

Chapter Five

The Prison Became a Classroom

"God can use even our darkest days to prepare us for our brightest future."

The thick stone walls seemed cold and hopeless. Iron bars covered the small windows high above the prison floor. The air was damp, and the rooms were filled with prisoners who had lost all hope.

Once again, Joseph had done nothing wrong. He had been faithful and honest. He obeyed God, yet now he was a prisoner. Many people would have become bitter. Many would have blamed God. Many would have given up. But Joseph chose a different path. That first night, after the prison became quiet, Joseph knelt on the hard stone floor.

"Father in Heaven," he prayed softly, "You were with me when my brothers sold me. You were with me in Potiphar's house. I know You are here with me now. Help me remain faithful."

Joseph believed that God had not forgotten him. The next morning Joseph noticed that many of the prisoners argued with one another. Some complained constantly. Others refused to work. Joseph quietly began helping wherever he could. He swept the prison floors. He carried water for older prisoners. He shared his food with those who were hungry. He spoke kindly to those who had lost hope.

Day after day, Joseph's cheerful spirit began changing the prison. The prison keeper watched carefully.

"This young Hebrew is different," he thought. "He never complains, and he works harder than anyone. He treats everyone fairly."

Before long, the keeper trusted Joseph with greater responsibilities. Soon Joseph was placed in charge of many of the daily duties inside the prison. He organized the work. He settled disagreements and made certain every prisoner received food. He helped keep peace inside the prison walls. Even there, God blessed everything Joseph did.

One day two important prisoners arrived. One had been Pharaoh's chief cupbearer. The other had been Pharaoh's chief baker. Both men had served the king himself. No one knew exactly why they had been imprisoned. They were given a place in the same prison where Joseph lived. One day, both men looked deeply troubled.

"Why do your faces look so sad today?" Joseph asked kindly.

The cupbearer answered, "Each of us had a dream last night. We know the dreams are important, but we can't explain what they mean."

Joseph smiled gently. "Interpretations belong to God," he said. "Tell me your dreams."



The cupbearer spoke first. "In my dream I saw a grapevine with three branches. The branches quickly blossomed and produced ripe grapes. I squeezed the grapes into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup into his hand."

Joseph listened carefully. Then he said, "God has shown me the meaning. The three branches represent three days. In three days, Pharaoh will restore you to your position. You will once again place Pharaoh's cup into his hand."

The cupbearer's face filled with hope.

Then the baker shared his dream. "I carried three baskets of bread on my head. The top basket held beautiful baked goods for Pharaoh. But birds came and ate the food from the basket."

Joseph became quiet. He knew the message would be difficult. Finally, he said gently, "The three baskets also represent three days. But in three days, Pharaoh will judge you."

The baker lowered his head. Three days later Pharaoh celebrated his birthday. Just as Joseph had said, the cupbearer was restored to his position. The baker was executed. Everything happened exactly as God had revealed.

Before the cupbearer left the prison, Joseph made one simple request.

"When you return to Pharaoh, please remember me. Tell him I have done nothing to deserve this prison."

The cupbearer promised, but after returning to Pharaoh's palace, he forgot. Joseph remained in prison. Another day passed. Then another. Then another. Months turned into years. Still Joseph trusted God. He could not see what God was preparing. But God was quietly arranging every detail. The time for Joseph's greatest opportunity was drawing near.



Potiphar's House



Rachel, Joseph's Mother. She died after giving birth to Benjamin.



From the Past. Rachel gives Jacob his new son, Joseph.

Chapter Six

The Dreams of Pharaoh

“God’s answers may seem delayed, but they always arrive at the right time.”

Two full years passed after Pharaoh’s cupbearer returned to the royal palace. Joseph remained in prison. Every morning, he awakened behind the same stone walls. Every evening, he looked through the same small window toward the distant sky. Joseph may have wondered whether the cupbearer would ever remember his promise.

But Joseph continued working faithfully. He helped the prisoners. He carried out the keeper’s instructions. He trusted God even when nothing seemed to change.

Then, during one quiet night, Pharaoh had a troubling dream. In the dream, Pharaoh stood beside the Nile River. Seven healthy, well-fed cows came up from the water and began feeding among the tall grass. Then seven other cows came out of the river. These cows were thin, weak, and sickly. The seven thin cows moved toward the seven healthy cows and swallowed them. Yet even after doing so, the thin cows looked just as weak as before.

