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## Best Biblical Career Advice from Joseph

Meditations on the Story of Joseph

By Bruce Baker

*Start at the bottom, and make yourself useful*  
(Genesis 39:20–23)

<sup>20</sup> And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. <sup>21</sup> But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. <sup>22</sup> And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. <sup>23</sup> The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph’s charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.



John August Swanson, “Story of Joseph”, 1985

The Bible is not a “how to” book for career advice.

That is, not if you are thinking of “career” as an orchestrated, planned roadmap to success in terms of professional responsibility, expertise and pay. In that sense, “career” is not really a biblical concept at all. There aren’t any examples of that sort of “career path” in the Bible. Instead of career advice, we find stories of people who are called to challenging tasks, through many hardships. Through their examples, we learn of faith and God’s providence. Some of them saw great worldly success, and many of them didn’t, but their lives are never presented as examples of career path or resume building.

Perhaps the one biblical person whose story comes the closest to what we might think of as a “career path” is Joseph. His story fills roughly nine chapters in Genesis (37 – 45), a very large portion of the history of the patriarchs.

Joseph’s “career”, if we may call it that, begins with his being thrown in a pit by his brothers, presumably to die, but they change their mind and sell him into slavery to foreign traders. From there he rises to become the overseer of a wealthy Egyptian’s household, before being falsely accused of adultery and thrown in Pharaoh’s prison. Through an astounding turn of events, he receives a pardon from prison, and enters Pharaoh’s service at the age of thirty. He rises to become the prime minister of Egypt, the most powerful nation on earth, and saves the nation from a crushing drought and ensuing famine.

Joseph’s path is an epic story of rising from the bottom to the top. In terms of vision, management and public service, he must be considered a standout success. But is this an example of “career”?

Not really. He never planned a single career move. Never wrote a resume. Never cultivated references. Never applied for a job. The one thing he did over and over again was to respond faithfully to whatever came his way. The secret to his success was the presence of God: “the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed” [v. 23].

In terms of career guidance then, perhaps the greatest lesson we can learn from Joseph is to respond in faithful obedience, and trust God to be at work bringing whatever success He will. This is not an excuse, however, to “sit around and hope for the best!”

To be sure, we put our trust in God, but He trusts us too, to be at work! He expects us to suit up, show up, and do our best in whatever task He has set before us. This is practical career advice from Joseph. We do well to follow his example: he started at the bottom, picked his head up to look around and see what needed to be done, and then did it. In short, *he made himself useful*.

He made himself useful to the slave traders, to the Egyptian who acquired him, to the prisoners and prison guard, and ultimately to Pharaoh and the entire nation. At each step of the way he saw what needed to be done and made himself useful to the people around him. That’s pretty good advice.

As we can see in Joseph’s story, the best careers grow out of a heart for serving the people we meet along the journey, and trusting God with the outcome.

*Think Above Your Pay Grade*  
(Genesis 41:15-36)

<sup>15</sup> And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” ...

<sup>25</sup> Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ...

<sup>33</sup> Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. <sup>34</sup> Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years. <sup>35</sup> And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. <sup>36</sup> That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.”



The Bible has much to say about faithfulness, but very little to say about how to rise in an organization or how to acquire more personal power, income or status—the very sorts of things which tend to go hand-in-hand with the secular notion of career.

If however we think of career in terms of walking by faith as we follow the path of our calling in business or any other pursuit, then the Bible has much wisdom to offer. The story of Joseph turns out to be a good source of such wisdom.

Joseph, the most-loved son of Jacob [Gen. 37:3], had a tortuous path filled with many unexpected dangers and opportunities. The metaphor of a tortuous path actually provides a more biblically sound notion of “career” than the secular idea of rising in professional status by gaining skill and experience through one’s achievements.

Joseph was sold into slavery and falsely imprisoned before he rose to rule Egypt as Pharaoh’s second-in-command. You might say Joseph was in the right place at the right time, and that makes sense in hindsight. But during the dark days of waiting in faithful obedience, the outcome for Joseph was always at risk, and never under his own control. Still, God used every moment and every mishap in Joseph’s life to move him into a position where he could be useful according to God’s overarching purposes. Eventually, Joseph ended up in a position where his faithfulness, perspicacity and administrative skills could be used to save the nation of Egypt and many surrounding peoples from a devastating seven-year famine.

It happened like this. Pharaoh heard that Joseph had the gift of interpreting dreams. He asked Joseph to interpret a particularly troubling dream, and Joseph did so. This was a risky thing to do, because Joseph

was delivering phenomenally bad news, and Pharaoh might not have appreciated it. But Joseph didn't stop there. He went on to set forth a plan to save the Egypt from the famine which he saw coming.

Joseph took a big risk with Pharaoh by speaking out of turn, giving advice when none was asked, and here is a lesson to be learned from Joseph—he had a habit of “thinking above his pay grade.”

Joseph was stuck in a position where he had to deliver bad news to the supreme ruler. Pharaoh could have killed Joseph for bringing an ill omen. But Joseph didn't just deliver bad news. He told Pharaoh, who held the power of life and death over him, what to do. He offered Pharaoh a plan and a way out. Pharaoh then put Joseph in charge of implementing the plan, which was undoubtedly the smartest hire Pharaoh ever made. It saved his kingdom, as well as much of the surrounding world, including Joseph's own family back home in Judah.

Following Joseph's example, there are good reasons and good times to “think above your pay grade.” There is also a need for savvy when it comes to knowing when to speak and when to remain quiet. Joseph seem to have that savvy also.

