

Operating in the Marketplace - Case Study 1 – Joseph

The vast majority of noteworthy people in the Bible worked in what we would today call “the marketplace”. Very few of those who are identified in the Scriptures as serving God did so as professional prophets, priests or preachers. Some lived in momentous times and were leaders of their people. Others upheld godly standards at times of moral decay. Some won battles against seemingly impossible odds. Others were misunderstood in the face of hostile market forces. All of them faced the kinds of underlying issues that confront us today and overcame great odds because God was with them and their hearts were in the right place. Sometimes they stumbled.

How did they manage to serve God in the face of unbelievers (or notional believers at best)? They were just like us. The so-called “heroes” of the Bible were ordinary people, who experienced ordinary human emotions. So, how did they retain their integrity and focus while fixing on God’s plan? What can we learn from their examples and apply in our own lives?

The Bible tells us that the things that happened to the people of God described in its pages were recorded for our benefit, to teach and warn us (1 Corinthians 10:11). As Christians, it pays to take notice of such lessons. The first case study we will look at is Joseph.

Background – a brief synopsis of Joseph’s life

Joseph lived around 1700 BC, coinciding with the rule of the early Hyksos kings in Lower Egypt and a native Egyptian dynasty in Upper Egypt. The Hyksos were foreign invaders, a mixture of Semitic and other races who came to power through gradual infiltration, rather than military dominance.

Joseph was born to the Patriarch Jacob and Rachel. He was his father's eleventh son (a younger brother was to follow, some years later), and in his childhood emerged as something of a “favorite” (much to his brothers’ chagrin). We are told that, when he was a boy, he received an elegant coat of different colours from his father, as a token of his special love. This partiality on the part of Jacob started to set the scene for the family’s break-up.

When he was around 17 years of age, Joseph had two dreams that changed his life. In one, he dreamed that his family’s sheaves of grain bowed to his sheaves. He also dreamed that the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed down before him, indicating that some day his family members would bow before him (Genesis 37:6-9). His announcements, perhaps spoken in haste and with some naivety, provoked great jealousy on the part of his brothers, who thought he had too high an opinion of himself. When the opportunity presented, they trapped and sold him to Ishmaelite businessmen who trafficked people to slavery in Egypt. To cover up the offence, they placed blood on his coat to make their father believe he had been killed by wild animals while minding the family’s flock of sheep.

In Egypt, as a slave, with no rights and no apparent future, Joseph coped well enough. He rose to a position of influence in the household of his owner, a man named Potiphar. However, he ultimately ended up in prison, with his feet shackled and his neck in irons (Psalm 105:17), on false charges of attempting to violate Potiphar's wife. Things seemed to go from bad to worse.

This is how it happened. He was young. He was handsome (Genesis 39:6). His Master's wife took a fancy to him and made repeated attempts to seduce him. When he rejected her advances, she became angry and fabricated allegations he had tried to rape her. He was peremptorily cast into prison. There was no such thing as trials for slaves. It is a wonder he was not executed. Slandered and maligned, he lost his reputation, his savings and the modicum of personal freedom he had enjoyed.

In jail his skills were recognized by the warden, who put him in charge of day-to-day affairs relating to the prison population under his jurisdiction. Cold comfort. Years rolled by, he served faithfully, made friends and appeared to have been a model prisoner, but he continued in detention. He interpreted a few dreams for fellow-inmates, but it appeared to do him little good, as he remained behind bars.

How he must have hated being there. Hoping for breaks that did not eventuate, counting on his exemplary behaviour and cooperation being noticed, so that he would be given a reprieve, but no reprieve came. His feet were constantly bruised. He was learning the hard way that he could rely on no one, humanly speaking. There was no justice system and Pharaoh and his officials were arbitrarily and incredibly cruel.

Finally (when the timing was right), he was called out of his cell to interpret a series of disturbing dreams experienced by Pharaoh. No one, not even the professional seers, could discern their meaning. Those dreams initially promised plenty and portended unprecedented famine to follow.

The whole episode made perfect sense to Pharaoh, but alarmed him; he now faced the dilemma of dealing with a national crisis. He needed a man he could trust, to save Egypt from ruin. Enter Joseph, with a track record as an interpreter of dreams. Suddenly everything fell into place. Pharaoh realized there was only one person with the discernment and street smarts to save Egypt; that person was Joseph.

