

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001

COPING WITH SUCCESS

Genesis 41:1-57

by

Steven J. Cole

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Genesis Lesson 69

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Today I'm going to talk about something purely theoretical: How to handle success. Often before I preach on a subject, the Lord will take me through an experience similar to what I'm going to preach about, but I'm sorry to report that He didn't do that with this topic! I have never experienced anything like Joseph's meteoric rise from the prison to the palace.

I titled my message, "Coping With Success." Usually "coping" goes with "failure," but it should be coupled with the word "success." It is often more difficult to handle success properly than it is to deal with failure. Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist, said, "Affliction is bad; but for every person that can handle prosperity, there are a hundred that can handle adversity." We need to learn to cope with success.

Maybe you're thinking, "This message is purely theoretical for me, too. I'll never be successful like Joseph was." But even though not many of us will experience the dramatic success that God granted to Joseph, we all can learn much from his story. He didn't know exactly what God had for him until the day it happened. That day in the dungeon began the same as every day had for the past two or three years for Joseph. And yet by day's end, he was second in the land to Pharaoh. But that couldn't have happened if Joseph had not been prepared for it. He had walked with God and had developed godly character which shone through in his work. That made him ready for the success God eventually granted him. Because Joseph honored God and was diligent in his work, he was able to cope successfully with success. His life teaches that

To cope with success, honor God
and be diligent in your work.

In New Testament terms, make God look good by your life (glorify Him) and do your work heartily, as unto the Lord.

1. To cope with success, honor God.

The Lord says, "Those who honor Me I will honor" (1 Sam. 2:30). Joseph had honored the Lord, whether in Potiphar's house or in prison. Now the Lord greatly honored Joseph. And Joseph, for his part, continued to be careful to honor the Lord in four ways which we should imitate:

A. Honor God by remembering that He is the source of all success.

Pharaoh had these dreams about the fat and lean cows and the plump and lean ears of corn. When his magicians could not interpret them, the cupbearer, whose dream Joseph had interpreted in prison two years before, ventured to mention to Pharaoh Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams. So Pharaoh called for Joseph. After getting himself presentable, Joseph was ushered into Pharaoh's presence.

Imagine how Joseph must have felt on this occasion! From a dreary existence in the dungeon, a few minutes later he is standing before the most powerful monarch in the world. I would think it could be a bit threatening! If it were me, I'd probably want to be very polite, not make any waves, and hope like crazy that somehow I could use the opportunity to get out of prison.

These human factors make Joseph's first recorded words to Pharaoh all the more impressive. When Pharaoh says, "I hear you can interpret dreams," it would have been easy for Joseph to say, "Aw, shucks, it's nothing really. Just a little hobby I've developed over the years." But instead Joseph boldly says to this pagan king, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer"

(41:16). Joseph was clear on the source of his success. He didn't let the splendor of Pharaoh and his palace make him forget, "Without God, I'm nothing. He is the source of any ability I have to interpret dreams."

When someone compliments you on your ability or on something you have done, it's fine to accept it simply by saying, "Thank you." The person is trying to encourage you, and it can come across as false humility if you always respond with, "It wasn't I; it was the Lord." But, even when you say "thank you," you had better be thinking to yourself, "Thank You, *Lord*, for Your grace in enabling me to do that." If you sense that the other person is attributing something to you where God alone deserves the credit, then you need to be bold to honor God as Joseph does. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "What do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). Remembering that God is the source of our success will keep us from pride.

- B. Honor God by bearing witness of His enabling in all you do.

Joseph didn't just think to himself that God was the source of his ability to interpret dreams; he told Pharaoh about it. That wasn't easy, because Pharaoh worded his sentence about Joseph's ability (41:15) so that the easiest thing would have been for Joseph to keep silent and let it pass. Joseph could have thought, "For the time being, keep quiet. Later I'll tell him about God." But instead he boldly let it be known up front that God was behind his ability.

Pharaoh's magicians were probably astrologers, trained in incantations and magic formulas to discern the future. I believe the only reason that they couldn't come up with some explanation of Pharaoh's dreams was that God

darkened their minds on this occasion. But probably they had come in before Pharaoh and chanted their magic words and performed all their impressive rituals, but nothing worked.

But Joseph was different: No hocus-pocus, no razzmatazz! He just says, "God will reveal the meaning of your dream." He listens to it, and then gives Pharaoh the straight stuff. In the process, he mentions God four more times (41:25, 28, 32). And Pharaoh got the point! Even though he was probably filtering things through his polytheistic grid, he acknowledges that there is a divine spirit in Joseph and that God has informed him of all these things (41:38-39).

There is a danger that as a Christian in a pagan culture, people will think of you as a good person and attribute your goodness to you, not to God. I first learned this in a message Dr. Haddon Robinson preached in chapel at Dallas Seminary years ago. He and Dr. Bruce Waltke had been in a bank together and the teller gave Dr. Waltke too much change. Dr. Waltke pointed this out to the girl, but was quick to explain to her that he didn't do it because he was an honest man, but rather, because Jesus Christ was his Lord. He didn't want the woman to think that his honesty stemmed from his own good nature (which it didn't).

