



# JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR CAREER CHOICES

## Introduction



One of the wonderful developments in the Reformation was the recovery of the doctrine of vocation, the understanding that God is pleased when each man and woman pursues his or her calling, whether that is to religious or “secular” work. Luther famously said,

*The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but all works are measured before God by faith alone.<sup>1</sup>*

The church, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, has often forgotten and then rediscovered this truth. One of the joys of the past twenty years has been seeing a re-recovery, so to speak, of this doctrine in many Protestant churches. A plethora of books extol the value of work and the importance of working in the marketplace, government, educational, and not-for-profit realms. No one must be employed by a church for God to be happy with his or her work. Further, there is value in good work, well done, even apart from the chance to evangelize and live ethically. The recovery of the idea that work itself is part of God’s purpose in making humanity has been a welcome emphasis of recent decades.

Oddly, though, this renewed emphasis on “faith and work,” as it is often called, has led to some unintended consequences. Some idealists find it difficult to live in the real world, where work labors under the impact of the Genesis 3 fall. Others, especially younger adults, become paralyzed by choice. If God could be equally happy with me working in any field, how do I choose? Do I need to somehow discern my career perfectly in advance, make a plan, and get it right on the first try, as if a first-job decision (or second or third or fourth...) will set a trajectory to an ideal life or a life from which I will never recover? There is a pervasive fear of making a mistake and somehow “missing it” in terms of a vocational calling.



Joseph’s story in Genesis 37–50 is a useful corrective, helping us to settle our slightly frenzied hearts and reset our expectations. The Bible leaves no doubt but that Joseph was called by God to his work, yet we misunderstand when we think that was an easy or clear process. Quite the opposite. It was only when he looked back upon his life that Joseph saw the Lord’s hand in his career path. As he went along, he would have struggled just as much as we do, and his example gives us hope as we try to figure out what God is doing with us and in us when we make job and career choices.

## Called by God... to Be a Bureaucrat!

Joseph is almost a paradigm in the faith-and-work literature, one of the best examples available to prove biblically that God specifically calls men and women to jobs in the marketplace or government, not simply to ministry. He makes this clear in Genesis 45:7–8:

*And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.<sup>2</sup>*

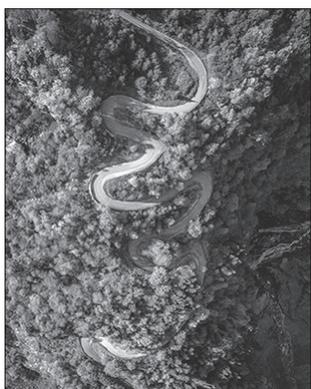
Joseph was not in his job by accident, but by the clear leading and hand of God, and his job was to be a bureaucrat, a powerful one, for certain, but a government employee! His job was to work in the service of the king of Egypt (Gen. 41:46). He worked for a king who followed a different faith, in a system that did not honor the Lord. But he worked to do good for all by doing government well, and this was all at God’s specific leading.



It is vital that we remember that Joseph was not a priest, not a religious leader, not a Levite, yet God called him to a specific occupation. God does call some into ministry. After all, our Lord left work as a carpenter to begin His earthly ministry, and He called His first disciples to leave their nets and follow Him. Nonetheless, God also calls others to nonreligious workplaces. Recognizing this fact gives dignity to the work that most men and women in a church do, day by day, Monday to Saturday. We do our jobs for their own value and their own calling, not simply so we can give money for religious leaders to do God's work. Our weekday and weeknight jobs are at His calling.

## A Story of Providence

We can read the Bible and think that Joseph had it easy, because he had a specific calling from God. But if we say that, we forget that, though he had such a calling, he didn't know in advance what it was! The key point is this: Joseph only knew his calling in hindsight. We misread the text if we think Joseph knew the whole time how this would all work out or even what career he would have. Quite the opposite, Joseph was just making his way through life as best he could, and his life often looked like it was going the wrong direction! We must remember that Joseph's job running Egypt was the *last* job of his career, not the first, and no one except God — not even Joseph himself — saw it coming.



Commentators and interpreters have often noted that the Joseph story is fundamentally a story of providence. The Christian doctrine of providence is the doctrine that God controls all people, things, and events, in detail, to bring about His purposes in the world. The Westminster Confession of Faith defines it this way: "God the great Creator of all things does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence..." (5.1). That statement is remarkably categorical, but it is in line with Christian doctrine from the very beginning of the church. The thing about God's providence, though, is that it often looks quite ordinary. God is God, so He is always free to work in extraordinary ways, but the way He controls all things is usually through means, things, that look very ordinary. Therefore, the Westminster Confession of Faith continues by saying, "God, in his ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at His pleasure" (5.3).

Joseph's life illustrates these truths beautifully. He did know he was somehow special and that God was going to do something through him. But what he knew was actually quite vague when it came to vocational calling. He knew from his dream as a boy that somehow his brothers and even mother and father would bow down to him (Gen. 37:5–11). He didn't know how; he didn't know when; and he had no particular reason to assume that would relate to his job at all. After that supernatural dream, consider how few divine interventions are reported in the Joseph narrative. The story is framed theologically with Joseph's dreams, but after that there are no angels, no voices from heaven, no particular miracles. The only miraculous thing is Joseph's ability to interpret dreams. Other than when Joseph speaks God's name during the episode in Potiphar's house, the name the Lord occurs only three times in the Joseph narrative. It looks, for all practical purposes, like Joseph is just figuring things out on his own as he tries to make his way through life; he has no grand plan to rule Egypt one day. Even in chapters 40–41, when Joseph is elevated to be ruler of all the land, he is simply trying to get himself out of jail. He must be as surprised as anyone when he goes from prisoner to Pharaoh's second-in-command in a single conversation (41:37–45)!