Now in official favour, Joseph was released and given responsibility for coordinating the country's food stores and ruling over most of the Kingdom's other affairs. He was only thirty years of age. He travelled with Pharaoh, as his right-hand man; every door was opened; he was honoured like no other, except the god-ruler. Even Potiphar and his wife were subject to him. For those whose mantra is, "Don't get mad; get even", this was the perfect opportunity for all the wrongs against Joseph to be visited on his enemies. Except that he chose not to do so.

As a young man, Joseph had boasted about his dreams of others bowing to him; now, older and wiser, he had come to realize that promotion and honour were not his to engineer, but were the prerogative of God. Who was he to get even, when he was as human and fickle as his neighbour? He was going to have to continue to rely on God to do well; otherwise he could lose his head.

When seven years of plenty gave way to seven years of plenty and disaster faced Egypt and the surrounding nations, the administration (led by Joseph) was ready to deal with all eventualities.

The famine was widespread. In due time, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt looking for food. Initially disguised his identity, he held one of his brothers hostage, and demanded that the others bring their youngest brother Benjamin (whom he had never met) to Egypt. When they returned Joseph removed the mask, revealed his identity and brought his father Jacob to live in Egypt, where he looked after them.

Some years later, Jacob finally died. Joseph's brothers panicked. They (perhaps predictably) wondered if he would hold a grudge against them; with Jacob gone there would be nothing holding back Joseph's vengeance. Events proved that Joseph was above vengeance. "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to preserve many lives" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph is remembered as the son and brother who saved the fledgling people of Israel from perishing and refused to take his earlier career disasters out on those responsible for his trials.

So much for Joseph "the dreamer" as his brothers had labeled him. God blessed everything he set his hand to, from his work as a slave of Potiphar, to his duty in the court prison; and finally his work as Pharaoh's chief government minister in Egypt. He is one of the best examples in the Bible of someone who served God as a faithful believer while functioning in the marketplace.

The characteristics of Joseph

The story of Joseph is often used as a type (a "shadow") of the suffering of Christ. Someone has estimated that there are more than 130 parallels between the lives of Joseph and Jesus, making Joseph a kind of "Messianic patriarch".

There is also much in the story that shows us how to relate as God's people, in a marketplace of unbelievers. Let's look at the story a bit more closely. What was it that characterized Joseph? If we put aside the obvious cultural and historical differences, how is his story relevant to ours, thousands of years later?

First, Joseph passionately believed in God, in spite of everything that happened to him. He trusted God's faithfulness, surrendered to His plan (albeit understanding it only incrementally) and knew that He was sovereign in everything. Joseph knew that there was a "God" side to life, a spiritual dimension, and that God could be trusted, even if everyone else let him down.

This trust enabled him to cope through years of misunderstanding (on the part of his family), loss of his father for many years (he never saw his mother again), betrayal and loss of liberty (engineered by his brothers), false accusation (by Potiphar's wife), deprivation and neglect (in prison), the pressures of high office (as Prime Minister of Egypt) and feelings of bitterness and desire for revenge (against all those who hurt him).

Even when he was in the midst of dark and personally chaotic circumstances, where nothing made sense and where you and I might have felt furious and sorry for ourselves, Joseph continued to trust God and believe He was with him. I have no doubt Joseph often felt angry and hurt and believed that God had somehow let him down. Where were the dreams now? Every small door appeared to be "it", but was then slammed shut. He was a nobody, shut away, out of sight, forgotten and in pain.

Through faith, Joseph managed to address each of his trials in turn with a sense of confidence that God was still in charge. The book of Hebrews tells us that what made Joseph different from everyone else in his generation was his trust in God (Hebrews 11:22), not a faith inherited from his father or religious upbringing alone, but forged in fire and trials that nearly cost him his life and sanity. When he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams (something no one else in the land was able to do) he was careful to attribute his skills to God alone (Genesis 41:16). Even Pharaoh came to realize the hand of God was with Joseph (Genesis 41:39-40).

