

# The Story of Joseph

## Fieldwork

Part 16 – June 3, 2012

We're moving onto Potiphar's plantation. Last week, we read ...

Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought [Joseph] from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. – *Genesis 39:1b NIV*



And we created a Potiphar based on the traits and skills of an ancient Egyptian, seasoned military commander of Pharaoh's elite palace guard, who's quick to size up and act on threats, alarmingly proficient in *all* weaponry, and carrying out the duty of Chief Executioner in the royal prison at his compound.

The Ishmaelites were hauling the pungent components of Egypt's most expensive fragrances.

And Jewish tradition says that Joseph *reeked* in the slave market, and that Potiphar caught the scent of nobility, and thundered in to identify, defend, and secure! But what he found was a slave who reminded him of someone ...

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome ... [**"You look like a leettle me. I am Pot-tee-fuh"**] – *Genesis 39:6b NIV*



Now, let's imagine the same scene but from *Joseph's* perspective. Can't speak the language, doesn't know the culture, and stinks like the high-titled aristocrats who have oppressed and dominated every poor lowbrow in that market at some point in their life. He's jeered, hissed, and pelted with eggs and rocks. **"What?! Why?!"** And then, as he prays in the pen, there's a huge commotion and a retreating circle of wide-eyed, terrified, eyeliner'd bystanders.

And he beholds the most chilling warrior he's *ever* seen; brandishing gleaming metal; snorting unintelligible words. And *everyone* in the market turns, nightmarishly, and points at Joseph! **"What?!"** Assuming this fragrant slave has robbed or murdered a noble, Potiphar charges toward Joseph. **"Into your arms, Lord!"** I picture Joseph stretching out his neck and bracing himself. Of all the horrific scenarios he's been imagining the past two weeks, a quick, painless beheading isn't as bad as it might sound! Potiphar interrogates the dealer. He sheaths his weapon. He turns and looks into the eyes of the 17-year-old slave who just stood his ground ... to Potiphar ... *that doesn't happen ... ever*. He speaks to the dealer in hushed tones. Shackles are unshackled, fetters unfettered, it's the only sound in the astoundingly silent market.

Potiphar pulls him out of the pen and points him to walk. And as Joseph steps forward, the crowd reflexively parts. No jeering, no hissing, just respect ... for the force *behind* him. And Joseph begins to realize this is *good ... really, really good!*

[Later, in verse five it says,] The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. [So, was Potiphar a farmer too?] – Genesis 39:5b NIV

As a (middle kingdom) Egyptian Official, Potiphar would've been compensated in government land to farm for food and trade. This is a 4000-year-old model of an Egyptian granary, made in Joseph's day; so too the cattle barn model and this slaughter house model.



Egyptian, Middle Kingdom Models from the Tomb of Chancellor Meketre, BC 1981-1975

Potiphar had a fulltime palace job. So, his slaves (many likely war captives) tended, and a steward managed, his fields, which is where Joseph began, and proved himself, and prospered.

The Lord was with Joseph [It's becoming more obvious to Joseph now] and [therefore] he prospered, and [therefore] he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. [This statement is best translated as a progression of causes and effects] – Genesis 39:2 NIV

There's a lot of ground covered – perhaps *years* – in those three words: “and he prospered”. Joseph has a lot to learn before can be promoted from an outside slave to a *trusted* inside servant (a master had to be sure his foreign slave wasn't going to steal his stuff and slit his throat in the middle of the night!). And Joseph is a despised Hebrew from a rural culture and an unsophisticated family. In fact, the mud brick bunkhouse at Potiphar's must've felt like a five-star hotel! “**You sleep here.**” “**Walls. Ceiling. Stability.**” “**These are your field clothes.**” “**Plain white ... my favorite!**” “**The war-captives bunk here too you know.**” “**I love outsiders! I'm an outsider; always been. Wow ... no more tension, no more contempt, no more envious, venomous, murderous brothers. ... And do my eyes deceive me, or is that a tiled squat-toilet?!**”



Tomb of Menna, c. 1400 BC

By sending Potiphar to buy him, God empowers Joseph with an intense attitude of gratitude, and a desire to throw himself into his field work like no servant of Potiphar's before him! And all the while God is guiding Joseph, both in ways he's aware of and ways he's not.

Potiphar means “he whom Ra [the false god] gives”. Amazingly, it is he whom the *true God* gives ... to Joseph, as his savior.

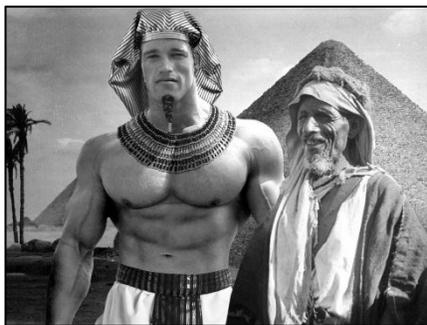
And because of Joseph's love and respect for Potiphar and his trust and gratitude for what God is *already doing* with his barely two-week-old calamity, he doesn't just endure, he thrives!

