



When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile,² when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds.³ After them, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank.⁴ And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.

⁵ He fell asleep again and had a second dream: Seven heads of grain, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk.⁶ After them, seven other heads of grain sprouted—thin and scorched by the east wind.⁷ The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads. Then Pharaoh woke up; it had been a dream.

⁸ In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him.

⁹ Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “Today I am reminded of my shortcomings.¹⁰ Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard.¹¹ Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own.¹² Now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us, giving each man the interpretation of his dream.¹³ And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was hanged.”

¹⁴ So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh.

¹⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.”

¹⁶ “I cannot do it,” Joseph replied to Pharaoh, “but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”

¹⁷ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “In my dream I was standing on the bank of the Nile,¹⁸ when out of the river there came up seven cows, fat and sleek, and they grazed among the reeds.¹⁹ After them, seven other cows came up—scrawny and very ugly and lean. I had never seen such ugly cows in all the land of Egypt.²⁰ The lean, ugly cows ate up the seven fat cows that came up first.²¹ But even after they ate them, no one could tell that they had done so; they looked just as ugly as before. Then I woke up.

²² “In my dreams I also saw seven heads of grain, full and good, growing on a single stalk.²³ After them, seven other heads sprouted—withered and thin and scorched by the east wind.²⁴ The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven good heads. I told this to the magicians, but none could explain it to me.”

²⁵ Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁶ The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; it is one and the same dream. ²⁷ The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine.

²⁸ “It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹ Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, ³⁰ but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. ³¹ The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe. ³² The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.

³³ “And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. ³⁴ Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. ³⁵ They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. ³⁶ This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine.”

³⁷ The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. ³⁸ So Pharaoh asked them, “Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?”

³⁹ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. ⁴⁰ You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.”

I was talking politics with someone this week and I made the comment how not only politics but all of life boils down to the issue of power. For example, there are some members of congress who are multi-millionaires and a few have hundreds of millions of dollars. Why would they want to run for a high elected office? They don't need more money but what they seek is power and influence. I am not suggesting that all of these people want to wield power for their own selfish pursuits. Some do want to have a genuinely positive influence on our government and society but there is no doubt that the appeal of power is pervasive and alluring. Power controls every society, every group and every relationship. Husbands and wives are often locked in a battle for supremacy in the relationship even though they are probably not aware of what they are doing. If the husband wants control he is generally more heavy-handed and authoritarian. He might raise his voice or move closer to you and get in your face. When a wife seeks to control the relationship she is more subtle in her approach. She is more likely to use her words and feminine appeal to get what she wants. But whether heavy-handed or subtle, the end goal of both people is to gain control over the other.

To some degree, the pursuit of power affects every relationship, every social group, including churches, and every level of government, from the city council to the oval office. Please don't misunderstand—I am not saying that power is a bad thing. God ordains power and authority at every level of society. In Romans chapter thirteen Paul wrote that ‘there is no authority except that which God has established (Ro 13.1). God has established authority structures in governments, in churches and in families and such power can be used either for righteousness or evil.

There are many themes and principles in this part of the Joseph story, but one of the most obvious theme is power. The two main characters are Pharaoh, king of Egypt and Joseph, a prisoner and slave. Humanly speaking, Pharaoh was the most powerful man on the earth. Egypt was the superpower of its day and Pharaoh was the high king. His power was absolute. Joseph on the other hand had been stripped of his family, his heritage and his rights. Under the power of the Egyptian rule, Joseph had no more rights than a clay pot. There could not have been more disparity between these two men—one had absolute power and the other had absolutely no power. But as the story unfolds, we will come to understand that there was a power infinitely greater than Pharaoh's directing every part of this drama.

According to Moses' telling, the powerful man had a dream. We know the dream by now. The skinny cows eat the fat cows and the skinny grain eats the fat grain. This is not the kind of dream for which Martin Luther King Jr. is famous. Pharaoh did not wake up in the morning and inspire his officials with a rousing speech. "I had a dream that the fat, healthy cows of racial harmony rose up out of the Nile. In my dream the skinny cows of racism and hatred tried to eat those the fat cows of racial harmony, but they could not prevail! Racial reconciliation will overcome!"¹ No, it was not that sort of dream. Nor was it the kind of dreams that I have, where I can't remember the combination to my locker at high school, where I am late for class and suddenly I am being chased through the hallway by a wild animal and then I start having a conversation with a herd of pink elephants and to top it off, I fall off of a cliff but thankfully wake up before I hit the ground otherwise I would have died in real life. ☺ These are the kinds of dreams that you and I have and they are more inspired by too many slices of pepperoni pizza than they are by anything of a spiritual nature.

In contrast, Pharaoh had an intense dream, actually it was two dreams. We all know what it is like to have one of those restless nights where we don't sleep well and we keep moving in and out of our dreams. Pharaoh had an intense dream and then woke up. He fell back to sleep and had another intense dream and woke up again. We are told that these dreams troubled him. This is reminiscent of the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel's time. In his first dream, Nebuchadnezzar was so troubled that he demanded that his magicians interpret the dream as well as the content of the dream. Pharaoh at least told his magicians about his dream and asked them to interpret.