Since that time, I've had numerous situations like that when my Christian character opened the door for witness. Usually it's when someone undercharges me and I go back to pay the difference. I confess, the more they undercharge me, the greater the temptation to let it slide. But the truth is, the more they undercharge me, the greater the potential witness when I go back to make it right. I try to make it clear that if it was up to me, I would have ripped them off. But Jesus Christ is my Lord, and because of Him, I want to pay what I owe. If I

can, I give them a gospel tract.

If you live as a Christian on the job, you'll have opportunities to bear witness to the Lord as the explanation for your behavior or job performance. But honoring God must be uppermost in your mind, or you'll miss the chance. H. C. Leupold observes, "After twelve years and more of injustice Joseph's first consideration is not deliverance but to take care that his relation to his God be entirely upright" (*Exposition of Genesis* [Baker], p. 1026). If glorifying God through your life is your daily aim, then you'll be quick to speak for His honor when opportunities arise.

C. Honor God by bearing witness of His sovereignty over all.

Three times (41:25, 28, 32) Joseph tells Pharaoh that God has determined what is going to happen and that it *will* happen because God has decreed it. Even though Pharaoh was the most powerful man on the face of the earth, he was nothing in comparison to the sovereign God. So in a subtle, yet unmistakable way, Joseph is letting this mighty king know that he is nothing in the sight of the God who is able to send prosperity and famine.

The sovereignty of God is a major theme that runs through the whole story of Joseph. It's obvious that God had His hand on all the events of Joseph's life: his dreams as a boy, his brother's selling him into slavery, his being sold to Potiphar, his imprisonment and eventual release. The characters were only bringing about the will of God for His chosen people, even though those who sinned were totally responsible for their sin. Joseph, for his part, had a big view of God as the sovereign God who not only could send prosperity, but also famine. And he wasn't afraid to let Pharaoh know

about it.

Don't be afraid to tell lost people that the God of the universe is sovereign. I sometimes hear Christians apologize for God's sovereignty by explaining away a tragedy: "God didn't *cause* it, He just *allowed* it"--as if that gets God off the hook somehow. You don't have to get God off the hook. The Bible plainly teaches that God is in sovereign control of all things, but at the same time, sinful men are responsible for their evil deeds.

I don't have any problem saying that God not only *allows* tragedies, He *sends* them (Isa. 45:7). Does that mean that we sit back passively and don't do anything to alleviate human suffering? No. Joseph's knowledge that this famine was coming led him to make preparations to alleviate its effects. But in the process, he bore witness to a sovereign God who is in control of the universe.

D. Honor God in your family life.

Pharaoh elevated Joseph to the number two spot in the land so that he could oversee the preparations for this famine and he gave him an Egyptian name (the meaning of which is uncertain) and an Egyptian wife. It would have been easy, in the process, for Joseph to have forgotten about God's promises to his forefathers, and to have blended in completely with the comfortable Egyptian lifestyle he was now enjoying.

For that reason, it is especially significant that when his two sons were born, Joseph gave them names which testified of God's faithfulness. Manasseh means "forgetting," signifying that God made him forget the pain of his youth. Ephraim means "doubly fruitful," testifying that God had made Joseph fruitful in the land of his affliction. No doubt these Hebrew names would have raised some eyebrows in Egypt. People would have

asked, "Why did you name your kids that?" No doubt, Joseph told them. He honored God with his family life, even in this foreign, pagan culture.

Some are bothered by the fact that Joseph took an Egyptian wife. Perhaps he was wrong, although under the circumstances, he didn't have much choice. Pharaoh was honoring him by giving him a bride from a highly regarded family in Egypt. Also, it's clear from the names given to their two sons that Joseph didn't allow his wife's pagan background to influence him but, rather, he influenced her toward the true God. Furthermore, throughout this story Joseph is a type of Christ. There are many striking parallels: Christ was rejected by His own, suffered and died, and was then exalted as the Savior of the world, at which time He received the name above all names and a Gentile bride (the church). Even so, Joseph, rejected by his brothers and given up as dead, was later exalted as the savior of the world from famine (41:55, 57). So his receiving a new name and a Gentile bride fits the type.

Another factor is that God's heart was always broader than just Israel. His covenant with Abraham was that through his seed, all the nations would be blessed. But Israel often forgot its missionary purpose and hoarded its covenant blessings. Through the fact that two of their tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, were half Egyptian, God was saying to His people, "Don't get proud about being Hebrews. I chose you to be the channel of blessing to all nations." Joseph's Egyptian wife should have kept Israel humble about their race and reminded them of their missionary calling. In any case, Joseph's taking an Egyptian wife in this situation does not provide an excuse for a Christian entering into marriage with an unbeliever, which is clearly forbidden in Scripture.