It's good career advice to think above your pay grade, because savvy bosses are most likely to promote people who do so. Why? Because the person who speaks up to offer a constructive plan and bring a solution demonstrates not only their good thinking, but also shows concern for the greater good, the higher aims, and the overarching vision for the enterprise. In Joseph's case this meant concern for the nation of Egypt and for Pharaoh's rule.

The best career advice often boils down to this—make your boss successful. Joseph did that. He saved Pharaoh from disaster and made him look smart by implementing a plan that kept Pharaoh in power, and kept Egypt at the top of the food chain.

In whatever role we serve, it pays to think in terms of the larger enterprise. That's not merely a savvy career move. It's also an act of faithfulness to offer the best thoughts and efforts we can, and then let the chips fall where they may. When we offer our best, and speak the truth in love, we can trust God with the outcome.

## *Serve Colleagues and Find Mentors*

(Genesis 41:9-15)

<sup>9</sup> Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “I remember my offenses today. <sup>10</sup> When Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, <sup>11</sup> we dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation. <sup>12</sup> A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream. <sup>13</sup> And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged.”



<sup>14</sup> Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. <sup>15</sup> And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.”

Joseph’s “career path”, if we may call it that, was full of unexpected ups and downs: he was thrown in a pit, lifted out again, sold into slavery, made chief of staff in his master’s estate, only to be imprisoned on a false accusation. While in prison, the captain of the guard recognized Joseph’s talent and put him in charge of affairs among the prisoners.

Then Joseph got his big break—Pharaoh’s cup-bearer and baker are sent to prison and placed under Joseph’s supervision. Joseph predicts the cup-bearer’s release and return to Pharaoh’s house. Joseph also foresees the baker’s unfortunate demise. Joseph begs the cup-bearer to lobby Pharaoh for his release from prison [Gen. 40:14]. This is Joseph’s big chance to get out of jail, and he gives it his best shot. He appeals to the cup-bearer’s empathy and sense of justice, “For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit” [Gen. 40:15].

In short, Joseph seizes the moment to ask a favor. But alas, the cup-bearer forgets all about Joseph for two full years. Then Pharaoh is troubled by a dream, and the cup-bearer remembers the talented “young Hebrew” in prison. Finally, Joseph gets his chance to see Pharaoh. When he comes face-to-face with Pharaoh however, Joseph makes no appeal for release. He doesn’t defend himself. He makes no complaint about the injustice he has suffered by being falsely accused and thrown in prison. He merely

does as Pharaoh asks; he interprets the dream, and then displays his wisdom by recommending a plan to manage the agricultural policy of the Egypt.

Joseph's example is instructive. No matter where he is, no matter what the circumstances, Joseph pays attention to the needs of the people around him, and serves them. He does this time and again. He earns the respect of the captain of the guard, who becomes his mentor and puts Joseph in charge of prison affairs. Joseph then serves the cup-bearer, who becomes a colleague, and eventually mentions Joseph to Pharaoh. Finally, Joseph gets the chance to serve Pharaoh, the supreme ruler, who becomes Joseph's greatest mentor, promoting him to the highest possible rank in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself [Gen. 41:40-45].

Joseph's story illustrates the old adage that, "nobody gets anywhere without a mentor." The corollary is that nobody gets a mentor without earning the respect of the people around them by serving them. Joseph develops colleagues and mentors by serving well.

There is no way to predict the "big breaks" that will bring the next opportunity to take on more responsibility. God directs those events and sets those times. But the best preparation for those pivotal moments is to serve well and faithfully. Find colleagues and mentors. Make friends. Develop relationships. Trust God to bring the right opportunity at the right time, and seize the moment when it comes.

*Walk by Faith*  
(Genesis 39:1-6)

Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. <sup>2</sup>The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup>His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. <sup>4</sup>So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. <sup>5</sup>From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. <sup>6</sup>So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.



“Life is what happens while you’re busy making plans,” so the old saying goes.

Joseph found this out the hard way. His big dreams did not work out at all like he would have wanted. None of the details or timing were predictable—or even imaginable, for that matter. The turning points all lay in God’s hands. One moment Joseph is thrown in a pit to die, and the next he’s lifted out again and sold to a wealthy Egyptian who gives him run of the household. Next, he’s thrown into prison, and later called out of prison to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams. Pharaoh is so impressed, he gives Joseph the keys to the kingdom. None of this was predictable, and none of it went according to any plan—except God’s perhaps.

These wrenching turns of events did not stop Joseph from dreaming big, however. Neither did they diminish his faith, or stop him from working hard and serving his bosses. He continued to trust in our one and only source of hope—the Lord [Romans 5:5]. The only significant clue the Bible gives as to how Joseph managed to succeed is the repeated observation, “the Lord was with Joseph” [Gen. 39:2, 21, 23].

So if Joseph’s life story teaches us anything about career planning, it’s that *you can’t control what you can’t control*. All the key turning points, both the ups and the downs, were out of Joseph’s control. But God was with him. God was present. The living God is present with you and me also, in our own trials.

So go ahead and dream big, like Joseph did. Let the dream guide your steps. Walk in the direction that seems good to you. Take bold strides. But submit your steps to the Lord in trust. When we step out in faith, he will guide us, but before he can guide us we have to be willing to act.



This lesson from Joseph's journey demonstrates the wisdom of the Proverbs:

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. [Proverbs 16:9]

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.  
[Proverbs 19:21]

We make plans, but events are beyond our control. The Lord will direct our steps. Our personal wills and God's will intermingle. This is the fundamental paradox of Christian life: we make plans, but we walk by faith, and we trust God to guide us through the uncertain twists and turns. As the saying goes, "God can't steer a parked car."