Here is another place that we see the theme of power in the story. Pharaoh was the most powerful man in the world and he was also worshipped as a god, yet he doesn't have any idea what his dream meant. Pharaoh relied upon his officials to make decisions and upon his magicians for the miraculous and hidden knowledge. Pharaoh fully expected them to possess the power to interpret his dream but they could not do so. There wasn't an army on the earth that could defeat the power of Pharaoh's army yet he was easily defeated by these strange dreams. I get the sense that Pharaoh was deeply agitated and anxious about the meaning of these dreams. You can detect his level of anxiety when he recounted the dream to Joseph later in the chapter. Pharaoh added specific details of his dreams. In verse 19 he described the skinny cows, saying, "I had never seen such ugly cows in all the land of Egypt." He added more details in verse 21. "But even after they ate them, no one could tell that they had done so; they looked just as ugly as before. Then I woke up." I don't know about you, but I almost immediately forget the details of

my dreams but Pharaoh continues to remember the vivid details. It was deeply upsetting to him and he would not rest until he had an answer.

Just then the cupbearer enters onto the scene and he recounts the events that are recorded in Genesis 40. The cupbearer had forgotten all about this slave named Joseph who had with precision accuracy interpreted his dreams and that of the chief baker. Verse fourteen reveals more of the urgency of finding an answer. *So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon.* This whole scene could either reflect the wisdom of Pharaoh or his desperation—or both. It could show his wisdom in the sense that he was not above looking in the most unlikely places for the answer to his problem. How likely would you be to search through a prison for someone to help you with any sort of problem? If you really needed help with a drug deal a bank robbery or a white collar crime, then by all means, look in the prisons but I wouldn't trust my deepest secrets to a dirty, smelly, bushy-bearded prisoner from a foreign land.

Do you recall our chart of ups and downs in the life of Joseph? When we have the end in mind, the whole thing begins to make sense. We see that God had orchestrated every step in the process. I like that word—*orchestrated*. I think it is helpful word in understanding the sovereignty of God. A conductor of an orchestra is responsible for every note played by every musician in the orchestra. On one hand, the conductor makes his musicians play the right notes but on the other hand each musician is free to play whatever notes they choose. I think this is a good picture of the convergence of God's sovereignty and human free will. But I would take the analogy a few steps deeper. If God is the conductor, he is not merely directing the musicians and the notes on the page, he was also the composer of the piece. Furthermore, he gifted the musicians with their individual talent. He created the concept of music and art. He created sound waves and eardrums and intelligence to be able to play the notes with musical expression. In short, God as conductor guarantees that exactly the right people with the right gifts will play the exact right notes and the right time but all of it is done without squashing their freedom and responsibility to play the right notes at the right time.



It is in this sense that God orchestrated the events of Joseph's life including everyone with whom he interacted. Joseph's brothers were made jealous so that they would get angry and sell him into slavery. Potiphar's was directed to purchase Joseph on the very day he was in the slave market instead of buying any other slave on any other day. Potiphar's wife was made into a temptress and an adultress so that she would ultimately be rebuffed by Joseph which caused him to be thrown into prison.

Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker did something to offend him such that they were thrown into the prison with Joseph. The cupbearer forgot about Joseph so that he could remember the incident at the point when Pharaoh was most desperate and Joseph was most needed.

Therefore we could say that God causes people to freely choose everything that fits into his perfect plans and purpose. This may sound like a contradiction at first but I assure you it is not. I

talked about the theme of power and this is the real power in the story. The real power is the sovereign power of God directing everything behind the scenes. How else do you account for such a crazy story as this one? The ruler of the world has a troubling dream and one of the men in his inner circle offers a suggestion. "I have an idea. I once knew this Hebrew slave in prison who could interpret dreams. I'll tell you what we should do. Let's give him a shave and a haircut, throw some perfume on him to hide the stench, dress him up in Egyptian clothes and parade him in here and see what he has to say! If nothing else it'll be good for a few laughs, maybe take your mind off of your horrible nightmare. Whaddya say Pharaoh, buddy?" The whole idea is madness. And the really crazy part about this is the fact that Pharaoh was dead serious. You would think that the story would be written with Joseph as the new court jester. It sounds like an idea conceived by a bunch of half-drunk fraternity brothers playing a practical joke on their professor. But it's not. As they say, truth really is stranger than fiction. This powerful man not only comes face to face with the man with no power, but at that moment, Pharaoh is actually in a subservient position of sorts. If Joseph really can interpret his dream, then even though he was sitting on his throne as the exalted king, Joseph had brought Pharaoh to his knees begging for help. The very fact that Pharaoh initiated bringing in Joseph tells us that he thought it was entirely possible that Joseph could help him. Why? Why would such a possibility have even entered his mind? Was it out of desperation? Was the cupbearer a smooth talker and incredibly convincing?