Pharaoh suddenly awakened. His heart was pounding. After a while, he fell asleep again and had a second dream. This time he saw seven full, healthy heads of grain growing on one stalk. After them, seven thin heads of grain appeared. They were dried and scorched by the hot east wind. The seven thin heads swallowed the seven full heads. Pharaoh awoke again. Morning light entered the palace, but Pharaoh could not forget what he had seen. He immediately called for Egypt’s magicians and wisest counselors. Pharaoh described both dreams and waited for an explanation. The counselors spoke quietly among themselves. Some offered guesses, but none could explain the dreams with confidence.

Pharaoh became impatient. “These dreams have meaning,” he declared. “Why can no one tell me what they mean?”

The chief cupbearer stood nearby. As he listened, a forgotten memory suddenly returned. He remembered the prison and his own dream. Most of all, he remembered Joseph. The cupbearer stepped forward and bowed before Pharaoh.

“Today I remember something I should have remembered long ago,” he said.

He told Pharaoh about the time when he and the chief baker had been imprisoned. Both men had dreamed, and a young Hebrew prisoner had correctly explained the meaning of each dream.

“Everything happened exactly as he said,” the cupbearer explained. “I was restored to my position, and the baker received the judgment Joseph had foretold.”

Pharaoh wasted no time. “Bring this Hebrew to me immediately!”

Royal messengers hurried from the palace to the prison. The prison door opened.
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Joseph,” a guard announced, “Pharaoh has sent for you.”

Joseph could hardly believe the words. He was quickly brought out of the prison. He washed away the dust, shaved, and changed into clean clothing. Then he was taken through the city toward Pharaoh’s magnificent palace. Joseph passed through enormous gateways guarded by soldiers. He walked between towering columns painted with brilliant colors. Servants and officials watched as the Hebrew prisoner entered the royal court.

At last Joseph stood before the ruler of Egypt. Pharaoh studied him carefully. “I have had dreams that no one can explain,” Pharaoh said. “I have been told that when you hear a dream, you can interpret it.”

Joseph could have taken the credit for himself. Instead, he answered humbly. “I cannot do it by my own power. But God can give Pharaoh the answer he needs.”

Pharaoh then described the seven healthy cows and the seven thin cows. He also told Joseph about the seven full heads of grain and the seven scorched heads. Joseph listened carefully. When Pharaoh finished, Joseph spoke. “The two dreams have the same meaning. God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do.” Joseph explained that the seven healthy cows and the seven full heads of grain represented seven years.

“For seven years,” Joseph said, “Egypt will enjoy great abundance. The fields will produce enormous harvests, and there will be more food than the people can use.”

Then Joseph’s expression became serious. “The seven thin cows and the seven scorched heads also represent seven years. After the years of abundance, seven years of terrible famine will come.”

The room became silent. Joseph continued. “The famine will be so severe that the years of plenty will be forgotten. The fact that Pharaoh received two dreams means that God has firmly decided this, and it will happen soon.”

Pharaoh and his officials listened with concern. But Joseph did not merely explain the danger. He also offered a solution.

“Pharaoh should choose a wise and trustworthy man to oversee the land,” Joseph advised. “During the seven years of abundance, a portion of every harvest should be collected and stored in cities throughout Egypt. Then, when the famine comes, the people will have food and the nation will survive.”

Pharaoh looked around at his counselors. No one spoke. The wisdom of Joseph’s plan was unmistakable. Pharaoh turned back toward Joseph.

“Can we find anyone like this man,” he asked, “a man in whom is the Spirit of God?”

Then Pharaoh rose from his throne. “Since God has revealed these things to you, there is no one as wise and understanding as you.”

Joseph stood silently, hardly daring to breathe.

Pharaoh continued. “You shall be placed over my household and over the land of Egypt. My people will obey your commands. Only in the throne will I be greater than you.”

The officials stared in amazement. Joseph had entered the palace as a prisoner. Now Pharaoh was placing him over an entire nation. Pharaoh removed his royal signet ring and placed it upon Joseph’s hand. He ordered servants to dress Joseph in fine linen and place a golden chain around his neck.

Then Joseph was given Pharaoh’s second chariot. As it traveled through the streets, servants went before him crying: “Bow down!”

