis 41 Pastor Rebecca Voss

People stuck in prison understandably have problems. We often assume it is a character problem, perhaps a personality disorder, or possibly an addiction. Some even have a justice problem and have been falsely accused, judged, and sentenced. It's not hard to have empathy for Joseph, who has been languishing in a prison for several years after attempting to flee his boss' wife's seduction and getting blamed for her immorality.

The beginning of this chapter reminds us that everyone has problems. Even Pharaoh had several very troubling dreams that he knew were important to understand and act on, but no one could make heads or tails of what they meant. *In the morning his spirit was troubled; so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh.*" (Gen. 41:8) The ruler of the Egyptian empire felt afraid and out of control. His "best and brightest" failed him, and the power players are suddenly upended and out of the game. Pharaoh has the biggest and smartest at his beck and call, but these haunting dreams have left him very vulnerable.

Then a distant memory jolts his cupbearer, who after two years remembers Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams. Pharaoh quickly summons Joseph, who reminds Pharaoh who really has the kingdom, the power, and the glory. *"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 I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."* (Genesis 41:15-16). Pharaoh and nearly everyone around him considered him to be a divine being. Who was this rival "God" that Joseph trusts? The distress of his dream humbled Pharaoh enough to be willing to attentively listen to a prisoner who clearly didn't worship him, but rather the Hebrew God, Yahweh.

The events of this whole chapter are turning perspectives upside down. In truth, it is turning upside down perspectives right side up. The power of God is contrasted with the relatively feeble power of Pharaoh. Despite the best calculations, none of us has the power to cause the future. Yes, there are ways to be prepared and proactive, and we should be. But we must always remember that God can work in new ways in the midst of all of our plans.

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)*

Just because God's plans and ways are above ours does not mean that there should not be human preparation. It means that we should make sure our plans are responsive and faithful to God's plans. It means understanding that God is God and we are not. It means being open to seeing when our agendas are not lining up with God's plans and being willing to let go of what we want so that God can do what God wants.

A little over ten years ago I was looking out of my kitchen window in a little town in northern Illinois. Our house backed up to a field that had been subdivided into 5-acre parcels. A few people built homes with room for horses and another had a field of pumpkins growing in their space. My imagination was getting revved up while my hands washed dishes. I could buy one of those lots, preferably the one with a gently sloping southern exposure, and grow berries! There could be raspberries, strawberries, and blueberries! We could offer pick-your-own, and I could employ local students to pick the rest to sell to local restaurants and the winery nearby that was looking for a good berry supplier! I could name it "Becky's Berries"!

I grabbed my "How to Write a Business Plan" manual off the shelf and started getting everything researched and written out. I spent several days getting all my ducks in a row and was ready to share my plan with the bank to get a business loan. I stopped for nothing but a bathroom break. It was in that tiny quiet space that I was still long enough to remember to pray. "Lord, I bet you're excited about this too! Thank you for inspiring me! I guess I should make sure this is part of your dream for my life. It is, right?"

There were a few moments of awkward silence between God and me at that point. Then I heard in my heart, "Why do you want to have a berry patch?" I replied, "Because I want to plant, grow, and harvest berries that everyone will enjoy eating and that will improve their health. I want to see families spend time together outside making memories and getting red and purple stains on their hands and smiles." The still, small voice replied, "Rebecca, I haven't called you

to harvest berries. I've called you to harvest souls." I did not want to hear that, especially in the midst of my enthusiasm. It was not the first time I was reminded that I was called to ministry. I reluctantly threw my well-crafted business plan and dreams in the recycling bin and applied to seminary instead.

It helps to learn sooner rather than later that we won't get far trying to oppose God. Whether we have the power of Pharaoh or the ambition to be a five-acre fruit farmer, all human efforts and abilities will come up short compared to what God can do. When we limit God and what God can do to what our own imaginations can grasp, even the biggest dreamers among us end up humbled by the greatness of God.

God gave Joseph more than a gift of dream interpretation that got him out of jail, cleaned up, and freshly clothed for the first time in many years. God had bigger plans and gave Pharaoh the insight to recognize Joseph's gifts of administration. Through Pharaoh, God lifted Joseph from the prison cell to the palace. Only a big God can make such a big change!

The rest of Genesis 41 shares how Joseph got married to Asenath, the daughter of a pagan priest, and they have two sons. The Hebrew names Joseph gave them carry significance of faith for both them and for us. The first child was named *Manasseh* which sounds like the Hebrew word "forget". Joseph explains that "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house" (v. 51). This doesn't mean he had forgotten his family, because we'll discover how they remained close to his heart. It means that God was big enough to help him overcome (forget) the pain of rejection and betrayal by his brothers. God shows Joseph how we can move on from things we will never get over. Our scars aren't erased by time, but we can learn to forgive. Once we "forget" holding the grudge of our pain, then a second child is born named *Ephraim*. It is Hebrew for "fruitful". It is a kind of fruitfulness far higher than the berry farm of my dreams.

First we are set free from bitterness, then we experience God's blessing. We learn to trust in first in God whose grace guides us beyond our wounds and limitations, and then we can walk in true fruitfulness. Is God big enough for you to forget what lies behind and find fruitfulness beyond your imagination? As the Sunday School song goes, "Our God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing our God cannot do."