

Service in the life of Joseph

BIBLE BASICS

Favored yet Hated

Joseph, a young man, only seventeen years of age, was distinguished and favored by his father. Out of love for Joseph, Jacob made him an ornate robe.

“Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. “Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.” (Gen 37:2-3)

While Jacob set Joseph apart with the robe, Joseph set himself apart with his virtues. St. John Chrysostom says: “Why does he also indicate to us Joseph’s age? For you to learn that his youth constituted no obstacle to virtue and for you to have a complete awareness of the young man’s obedience to his father and his sympathy for his brothers despite their savagery. Despite his being so well disposed to them, Joseph was unable to win them over to concord with him on the grounds of his youth so as to be willing to maintain the bond of love. Instead, they saw from the outset the youth’s inclination to virtue and the father’s favor for him and were prompted to envy him. You see, “they brought false reports about Joseph to their father Israel.” The ornate robe was a metaphor for many things, such as him standing out from his youth, as well as set up to be glorified.

As Joseph then had a dream, and told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. Joseph's dreams serve as a catalyst for the escalating tension between him and his brothers. *“He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it. His brothers said to him, “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. “Listen,” he said, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, “What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you? His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.”* (Gen 37:5-11) His brothers were consequently filled with envy; they were just blinded and could not be optimistic.

Joseph, favored by his father Jacob, recounts two vivid dreams to his family. In the first dream, Joseph's sheaf of grain stands upright while his brothers' sheaves bow down to it. In the second dream, the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow down to Joseph. These dreams, interpreted as symbols of

Joseph's future dominion over his family, ignite a deep-seated jealousy and resentment within his brothers.

The brothers' reactions to these dreams reveal their underlying insecurities and fears. The brothers' question, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" underscores their apprehension about being subordinate to their younger brother. Their immediate response is to hate him even more, highlighting the destructive power of envy. Jacob's rebuke of Joseph, questioning the audacity of his dream, adds another layer of complexity. While seemingly chastising Joseph, Jacob also "kept the matter in mind," suggesting an underlying recognition of the potential significance of these dreams.

The Cycle of Service and Struggle

The story of Joseph's dreams introduces a broader theme: the cyclical nature of service and struggle. Those who engage in honest and dedicated service often experience periods of intense demand and pressure. This can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed and burdened. Servants across various roles and responsibilities will encounter different challenges and setbacks. These struggles are not indicative of failure but rather a natural part of the cycle of service. Sometimes a servant feels relied on so heavily and then gets pulled on more and more, especially their service is honest, before starting to face many struggles.

“My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for testing. Set your heart right and be steadfast, and do not be impetuous in times of calamity. Cling to him and do not depart, so that your last days may be prosperous. Accept whatever befalls you, and in times of humiliation be patient. For gold is tested in the fire, and those found acceptable, in the furnace of humiliation. Trust in him, and he will help you; make your ways straight, and hope in him. You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; do not stray, or else you may fall. You who fear the Lord, trust in him, and your reward will not be lost. You who fear the Lord, hope for good things, for lasting joy and mercy. Consider the generations of old and see: has anyone trusted in the Lord and been disappointed? Or has anyone persevered in the fear of the Lord and been forsaken? Or has anyone called upon him and been neglected? For the Lord is compassionate and merciful; he forgives sins and saves in time of distress.” This will happen to everyone. Everyone in service will go through a stage similar. But everyone’s response will be different. Some may have already gone through one of such trials, others may have not. Some respond positively, while others stay in limbo, stuck, unable ever to yield the fruit of the trial.

Serving the Lord involves facing trials, preparing ourselves by being spiritually ready, with a strong hopeful heart, and staying calm during difficult times. Trials are like a refining fire that purifies our faith. St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 acknowledges the difficulties but emphasizes that these trials do not have the final say: “We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” St. Paul faced immense challenges and hardships in his ministry. He was constantly under pressure, facing persecution, and experiencing physical and emotional difficulties yet he maintained resilience and unwavering faith in the face of adversity.

These passages are a powerful reminder that even in the midst of difficulties, we can remain steadfast in the faith. Joseph's life exemplifies these principles. He faced immense trials, beginning with the rejection of his brothers. After Joseph's coat was taken, he essentially was being stripped of all previous glory. He was forced to start his life entirely, in the land of Egypt which was the God of Israel did not reign. There was no family, no familiarity of worship, no community. A devastating situation that many would cry to God in despair. Yet, he did not allow it to waver his faith in our Lord. He remained faithful to God, maintaining a strong heart and calm demeanor. Everyone faces trials, but our responses differ. Some respond positively and grow, while others remain stuck.

