

Understanding the Basics of Bible Prophecy

Session 2: Principles from Dreams in Genesis

(Foundations of the Historicist Method)

Introduction: *In this lesson we are going to explore*

- 1) *The Dreams of Joseph in Genesis*
- 2) *The Dreams of Pharaoh's Servants in Genesis, and*
- 3) *The Dreams of Pharaoh in Genesis*

We'll be looking at the principles, symbols, and applications as used in this first book of the Bible, Genesis, to determine how God gives us Bible prophecy, what He means to accomplish by it, and how we are to *understand* it clearly.

This lesson lays the biblical foundation for understanding all Bible prophecy correctly.

Let's proceed to our first section, on the Dreams of Joseph.

I. The Dreams of Joseph

Joseph's dreams are not the first prophetic dreams in the Bible. Noah received instruction from God, as others (Gen. 6:8-22) though perhaps not in a dream – there is no mention of a dream or of symbols. *Abraham* had prophetic dreams, though they were quite *direct* instruction, and *not greatly symbolic*, though some symbolic meaning was present (i.e. the sacrifice and God's glory consuming it – vs. 17). For example, in Genesis 15:1 Abraham had a *vision* where God instructed him. On the same day God also gave him a *prophetic dream* with direct instruction (not symbolic; Gen 15:12-21). God *fulfilled* His word (Gen. 16-17, 21). Jacob's dream in Genesis 28 has *some* symbolism (vs.12; John 1:51), but is mostly literal instruction.

The dreams of Joseph, Pharaoh's servants, and Pharaoh are *highly symbolic however*. They superbly lay a foundation for understanding *apocalyptic prophecy as in Daniel and Revelation*.

Joseph's 1st Prophetic Dream: Genesis 37:4-8

- a. God *knew* the *trouble that was brewing* in this great controversy between good and evil. He knew what was happening and going to happen.
- b. God was giving Joseph *dreams to encourage him and guide him* through the dark times coming just ahead of him. Direction, meaning, and purpose were revealed.
- c. The dream is *symbolic*, yet clear in meaning.
- d. An interpretation is clear to the brothers, and stated in God's word.

- e. The *truth* of the dream became a testimony to all. Joseph told it faithfully exactly as it was shown him. Though, Joseph was hated and persecuted for sharing it, even by his own brothers. **Do not miss this point.**
- f. God puts dreams and visions into symbols for a reason. Not everyone will be receptive to the **real** meaning or message of such dreams and visions.
- g. The devil is ready to persecute and kill those who carry the real truth of Bible prophecy (See **Revelation 12:17; 19:10**).
- h. Even from our own “brothers in the faith” will persecution and killing come for simply *bearing, believing, and practicing the truth of God’s word and prophecies*.
 - i. Is it not true that Christ “our brother” was killed for envy and truth, even by religious fellows?
 - ii. Is it not also true that Cain killed Abel his righteous brother because Abel kept God’s commandments and the faith of Jesus? (**Gen. 4:2-8**)
- i. Prophecy is CLEAR. This same scenario will happen in the last days to God’s faithful bearers of the message and faith of Christ. (Matt. 24:9-12; Mark 13:12-14; Revelation 13:7,10,15,17; 14:12).

Joseph’s 2nd Prophetic Dream: Genesis 37:9-11

- a. There is *clearly* **repetition** of the SAME MESSAGE in **different symbols**.
- b. It was given at a future time, after the first dream.
- c. The repetition signifies the importance of it and confirms the message.
- d. The message was also **ENLARGED** (now father and mother are brought in)
- e. So, we have the **principle of “repeat and enlarge” established** here for apocalyptic/symbolic prophetic visions and dreams.
- f. This time, the effect of sharing the symbolic prophetic truth was more anger and more people angry. (but the father perceived something true from God in this)
- g. All of this is true of the dreams and visions in Daniel and Revelation. For example, we find the “repeat and enlarge” concept used heavily there, especially in Daniel 2, 7, 8, and 11, and all throughout Revelation.
 - a. Different symbols, same message
 - b. Repeat and enlarge
 - c. Also, more hatred and killing of the faithful who bear the message (Dan. 11:32-35; Revelation 13:7, 15).

II. The Dreams of Pharaoh’s Servants

When Joseph was unjustly imprisoned in Egypt (from the “false” affair with Potiphar’s wife), he made the best of it and worked and served nobly for God there, conducting himself with honor. God set him up as a leader and helper, a respected man in the prison. Joseph only had the HOPE provided by his prophetic dreams to **keep him going** during these darkest hours, knowing and believing that God would do something great for him! It was at this time and place that God

brought about circumstances for Joseph to mingle with high officials of the royal court in a place of their humbling. This later led to his connection with the Pharaoh and God's placement of Joseph over all the land of Egypt. While the Pharaoh's **butler and baker** both fell into suspicion with the Pharaoh, they were placed in the same prison as Joseph, under his care. God then gave them troubling and mysterious prophetic dreams, to bring them into connection with His servant Joseph for godly answers. (In later history, God would do similar troubling for Nebuchadnezzar)

The dreams and Joseph's interpretive work are very instructive for us on prophecy.

The backdrop is found in Gen. 40:1-5. Joseph cheerfully served and got to know the chief baker and chief butler of Pharaoh a bit. He recognized how the dreams changed them.

Joseph Hears the Matter and Explains "Interpretations" (Gen. 40:6-8)

- a. Joseph points out that **"interpretations belong to God"** (v.8) and reveals that he is a servant of God – "tell me, I pray you..."