Second, Joseph never lost his moral integrity. A slave, from another culture (one regarded as inferior to the might and sophistication of Egypt), with no legal rights, no family or friends, he came to be trusted with the business affairs of his owner. We can only imagine the temptations he faced to abuse the trust reposed in him. You and I will face many temptations to compromise our integrity, whether in the area of sexuality, finances, personal relationships and business and professional ethics. Joseph dealt with moral temptation by believing that yielding would not only have been a sin against his master, but also against God (Genesis 39:9, cf Psalm 41:4; 51:4). It would have been the easiest thing in the world to give in to the seduction of Potiphar's wife; had he pleased her the affair would have been hushed up. Instead, he risked everything, and lost it all (or so it seemed) because of his determination to remain accountable to God and keep himself morally clean, when to do otherwise might have seemed a pragmatic thing to do. What a test. What a price! Yet, if we lose our integrity, we lose everything.

Third Joseph consciously sought God's favour in his life and actions. He lived as though God (not Potiphar) was his real Master. Throughout my work life I have often asked God for His "favour" in my business dealings. I have been blessed with many interesting and rewarding opportunities in life; however I know my weaknesses and human limitations. At times, I feel that I am nobody compared with people with whom I deal. I continually need fresh and dynamic ideas to undertake tasks for which I have not been trained. (Don't we all feel like that from time to time?) As a Christian I know God makes up for what I lack.

Having God's favour and an awareness of the divine call on his life made Joseph resilient and gave him strength to resist seemingly worthwhile temptations that came his way. Imagine if he had "blown it" by giving in to Potiphar's wife, to feelings of resentment, to the temptations to mishandle Potiphar's finances or the power he eventually exercised in Egypt.

Because of his vision of God and his acknowledged reliance on God's favour Joseph held himself back from sin. The Bible says that, where people have no such vision, they "cast off restraint" (Proverbs 29:18), because they feel there is no reason to be honest or morally upright. If we are accountable to no one, there is no reason to exercise restraint. Joseph became prosperous (Genesis 39:2), but he did so through honesty and God's advancement.

Fourth, Joseph prayed for God's wisdom. Coming from a rural family, with limited skills, the underling of ten brothers and a father who lived a nomadic lifestyle, compounded by life as a slave with a criminal record, he rose unexpectedly from prison to high office in the space of a single day (after some seventeen years of slavery or imprisonment). While working for Potiphar undoubtedly drew out and honed some management skills, these were minimal compared with the task of preparing to guide an empire through a major climatic catastrophe.

What's more, the strategies he designed and implemented went against vast entrenched vested interests. Powerful people were put off side by his decisions; they came to hate him because he had been promoted ahead of them and threatened their financial bottom lines by appropriating much of their bumper harvests. During the years of plenty, they would have tried to undermine his prediction of a severe famine and sought to find fault in his policies. They would have criticized his methods to Pharaoh, and sought to remove him from office because their traditional power structures and ways of doing things were being undermined by him. He needed supernatural wisdom and the benefit of experience (working for Potiphar and the jail warden were good learning experiences) to navigate the rough passage of business and politics.

Joseph understood the difference between leadership and management, power and authority, serving God and serving people. As a young man, he was eager to do his father's will, even when it meant going out of his way (Genesis 37:12-17). He faithfully served the prison warden, when given carte blanche to manage the jail, even though his freedom was limited. He saw the underbelly of Egyptian society, but didn't get sucked into it or take on its values. He saw the hard edges of power and politics in the greatest nation on earth, without being captivated by it. He knew (but did not violate) the limits of what Pharaoh had entrusted him to undertake, even when he was given a blank cheque and a Prime Ministerial mandate over all of Egypt except Pharaoh's own decisions.

Position didn't come because he was lucky, but because he listened to God and proved himself as reliable to people in authority over him. God's wisdom enabled him to come up with innovative ways of doing things, to operate cross-culturally, to understand people and to keep the big picture in focus.

In times of plenty Joseph taught the nation to be thrifty. During the long, hard years of drought, he did not succumb to negativity and the despair millions of others felt. He never lost His way. The Bible says that, if we need wisdom, we should ask God, with a right attitude, and we will be given it (James 1:5).