To come back to my point, remember to honor God by

your family life, especially if He prospers you. All too often in our culture, career success means sacrificing your family. I admire men like a friend of ours in Dallas, who said no to a promotion because it would have meant too much time away from his family. In a culture like ours, where families are falling apart at the seams, a successful man who honors God with a godly family life will be greatly used to bear witness to His name.

So when God gives you any measure of success, be careful to honor Him by remembering that He is the source of all success, by bearing witness of His enabling and His sovereignty, and by your family life. But Joseph's story includes a second important ingredient:

2. To cope with success, be diligent in your work.

Both Joseph and Daniel stand out in the Bible as men who served God in important government jobs in foreign lands. To do that well, without compromising your faith and integrity, is a tough assignment. But both men were faithful and God used both of them greatly.

Note also that Joseph wasn't afraid to help a pagan king and a pagan nation to prosper. His plan saved Pharaoh's reign from failure and saved many people from starvation. Some Christians are so otherworldly that they withdraw from involvement in solving the problems of this world. I have some relatives who belong to a Christian group whose members don't vote or get involved in any constructive way with this world, because they're "citizens of heaven." But for the time being, we're also citizens of earth. The most effective place for Christian witness is when believers get involved in solving some of the problems confronting our world, and yet maintain their purity and integrity.

There are two ways in which you need to be diligent in your work when God opens the door of success:

A. Be diligent to keep character above career.

Joseph was diligent to develop and maintain godly character and to let God take care of promoting him. It's amazing that when he finally gets his chance before Pharaoh, after years in the dungeon, he doesn't even mention his desperate need for freedom, but instead he honors God and then interprets Pharaoh's dream. I can't help but think that if this had been Jacob, the schemer, standing before Pharaoh, he might have said, "I'll interpret your dream if you promise that I'll get out of prison." But Joseph did the right thing and trusted God to take care of his promotion.

Even when he proposed that Pharaoh find a discerning and wise man to oversee the storage and distribution of grain, Joseph never dreamed that he would be picked for the spot. He was a foreigner, a slave, and a prisoner at that. He probably hoped he would be set free, but the thought of being promoted to second in Egypt was far from him.

There are people who go through life hoping for a lucky break, where suddenly their fortunes will be reversed. But Joseph's promotion was no lucky break. His godly character, forged through his consistent walk with God and his submitting to God in difficult trials, where it would have been easy to have grown bitter, was at the core of why he was promoted in Potiphar's house, why he was able to resist Potiphar's wife's advances, why he was promoted in the prison, and why he was able to interpret the cupbearer's, the baker's and, later, Pharaoh's dreams. All these things were built on years of diligence in walking with God and developing godly character qualities.

Are you doing that right now where you're at? Maybe

you are a teenager. That's when Joseph started. You may be in a dungeon of circumstances. That's where Joseph kept at it. If he had grown bitter, complaining about how unfair life had been, he wouldn't have been ready for the promotion when the time came. You don't move overnight from being a self-centered, negative, grumbling person to being a joyful, competent, successful one. Joseph's overnight change of position didn't involve any change of character. Rather, it was built on years of godly character development. Be diligent to work on godly character. Let God take care of the career promotions.

B. Be diligent to keep competence alongside character.

Joseph was not only godly, he was good at what he did. He proposed a wise plan of action and he had the skill to carry it out. His plan involved collecting a fifth of the harvest each year for seven years, so that they had enough surplus not only for Egypt, but also for surrounding countries hit by this famine. It would have taken skillful administration and a lot of discipline to make this happen on a national scale. No doubt Joseph caught a lot of flak from people who wanted to use all the harvest and not save it for the future. But he was good enough as a leader to pull it off.

A lot of Christians think that character is enough on the job. They expect that God will get them the promotion because they've been faithful to have morning devotions. They sit around praying for the promotion instead of developing competence on the job to go with their Christian character. You need both. As a Christian, you need to be godly, but you also need to be good in doing what you do.

CONCLUSION

No doubt God will have different ways that each of us needs to apply this portion of His Word. Some of you have not been honoring God on the job or in your home life. You need to confess that to Him and begin to live consistently as a Christian. You may need to confess that you have chafed under His sovereign dealings with you, rather than submit to Him, as Joseph did in the dungeon. You need to let go of your rebellious spirit. God may have put His finger on the fact that you have put your career above your character. You need to make the commitment to walk with God first in your life.

Perhaps you have never personally put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior from the penalty of your sin. Just as the whole world had to come to Joseph during the famine for bread, so now every person must come to Christ, the Bread of Life. Without Him, you will perish. You must come to Him and receive the gift of life He offers. Just as God delivered Joseph in one instant from the prison to the palace, so He will deliver you from the dungeon of your sin and give you eternal life the instant you call out to Him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When (if ever) is it proper for a Christian to accept honor, and when must we defer all the honor to God?
2. How can a Christian harmonize career success with biblical values? Is it wrong to seek career success?
3. How can a man putting in the hours necessary to succeed in his career honor God in his family life?
4. Is it wrong for a Christian business owner or employee to pursue the company's "bottom line"? Is this serving mammon?

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