The people watched as Joseph passed. They did not know that this powerful ruler had awakened recently inside a prison. Joseph had been thrown into a pit, sold as a slave, had been falsely accused. He had been forgotten in prison, but God had never forgotten him. Every hardship had prepared Joseph for this moment. The young man who once cared for his father’s sheep was now responsible for helping save the people of Egypt. Now, Joseph’s life changed so quickly. But God had been preparing these days for many years.

Pharaoh and his wife were like a god and a goddess to the people. Now, Joseph was elevated to be the second highest official in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. It’s true: Joseph was humble, and he bowed before the God of Israel. But at the same time, Joseph was extremely intelligent. As time will show, Joseph saved the lives of hundreds of people. Plus, Joseph’s policies added to Pharaoh’s wealth and power.



Pharoah in his “casual” wear. He and his wife are about to take a ride in his gold-covered chariot.

Chapter Seven

Preparing for the Famine

"Wisdom prepares today for the needs of tomorrow."

The people of Egypt could hardly believe what had happened. Only a short time earlier, Joseph had been a forgotten prisoner. Now he rode through the streets in Pharaoh's second royal chariot. Soldiers marched before him, calling out, "Make way for Joseph!"

Everywhere he traveled, the people stepped aside with respect. Pharaoh had placed the royal signet ring upon Joseph's hand. The ring gave Joseph the authority to act in Pharaoh's name. Joseph was only thirty years old. His work was enormous. He was responsible for preparing one of the greatest nations on earth for seven years of terrible famine.

Joseph wasted no time as he traveled throughout Egypt, studying the land God had entrusted to his care. He crossed broad fields of waving grain and visited busy villages where farmers harvested corn, wheat, and barley. As he traveled, inspected granaries already standing and ordered many more to be built. Storehouse after storehouse rose across the land. The people worked with great determination because the harvests were larger than anyone had ever seen. The Nile River overflowed its banks each year, leaving behind rich black soil. The crops grew tall and strong. Every field seemed covered with gold.

Joseph instructed the workers to collect one-fifth of every harvest. Many people wondered why so much grain was being stored. Others just trusted Joseph because they knew Pharaoh trusted him. As each harvest ended, day after day, week after week, year after year, wagons loaded with grain rolled toward the great storage cities.

During the time when Joseph governed Egypt, the King introduced Joseph to an Egyptian woman from royalty. Her name was Asenath. She became Joseph's wife. Joseph gained a glorious companion. But that event did not slow down the food storage program.

Even then, more grain continued to arrive. Soon, there was so much grain that the workers stopped trying to count it.

"There is more than the sand on the seashore," one official exclaimed. Joseph smiled. God had kept His promise.

Although Joseph had suffered greatly, he no longer allowed painful memories to control his heart. Instead, he thanked God for every blessing. At last, the seventh year of abundant harvests came to an end. The storehouses were filled and the granaries could hold no more. Then the skies changed and rains became scarce. Consequently, the fields no longer produced great harvests.

The green plants slowly turned brown beneath the hot Egyptian sun. The famine had begun exactly as God had revealed. At first the people hoped it would soon pass, but each season became worse. The grain in the fields disappeared. The rivers grew lower. Families began wondering how they would survive. Soon they came to Pharaoh asking for food.

Pharaoh gave them a simple answer. "Go to Joseph. Do whatever he tells you."

Joseph ordered the great storehouses to be opened. Doors slowly swung outward. Inside were mountains of grains collected during the seven years of plenty. The people came with baskets and sacks. Some even came with wagons pulled by donkeys and oxen. Every family received food.

Egypt survived because God had warned Pharaoh years earlier. But the famine did not stop at Egypt's borders. Far away in the land of Canaan, Jacob and his sons also felt the effects of the famine. Their fields produced almost nothing, so their food supplies grew smaller each week.

One day, the word reached them: "There is grain in Egypt."

Jacob gathered his sons.

"I have heard that food can be purchased in Egypt. Go to Egypt and buy grain, so that our family may live."

The brothers prepared for a long journey. None of them knew what awaited them. The brothers never could have imagined that the powerful, new ruler who now governed Egypt was the brother they had betrayed many years before. God was bringing the family together once again, and the greatest test of forgiveness was about to begin.



Grain Storage in Egypt





A Wedding for Joseph and Asenath

Chapter Eight

The Brothers Bow Before Joseph

“God may bring us back to the past so that He can heal what happened there.”

The famine continued to spread across the land. In Egypt, Joseph opened the great storehouses and now sold grain to the people. Families arrived from every direction, carrying sacks, baskets, and silver for food.

