

SERIES: Joseph: From Pit to Prominence

SERMON: **How a Wise Leader Functions Under the Providence of God**

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 47:13-31

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DATE: July 29, 2007

Last Fall I preached a series on the Christian and work, called *The Ministry of the Market Place*. Our purpose was to demonstrate that secular work is, or should be, full-time service for God. As I introduced that series nearly a year ago, I said the following:

*I am discouraged by the movement to see ministry as business, (but) I am encouraged by another movement I see taking root, and that is the notion that business is, or can be, ministry. More and more business leaders are looking to the Bible for principles and practices of leadership and management. Not only that, more are seeing the enormous potential for Gospel witness and spiritual impact in the arena where they spend 40-60 hours each week.*

One of the sermons in that series was on Joseph. We talked about his integrity in the work place—whether as chief steward of Potiphar’s house, chief steward of the prison, or Prime Minister. But I didn’t touch upon the chapter before us this morning, which contains some excellent examples of wise business leadership. This morning I want us to examine some of these principles, but at the same time I want us to look for something else in this story.

It’s what I would call “the simplicity of God’s providence.” Have you noticed that there are no miracles in the Joseph story? None, except possibly the revelation of the dreams of Pharaoh to Joseph. I suppose you could call that a miracle, but it’s not the kind of miracle that takes our breath away! It’s a minor league miracle compared to the plagues on Egypt, and the crossing of the Sea, and the later crossing of the Jordan. Frankly, one of the things that attracts me to the Joseph story is the *lack* of miracles. I don’t know about you, but I can relate better to someone who faces ordinary circumstances with extraordinary faith than someone like Moses who could hit a rock with his stick and produce water. I can’t do that. But I can be like Joseph! (Now I don’t mean to convey that Moses is not a worthy example for the believer to emulate; he is, and so is Christ, of course, who could run circles around Moses, miracle-wise. It’s just that there is something especially appealing about Joseph and what he accomplished under the providence of God.

While the term “providence” is not found in Scripture, it has been traditionally used to summarize God’s ongoing relationship to his creation. We may define it as God’s continuing action by which He preserves the creation He has brought into being, and guides it to His intended purposes for it. Providence stands in opposition to Deism (which teaches that God created the world but then essentially abandoned it) and to Pantheism (the view that creation is just a part of God and is not distinct from Him).

I believe that faith in God’s Providence is central to the conduct of the Christian life. It means that we are able to live in the assurance that God is present and active in our lives. We are in His

care and can therefore face the future confidently, knowing that things are not happening merely by chance. We can pray, knowing that God hears and acts upon our prayers. We can face danger, knowing that He is not unaware or uninvolved. There are a multitude of Scripture passages that teach God's providence. Daniel 2:21 says, "He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings." Paul says of Christ in Col. 1:17, "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." The writer to the Hebrews speaks of Him as "upholding the universe by his word of power." (1:3) Countless passages teach the inseparability of God's children from His love and safe-keeping.

Now while God's providence *is* supernatural, it is not always miraculous in the normal sense of the term. By miracle we refer to those acts of providence which are not explicable on the basis of the usual patterns of nature. They are either violations of the laws of nature or, perhaps better, situations where natural forces are countered by supernatural force in a dramatic and obvious manner.

I have mentioned before that there were only three great periods of miracles in the Scripture—the time of Moses, the time of the greater prophets (Elijah, Elisha, etc.), and the time of Jesus and the Apostles. And I have explained why I believe that is—because those were the primary periods of revelation. Those were the three times when the vast majority of Scripture was written. God used miracles to validate His messengers—the prophets and apostles—so that there would be no doubt in anyone's mind that God was speaking through them.

The rest of human history has been largely devoid of astounding divine interventions into the laws of nature. Oh, I'm not saying that God has been doing no miracles, only that large, public displays of first-class miracle-working power have generally not been evident. Instead God is generally ruling this world through divine providence. If you stop to think about it, this should surprise no one. If miracles were ordinary, everyday, run-of-the-mill kinds of things they wouldn't be miracles! The very thing that makes them so stunning and thus so impactful is their extreme rarity.

Yet there are many today who just can't seem to accept that God is working any differently today than He did in the first century when Jesus and the apostles were doing all kinds of miracles as they were speaking God's Word to us. So they interpret many normal acts of providence as miracle, and they speak of any unusually fortuitous event as though it were a first-class miracle. For example, if a tumor shrinks after prayer, they will call it a miracle, even though this sort of thing happens for unbelievers who never pray, as well as for believers who pray. Or if they survive a terrible accident, they call it a miracle, even though surviving terrible accidents is fairly common. I certainly think a believer should thank God for a tumor shrinking or for surviving an accident, but I think it is wiser generally to view these things as the exercise of God's providence rather than carelessly tossing around the term "miracle."

