

# STEPS TOWARD SPIRITUAL MATURITY

*Joseph: Man Of Faith...Image Of Christ*

by Ron Ritchie

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In 1983 I was fifty, and my son Ron, Jr. was about to turn twenty-one. So I invited him out to dinner at a local restaurant to celebrate his passage into responsible manhood. At the same time I wanted to have a last man-to-man conversation with him about all the spiritual and practical principles I had learned in my fifty years on this earth about my relationship with the Lord, women, money, and the choice of a career. We had a wonderful dinner, and then during dessert I asked him if I could share some of these things. He said he would really like that. So I began laying out some basic principles of life, and some of my mistakes as well as some of my successes. He sat there listening for more than an hour, and then when I was finished I asked him if he had any comments or questions. I will never forget his mature response:

"Dad, I heard every word you said. But could I just ask you one question?"

"Yes, of course," I said.

"Do I have to be fifty at twenty-one?" my beloved first-born asked. For as he listened he understood that physical, emotional, and spiritual maturity doesn't happen overnight, but it is a process that continues over a lifetime, and he was hoping that I also understood that.

The process of maturity is what we will consider as we again look at the life of Joseph the patriarch in Genesis 40-41.

In Genesis 37-39 we found that Joseph, the eleventh and most beloved son of Jacob, had been given two dreams in which his family would bow down before him sometime and someplace in the future (Revelation 12). This caused his brothers' hearts to become filled with hatred to the point of murder. They sold him to some traveling Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt and in turn sold him as a slave to Potiphar, the captain of the Pharaoh's guard. In Pharaoh's house God was with him and richly blessed everything he touched, so much so that he became second in command of the house and fields. However, Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of attempted rape, and he was placed in the king's dungeon. While he was in prison the warden saw his administrative ability and put him in charge of the whole prison including all the prisoners. The secret of Joseph's success in Potiphar's house and then in the prison was the spiritual reality that "the LORD was with Joseph." And as we have seen and will continue to see in this story, Joseph was a man of faith and an image of Christ.

Now, it appears that Joseph came into Potiphar's house at the age of seventeen, and he would become vice-president of Egypt at the age of thirty (see 41:46). It is unclear how long he was working in Potiphar's house, but we do know that he spent more than two years in the Egyptian dungeon (see the terms "for some time" in 40:4, and "two full years had passed" in 41:1). But it was during these thirteen years that Joseph matured in his spiritual walk with the Lord. He had to hold onto the revelation God had given him that one day God would place him in a position of power and honor. From his life we can gain much insight to help us in our own process of becoming spiritually mature. According to Paul's letter to the Ephesians (4:15), "...We are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head [of the body], even Christ." Becoming spiritually mature takes time for all followers of Christ, and our Lord may use a variety of trials, temptations, and persecutions to bring us to the place where we can be used by him to the blessing of others in the body of Christ and to our own personal joy. One of the first lessons we all need to learn is to....

**Trust in God regardless of the circumstances**

## Genesis 40:1-23

We'll take a brief look at chapter 40, then spend more time on chapter 41. As our story opens Joseph might have been about twenty-eight years old when Pharaoh threw his chief cupbearer and chief baker into jail, and the captain of the guard (who could have still been Potiphar) assigned them to him. One morning he found them in a state of depression because they couldn't interpret the dreams they had had the night before. (The Egyptians had a belief, widespread in antiquity, that "sleep puts us in real and direct contact with the other world where not only the dead but also the gods dwell. Dreams therefore are a gift from the gods." (Vergote, *Joseph en Egypte*.) Joseph took advantage of this "teachable moment" and told them of his relationship with *Yahweh*, the one and only living God in this land of hundreds of manmade gods. And then he asked them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams." Joseph's attitude was consistent with the Old Testament's rejection of occult practices and its reliance on prophecy as a means of discovering God's will (see Deuteronomy 18:10-22).

Dreams are a sequence of sensations, images, thoughts, etc. passing through a sleeping person's mind. Some dreams, because of their clarity, are the seeds for poetic and musical invention, scientific solutions, and spiritual perceptions. Some dreams are just the revelation of our true nature, because in dreams there are no moral or ethical restrictions, and the images are filled with sinful actions and selfish hopes and goals (see Mark 7:20-23). (We are like computers: "Garbage in, garbage out.") Some dreams have spiritual content that God uses to speak to the godly, such as Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph; and the ungodly, such as King Abimelech (see Genesis 20:3-7).

