

Yes, Prime Minister

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 November 2000

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 26th of November 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Yes Prime Minister and is from Genesis chapter 41 verses 15 to 49.

Well, let's pray that God will help us to understand what this reading is about and apply it in our lives and thinking.

God, we thank you that you are a God who reveals yourself to people in this world, primarily now in these days through your word in the scriptures. And we pray that as we look at it, you will speak to us, to our hearts, that we may not only understand but also live this word for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Rags to riches stories hold endless fascination for us. The biographies of the famous and the rich are always, it seems, on the best-selling shelves in the bookshops.

[1 : 1 1] The novels of Charles Dickens are perennially popular. Stories of people like David Copperfield, Oliver Twist and Pip in Great Expectations who go from being virtually nothing, cast out of society, to becoming wealthy or important or famous.

Those sorts of stories, whether fictional or true, often have their popularity because they inspire the normal people of society to strive or dream, at least, for something greater, something better.

Here in those sorts of biographies or novels, we see people who are down and out in rags, ordinary people, perhaps like you and me, who somehow, through some means or mechanism, become famous, influential, rich, wealthy, etc.

Sometimes they achieve that through strokes of good fortune, they might say. Luck, a lucky break, a fluke, a chance conversation with somebody in a street or cafe.

Sometimes they tell us that the reason for their success or influence is because they're ruthless or they're cunning or they're optimistic or they're full of positive thinking. All sorts of formulae for success those books give us.

[2 : 2 7] It's the same too with prime ministers, I guess. The most unlikely people often become prime ministers. You don't have to look far to find one. But there are others as well.

I mean, I don't mean... I mean, in Australia. But, I mean, who would imagine that a grocer's daughter would become the longest-serving British prime minister for over 150 years?

Margaret Thatcher, no less. Who would believe that the son of a circus performer and a collector of garden gnomes would become her successor as a prime minister of Britain?

Though perhaps not so notable. And who would imagine that Jim Hacker, a most incompetent and bumbling person would end up being prime minister through, I guess, a compromise, of course, in political circles.

A dopey compromise at that. Well, the story of Joseph is a rags-to-riches story. Quite literally, in fact. His garment we saw last week was torn from him by Potiphar's wife.

- [3 : 32] He's left literally with rags and he ends up literally in riches and wealth and influence. No wonder this became a popular Lloyd Webber musical. The music didn't do it any good.
- It's the story that made it so popular, surely. It could be read as a story of lucky breaks, good luck, fortune, almost a sort of case of fatalism, perhaps.
- A fluky conversation in prison. But rather, it is in fact a story of a sovereign hand of God working to bring about his purposes in and through unlikely means and indeed an unlikely person and people.
- Remember back to last week, if you were here. Joseph was thrown into prison, not for wrongdoing, but for his moral uprightness at refusing the sexual advances of his master's wife, Mrs. Potiphar.
- There in prison, his exemplary behaviour leads to him being respected and honoured and in a sense amongst prisoners being promoted so that he had some charge over other prisoners in the pharaoh's prison.
- [4 : 38] Now we find in chapter 40, before the passage that was read and acted for us, two of pharaoh's servants join him in pharaoh's prison. Pharaoh literally is king, king of Egypt.
- That's his title, not his name. And his cupbearer and his baker join Joseph in prison. We don't know what they've done wrong. It doesn't matter for the story, but they're there in prison.
- And that's at the beginning of chapter 40, verses 1 to 4. And both of them then, we're told, dream. One night, they both dreamed the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt who were confined in the prison.
- Each his own dream and each dream with its own meaning. Both of them, not only dreamed, but both of them were troubled by their dreams.
- They couldn't understand them and interpret the dreams. When you read what their dreams are, you think, well, it's fairly obvious, the general thrust of it. But they were troubled. Probably in ancient Egypt, like many ancient societies, there would have been professional people of the court whose job it was was to interpret dreams.
- [5 : 43] But when you're stuck in prison, you don't have access to the local dream interpreter's shop. So they're troubled. And Joseph, who has some exercise of custody over them, asks them, why are your faces downcast today?
- And they reply to him, we have had dreams and there's no one to interpret them. Joseph doesn't bat an eyelid, but says to them in verse 8 of chapter 40, do not interpretations belong to God.
- Not to professional people, but to God. And then he says, please tell them to me. Well, what a juxtaposition. Don't interpretations belong to God, well, tell them to me then.
- See, Joseph is claiming, without really arrogance, I think, interpretations belong to God, but God has entrusted that sort of gift to me. If you want to find out God's interpretation, tell your dream to me and I'll tell you the interpretation.
- Here's a man full of confidence in God, even though he's wallowing in Pharaoh's prison, unjustly and unfairly. Now let me say, we ought to be careful about dreams.
- [6 : 56] I think a lot of people get a bit messed up sometimes by dreams. Psychologists tell us that we all dream, and probably every night, even though most of us, most nights, don't remember what we dream.
- Often I find that some of the dreams I remember are rather surreal, really. All sorts of unlikely events and combinations of events and people happen. It's a bit hard to make any sense of it, and I try not to bother.