You see, I don't think it's demeaning to God one whit, or demeaning to the believer's faith, to say that God chooses to work through providence most of the time rather than through miracle. It's still God working. It's just that He's working more behind the scenes to arrange timing and

circumstances and relationships to bring about His perfect will.

Now I have put these two themes—Joseph’s wise business leadership and the providence of God—together to come up with my title today, “How a Wise Leader Functions Under the Providence of God.” Here’s my theme in a nutshell: a wise leader refuses to sit back and wait for God to perform miracles. Instead he seizes opportunity by the throat, uses the brains God gave him, and makes wise decisions based upon the information he has, all the while acknowledging God’s sovereignty and giving Him gratitude and glory.

Now just before reading our Scripture text from Genesis 47, let me set the stage for those who may have missed our series so far. I’ve done this a number of times, but I do it not just for new people. I have another goal—that all of us will learn the story of Joseph well enough that we can talk with our children about it intelligently, for as you know our Children’s worship is also studying the Life of Joseph right now.

Joseph was one of the four great patriarchs of Israel (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph). As a young lad of 17 he was sold into slavery by his own brothers because of their jealousy at their father’s favoritism. He was taken to Egypt, sold to a high government official, framed, and thrown into prison. But due to his faithfulness and God’s sovereign good pleasure, Joseph was given the ability to interpret some dreams that Pharaoh had, and Pharaoh was so impressed that he elevated Joseph to the position of Prime Minister at the age of 30.

The dreams of Pharaoh contained a prediction about seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. So impressed was the Egyptian ruler with Joseph’s ability to discern the meaning of these dreams that he gave Joseph the task of saving enough grain during the plentiful years to provide food during the lean years. When the famine arrived, just as predicted, it affected not only Egypt but the entire Middle East, including Palestine, where Joseph’s brothers still lived with their father. For the last few weeks we have followed the fascinating account of how his brothers came to Egypt looking for food and how that led to forgiveness and an incredible family reunion. Our text today, Genesis 47:13-27, moves our attention off Joseph’s family and focuses on the larger picture of how Joseph helped feed Egypt and the surrounding nations:

*There was no food, however, in the whole region because the famine was severe; both Egypt and Canaan wasted away because of the famine. Joseph collected all the money that was to be found in Egypt and Canaan in payment for the grain they were buying, and he brought it to Pharaoh's palace. When the money of the people of Egypt and Canaan was gone, all Egypt came to Joseph and said, "Give us food. Why should we die before your eyes? Our money is used up."*

*"Then bring your livestock," said Joseph. "I will sell you food in exchange for your livestock, since your money is gone." So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and he gave them food in exchange for their horses, their sheep and goats, their cattle and donkeys. And he brought them through that year with food in exchange for all their livestock.*

*When that year was over, they came to him the following year and said, "We*

*cannot hide from our lord the fact that since our money is gone and our livestock belongs to you, there is nothing left for our lord except our bodies and our land. Why should we perish before your eyes we and our land as well? Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and we with our land will be in bondage to Pharaoh. Give us seed so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate."*

*So Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, one and all, sold their fields, because the famine was too severe for them. The land became Pharaoh's, and Joseph reduced the people to servitude, - from one end of Egypt to the other. However, he did not buy the land of the priests, because they received a regular allotment from Pharaoh and had food enough from the allotment Pharaoh gave them. That is why they did not sell their land.*

*Joseph said to the people, "Now that I have bought you and your land today for Pharaoh, here is seed for you so you can plant the ground. But when the crop comes in, give a fifth of it to Pharaoh. The other four-fifths you may keep as seed for the fields and as food for yourselves and your households and your children."*

*"You have saved our lives," they said. "May we find favor in the eyes of our lord; we will be in bondage to Pharaoh."*

*So Joseph established it as a law concerning land in Egypt that a fifth of the produce belongs to Pharaoh. It was only the land of the priests that did not become Pharaoh's.*

Now our first reading of this passage may cause us to doubt Joseph's qualifications as a man of God and think of him as just one more Middle Eastern tyrant. I think that would be a serious misunderstanding of the text. We, of course, must not evaluate Joseph against the backdrop of western democratic ideals or capitalistic economic principles. We must understand as well that Joseph was not Pharaoh; he was *under* Pharaoh. And Pharaoh was an absolute monarch. His word was law.