Leaving Your Dream with God

Imagine the emotions of Joseph as he goes from his father's favorite son with big dreams, to being sold as a slave to ending up on the slave crew of Potiphar in Egypt. Imagine the emotional turmoil that Joseph must have endured during this period. Stripped of his identity, separated from his loving father, and subjected to the dehumanizing conditions of slavery, his world was turned upside down. It's natural to wonder how he reacted to such a profound injustice. Did he cry out to God in anger? Did he question his faith? Did he harbor feelings of resentment towards his family, or even towards God Himself?

It's plausible to question if Joseph, like any human being in his situation, experienced a whirlwind of negative emotions. Perhaps a surge of anger towards his brothers, a sense of betrayal that cut deep. Maybe questioning God's plan, wondering why he had been allowed to suffer such a cruel fate. It's even possible that he entertained thoughts of revenge, vowing to repay his brothers for their treachery.

What would you have been praying to God during these days? (Genesis 37:12-36) What would your response be? Anger to God? Not caring to God's laws. Hatred to family? Hatred to the world? Just like I was treated, I will do to others? Living out of spite? Imagine those are the emotions he had – let say maybe he had them momentarily and beat them. Wouldn't they linger in the background for years?

These emotions, while understandable, are also dangerous. Resentment and bitterness can fester, poisoning the soul and leading to a cycle of destructive behavior. Joseph, however, did not succumb to these negative impulses. His story is not one of revenge, but of redemption.

Prosperous with God

Despite his trials, Joseph remained steadfast in his faith. He continued to trust in God's plan, even when it seemed incomprehensible. He refused to let bitterness consume him. Instead, he chose a path of with God.

“The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, 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. 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. So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate." It did not take time for him to be prosperous again. Keeping God by His side, he gains trust in Potiphar's house.

Note here his response to the trial: he kept the Lord by His side. He did not grumble against God. He kept Him and his statutes in his heart. He cared to please God, to the point where Potiphar noticed his integrity and how God remained by his side, thus putting him in charge. He responded to the trial with godly integrity and was accordingly put in charge.

Now, again, integrity, honesty and dedication to God does not come unchallenged. Joseph clearly was victorious over his first trial, a great one for that matter. Yet, now, after defeating the first challenge of having grown up exalted and favored in his family's house, only to be rejected and be found alone, Joseph is about to be threatened for even greater isolation.

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

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. 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?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. 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.

Joseph's story is renowned for his courage to stand firm for his purity. Yet when Potiphar's wife comes and tells him to be with her, he is not only being given a temptation of lust, but much greater; a temptation to not be alone anymore. Having been rejected by his family, being alone in a town where he knew no one, the man who does not cling to God may desire to feel accepted. Potiphar's wife, in some sense, offered this to him. Yet, Joseph's response was unequivocal, he did not feel alone: "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" The presence of God was real before him. In the midst of trial, in the midst of rejection, in the midst of temptation, Joseph knew he was before God. Add to this, that this is the same man who grew up in a house whose brother was filled with evil. It is thus fair that he did not have the knowledge of the law and understanding of the law like we do. He was not as exposed to it as us. But he upheld, somehow, what was right! Recall that 10 commandments were not even written yet! This is an incredible feat.

A Leader in Prison

Through these trials, he recognizes that his success is not self-made. He enters prison, and though he is now even more ostracized and alone, he maintains his integrity and reaffirms God's authority. Although, at each stage before the struggle, Joseph may have felt he had reached the pinnacle of

success, God envisioned a different summit. This principle applies to us as well. He consistently has something extraordinary in store for us. While it may not appear glorious from our perspective, it undoubtedly is from His.

And [Joseph] was there in the prison. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who *were* in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. The keeper of the prison did not look into anything *that was* under *Joseph's* authority, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made *it* prosper." The make of the best servant: his integrity was phenomenal. he truly accepted whatever state he was put in. We tend to think that I need to plan and fight to be the leader and be ambitious for the services/work, but service is about true honesty with God. - Genesis 39:20-23

Joseph's unwavering integrity is truly remarkable. It serves as a shining example of what it means to be a devoted servant. Joseph's story illustrates a powerful principle: it doesn't matter what task we're given, whether it seems menial or insignificant. The key is to approach every responsibility with a heart of dedication and excellence. Joseph's commitment to doing everything right, even in the dire circumstances of his imprisonment, is a testament to his character.