Fifth, Joseph did not permit life's reverses to make him bitter or resentful. For many years, waiting for God to open up doors, he faced only sorrow, anguish, discomfort and danger. Ultimately faced with an opportunity to destroy those who had sold him into slavery, or sent him to prison, he forgave them all. He was not stupid or naive. He had been betrayed several times and had spent years away from family and friends, in a foreign land and in prison, because of the actions of others. However, he was determined not to adopt their standards. Unforgiveness and wrong attitudes harboured towards others can result in spiritual paralysis. Joseph displayed a forgiving spirit. There is no hint that he used high office to do anything other than bless his persecutors.

So, what does all this mean for us?

The account of Joseph is a nice story with a happy ending, where the good guy gets beaten up a little on the way but eventually wins out. It is the stuff of great legends. However, if what Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthian church remains true (that what happened to Joseph contains lessons for today), what does it mean for us? Let's consider the implications.

You and I were created by God for a purpose. You may not have God-inspired dreams about your future, in the way Joseph did, but the presence of God is just as real in your life as it was in his. It was not Joseph's brothers, but God, who sent him to Egypt and gave him wisdom and favour with Pharaoh (Psalm 105:17, Acts 7:9-10). Nor was he sent ahead just to teach him humility and expunge his teenage boastings about being great (like one of my sons who sat at the dinner table recently and told the family he had dreamed we were all bowing before him). Joseph was sent to testify about God (Psalm 81:15). In spite of every trial and reverse, he continued to honour God. That takes incredible character.

You can know that, whatever happens, God can use each and every event in the context of unpacking His plan for your life. It was God who led Joseph, who opened doors and gave him special favour, elevating him to authority at the appointed time. Stephen explained that it was God who "delivered (Joseph) out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house" (Acts 7:10).

Even when things are not going well, when you are facing difficulties, you can trust God and have confidence that this is where you are meant to be. There have been times in my life, when things have not been going well, when all I have been able to say has been, "God, I trust you". Ephesians 5:17 says that we need to wise and understand what the will of God is. There's nothing wrong with asking, "God, what are you doing?" Working out His will involves keeping our eyes on him, not our business connections, personality type or family circumstances, not even what others think of us at any given time.

Joseph learned that associates can turn into enemies in a moment of time and that family and friends can be perfidious and make life unbearable. But he also demonstrated that God will not fail to come through when His time and purpose are involved. If He wants to something in and through us, He will do it. (What He expects us to do is remain faithful and trust Him.)

Joseph lived as though his Master was God, not Potiphar or Pharaoh. If we believe Father God has our lives in His hands, we should work as though Christ, not the world around us, is our Master (Ephesians 6:9) and that pleasing Him is more important than any other human commitment. Even when we have clearly identified bosses, department heads or authority structures, God is over all.

Acceptance of God's will, and a sense of accountability to Him, gives us the motivation and reason to hang onto moral integrity in the marketplace, even when others do not share our scruples. Deeply spiritual people experience the full range of temptations that others do – tragically, some succumb to moral, financial or other failure. Success and prosperity can corrupt and breed arrogance. The Bible warns us to take heed, if we think we stand firm, so that we do not fall (1 Corinthians 10:12).

If we know we are in the centre of God's will, we can feel fulfilled, instead of surrendering to malaise. We can keep on track, even when others are listless or negative (unlike Joseph, they may be physically free, but languish in emotional and spiritual prisons). That negativity can come from those closest to us, such as family, friends or work mates. The message we hear from God is totally different:

"I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, and for My own sake, I will act" (Isaiah 48:10-11).

"Trust me in your times of trouble and I will rescue you, and you will give me glory" (Isaiah 50:15).

Christians serving faithfully and doing their jobs can be misunderstood or slandered, as was Joseph. (In some countries, they end up in jail, or worse, just for being believers.) They can conclude that "life isn't fair" and feel justified being resentful. All the more reason to remain dependant on God, so that the good things that happen do not go to our heads and the bad things do not cast us into a pit. We can know experientially that all things work together for our good, because we love God (Romans 8:28). He will use our experiences to teach us.

The story of Joseph was located in the marketplace. He was a highly visible figure in the nation of Egypt for many years. Our marketplaces are very different from his; they can be an office, a classroom, a factory, farm, family or a virtual community; however the underlying issues are similar. The presence of God, the power of faith, moral integrity and strength of character that were Joseph's can be ours. They need to be if we are to have any hope of succeeding.

It is not about you, your struggles, education, position, wealth, influence or disappointments, but about God. He is faithful, and He can make it happen.