



Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.

² The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. ³ When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, ⁴ Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. ⁵ From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. ⁶ So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

⁸ But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. ⁹ No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" ¹⁰ And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

¹¹ One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. ¹² She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.

¹³ When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, ¹⁴ she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. ¹⁵ When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁶ She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷ Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. ¹⁸ But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁹ When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. ²⁰ Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.

But while Joseph was there in the prison, ²¹ the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. ²² So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. ²³ The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

Seventeen. It's the age of adventure. It's the age where teens are closing in on the end of high school and making decisions about college and their future. What were you doing when you were seventeen? Joseph was also starting a new adventure and contemplating his future—that is, his future as a slave in Egypt. We know that God predicted that he would bless Abraham and his descendants, that he would give them land, numerous descendants and they would be a blessing to all nations. But we must not forget that the Lord also promised that this same nation would be enslaved and mistreated in a foreign land for 400 years. “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years” (Gen 15.13). This promise is just as certain as all the others. The last eleven chapters of Genesis tell us how the budding nation of Israel arrived in this foreign land and how they began their 400 years of slavery. But first, we need to see what happened to the seventeen year old Joseph.

The familiarity of this story keeps us from missing some of the intense drama. For instance, we should see the amazing and providential event of Joseph being purchased by Potiphar. Potiphar was one of Pharaoh's officials. It would be similar to being a cabinet member to the President of the United States. Potiphar was the captain of the guard so we could liken him to the Secretary of Defense. Joseph could have been bought by almost any Egyptian but the Lord led him directly to the house of Potiphar. This also serves as a foreshadowing of Joseph's rise to second in command of Egypt. That is, Joseph's current master would one day become a servant to him.

The key to this story is verse two—“The Lord was with Joseph.” All by itself this one verse answers the problem of evil. All of us have asked the following question. “Why did God allow _____ to happen to me?” Everyone in this room can fill in that blank with one or more difficulties and trials in life. The question usually starts out as a cry for help but if we are not careful it quickly turns into a cry of anger and doubt. Because this difficulty happened to us we may begin to doubt the Lord's goodness. We think, “If God is so good, why did he give me this bad thing?” It is true that Joseph landed in the house of an important man but he was still a slave. He was trapped. He owned nothing. He was stripped of all rights and was nothing more than a possession in Potiphar's house. But all the while “the Lord was with Joseph.” Was the LORD with Joseph when his brothers stripped off his clothes and threw him into the cistern? Was the LORD with Joseph when he cried for mercy to his brothers to spare his life? Was the LORD with Joseph when he was sold to the Ishmaelites and was dragged on a journey of several months in chains? The answer to each of these questions is a resounding YES. As the readers of this story, you and I get a “behind the scenes” explanation of all that was happening. Furthermore, we have turned to the last page and we know how the story ends. We know exactly how God was working out his plans and purposes. The only difference between Joseph's story and ours is that we do not get this special “behind the scenes” look into our own lives.

Much of God's plan and purpose is hidden from us, just as it was hidden from Joseph, but that does not mean that God has abandoned us for even one second. If you are a born again believer, then the story of your life is written exactly as Joseph's—the Lord is with you. Any prosperity and blessing that comes your way is given as a direct result of the fact that “the Lord is with us” and any setback or trial that comes our way is a direct result of God working out his secret plan and purpose. But whether through triumph or trial, the Lord is with us. We can imagine Joseph praying a familiar prayer—“Lord, why did allow my brothers to sell me into slavery in a foreign

land?" Did God answer that prayer? In his mercy, the lord did reveal his secret will to Joseph and he did answer that prayer, but not until twenty two years later! Joseph no doubt prayed prayers that were never answered just as God does not always reveal his secret will to us but this in no way changes the fact that God is with us.

We are told in the second verse that Joseph lived in Potiphar's house. By itself this is a surprising turn of events. Normally if a new slave was purchased, especially a strong, healthy young man like Joseph, he would immediately have been set to work in the fields. Serving in the house of the master was normally a privilege reserved for slaves that had proved themselves to be trustworthy and hard working yet Joseph achieved this elevated status from the beginning. This allowed the events of verse three to happen. *When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did,*⁴ *Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant.* Why did Joseph receive this huge promotion? Because Potiphar somehow knew that the Lord was with Joseph. How did Pharaoh come to gain this important fact?

Do you remember how the gospel message first spread to foreign lands in the book of Acts? *On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went* (Acts 8:1,4). Up until that time, all evangelism was limited to the city of Jerusalem. More and more Jews were becoming Christians in Jerusalem but no one was spreading the word to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Jesus' Great Commission was not being obeyed. It took a great persecution and suffering in order for the gospel to spread. In a similar way, I believe that Joseph testified to Potiphar about his God. I believe that he told Potiphar about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I believe that God used the suffering of Joseph to tell Potiphar about the Lord—Yahweh, who was no mere regional deity but that he was creator of the heavens and the earth. We have no way of knowing if Potiphar took this to heart but we do know that he credited all of Joseph's success to the Lord.