Bible heroes, you know, lived in two worlds—the political and economic and social milieu they grew up in, and the world of biblical faith. Frequently there were clashes between those worlds. Never did God tell them to abandon their culture or to institute a revolution against it. They were to be *in* their world while not being *of* it. That's still our responsibility, and I believe Joseph is a good example of how to do that.

Now, believe it or not, all that was really introduction. The first principle I want to share with you this morning is:

**A wise leader practices delayed gratification.** (41:46-49, 53-57)

One of the greatest problems our political leaders exhibit today, in my estimation, is almost a complete rejection of the principle of delayed gratification. With the exception of Senator Tom Coburn of our neighboring state of Oklahoma, I'm not sure I could point to a single legislator in Congress who regularly practices any significant degree of self-control regarding the spending of

taxpayer money. The issue of earmarks has been much in the news lately. An earmark is a line-item that is inserted into a bill to direct funds to a specific project or recipient, usually a political supporter of a senator or congressman, without any public hearing or review, and without identifying the legislator who approved it. In a recent year there were over 14,000 earmarks costing well over \$50 billion dollars! At the same time Congress, because of partisan politics, is completely ignoring the looming crises in Social Security and Medicare. All the while the national debt continues to climb into the stratosphere.

But I don't entirely fault our Senate and House of Representatives. I fault the American people, because we send those characters to Washington to represent us. Everyone wants his piece of the pie and as long as our representative is bringing home the bacon to our district, most of us will keep sending him back up the Potomac.

That's one of the reasons I see the story of Joseph as so amazingly refreshing. He exhibits the leadership and the courage to institute a plan of forced savings for an entire country. It all started, you will recall, when as Prime Minister Joseph insisted that the nation set aside huge amounts of grain for seven years. Look back at 41:46-49:

*Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh King of Egypt. And Joseph went out from Pharaoh's presence and traveled throughout Egypt. During the seven years of abundance the land produced plentifully. Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it. Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure.*

Now I don't think that is meant to be taken literally—that he “collected *all* the food produced in those seven years.” If he did that, no one would have had anything to eat. I think it means that he collected all the extra food, i.e. all the food that exceeded what was grown in a normal year. Even that is amazing. With most people when they discover they have more than what they expected they just spend more. That's certainly normal with our political leaders.

I have little doubt that Joseph faced opposition for doing this. I can just hear some of the politicians of his day saying, “Let's sell this extra food and use the proceeds to cut taxes or to finance a new prescription drug plan or to launch universal health coverage.” Almost never do you hear anyone seriously suggesting that government should save anything for a rainy day or even pay down debt.

Rainy days do come, you know. You can count on it. They sure came on Egypt. Maybe I should say “dry days come.” Famine arrived. We read about that in verses 53-57 of chapter 41:

*The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food. Then Pharaoh told all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph and do what he tells you."*

*When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world.*

Delayed gratification. It's the best way to have what you need when you need it. It's the best way to enjoy some extras without mortgaging your future. It's actually the best way to enjoy almost anything because the longer you wait for it, the more enjoyable it will be (or in some cases you'll discover you didn't need it in the first place). Delayed gratification, of course, is not just an economic principle but a spiritual one as well. It's God's way, and always has been. For example, He calls upon us to delay gratifying our sexual urges until marriage so that the real fullness and satisfaction God intended can be realized. Listen to how Moses got in the Hall of Faith and ask yourself if this isn't speaking about delayed gratification (Hebrews 11:24-26):

*By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.*

Is sin pleasurable? Is it gratifying? Sure it is. But it's only gratifying for a short time. Moses chose delayed gratification, actually eternal gratification instead. And Joseph practiced delayed gratification as a business leader and as a political leader. May his tribe increase!

Now I've spent a lot of time on this first principle because I believe it's so critical and because it's a dominant theme of the Joseph story. The others I will cover more quickly.

**A wise leader submits to authority and practices accountability.** (47:13-14)

As we have noted, Joseph was #2 man in Egypt. As #2 it was his job to further Pharaoh's interests. Not the people's interests, mind you, nor the interests of immigrants from Canaan, nor the interests of other countries in the Middle East, but Pharaoh's interests. As long as Pharaoh's interests were not in conflict with the laws of God Joseph was perfectly within his responsibility, even obligation as a believer to do so.