But sometimes I find that dreams are just my anxieties being expressed through the night. Building incredible buildings on this site, for example. That actually wasn't my dream, it was one of the church warden's dreams about a week or two ago, that there was a grand new cathedral building here.

As I've said in a previous sermon, I remember about 10 or 11 years ago, the night before the first wedding that I took, having terrible dreams about marrying the organist and the bridegroom and all sorts of other combinations of people.

And I woke up to find it was untrue, thankfully. God, I think, rarely uses dreams to communicate these days. It is a possibility, but I think it's rare.

[8 : 09] It is indeed rare in the Bible that God uses dreams to communicate. It happens a lot with Joseph, and it happens here and there with Daniel, for example, and then another Joseph, the father, humanly speaking, of Jesus, in a sense.

A few other occasions in Scripture, but even in the Bible, God speaking through dreams is rare. I suspect it is just as rare today, if not rarer, and the reason for that is the means by which God communicates to us is primarily through Scripture.

But of course, Joseph and Daniel and some of the others didn't really have Scripture like we have it. So God used dreams perhaps a little bit more frequently than he does now. But for two Egyptian prisoners, troubled by their dreams, what did they mean?

Well, firstly, the cup bearer to Pharaoh, probably the person who was the waiter and brought him drinks at his table and so on. He tells Joseph his dream. Chapter 40, verse 9.

In my dream, there was a vine before me and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand.

[9 : 25] This is the sort of fast forward type dream. All of a sudden you've got branches, they blossom, they bud, they're fruit, the fruit is picked, it's squeezed into a cup and the cup is taken and it's wine. You don't have to wait many months or years for these grapes to ferment.

This is a fast forward type dream. What does it mean? Well, Joseph gives his interpretation in the verses that follow. This is his interpretation. He says, the three branches are three days.

Within three days, Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. Straightforward.

But then Joseph adds a plea. He seizes the opportunity. Having just said that within three days this cupbearer languishing in prison is going to be restored to his office as cupbearer to the king, Joseph takes the opportunity to make a plea, a request.

It's fairly polite and it's fairly humble. He says, remember me when it is well with you. Please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh and so get me out of this place.

[10 : 35] And then he pleads his innocence. For in fact, I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews and here also I've done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon. Twice Joseph has suffered unreasonable hardship, being sold by his brothers into slavery and then by being placed in prison unjustly as we saw last week.

The baker has been hearing all this. He's heard a favorable interpretation to the cupbearer's dream that he's about to get out of prison so he thinks, hey, this sounds a pretty good idea.

Let me tell you my dream. So he does. Verse 16 and 17 of chapter 40. I also had a dream. There were three cake baskets on my head and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head.

Joseph interprets that. I'm not sure the baker expected such an interpretation. This is its interpretation, Joseph says. The three baskets are three days.