In this story God wanted to use Joseph as his instrument to interpret the dreams of others. At this time Joseph didn't know that his spiritual ability to interpret these dreams would eventually be used of God to bring him into the presence of Pharaoh, who in turn would be the instrument of God to fulfill the dreams God had given to Joseph when he was seventeen years old in Hebron, Israel.

The chief cupbearer was not only responsible for tasting Pharaoh's wine for drugs or poison before he drank it, but he was also a trusted political advisor. Verses 9-19:

So the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream. He said to him, "In my dream I saw a vine in front of me, and on the vine were three branches. As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and put the cup in his hand."

"This is what it means," Joseph said to him. "The three branches are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon."

When the chief baker saw that Joseph had given a favorable interpretation, he said to Joseph, "I too had a dream: On my head were three baskets of bread. In the top basket were all kinds of baked goods for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head."

"This is what it means," Joseph said. "The three baskets are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat away your flesh."

Three days later Pharaoh had a birthday party and invited the chief cupbearer and the chief baker to attend. He restored the chief cupbearer and hung the chief baker, just as Joseph had said. The chief cupbearer, however, forgot all about Joseph.

As Joseph suffered unjustly in prison before he was released and placed on a throne, so Christ came to this earth to suffer unjustly on our behalf. As the writer to the Hebrews would tell all of us, "...let us run with

endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:1-3). First the cross, then the crown.

When fear overtakes us at times, we need to stop and remember that the Lord is still with us, then review the truth we find in Joseph's story: In spite of our desires to the contrary, we do find ourselves in these dungeon experiences, but God uses them to mature us. And spiritual maturity begins with learning to live by faith in God regardless of the immediate circumstances. Faith is the belief in invisible realities (Hebrews 11:1-2). The Lord was invisible but ever present with Joseph and blessing him. And so by faith Joseph depended on the Lord to give him the ability to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker.

The next step in the process of becoming spiritually mature is to...

### **Stop trusting in ourselves**

Genesis 41:1-16

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

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

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.

Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "Today I am reminded of my shortcomings. Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard. Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. 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. And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was hanged.

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.

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."

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

Two years have passed, and Joseph was thirty years old but still in the Egyptian dungeon waiting on his Lord. Then one night God gave Pharaoh two dreams. Kings were thought to be close to the divine realm, so they were often credited with revelatory dreams according to the ancient oriental texts. The Pharaoh was troubled and sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt to interpret his dreams. They had four clues out of their Egyptian religion: First, seven was a sacred number sometimes symbolizing fate (for the Hebrews it symbolized completion, based on Genesis 1-2, where God created the world in seven days). Second, the reeds by the banks of Nile symbolized the vegetation alongside the Nile. Third, the Nile was both the basis and the

symbol of Egypt's power and wealth, for as it overflowed it became the source of the fertility of the land. And fourth, the cows were the symbol of Egypt as well as one of their goddesses, Isia. Isia was the goddess of the all-sustaining earth, and in the hieroglyphics the cow represented the earth, agriculture, and food. But even with these four clues the magicians were unable to provide any spiritual wisdom or reasonable interpretation.

Job would later write during his season of suffering (12:13-22),

"To God belong wisdom and power;  
counsel and understanding are his...

He leads counselors away stripped  
and makes fools of judges...

He silences the lips of trusted advisers  
and takes away the discernment of elders...

He reveals the deep things of darkness  
and brings deep shadows into night."

But finally the cupbearer remembered Joseph and told Pharaoh about his dream as well as the baker's dream, and how this Hebrew prisoner had interpreted them both to the letter: "I was restored to my position, and the other man was hanged." So Pharaoh sent for Joseph and brought him out of the dungeon. Then they shaved him (the Egyptians hated hair and would shave all the hair off their bodies and then wear wigs), changed his clothes, and brought him before the king. Joseph, the former shepherd, slave, and then prisoner, stood before the king of Egypt. The king repeated the dreams to Joseph with the hope, based on the story of his cupbearer, that he would be able to interpret them. Joseph once again gave honor and glory to *Yahweh*, saying, "I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."