This unwavering integrity didn't go unnoticed. It paved the way for his promotion to a position of authority within the prison. This transformation highlights a profound truth: when we embrace our circumstances with integrity and a commitment to serving God wholeheartedly, He can use our situations for His purposes and elevate us in due time. Joseph's story resonates with the Apostle Paul's teaching in Philippians 4:11: "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content." This contentment doesn't imply passivity or complacency; rather, it reflects a deep-rooted trust in God's sovereignty and a willingness to serve faithfully, regardless of our circumstances.

Joseph displays the make of a great servant. When we approach our roles and responsibilities, whether in the church or in other areas of life, with Joseph's level of integrity and commitment, we open ourselves to God's blessings and guidance. It's not about seeking recognition or demanding specific roles; it's about serving with a pure heart and trusting God to direct our paths. The attitude of "this class or nothing" stands in stark contrast to Joseph's example. It's a reminder that a spirit of entitlement and a focus on personal preferences can hinder our spiritual growth and limit our opportunities to serve effectively. Joseph's story calls us to approach every task, no matter how seemingly insignificant, with a spirit of excellence and a willingness to serve God wholeheartedly. As we do so, we position ourselves to experience God's favor, just as Joseph did. Remember, God sees our hearts and honors our faithfulness. He can use our humble service to accomplish extraordinary things.

Transformed When Hidden

The Lord never abandoned Joseph; St. Ambrose says: "therefore I might say Joseph was happier when he was put into prison, because he was giving witness on behalf of chastity. For modesty is a good gift but one of lesser merit when it involves no risk. Where, however, it is maintained at the risk of one's safety, there it wins a more abundant crown. With his case unheard, his truthfulness unexamined, Joseph is sent into prison as if guilty of a crime. But the Lord did not abandon him even in prison. The

innocent should not be troubled when they are attacked on false charges, when justice is overcome and they are shoved into prison. God visits his own even in prison, and so there is more help for them there, where there is more danger.”

God's providence is never absent, even in the darkest of moments. When St. Ambrose reflects on Joseph's imprisonment, he highlights the sanctity of suffering for righteousness' sake. Joseph's steadfastness in preserving chastity under peril brought him a greater spiritual crown. This teaches that trials for the sake of virtue are not only allowed by God but are avenues for deeper communion with Him. Trials are not a sign of abandonment but an opportunity to experience God's nearness more profoundly. In the prison of unjust suffering, Joseph encountered the sustaining presence of the Lord, showing that God does not merely observe our struggles from afar but enters into them with us.

St. John Chrysostom further elaborates on this theme, likening virtue to a pearl that shines no matter where it is placed. Joseph's ability to thrive, even in a prison cell, reflects the transformative power of divine grace: “you notice how even when Joseph encountered troubles he had no sense of distress; instead, the creative wisdom of God transformed all his distress. Just as a pearl reveals its peculiar beauty even if someone buries it in the mire, so too virtue, wherever you cast it, reveals its characteristic power, be it in servitude, in prison, in distress or in prosperity. So since, even when cast into prison, he won over the chief jailer and received from him control of everything there, let us see in this case as well how Joseph reveals the force of grace coming his way.” (Homilies on Genesis 63.2.) External circumstances cannot diminish the light of a soul rooted in God. Instead, adversity becomes an opportunity to reveal the beauty of God's work within us. Through Joseph, we learn that focusing on God, even in suffering, opens paths for deliverance and transformation, allowing His grace to turn trials into blessings.

The Baker and Cupbearer: The Fruit of Discernment

Joseph's journey reflects the profound spiritual reality of rejection and divine intimacy. Betrayed by his brothers, unjustly accused, cast into prison, and now forgotten even by those he helped, Joseph's life became a testament to the transformative power of communion with God. Despite these layers of rejection, Joseph did not grow bitter or despondent. Instead, he turned to God with complete dependence, his closeness to God refining his soul and granting him the extraordinary gift of discernment.

“We both had dreams,” they answered, “but there is no one to interpret them.” Then Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.”