Within three days, Pharaoh will lift up your head. The same expression he's just used for the cupbearer. But for the cupbearer, the expression to lift up your head means to restore to office, to exalt you and honour you.

[11 : 54] But notice now what Joseph's interpretation of this dream is. Pharaoh will lift up your head from you. That is to separate your head from your body. That is basically to execute you.

And he will hang you on a pole. Probably it means to impale you rather than actually hanging. and the birds will eat the flesh from you. That is, he'll probably be beheaded and his body will then be impaled on a pole and left outside on a pole for the birds to eat the flesh.

I bet the baker wished he'd never asked. Three days later, it's Pharaoh's birthday. Happy birthday, Pharaoh. And on his birthday, we're not quite sure why.

The cupbearer is released from prison and restored to his office and the baker is executed. We don't know why they ended up in prison. We don't know whether this is unjust of the baker or whether it's even unjust for the cupbearer.

But it doesn't matter. The point is, they had a dream and Joseph said, God interprets dreams, tell them to me. He interpreted them to them and the dreams were fulfilled exactly as his interpretation said.

[13 : 06] That's the point. God is with Joseph, we saw last week, in prison, as he was with him in Potiphar's house. And here is evidence of God being with Joseph because Joseph interprets the dreams according to God, the interpreter of dreams.

But, despite the fact that God was with Joseph in prison, the end of chapter 40 tells us that the cupbearer forgot.

The chief cupbearer, the one to whom Joseph had pleaded, remember me and make mention of me to Pharaoh when you get out of prison. He forgot. Well, we all forget things, don't we?

It's no big deal, perhaps. And surely in the euphoria of being restored to your office, who's going to worry about some foreign prisoner? Nameless, perhaps, even in prison.

Joseph is forgotten. We might well think, how much bad luck can a bloke take? He's been betrayed by his brothers because he had a dream and a fancy coat and he's sent off to a foreign land.

[14 : 09] He does all the right things in the service of a chap called Potivar, but Mrs Potivar sort of gawks and lusts after him because he's good looking and as a result of all that, despite doing the right thing, he ends up in prison.

Doubly bad luck. Betrayed by brothers and sent to prison by the man whose wife wanted him. And now in prison, he interprets dreams, he rises up within the prison, highly respected, the dreams are fulfilled exactly as he has interpreted and he's forgotten.

It seems that Joseph just can't get one thing right. Welcome to the real world, Joseph. That's what life's like for lots of people.

You can do the right thing time after time after time, but you may not prosper from it. There are plenty of good and upright people in our world who suffer for their goodness sometimes.

There are plenty of people whose ethical work principles are upright and fine, they care for their employees and for their customers and their company goes bust.

[15 : 16] Whereas there are others who have underhanded deals, who know people, who tap their nose knowingly and their companies prosper. The good suffer often.

The bad prosper often. See, you're on your own, buddy. The end is the breaks. You've got to make your own luck, Joseph. Don't rely on anyone else.

You've got to do it. You've got to be ruthless. That's what our world tells us all the time. Or is it true? Two years later, the baker's been dead two years, the cupbearer's been back in office two years, and Joseph is two years older in prison.

And now we get more dreams. Two dreams this time, again, but both by the same person. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt himself. And the dreams as we heard in the reading that was read for us actually occur at the beginning of chapter 41.

The first dream is that Pharaoh is standing by the Nile River, the Murray River equivalent of Egypt. And they came up out of the Nile seven sleek and fat cows.

[16 : 26] Don't say that in a hurry after a drink. And they gazed, they grazed, rather, in the reed grass. Then the second part of the dream, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile.

And then, unusual for cows, the ugly and thin cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. Cows don't normally eat other cows, and Pharaoh awoke. Well, you can understand why.

Then he goes back to sleep again, and then comes dream two. Seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. And then the second part of the second dream, then there were seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind, the wind that comes from the desert from the south and the east, the Arabian and perhaps the eastern bit of the Sahara desert, sprouted after them.