Joseph was again an image of Christ in his dependence on God. "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in Him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing...Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love" (John 15:5-10).

Learning to live by faith in God regardless of the circumstances and no longer trusting in ourselves are both possible when we are...

### **Filled with the Spirit of God**

Genesis 41:17-38

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream I was standing on the bank of the Nile, when out of the river there came up seven cows, fat and sleek, and they grazed among the reeds. 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. The lean, ugly cows ate up the seven fat cows that came up first. 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.

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

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. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; it is one and the same dream. 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.

"It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and famine will ravage the land. The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe. 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.

And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. 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. 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."

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

When Pharaoh told Joseph about his two dreams, he added a little more insight to the dream about the cows: The second herd of seven were the ugliest cows he had ever seen in Egypt, and even after they ate the first seven they were not any fatter. Then Joseph told him by the power of the Lord God of Israel, "Both dreams mean the same thing. God has told Pharaoh what he is about to do in Egypt. The seven fat cows and full heads of grain are seven years, and the seven ugly cows and worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind are seven years of famine." The ugliness of the thin cows represented evil in contrast to the good. Joseph is the embodiment of the ideal of true wisdom. The ability to discern between good and evil comes only from God. Blessings were to come through Joseph to his own people as well as to all the nations, according to the covenant of God.

"My God *Yahweh* has revealed to you that Egypt will experience seven wonderful years of abundance for its people, but then the famine will be so bad that no one will remember the 'good old days.' 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." At that moment Joseph was cast in the role of a prophet of God, as Abraham (see 20:7), Isaac (see 27:27-29) and Jacob (see 48:15-49:27) had been before him.

But Joseph not only interpreted the dreams; he then gave wise discernment on how to deal with the coming famine: "Pharaoh, here is what you need to do as soon as possible: (1) Find a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. (2) Appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of all the grain from the farmers each harvest and store it during the seven good years to be used during the seven years of famine, so that the nation will not be ruined by the famine."

Pharaoh and all his officials liked the plan of Joseph. "So what we need to do is find a man just like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God [the spirit of *Elohim*, the spirit of supernatural wisdom and insight]."

Here Joseph was an image of Christ in that, as Moses said of the One God would send, "The Lord God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed in everything He says to you. And it shall be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people." (Acts 3:22-23; see also Deuteronomy 18:15.)

Spiritual maturity begins with learning to live by faith in God regardless of the immediate circumstances, followed by no longer trusting in ourselves, which are both possible when we are filled with the Spirit of God. Then we can meet the goal of spiritual maturity, which is getting into a position where God can bless many people through us. However, as Joseph spent thirteen long years in slavery and prison before God would begin to bring blessing through him, we need to be aware of the danger of getting into a position of leadership

before our time. If that happens, we may end up hurting many people. At the same time, we find that God uses us all the time in the midst of the ongoing process of maturing us. And as we allow the Spirit of God to rule in us, eventually we can...

### **Allow the Lord to raise us up**

Genesis 41:39-57

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 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."

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, "Make way!" Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt." Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt.

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from Pharaoh's presence and traveled throughout Egypt. During the seven years of abundance the land produced plentifully. Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it. Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure.

Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."

The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food. Then Pharaoh told all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph and do what he tells you."

When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world.

The king was encouraged to believe Joseph, because in contrast to the complexity the magicians had put into their attempts to interpret his dreams, Joseph's interpretation was clear and practical. Notice that the Egyptian rulers didn't like to work! (1) Potiphar turned everything over to Joseph, (2) the prison warden turned everything over to Joseph, and (3) now the Pharaoh turned everything over to Joseph (of course, in each case Joseph was under their authority).

So Joseph was put in charge of the whole land of Egypt (the fulfillment of his first dream). He was given the Pharaoh's signet ring of authority and dressed in robes of fine linen (remember, his brothers took the first one). He was given a gold chain around his neck and a private chariot. Men shouted before him, "Make way!" He was second in command in Egypt, having the final word after Pharaoh.