When he interpreted the dreams of his fellow prisoners, he humbly declared, “Do not interpretations belong to God?” attributing all wisdom to the Lord rather than himself. Joseph's humility shines even brighter in his appeal to the butler :“But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. 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.” He did not seek to exalt himself or recount his righteousness. His words carried no hint of resentment toward those who wronged him or demands for vindication.

St. John Chrysostom beautifully captures this moment, noting that Joseph's request to be remembered reflects a deep humility and a philosophical disposition. He did not dwell on his innocence or the injustices he endured but asked only for a simple act of mercy: "Joseph's appeal to the butler to remember him and intercede with Pharaoh for him can be interpreted as a sign of his philosophical attitude and his great humility."

This teaches us that true faith does not rely on the acknowledgment of others or visible rewards. Joseph's steadfastness was rooted in a faith that remained unshaken by external circumstances. Even in the depths of prison, he embodied the heart of a servant—humble, faithful, and unwavering in trust that God's providence would prevail in its time. Through Joseph, we see that those who draw near to God are not only upheld in suffering but transformed, their virtues perfected through trials.

Leadership - Vision, Wisdom, Understanding, and Boldness

This peak of discernment stemmed from Joseph's reliance on God and marked the pinnacle of his transformation. His journey exemplifies a profound truth about leadership: true leadership necessitates the destruction of self, a feat Joseph had remarkably accomplished. Consequently, he was ideally prepared to assume a leadership role. Similarly, our capacity for servant leadership is shaped by our experiences with and reliance on God. We must possess vision and a deep desire for our children's well-being, coupled with the wisdom and understanding that come from depending on God.

Our vision as servant leaders should always be focused on a holy objective for the children we serve. Our goal goes beyond a lesson delivery; it's about nurturing their relationship with God and preparing them for future struggles. Like Joseph, we must look ahead, ensuring they have the spiritual sustenance needed to face life's challenges. This sustenance is rooted in reliance on God. Additionally, a deep wisdom and understanding of the Church, as well as its people, is a good quality in any servant or leader.

Joseph's unwavering boldness in acknowledging God, even before the most powerful monarch on earth who worshipped other gods, is a testament to his faith (Genesis 41:25-28). He was unashamed of his God, His sovereignty, and his religion. Are you as bold in speaking on behalf of your Maker and Savior? He was fearless and zealous religiously. There is no vengeance in a successful service. Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it."

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. Now hurry back to my father and say to

him, This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay."

In this moment of revelation to his brothers, Joseph's emotional outburst reveals the depth of his feelings. He reassures them, emphasizing that their actions, while hurtful, ultimately served a godly plan. Joseph's humility and unwavering faith in God's plan are evident as he acknowledges, yet again, that it was God, not his brothers, who orchestrated his journey. At this point, Joseph had reached the pinnacle of success, yet he faced a critical juncture where an unwise decision could jeopardize everything. His story serves as a reminder that even in positions of power and influence, our choices must align with our faith and values.

No Vengeance in Service

Joseph's ultimate rise to power in Egypt was not a result of ambition or manipulation. It was a testament to his unwavering faith, his wisdom in interpreting dreams, and his ability to forgive those who had wronged him. As a leader, he demonstrated foresight, compassion, and a deep understanding of human nature. This final stage of servant leadership is characterized by visionary thinking, wise decision-making, and the capacity to forgive and reconcile, even in the face of great hurt.

As a servant leader, you will inevitably encounter differences of opinion and even conflicts with those you serve with. Some may unintentionally cause harm, while others may act with deliberate malice. However, Joseph's response to his brothers offers a powerful example of how to navigate these challenges. His ability to forgive, reconcile, and ultimately lead with wisdom and compassion demonstrates the transformative power of servant leadership. There is no place for revenge in service.

The path to becoming a servant leader is not always easy. It requires courage, humility, and a willingness to learn from both successes and setbacks. However, by embracing these stages of growth and development, we can cultivate the qualities necessary to lead with integrity, wisdom, and compassion. Remember, servant leadership is not about power or control; it's about serving others with a genuine heart and empowering them to reach their full potential.



Review Questions

1. Did Joseph's faith in God ever waver? (A: No)
2. True or false? Joseph became a leader in prison? (A: True)
3. What did the ornate robe represent? (A: It represented him standing out from his youth, as well as being set up to be glorified.)
4. True or false? Joseph always remained unashamed of what he believed in, whether it was accepted or not. (A: True)
5. Who were Joseph's brothers? (A: The sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah.)