Joseph models the Apostle Paul's words of encouragement and wisdom to the *Roman* slaves and servants of *his* day.

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. – *Colossians 3:23-24 NIV*

If you started tomorrow *working as for the Lord*, what would be the biggest change in your habits and your routine? Now, I don't know your exact situation, but I'd wager that your top three would be your attitude, your attitude, and not stealing office supplies ... just kidding, the third one is your *attitude!* You've most likely heard this quote, a lot, but we need to remind ourselves, a lot: **"Life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I respond to it."** – *Charles Swindoll*

Working for *God* empowers us to relate and respond from a secure and grateful desire to please *Him*. Unlike the desperation of those who *define* their identity and significance *by* their field.



Joseph could've saw Potiphar as his *oppressor*. But instead, he sees him as a gift from God and, I think, a *father figure*. Potiphar is *everything* Joseph's dad isn't.

Jacob is passive, deceptive, and disrespected. Potiphar: decisive, commanding, admired, feared. Potiphar saves Joseph from an untold number of horrific likelihoods for a detested Hebrew slave. And, Jacob? He couldn't even protect his *favorite son* from his own brothers.

So, Joseph embraces the field work. But he's still an outsider, laboring away (for how long, we don't know); and from time to time gazing longingly at that big, clean, palatial mansion. *That's* where he could *really* make a difference for *God!* *That's* where he could *really minister!* *That's* where the *glamor* is. **"How long do I have to waste my time in the dirt, Lord? Promote me already!"**

We often fail to see *our* field work as *ministry*, or that we're making a difference for God. It doesn't have that *spiritual glamor*. So we hold onto Jesus' words as we stare at that house.

Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. – *Luke 16:10 NIV*



Joseph remained faithful and grateful in those dirty ol' fields even as he longed to be inside that big, clean, glamorous house. Yes, God prospered him, but don't think it was easy. God doesn't work that way. Joseph was faithful in the field *and* burning the midnight oil, to learn how to speak, think, act, and of course walk, like an Egyptian. He's shaving his beard *and* his head, wearing a *wig*, and applying *eyeliner* ... and ... *lipstick* (*they did that back then*).

He's embracing and adapting to where God has planted him. It's *way* outside his comfort zone, but his eyes are on that house. What Joseph doesn't know, can't know – How could he?

We rarely sense it when it's happening to *us!* - is that the house *wasn't* God's *goal* for Joseph ... the *field* is ... the field *always* was!

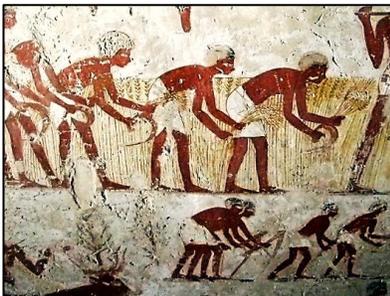


His first dream, what was the setting? A *field*. What kind of a field? A *wheat field*. And what was happening?

The wheat was bowing to him.

"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." – *Genesis 37:7 NIV*

He was called to master the wheat field. His brothers are going to bow to him one day; and it'll be when they come to Egypt to buy grain during the famine.



Tomb of Menna, c. 1400 BC

But, long before the wheat will bow to Joseph, Joseph must bow to the wheat. Learn it. Care for it. Understand it. Relate to it. He thought the goal was the big, clean house, but the house was just a brief stop along the journey of his created purpose.

If he *hadn't* been faithful in the *dirt*, he would've forfeited his destiny. Just 13 years from when God plants him in Potiphar's field, he becomes the *Agricultural Minister of all Egypt!*

He'll propose and *administer* a God-given, 7-year plan, to grow, harvest, and store enough grain to feed Egypt, her neighbors, and the people of Israel during the 7-year famine. The *field* was his *ministry* all along! It just grew as *he* grew.

"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." – *John 4:34-35 NIV*

What's it called when you go outside the safe environment of a classroom or a laboratory and get your hands dirty, learning and understanding your subject in the *real world*? Fieldwork! And the church is the big, clean, safe and sterile laboratory where we digest information and discuss theories. But, out there is the *fieldwork*, with soccer-mom ministers, and backhoe-operator ministers, and college-student ministers, and Starbucks-barista ministers, and *insert-your-field-here* ministers! And just like Joseph, *you were created* for the fieldwork!

[Paul said,] We [all] have different gifts, according to the grace given us. [And we're each given a different dream for how we might use our gifts] – *Romans 12:6a NIV*

[And we'll all be held accountable] So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. – *Romans 14:12 NIV*

So, what are your gifts? And where is your field? And *are* you serving faithfully and gratefully with an attitude of gratitude? It's the *only way* you get to the destiny of your created purpose.