When I open the pages of this story, the sovereign power of God literally drips off of its pages. His sovereign power runs down the page and onto my wrists and flows down my arms. I realize you could say the same thing about practically any portion of Scripture, but it just hits me on the head like a hammer again and again in this story. God controls everything. God will bring about his sovereign purpose and plan. We must realize that unless God is absolutely sovereign he ceases to be faithful. In other words, God's faithfulness is inseparable from his sovereignty.

This becomes clear by asking a simple question. Can God perfectly keep all of his promises if he cannot control their outcome? The answer is an obvious no. For example, if I promise to take my kids to Dairy Queen this afternoon, can I be certain of fulfilling that promise? Now if I was the kind of father who routinely made empty promises and never kept them, that would be one thing. If in answer to my promise, my kids said, "Oh right dad. You have been saying that *every* Sunday for the past three years and you've *never* done it!" But if I was the kind of father who moved mountains to keep my promises to my kids, could they depend on me 100%? The probability may be extremely high but there is no way I could ever make a promise with a 100% guarantee. And why is this the case? Because I cannot control every conceivable circumstance regarding getting my kids to Dairy Queen that very afternoon. An emergency might arise that would pull me away. Both of our cars might break down. Maybe I will break my leg between then and now. Perhaps they will run out of ice cream at Dairy Queen. The likelihood of actually getting to Dairy Queen is mostly within my control but there are any number of circumstances that are outside of my control and would prevent me from keeping my promise.

But every promise that God makes has a 100% guarantee of fulfillment and this can only happen because God controls 100% of every conceivable action of every person and anything else that could happen right down to the rotation of the electrons around the nucleus of every atom. If this were not the case, then all of God's promises would at best be hopeful. Granted, God has a lot

more resources available to him than I do, but if he is dependent upon other people to follow his plan, then he cannot control the outcome. And if he cannot control the outcome, he cannot fulfill any promises and if he cannot fulfill his promises he ceases to be faithful.

I hope that the application of this truth is abundantly clear. It means that no matter what life throws at you, God controls all of it. No matter what is swirling through your life or those around you, not one slightest piece is outside the control of God's sovereign power. Now for some of you, that thought scares you to death because you think it means that God might be responsible for bringing evil into your life. Many Christians hold to what is called the Openness of God doctrine which states not only that God doesn't control all things but that he doesn't even have full knowledge of all things. The first point in our denomination's statement of faith was written with the express purpose of denying this false doctrine.

1. We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power**, God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.

One of the goals of holding to a belief in Open Theism is that it gets God "off the hook" so to speak. If God doesn't know or doesn't control the bad things in life then I can't blame him and my so-called "faith" is secure. But such a belief is nowhere supported in Scripture. Job's wife taunted him with a similar attitude.

His wife said to him, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:9-10)

That's a powerful question—"Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" If God is sovereign over everyone and everything, then the answer is no, we will accept both good and trouble. But if he is not sovereign, then the bad things that come our way are just mindless, horrible things about which God can do nothing. Now that is a horrible thought—a God who stands by and wishes us well but has no power to help. This is not the way that Joseph understood his God. After the guards pulled Joseph from the dungeon, gave him a shave a haircut and a new set of clothes, he appeared before mighty Pharaoh who said, *"I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."*

In my opinion, this is the turning point of the entire story. If Pharaoh had not trusted the report of his cupbearer he never would have brought this slave up from the prison. But there he stands with an offer to interpret the dream that the god-like Pharaoh and his magical magicians cannot accomplish. Take careful note of Joseph's response. *"I cannot do it."* Before Joseph finished his sentence there must have been an earth shattering sonic boom rumble through Pharaoh's head. Joseph could have taken credit for his understanding of dreams but he denied it in the most vigorous of terms. *"I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."*

Individual Christians and churches as a whole would do well to remember and live out this simple phrase. “I cannot do it, but God will...” How can you apply that to your life this very morning? What are you facing this week that has this as the answer? “I cannot do it, but God will...” The problem is that we often flip this phrase on its head and think, “I’m not sure if God can do it, but I will...” We don’t actually say such a thing because that sounds blasphemous but when we move ahead or make decisions in our own strength and our own wisdom, we might as well have said it out loud, “I’m not sure if God can do it, but I will...” And sometimes the greatest enemy in our lives is not the trials and failures but it’s the successes. The more success we get the more likely we are to go it alone.

“I cannot do it, but God will...” is precisely what Jesus taught in John 15 when he said “Apart from me you can do nothing.” It means that nothing we do will have an eternal value. It will not pass through the purifying flames.

Remember when I said that all of life revolves around the use of power? Well this simple phrase is the answer to the issue of power. I don’t have any and God has it all. But what if God doesn’t answer my prayer according to the way I want him to? Then it shows that you are depending on yourself again. You are depending on your own wisdom. You are saying that God’s way is not right and your way is better. You are robbing God of his sovereignty. “I cannot do it, but God will...” does not mean that he will do what you think is right but he will always do what he thinks is right. Shall we accept good from God and not trouble? If we abide in Christ we can do both

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¹ I intend no disrespect whatsoever toward King and his amazing speech. I encourage the reader to read or listen to it as well as my personal favorite, King’s [A Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#).