Soon travelers began coming from lands far beyond Egypt. Among them were ten men from Canaan. They were Joseph’s older brothers. The journey had been long and difficult. The roads were dry, the animals were tired, and every brother worried about their families waiting at home.

Jacob had allowed ten of his sons to travel to Egypt, but he kept Benjamin with him. Benjamin was Joseph’s younger brother, the only other son born to Rachel. Jacob feared that something terrible might happen to him.

When the brothers entered Egypt, they were amazed by what they saw. Massive buildings towered over the city. Soldiers guarded the storehouses. Workers carried grain through wide courtyards. Officials carefully recorded every purchase.

At the center of all this activity stood Joseph. He wore fine Egyptian clothing. A broad royal collar rested across his shoulders, and Pharaoh’s signet ring was on his hand.

Joseph had become one of the most powerful men in Egypt. The brothers approached him and bowed low to the ground. At that moment, Joseph remembered the dreams of his youth. Many years earlier, he had dreamed that his brothers’ bundles of grain bowed before his bundle. Now those dreams were being fulfilled.



Joseph immediately recognized his brothers. Their faces were older and hair and beards had changed. But Joseph knew every one of them. The brothers did not recognize him. They saw only a powerful Egyptian ruler speaking through an interpreter. Joseph's heart filled with many emotions. He still remembered the pit and their angry voices. And he could never forget being dragged away in chains. But he did not reveal himself.

Instead, Joseph spoke sternly. "Where have you come from?"

"From the land of Canaan," they answered. "We have come to buy food."

Joseph studied their faces. "You are spies," he said. "You have come to discover where Egypt is weak."

The brothers became frightened. "No, my lord," they replied. "We are honest men. We are twelve brothers, the sons of one father. The youngest is at home with our father, and one brother is no longer alive."

Joseph knew they were speaking about him. He wanted to know whether they had changed. He also wanted to know whether Benjamin was safe.

Joseph said, "Your story must be tested. One of you must return home and bring your youngest brother here. The rest of you will remain in custody."

Then Joseph placed them in prison for three days. For the brothers, the prison was frightening. For Joseph, it brought back painful memories. He had once been helpless because of them.

Now they were helpless before him. But Joseph did not seek revenge. He was searching for the truth in their hearts. On the third day, Joseph summoned them.

"I fear God," he told them. "Do this, and you will live. One of you will remain here. The rest may take grain home to your hungry families. But you must return with your youngest brother. Then I will know that you have spoken the truth."

The brothers began speaking to one another in their own language. They did not know that Joseph understood every word.

"This trouble has come upon us because of what we did to Joseph," one brother said. "We saw how frightened he was, how he begged us for mercy, but we would not listen."

Reuben spoke bitterly. "I warned you not to harm the boy, but you refused to listen. Now we are being punished for his blood."

Joseph turned away from them. Tears filled his eyes. For years, he may have wondered whether his brothers felt any sorrow for what they had done. Now he had heard their regret with his own ears.

Joseph stepped into another room and wept. When he returned, he ordered that Simeon be bound before them and kept in Egypt.

Then Joseph gave secret instructions to his servants. "Fill their sacks with grain," he said. "Return each man's silver to the top of his sack. Also give them food for the journey."

The brothers loaded their donkeys and began traveling home. During the journey, one brother opened his sack to feed his donkey. He found his silver inside.

"My money has been returned!" he cried.

The brothers stared at one another in fear.

"What is God doing to us?" they asked.

When they reached Canaan, they told Jacob everything. They described the Egyptian ruler. They told him that Simeon had been kept as a prisoner. And they explained that they could not return for more grain unless Benjamin went with them. Then the brothers emptied their sacks. Every man found his silver inside.

Jacob became deeply troubled. "Joseph is gone," he said. "Simeon is gone and now you want to take Benjamin away from me."

Reuben promised to protect Benjamin, but Jacob refused.

Jacob says, “My son will not go with you. His brother is dead, and he alone remains of his mother’s children. If anything happens to him, sorrow will bring me to my grave.”

The brothers could not change their father’s mind. For a while, the family had food, but the famine continued. The grain from Egypt slowly disappeared. Soon Jacob would have to make a painful decision. And Joseph would have to decide whether his brothers were truly different from the men who had once sold him.



Pharaoh gave Joseph supreme authority, and Pharaoh gave his ring to Joseph.