

Lessons in Leadership from Joseph, Ph.D.

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The Old Testament is a great place for learning about leadership. It is a place for seeing frail humans stumble through life – tossed into positions, and carried by God’s grace into world changing roles in God’s great scheme.

Today, Joseph will be our inspiration.

Before we look at Joseph’s leadership style, I want to pause a moment to see how he got to that world changing – life sustaining position of saving Egypt and his family from certain starvation and destruction from famine.

As a high schooler, Joseph was the bratty little brother – Daddy’s favorite. While he could do no wrong in Dad’s sight, he did plenty to irritate and annoy his brothers. It was probably out of respect for their father that caused the brothers to put up with Joseph as long as they did – without harming him. However, when he started going on and on about his vision of his brothers and even his own Father bowing before him – Dad was perplexed at his egotistical son’s behavior, however, the brothers had had enough!

It didn’t take long for the brothers to find the right opportunity to deal with Joseph the brat. They came up with a plan - the brothers decided it was time for Joseph to go to college – so, they enrolled him in the nearby desert campus of Cistern Community College. But big brother Ruben was worried about how their father would deal with the absence of his precious chosen son. How could Joseph possibly spend all that time in the heat, down deep in a hole in the desert – fighting off area mascots?

Of course, it would be more fitting for Joseph to go to a university where he could get a true liberal arts degree. Wouldn’t you know it – just at the right time some university recruiters came along and with the brothers’ help, Joseph was awarded a full-ride scholarship to the school of leadership at Egypt’s famous Slavery University.

At first it wasn’t so bad. Joseph took some of the basic required courses in the slavery major like household management 101, but it didn’t take long for harder courses such as False Accusations 303 and Indefinite Jail Time 327 to be added to his course load. These upper level courses came with a transfer to the Prison Extension Campus.

Now this doesn’t seem like a very good course of study for a future leader, but it did have the added benefit of more elective courses. While at the Prison Campus, Joseph enrolled in courses like: Networking, Counseling, Dream Interpretation, and Cross-Cultural Communication.

After a time, Joseph moved into his masters & doctoral programs which he pursued after transferring to Forgotten in Jail U.

It was in these days in “higher education” – nearly two decades of studying leadership that the arrogant, self-centered Joseph began to mature into a leader God could use.

When God’s timing was right, the Pharaoh had a dream that no one could interpret. Out of the blue, a former classmate remembered a young protégé in the dream interpretation course at Forgotten in Jail U.

Joseph’s communication and networking courses finally paid off. He was called forward for an interview with the Pharaoh. And the rest they say, is history.

We can have lots of fun at Joseph’s expense, but what can we learn from his leadership?

1. BE STRATEGIC

Even as a 17 year old, Joseph had a plan – he was going to rule the world! I’d say, although it may have taken a different path than he expected – he did reach and maybe even exceeded his own expectations.

Later, when he was interpreting the Pharaoh’s dream, he laid out a clear strategy for how the Pharaoh should lead his people through the next 14 years. Joseph did such a great job communicating the plan that he got the big job in leadership of implementing his own strategy for the Pharaoh.

Additionally, it is important that Joseph stuck to the plan to conserve – even when it appeared they had more grain stored than they could ever need. It might have been easy for a weaker leader to lose sight of the pending trouble and give the Egyptians a break – didn’t they deserve it after all those years of sacrifice? Of course. That Joseph didn’t change the plan meant that there was grain for the Egyptians, Joseph’s family, and many others who came from outside Egypt looking for lifesaving food. In fact, his foresight led to there being enough grain available for planting when the crisis was over – and a rich future filled with prosperity for Pharaoh and his wise Hebrew leader, Joseph. By employing a solid strategy, Joseph rescued his family and secured a legacy for himself.

Joseph had the mind of a strategist and therefore was able to recognize God’s strategy in sending him to Egypt. When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers in Genesis 45, starting at verse 4, he gives God credit for working out every detail!

“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 or 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.

2. BE FORGIVING

There have been many who speak about the power and place of forgiveness in leadership. The scripture is clear that we will be forgiven in the same way we are forgiving.

Joseph's ability to come to a place of forgiving his brothers for all they put him through, is really what brought health and a future to his family.

In the next few days, when you return to Genesis 37-50 to read this story with fresh eyes, you will begin to notice how broken and dysfunctional Joseph's family was throughout the story – from the father's favoritism toward Joseph and Benjamin, to the abusive and deceptive relationships of the brothers.

Joseph could have held onto his anger and pain and no one would fault him. And in that case, no amount of grain that he gave his brothers to fill their stomachs would have been enough to keep the family from being destroyed from within.

No time is more important for Joseph to recognize the need for forgiveness than after their father's death. In Genesis 50:19-20, Joseph said to his brothers, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

The ability to forgive and also to trust God's strategy leads us now to our final point.

3. BE YOUR BEST SELF – where you are!

I had the privilege of serving under Dr. LeBron Fairbanks while he was the education commissioner for the Church of the Nazarene. From time to time, I would ask him to advise on where my career should head – or if I should apply for a certain position. His answer was always the same.

"Be your best - right where you are – do your very best job at this job – give everything you are to this assignment and God will open doors for you."

Believe me I know what hard advice this can be – especially for those of us who want to be strategically planning our lives and ministry.

I do believe the story of Joseph shows us a man of God who in every assignment – did his best at his job and at honoring God in that role.

I want to encourage you today – whoever you are – wherever you serve – whether as a student, or pastor, or person of some leadership status:

Stop looking around you - gazing at others and coveting their job.

Stop whining – instead give credit and praise to God for what you have

Stop scheming for a better assignment – after all, in essence, wasn't that what the brothers did? They took things into their own hands and look at the misery it brought on them. If you jump out of one assignment too soon – not only will you miss out on being a part of what God wanted to do through you there, but you may land in a position that is not in God's timing or will for you to be there. Wait for God to call you forward in His time, for His purpose, for your life.

Stop saying to yourself – he has it so easy, or, he has never had to work a job like mine, or, she just doesn't understand what it is like to be where I am ... That may all be completely true, but the story of Joseph is a story of the sovereignty of God.

You meant it for evil, BUT GOD!

Ultimately, the story of Joseph is a story of God's sovereignty – If you don't buy into the lifestyle that proclaims that God is in charge and is not surprised by ANYTHING – then you will live your life as a fearful, whiny brother – instead of as Joseph - the strategic, gracious and forgiving, contented servant leader!