There are numerous examples of Semites rising to positions of great authority in Egypt from

the Middle Kingdom...and New Kingdom periods. One of the most striking parallels from the time of Akhenaton is that of Titu, who, among other offices, was appointed "highest mouth in the whole country." This last title meant that he had total authority in the special task he was given and was responsible only to the Pharaoh. It is one of the titles that Joseph is supposed to have had. The wall paintings on the tomb at Tell el-Amarna show Titu's appointment by the Pharaoh, who is putting the golden necklace of office around his neck. They also show him leaving the palace, getting into his chariot and riding off as the people prostrate themselves before him in acclamation. (*Word Biblical Commentary* , Volume 2, Gordon Wenham.)

He was given Potiphara's daughter Asenath in marriage. (Potiphara was a priest of On, the sun god, and his daughter belonged to the goddess Neit. From a very early date there was a celebrated temple of the sun god in Egypt. It had a learned priesthood, and it held the first place among the priest colleges of Egypt.)

Pharaoh changed Joseph's name to Zaphenath-Paneah ("Support/Sustainer of Life") with reference to the call entrusted to him by God. Joseph would become the preserver of Egypt as well as his own family. For the next seven years, Joseph went throughout Egypt collecting a fifth of the abundant wheat harvest and storing it in the cities surrounded by the respective fields. There was so much wheat that he stopped keeping records.

Joseph and Asenath had two son before the famine. The first was named Manasseh ("God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household"). We might wonder what "forget...all my father's household" meant. It could not have meant that he had really forgotten, or he would not have mentioned it. It may have meant that he now saw that the days of evil and struggle had been erased by the joy of his new position as vice-president of Egypt, in which he could bring blessings not only to the nations but to his own family as well. Others have thought that it referred to the spiritual insight that God was going to use him as shown in his two dreams, and his time as a slave had all been part of the plan for his life to bring glory to God and blessings to the nations as well as to his own family.

Joseph's other son was named Ephraim ("God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering"). Joseph's suffering was real, but out of it came an abundant life. He had suffered physically and emotionally as a slave, but he was spiritually fruitful as he realized he was a partial fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in which blessing would come to many. Ephraim would become one of the most fruitful tribes (see Deuteronomy 33:17). Both names have a note of thankfulness to the God who preserves and blesses. Both confirm God's promise: "I am with you" (see 39:3, 21, 23). Thus Joseph was expressing his faith that God had been with him and had blessed him. This brings to mind Psalm 105:1, 16-19:

"Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,  
make known among the nations what he has done...  
[God] called down famine on the land  
and destroyed all their supplies of food;  
and he sent a man before them---

Joseph, sold as a slave.  
They bruised his feet with shackles,  
his neck was put in irons,  
till what he foretold came to pass,  
till the word of the LORD proved him true."

The great famine of the prophecy finally arrived, and it affected not only Egypt but other lands including Israel, where Joseph's family lived in Hebron. But because of the wisdom of Joseph there was now food in Egypt. When the people of Egypt went to Pharaoh and cried out to him for food, he told them to go to Joseph. Joseph then opened the storehouses and sold to the people the grain that he had been storing for the last seven years. Then the word got out, and all the countries that were affected by the famine also began sending their people to Egypt to purchase grain. And once again this was part of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant as stated by God to Jacob in a dream: "...In you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Genesis 28:14.)

As Joseph was moved by God from the position of a slave to that of a prophet and ruler, so we can see in him the image of Jesus' exaltation before his humiliation. As all were to bow before Joseph, so all shall bow before Jesus:

...When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human!...It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death---and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion.

Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth---even those long ago dead and buried---will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11 in *The Message*, a modern paraphrase by Eugene Peterson.)

Spiritual maturity begins with (1) learning to live by faith in God regardless of the immediate circumstances. The next step is to (2) no longer trust in ourselves. All this is possible when we are (3) filled with the Spirit of God. And then we (4) allow the Lord to raise us up at the right time to serve him all the days of our lives.

No, we don't have to be fifty at twenty-one. But the Lord wants us to allow him to begin the process of making us spiritually mature, to his glory, our joy, and the blessing and saving of many lives.

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Ron Ritchie  
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