The thin ears of grain swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Well, ears of grain don't usually do that either. And Pharaoh awoke, and you can understand why.

After awaking, Pharaoh is troubled. We're told that his spirit was troubled, so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men.

[17 : 46] You don't know whether anyone came, but presumably lots did. But there was no one who could interpret them, the dreams, to Pharaoh. Here's the king of Egypt, the world empire of the day, probably.

And he's impotent, helpless, because he's had dreams and he's troubled because nobody, none of all his richly paid courtiers, the people who've done university degrees in dream interpretation and Jungian and Freudian psychology, no doubt to boot, can't do a thing for him.

Pharaoh is stuck, helpless. Important people, in fact, you can tell, I think, the importance of a person by how difficult it is to speak to them.

They're often screened from callers and messages by a whole array of secretaries and aides and assistants. The other week I rang up the archbishop. I wanted to have a two-minute conversation with him.

I spoke to his secretary who told me that I would have to wait until the next Thursday, a week later, before I could fit in a two-minute phone conversation with the archbishop. I felt rather frustrated and I felt like bringing him at home because I happened to have his home number and his secretary doesn't work from there, but I thought I'd better not.

[19 : 02] I know that his secretary, Elaine, protects him like a hawk, so much so that Margot, the archbishop's wife, often has trouble talking to him as well. I'm sure it's the same with the prime minister.

You can't just get on the phone and say, is that John Howard, the prime minister? You'd probably get some under-secretary who'd pass you through to another secretary, to another secretary, put you on hold listening to tinny music and in the end you give up.

Well, God doesn't acknowledge the sort of protocols to important people. He barges in, out of hours, at night, with a dream. Pharaoh's secretaries can't stop God getting to Pharaoh.

And God intervenes with two dreams to Pharaoh this night, two years after the release of the cupbearer and the execution of the baker. Pharaoh. The cupbearer may have forgotten Joseph, but God hasn't.

It takes him two years, but now he's getting through to Pharaoh with dreams. And as a result of Pharaoh being troubled by these dreams, the cupbearer remembers at last.

[20 : 03] I forgot, he said. There was a man in prison who, when I came out of prison, I had said that I would plead his case to you, Pharaoh, and I forgot. But I've remembered now.

And he can interpret dreams in effect. So Joseph is retrieved from prison. He shaves because that was the ancient Egyptian practice. We know from ancient pictures and drawings and inscriptions that the ancient Egyptians would be clean shaven, whereas the ancient Palestinians or Canaanites or others would all have beards, at least the men, I presume.

And he was clothed. After all, he had to be clothed because he just had some rags in prison, the torn bits of clothes that he did manage to keep off from the clutching claws of Mrs. Potiphar.

Joseph is brought to Pharaoh. And literally, in the way it's written in Hebrew, his first words to Pharaoh were bold. God, he said to Pharaoh.

Now, to the Egyptians, Pharaoh was a god, a divine figure whom they would worship. That's part of the thrust of the book of Exodus, when all the plagues of Moses come against Pharaoh.

[21 : 16] It's actually a contest between God and God, or Pharaoh and God. That's the contest. And the same here in Joseph's day. Pharaoh is a divine figure for the Egyptians.

They would, in some respects, worship him as one among many gods that they would worship. But this Pharaoh god is rendered impotent by a dream. And Joseph is doing everything he can, as swiftly as he can, to undermine Pharaoh's claim to be divine.

So in verse 16, Joseph answered Pharaoh, and the word order is literally, God, not I, will give Pharaoh a favourable answer. That's a bold statement to a person who claimed to be God.

But Joseph is saying there is actually a real God, and you are not a God, you're impotent, you're stuck, you're troubled, the real God will interpret your dream. Not even me, Joseph.

My ability comes from the real God, not from a court or a university degree in interpretation. So Pharaoh retells his dream to Joseph. Just as we read it at the beginning of the chapter, so Pharaoh retells it again.

