Pharaoh’s Dreams

In Ernest Hemingway’s “The Sun Also Rises” the character Mike Campbell is asked “How did you go bankrupt?” He answered “Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly”. His bankruptcy was the culmination of years of bad decisions, profligate spending then a crisis (perhaps brought on by some heartless banker who demanded payment on a loan). While Campbell’s gradually then suddenly experience was negative, we see this phenomenon at work in many areas with positive or neutral results. A good example is the trend in recent years of working from home as technological advances made telecommute a new word. What was a steady increase in employees working from home became an avalanche as the COVID 19 virus forced companies to close offices that had previously held multiple workers, often in close proximity.My personal gradual/suddenly experience occurred in 1985. I was a few months into a year long training program with a bank in Greenville when I transferred to Sumter. My training program was cut sort as I was thrust into managing a branch of the bank. Joseph experienced something of this sort as we see in our study of Chapter 41 of Genesis.

The chapter begins with Pharaoh having 2 dreams which troubled him. In his first dream he saw 7 sleek, fat cows grazing only to be eaten by 7 ugly, emaciated cows. His next dream was similar with poorly developed heads of grain consuming larger healthy heads. He summoned magicians to interpret his dreams but none was able. His cupbearer then mentioned Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams the cupbearer had witnessed 2 years before. He seemed to insinuate that he was faulty in not remembering Joseph before but it is likely that once he was released from prison, he had no interest in advocating for Joseph. Joseph was brought before Pharaoh who said that he was told that Joseph could interpret dreams. Joseph replied that he could not but God could. Pharaoh repeated his dreams to Joseph who told Pharaoh that the dreams were a revelation from God and that the both dreams represented 7 years of abundant crops followed by 7 years of famine. Joseph then went beyond his assigned task of interpreting the dreams. He actually offered unsolicited advice to Pharaoh by telling him that he should put a man in charge of all the land in Egypt and appoint commissioners to administer the crops. Pharaoh selected Joseph to lead Egypt in preparing for the famine and put him in charge of the land, effectively naming him the prime minister of Egypt. He also gave Joseph a wife who bore him 2 sons Manasseh and Ephraim would become leaders of 2 of the tribes of Israel. It is interesting to note that his father in law was named Potiphera, very similar to Potiphar. Some speculate they are one and the same person. The chapter ends with the famine spreading throughout the world and people coming from other countries to buy grain from Joseph.

Joseph had been either a slave or a prisoner for 13 years and he saw his fortunes drastically change for the better in a few moments. Matthew Henry wrote “Those that patiently wait for God shall be paid for their waiting, not only principal but interest”. What appeared to be a sudden change was the result of God slowly preparing Joseph for the position in which he was placed by Pharaoh. He had gone from a brash young man of 17 boasting of his superiority to a mature man of 30 who remained steadfast in his faith even in the harshest of circumstances. He had tried to gain his freedom previously but God had chosen the appropriate time for his release. The time of our preference is not always God’s time, indeed we have no concept of how God views time (see 2nd Pet. 3:8). Even while wanting his freedom, Joseph still attended to his responsibilities in prison. Had he been sullen and withdrawn, he would not have been seen as a potential leader. Joseph had learned to adapt to his circumstances and be content in what he had (see Philippians 4:12). The lesson we can learn from Joseph is to prepare ourselves for what God has planned for us whether it be a career or ministry. Often opportunities can come upon us suddenly and our gradual growth will prepare us. The philosopher Seneca said “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity”.