Joseph had a deep and lasting impression on Potiphar and I find it interesting that a high ranking official in a pagan land recognized what you and I often forget—every bit of success and blessing comes from the hand of the Lord. We too often like to pat ourselves on the back for our success or else we give lip service to the Lord but in the back of our minds we secretly believe that good things have come our way due to the sweat of our brow. Potiphar could have credited Joseph's success to his solid work ethic. Potiphar could have patted Joseph on the back and rewarded him for his good behavior and trustworthiness, but instead he credited Joseph's success to the Lord. Obviously Joseph was the one who told Potiphar about his Lord but I think there is another layer here that we are missing. Potiphar lived in a day when everyone was religious. Everyone served one god or another. There was no such thing as an atheist. Everyone's success or lack of success was attributed directly to a particular god.

We see this clearly illustrated in 2 Kings. Assyria had risen to become the unquestionable superpower of their day. Assyria had a massive and powerful army that had just decimated the northern kingdom of Israel. Samaria was destroyed and everyone except a few poor people were taken captive to Assyria. Shortly after this, Assyria began to breathe down the neck of King Hezekiah in the south. If the Israel to the north could not stand against Assyria, what chance did Hezekiah have? Nevertheless, Hezekiah assured his people that the Lord would deliver them

from the hand of Assyria. Before they attacked, King Sennacherib of Assyria sent officers down to Jerusalem to give the people an opportunity to surrender rather than being annihilated. Here is a portion of their speech to the people of Jerusalem.

“Do not listen to Hezekiah, for he is misleading you when he says, ‘The LORD will deliver us.’ Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?” (2 Kings 18:32-35)

Do you see? Each of these nations had their own god and each of them trusted in the power of their god to deliver them from the mighty Assyrian army. Assyria knew that each of these regional deities were powerless compared to him but it illustrates the fact that everyone looked to a particular god for deliverance from trouble and for the blessing of prosperity. Potiphar would have had this same mindset. When he recognized the amazing success of Joseph his first thought would have turned to the identity of Joseph’s God. Who is this God who brings this young slave such great success? Joseph had this great opportunity to testify about the Lord.

Though it was written two thousand years later, Joseph lived out this truth from Ephesians chapter six.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free (Eph. 6:5-8).

Joseph knew full well that Potiphar had paid good money for him. Joseph’s brothers sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver and the person who bought slaves for Potiphar may have paid twice that amount in the slave market. Nevertheless, Joseph knew that his true master was not Potiphar but the Lord.

The closest application for us is the relationship of employer to employee. Obviously we are not slaves to our employers, although in this economy some might beg to differ, but the principles are the same. What is your attitude to your employer? Is it negative and adversarial? Do you often think that you deserve far more than you are getting? If your boss took a good look at your work ethic and attitude, would he or she be impressed? The word vocation is not used very often but it is an important word. At its core, vocation is just a fancy word for “job.” Part of the problem is that many of us are more concerned about our vacation than we are our vocation. I was reminded recently that the word vocation comes from the Latin word meaning calling. The co-called Protestant work ethic is not just about working hard, because anyone can work hard in their job. But the Protestant work ethic is rooted in this word vocation which means that no matter what your occupation, it is a calling from God. And our vocation as a calling is rooted in part from this passage in Ephesians. Our work is to be done “as if we were serving the Lord.” We may not be slaves to our employers but Paul told us that we are “slaves to Christ.” Did Christ purchase us? Indeed he did, with his own precious blood. No higher price could ever be paid.

As I thought about this, a very frightening thought entered my mind. What if we really are serving our employers “as if we were serving the Lord”? In other words, what if our service to

the Lord is so weak and anemic that when we model this in our work lives it is also weak and anemic? Can you see where I am going with this? We have such a low view of our work lives, we have such poor attitudes on the job, not because we fail to serve them as we serve the Lord but rather because we serve them as we serve the Lord. That's a pretty grim thought, but let's turn it around. Could we have a similar effect on our employers as Joseph had on Potiphar? Could we bring such success to our employer that he or she would ask what God we serve? If we could see our jobs as vocations, as a calling, and not merely a paycheck to meet our needs and wants, how might that affect our employers and fellow co-workers? What kind of attitude would you bring to your job tomorrow morning knowing that your job was a calling, that every minute you spent on the job was done in service to the Lord?

Don't miss how dramatic of an impact Joseph had upon Potiphar. Look at the highlighted words in these four verses.