[22 : 26] The repetition in the story underlines the importance of the dream, the significance of it, the troubling of Pharaoh, and the way he tells it to Joseph, underscores the fact that he's really alarmed by what he's seen, how ugly the cows are, how blighted the grain is, and so on.

And yet again, Joseph doesn't miss a beat. He doesn't pause for prayer. He doesn't go and consult a prayer book or some sort of book about how to interpret dreams. Virtually, it seems, if you read the story fluently, without a breath, Joseph replies with the interpretation from verse 25 onwards.

God has revealed what he's about to do. That's the thrust of the dream. It is God speaking. It's God revealing the future to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.

Seven years of plenty will follow, and then after that will come seven years of famine. And there is an emphasis in Joseph's interpretation in these verses 25 onwards on the famine.

It's going to be bad. The years of plenty are described in just one verse really, but a few verses are given over to the description of the years of famine, because that's the significance of the dream.

[23 : 34] For example, in verse 31, the plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous. This is significant famine indeed, so much so that people will even forget the abundant years that preceded it.

And Joseph says the doubling of Pharaoh's dream, that is having dreams about cows eating cows and grain eating grain, good following bad, good following bad. The doubling of the dream is to say that it is certain, fixed by God that is, and it's imminent.

It's about to happen. We're not talking about something that's going to happen centuries later. This is near. It's about to happen. If you remember, Pharaoh's dream occurred, well not the dream didn't occur, but in the dream, Pharaoh was at the Nile River.

The Nile for Egypt is the source of life. It's water, hence life. It is the fundamental means by which people in Egypt, ancient and modern, live, have irrigation, crops and animals that can stay alive.

The Nile itself is almost worshipped, or was in ancient Egypt at least, as some sort of life-giving god. Just under a year ago I was in a plane flying down the Nile River, or at least above it, along the Nile River before flying to Nigeria from Cairo.

[24 : 55] And it's quite stark. The Nile River runs down like that. For a few hundred metres either side there is rich greenery. And then there is a very clear line when you go to yellow sand.

Very clearly, if the Nile was not there, Egypt would be desert and death. The Nile is the source of life for the people of ancient and modern Egypt.

Very much so. But the Nile isn't divine. That's part of the context of where the dream occurs, by the Nile. See, ancient Egyptians and Pharaoh would have honoured in some way the Nile as that divine life source to some extent.

But nature isn't to be worshipped. Mother nature doesn't have any children. She's not a goddess. She doesn't have any control on world history. Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream says that God alone is sovereign.

Not nature, not the Nile, not any river for that matter. Plenty and famine are in the control of God's hand and God's alone. That's in effect what Joseph is saying here by way of interpretation of Pharaoh's dream.

[26 : 14] God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. Not God saying what nature is going to do. Not God saying what is determined by fate or by any other gods.

It is God saying what God will do. He is the one who controls seven years of plenty and he is the one who controls seven years of famine to follow on after the years of plenty. Well now comes the beginning of Joseph's rehabilitation in a sense into society.

Again it seems Pharaoh is impotent because Joseph having interpreted the dream goes on in verse 33 to give advice. Unsolicited it seems. Pharaoh doesn't say well what on earth am I going to do here?

Joseph just plows on saying this is Pharaoh what you should be doing. He advises him how to act. He says to him in verse 33 you've got to appoint a wise and discerning overseer. Somebody who will manage this situation knowing what the future has.

Well it's a bit ironic to say you've got to find a very wise person to do this because we've already heard earlier in the chapter that all the wise men of Pharaoh's court couldn't actually even interpret the dream. So when Joseph says find a wise man to do this we're meant to be thinking is there one who can do that?

[27 : 28] And then he says you've got to get this person and some other assistant overseers to enforce a tax of 20% so the grain can start to be stored up from the years of plenty for the years of starvation and famine that are following.

And that grain in verses 35 and 36 is to be kept in a reserve and guard and protected so people won't loot it so it's there for the years when it's needed. Well Pharaoh does what Pharaoh has to do.