The Butler shares his Dream (v.9-11)

Joseph Interprets the Dream and Appeals (v.12-13, 14-15)

Notice:

- a. The overall *tenor* of the dream was **good**. The event pictured in symbols seemed to be a good one, and the outcome of it was in fact good, for him.
- b. The **number** provided in the dream was **significant**. It was a **literal number**, but **figurative/symbolic units**. *Three branches represented three literal days of time.*
 - i. Numbers are significant and have literal counterparts in the real world, when compared with the prophetic symbols.
 - ii. Certain "units" (like "branches") can represent other things like literal "days," for example. But the number tends to stay consistent.
 - iii. In **Daniel and Revelation's prophecies** we have **examples** such as "the ten horns," the "3 ribs," the "four heads," or "7 heads," etc. The number is consistent, while **the unit** represents something important which **varies**.
- c. **God provided the interpretation to His prophet** (i.e. Joseph). The prophet then gave the interpretation, later to be recorded in the Bible. **Bible interpretation**.
 - i. The important part to notice here is that **God provides the interpretation of the "units" or symbols. It is REVEALED IN HIS WORD.**
 - ii. *"20 Knowing this first, that **no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation**. 21 For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost"* (2 Peter 1:20-21). [The Holy Spirit has a definite meaning intended]

- d. All prophetic dreams, as this one, have **real world outcomes**. They declare real truth for the real world – a special message God wants us to know!
- e. Let the Bible interpret the symbols (i.e. its own symbols). DO NOT try to interpret them yourself, thus coming up with your own “private interpretation” which the Bible says is wrong and a big no-no (2 Peter 1:20).

The Baker then shares his Dream (v.16-17)

Joseph (the Bible prophet) then Interprets the Dream (v.18-19)

The predictions then happened EXACTLY as interpreted (v.20-22)

Notice:

- a. The overall *tenor* of the dream was **bad**. The event pictured in symbols seemed to be a bad one, and the outcome of it was in fact bad for the Baker.
- b. Again, the number was significant. The unit or symbol was figurative, in this case representing literal “days.” The three “white baskets” represented **three days**.
- c. **Keep this in mind** when you study Bible prophecy. The number will usually be literal while the “unit” or symbol employed *figuratively represents something significant*. **Also remember that God interprets the symbol. The Bible has the correct interpretation of the symbol. (You must *study* to know *the real meaning*)**
- d. The real-world events happened EXACTLY as God said they would. **You can be sure that Bible prophecy, RIGHTLY UNDERSTOOD, will unfold in the real world precisely as God has revealed to us. THEREFORE, it BEHOOVES US to understand precisely what the Bible is trying to communicate to us and NOT MERELY WHAT WE THINK it is saying to us. (see the distinction here?)**

That brings us to our third and final section, the dreams of Pharaoh.

III. The Dreams of Pharaoh

Let’s notice a few details about Pharaoh’s dreams, as found in Genesis 41.

We see again, these dreams are **symbolic in form (not literal)**. **Yet, the events described are very real** and **actually take place in history**. (i.e. symbolic prophecies)

Dream One of Pharaoh. Read Genesis 41:1-4. Notice again:

- a. The **number is significant and literal** (but the unit symbols represent specific real-world events, and vary between dreams) (7 good cattle, 7 bad eat the good)
- b. The event **order is also significant** (First the well favored. Then, the lean)
- c. The **actions** are significant (the lean ones **eat up** or devour the good ones—so they must be pretty bad in comparison, and consuming)

- d. The **characteristics** are significant (Bad vs. Good)
- e. The **source** is significant. They both “came up” from the River—the River would have suggested the “Nile,” which was connected with the prosperity and life of Egypt’s crops and of Egypt itself. The famine would be throughout the land of Egypt...though some other areas were touched too, such as Canaan.

Dream Two of Pharaoh (v.5-8)

- a. **Repetition** using *different symbols* (all the significant characteristics of the first dream stayed the same though). By repeating the vision w/different symbols God made a deeper impression on Pharaoh’s mind as to the importance of this (so also with Dan. 2, 7, 8, 11). It was “doubled” to Pharaoh so he could know it was from God (not just a regular or unimportant dream) (Gen. 41:32). This gave surety to the fact that these things would happen.
- b. *Accurate* interpretation is critical! (v.12-13) (and leads to future faith).

God interprets the Dreams through His Prophet (v.15, 16)

- a. Pharaoh was searching for *accurate interpretation* (v.15).
- b. Joseph points out God provides accurate interpretation (v.16)
- c. **(v.25-32)—the two are one.** (doubled instruction means *extra important*)
- d. We should DO SOMETHING about it (**v.33**). *Prophecy revealed and rightly interpreted requires a **plan of action and action*** (v.34-36).
- e. Wisely, Pharaoh implemented the plan, took action, and spared many souls through **heeding** God’s prophetic counsel (v.37-57).
- f. Revelation 1:3 counsels us to *heed* God’s prophecies and reap the blessings.

IV. Overview of Primary Lessons on these Dreams

- 1) God gives dreams and visions to share *important messages* with people.
- 2) God often *repeats and enlarges* especially important messages.
- 3) God often uses *different symbols* to describe the *same message*.
- 4) Symbolic visions and dreams point out *real future events*. (often spanning multiple years)
- 5) Accurate *biblical interpretation* is essential.
- 6) *Accordingly, plans of action and action* are essential to *wisely heed* the message of God.

Appeal: Do you want to commit to seeking accurate understanding and interpretation of God’s visions and dreams (aka Bible prophecy)? Will you seek to plan and act wisely, accordingly?

Looking Ahead: In our next lesson we’ll cover *Bible Prophecy Symbols and Applications*.