*When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in **everything** he did, ⁴ Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care **everything** he owned. ⁵ From the time he put him in charge of his household and of **all** that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on **everything** Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. ⁶ So he left in Joseph's care **everything** he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with **anything** except the food he ate.*

Joseph had complete authority over Potiphar's household and business. The only thing that Joseph did not have charge over was Potiphar's food, which may have been a way of saying that Potiphar had no worries—all that he had to do was lift his food to his mouth. Let's think through all of his responsibilities. First, Joseph would have functioned as CEO overseeing all of the people and resources in the household. A wealthy and influential man like Potiphar may have had a hundred servants or more. Joseph would have been the human resources manager. He probably appointed managers below him to watch over various tasks—one for the planting and harvesting, another for all of the household duties, etc. He was probably in charge of purchasing new slaves at the slave market, or at least deciding where they would work. He would have also served as the investment banker and accountant buying and selling goods and services and balancing the financial books. If Joseph wanted to buy a plot of land, he didn't need to check with his master, he just did it. Other wealthy and influential people would work directly with Joseph in all matters of business. I get the feeling that if I were a slave Potiphar's household, I would have like to have worked underneath Joseph. He knew that he was sold into slavery against his will so he would have been a kind and fair manager. He obviously set the prime example of honest, hard work and success for all of the other slaves to model after. He would have punished dishonest managers, encouraged struggling managers and rewarded successful managers.

There is a tremendous principle of stewardship in this story. The key verse is four.

*Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care **everything** he owned.*

Allow me to substitute a few words and make a broader application.

*God put us in charge of his creation, and he entrusted to his care **everything** he made.*

Joseph's stewardship over his master's household is a needed reminder of our stewardship over all of God's creation. When we read this story we are amazed at all of the trust that Potiphar

placed in Joseph. Joseph possessed huge power and enormous responsibility. But what is a greater responsibility—being a steward for a wealthy government official or being a steward of all of creation? It's staggering to realize that we have dominion and stewardship over all that God has created.

When we use the word stewardship we generally think of the money we give to church, missions and charities. Being a good steward means giving away ten percent of your income, but is that all stewardship is about? Isn't it also about the other 90%? In fact, most Christians don't give at least ten percent of their income away because they are poor stewards of the other 90%. For some, being a poor steward means that they are wasteful of their resources. Such people do not know how to properly manage their money so they don't have enough to give back. Others believe that they own more than 90% of what they make. They enjoy keeping most of their money and spending it on themselves. They couldn't possibly think of giving away ten percent or more of their hard earned cash.

I would love to see a list of reasons why Christians do not give away at least ten percent of their income. I think it would be a frightening list to read but also very enlightening. If you fit into that category, what reason would you list? Would you be willing to write down that list and put in a prayer to the Lord? "Dear God, I wanted you to know why I don't practice tithing my money. I like my money and I want to keep most of it for myself." What if Joseph suddenly decided that all of the things Potiphar put him in charge of were suddenly his own? What if he went out and slaughtered a sheep and made himself a great feast? What if he helped himself to the treasures of gold and silver? What if he decided to make some of the slaves into his own personal servants? How long would he last as chief steward with that kind of behavior? Do you see my point? If we think we actually own all of our money and things then we will behave very differently than we would if we knew we were simple managers entrusted with God's money and his creation.

I know that everyone who struggles with this thinks they have a valid reason and most of them do not. But I think there is one good excuse for not tithing—you are afraid to try it. I say that it is a good reason because at least there is the sense that you know it is the right thing to do and you would like to do it but you are too afraid to try. Now that would make a good prayer! "Lord, I know that you have entrusted everything to me. I don't own my house. I don't own my car. I don't own my clothes. I don't even own my children. These are all gifts—each of them and all of it together is a marvelous gift. Lord, I know you want me to be generous with these gifts. I know you want me to share these gifts, but I am afraid. I am afraid that I won't have enough to pay my bills. I am afraid so could you please take away my fear and help me to trust you?" If we can be good stewards of 100% of the gifts God has given us, the other ten percent will fall into place.

Joseph embodied stewardship and Godly service. Though he was a slave with no rights, he walked in the fear of the Lord and the Lord was quite obviously with him. Out of all of these qualities, there was one quality which turned out to be a liability, and it's found in verse six. *Now Joseph was well-built and handsome.* This is interesting because notice how his mother was described. *Rachel was lovely in form and beautiful* (Gen 29:17). Rachel not only had a pretty face but she also had a beautiful body. As I have often said, she was the ancient equivalent of a supermodel. And Joseph, Rachel's son, is described in exactly the same way—he had a handsome face and a well-built body. Joseph would have been on the cover of GQ or Muscle and

Fitness. In all of Scripture, only Rachel and Joseph are described in this full extent. So what's wrong with being well-built and handsome? I'm sure you heard of the phrase "it's possible to have too much of a good thing"? Through no fault of his own, Joseph's good looks got him into trouble and next Sunday we will see what got him out of trouble—and it is the answer you might expect.

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