Joseph did not give grain away, he sold it, and the money went into Pharaoh's coffers. Note verse 14: "Joseph collected all the money that was to be found in Egypt and Canaan in payment for the grain they were buying, and he brought it to Pharaoh's palace." That not only infers that Pharaoh was getting very rich but also that Joseph wasn't skimming off the top. All the money came to the palace. There's a lot of corruption in American business and politics and sports. Believe me, a lot. And the greater the amount of money that is being transferred, the greater the corruption (witness the aftermath of Katrina and the rebuilding of Iraq as two notable examples). But next to most third-world countries the U.S. is definitely in the minor leagues when it comes to corruption. There are many countries where you can't get anything done without a bribe. Joseph was accountable in regard to the huge amounts of money he was handling.

By the way, if you are troubled by the fact that Joseph sells this grain, keep in mind that he undoubtedly bought it in the first place. Furthermore, I am sure he didn't hide why he was doing this. I am certain that he couldn't have stored up such massive amounts of grain without it being widely known that a famine was expected. Private citizens could have stored up grain as well so that they would have what they needed and wouldn't have to use all their money to buy grain from the government. They just didn't do it. Let's place responsibility where it lies.

**A wise leader faces extreme circumstances with creativity and competence. (47:15-21)**

There is no question but that Joseph faced extreme circumstances. Probably never since Noah had the civilized world faced a greater crisis than this extensive famine. It's at times like this that people look for great leaders, creative leaders, competent leaders to solve huge problems. Franklin Roosevelt, whatever you think of his politics, was just such a leader. He found ways to provide hope for a nation in despair. Churchill did the same thing for England in the dark days of WWII. And Joseph did it for his nation.

He built granaries all over Egypt. I saw some of those ancient granaries when I was in Egypt three years ago. Rows and rows of them recently uncovered from the endless sands! Then he devised a way to dispense the grain. It must have taken quite a bureaucracy to dispense huge amounts of grain to the whole nation, plus foreign countries. And he devised a system of payment, first involving currency, then livestock, and then the land. Just imagine how this was done without riots or chaos! It is evidence of Joseph's competence and creativity. He must have set up amazing systems for all these transactions long before they were even needed.

But you say, something can be creative and competent but still not be moral. All the currency is now in Pharaoh's coffers, the livestock all belong to him, and all the land has been deeded to him. Instead of private ownership, now everything belongs to the state, which means it belongs to one man. Yes, but is this immoral, or is it simply distasteful? Did Pharaoh steal it? If he is a benevolent dictator, is the power he exercises automatically immoral?

But then we learn something even more disturbing. It says in verse 21, "and Joseph reduced the people to servitude from one end of Egypt to the other." That sounds totally unacceptable to our ears, but I don't think we should read the English or American slave trade back into this verse. Quite the contrary, I think this paragraph illustrates still another principle:

**A wise leader acts responsibly in behalf of the people under him. (47:23-26)**

Joseph was providing the single greatest need the people have—the need for food. And it is clear from verses 23-24 that he didn't take away from the people their income-producing capacity, for Pharaoh took only 20% of the produce and the people retained ownership of the other 80%. There was no private ownership in slavery in the U.S. In fact, 80% is more than our government today lets us keep!

Not only that, the people's attitude in verse 25 is one of extreme gratitude: "'You have saved our lives,' they said. 'May we find favor in the eyes of our lord. We will be in bondage to Pharaoh.'" So whatever kind of servitude they were placed into, they agreed willingly and considered their present state far superior to the alternative—starvation. We may look with disfavor on the political and economic results of Joseph's plan, but I think the people who experienced it are the better evaluators of its effectiveness and its morality, and they were grateful.

I thought of adding one more principle today:

**A wise leader exempts the clergy from paying their fair share.** But I thought that might be a bit self-serving, so I'm leaving it out. Verse 26 is best understood in view of the fact there was no separation of church and state in that day. This was apparently Pharaoh's desire, or at least a political reality he had to accept.

**Conclusion:** I return to the theme I began with: A wise leader refuses to sit back and wait for God to perform miracles. Instead he seizes opportunity by the throat, uses the brains God gave him, and makes wise decisions based upon the information he has, all the while acknowledging God's providence and giving Him gratitude and glory. The wise leader knows that God will work all things after the counsel of his own will and for the benefit of those who love God and are called according to his purposes, but he also knows that God expects him to act with integrity, competence, and creativity as though he is God's ambassador to a secular world, which he is. He is an ambassador of the Good News that God has dealt with our sin problem through the Cross of Jesus Christ and accepts everyone who puts his or her faith in Christ into His forever family.