Joseph is the only candidate who qualifies for the position of overseer of all this. So Pharaoh appoints him in effect as prime minister. From prison to prime ministership in one day that's a fairly meteoric rise though it has happened in world history.

When governments are toppled in coups someone can come out of prison and become a prime minister in a day. I think more or less that happened in the Czech Republic. East Timor is perhaps not quite so rapid but a similar sort of thing I guess is on the way.

The man who was left in rags last week is now clothed with the clothes of royalty and prime ministership in verses 41 and 42. Maybe not a doctor's stethoscope, maybe not a suit coat but certainly the clothes of Egyptian royalty are conferred on Joseph as a sort of installation ceremony in effect that he's now become the prime minister.

[28 : 48] The only thing that lies outside the domain of Joseph's rule is the throne of Pharaoh. Just as in Potiphar's house last week everything was under the control of Joseph except Potiphar's wife so now everything is under the control of Joseph.

Nothing is accepted except the throne of Pharaoh himself. The man who was promoted in Potiphar's house then we saw fall into prison.

The man who was promoted in prison we saw then forgotten in prison. The man now is promoted over the nation of Egypt under Pharaoh alone. Will there be yet a third fall or not?

Dreams have marked these two chapters, chapters 40 and 41. But there's one dream that is still hanging in the air like a nightmare, a dark cloud over this story.

The cupbearer's dream was fulfilled to his relief, he was restored. The baker's dream was fulfilled, he was executed. Pharaoh's dreams, as the story goes on to show, are also fulfilled.

[29 : 55] Seven years of plenty do come, followed by seven years of famine. But the very first dream in this story is yet to be fulfilled. The dream that Joseph himself had in chapter 37 as we saw a fortnight ago.

The dream by which he was being honoured and bowed down to by all his family, his brothers and his father as well. That was the dream that began his troubles of course, that led to the jealousy of his brothers and led to them selling him into slavery.

But that one dream remains yet to be fulfilled. All the later dreams are more quickly fulfilled. But not Joseph's dream. Could it be that that dream lies beyond the bounds of possibility for God?

It's hard at this point, even when he becomes Prime Minister, to see that dream being fulfilled. But of course there's more to the story yet, as we'll see next week. Joseph's rise is not a lucky break.

It's not ingenuity. It's not his own ruthlessness or his own skill. It's not the sort of formula you'll find in the books of the rich and famous who came up from rags to riches. God is the one who's brought Joseph to be Prime Minister.

[31 : 08] God alone. He's done it through dreams. Dreams of Joseph, a cupbearer, a baker and the Pharaoh. And God has one dream yet to fulfil. And it is God who guarantees the future.

It is God alone who's sovereign. It's God who's in charge. Pharaoh would have thought that he could do whatever he liked, but he can't. He can't even get his dream interpreted. And he can't control the destiny of famine and plenty either.

See, what guarantees the future? What does our society tell us guarantees the future? What does our society tell us? A-M-P? A-L-P? You see, economics and money, or politics and politicians, they don't guarantee the future.

All the planning in the world by able or stupid men is not going to do that. What about Mother Nature? Fatalism. The stars. That doesn't control the future any more than a government or an insurance company.

Only God. A God who's sovereign over nature. Who's sovereign over economies. Who's sovereign over nations. Who's sovereign over individuals. In prison or on a throne.

[32 : 22] It is God who controls the future. It is God in whose hands is the destiny of us as individuals, as a group, as a world.

Despite the incongruities of life, its difficulties, its frustrations, its lack of reward for the righteous, its prosperity for the wicked, despite all of those troubles, God is in control and sovereign.

And his purposes he will fulfill in his time and in his way. God doesn't promise riches for every rag that a Christian has.

Indeed many Christians find their life full of hardship and difficulty, strife and grief. But God does promise us heavenly glory. He does promise us clothes of righteousness.

He does promise us crowns in heaven. And the God who is sovereign and in control is guiding by nature and history to that end and that purpose for his glory.

[33 : 25] And he calls us like Joseph to trust in him and trust in his sovereignty.