In much of Joseph's life it looks as if God is absent, except for Joseph's continued personal insistence of believing in Him. The number of "accidents" that propel the story forward, however, is striking. Joseph wanders around Shechem and happens upon a man who has overheard where his shepherd brothers were heading for pasture. The Ishmaelite merchants just happen to come along at the right time to save his life. Judah just happens to think of the idea of selling Joseph into



slavery instead of killing him. The merchants happen to be going to Egypt instead of another land. Joseph happens to be sold to Potiphar, a man whose wife happens to be untrustworthy. In jail, Joseph happens to be near the cupbearer and baker. The cupbearer happens to hear of Pharaoh's dream and remembers Joseph. The coincidences are too much to be coincidence. It is wild beyond improbable — to the point of impossible — for a convicted Hebrew rapist (even if wrongly convicted) to end up running Egypt. Unless God was behind it, that is, which is the point Joseph himself gives to the narrative in Genesis 50:20: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

### Called by God... but Only Seen in Hindsight

Joseph was called to his vocation, but as he lived through his life, he did not know how that calling would work out or even the thing to which he would be called. The Bible, like any narrative, telescopes time. For example, two full years pass between Genesis 40:23 and 41:1. For two years nothing changed. Joseph continued to live in prison, each day the same. Would you have lost hope? I would have, and Joseph probably struggled. He did not have a master plan. He simply tried to live faithfully in the rotten situation he had. Think of the times and places in which he must have compared his life to the dreams he had when younger. What am I doing shining Potiphar's shoes? What am I doing rotting in prison, and that because I was upright? God told me I was supposed to make a difference, even to rule. What is God doing? My life doesn't make sense. Joseph even had huge mistakes and moments of panic, when he felt the whole plan was ruined, when his own pride seemed to have destroyed God's purposes for him. Things would only make sense in hindsight.

What Joseph's story means is that as we seek to understand our own vocational callings, we should expect it to be a slow, messy process with lots of twists and turns. Joseph's certainly was! The uncertainty and the difficulty of this process is normal. A career will have twists and turns that no one sees coming. Nonetheless, the message of the Scriptures is that God has all of this in the palm of His hand. We will be able to look back — quite possibly in this life, but certainly in the next — and see how God called us to our careers, to our job choices, and how He put us exactly where we were supposed to be. As we walk through the process, however, we have that assurance, but, like Joseph, no specific guidance. We simply try to live as best we can, staying faithful (like Joseph in Potiphar's house), and looking for God to deliver us (like Joseph in prison).

We also therefore remember that our mistakes do not doom us. Joseph certainly blew it early in life. He was arrogant and headstrong and, at a minimum, unwise in how he dealt with his brothers. It almost got him killed, and he was in a panic (see Gen. 42:21). He ended up in slavery in Egypt due to the sin of his brothers, for certain, but his lack of wisdom early in life screams from the pages of the narrative. He did not know how to read people or interact, and he must have felt that his mistakes had doomed him. Maybe he lost the hope of the dream that God had given him.

To the contrary, God was using even Joseph's mistakes to guide him in the ways that would lead to his calling.

So what do we do? We live faithfully in the situations God has given us. We try to make the most of the situations we have, and we look in faith and trust to try to discern what God is doing and how He is leading us. And do not stress if you are twenty (or thirty or forty or fifty or sixty or retired) and it has not come together yet. In God, it has. You see providence only in hindsight. ■





NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church 1520: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, trans. Erik H. Herrmann (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.



Don't imagine I've been selected to go to Perelandra because I'm anyone in particular. One never can see, or not till long afterwards, why *any* one was selected for any job. And when one does, it is usually some reason that leaves no reason for vanity.

[Elwin Ransom in *Perelandra*]

— C.S. Lewis



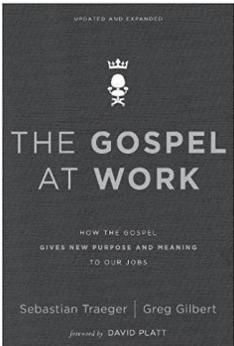
- 1 What, according to William Fullilove, are some of the unintended consequences of the renewed emphasis on “faith and work”, and how is Joseph’s story in Genesis a useful corrective for us?
- 2 As you seek to understand your own vocational callings, what insights can you obtain by considering Joseph’s story?



WILLIAM FULLILOVE, PH.D.

MINISTRIES PASTOR, MCLEAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH • MCLEAN, VIRGINIA

William Fullilove serves as the ministries pastor at McLean Presbyterian Church in McLean, Virginia, where he is also principal and senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, and Culture. He is also associate professor of Old Testament and dean of students at Reformed Theological Seminary, New York City. Bill earned a Ph.D. in Semitic and Egyptian Languages and Literature at The Catholic University of America. He completed his M.Div. at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando.



## RECOMMENDED READING

Sebastian Traeger and Greg Gilbert, *The Gospel at Work: How the Gospel Gives New Purpose and Meaning to Our Jobs* (Zondervan, updated and expanded, 2018)

Reclaim God's vision for your life.

Many Christians fall victim to one of two main problems when it comes to work: either they are idle in their work, or they have made an idol of it. Both of these mindsets are deadly misunderstandings of how God intends for us to think about our employment.

In *The Gospel at Work*, Sebastian Traeger and Greg Gilbert unpack the powerful ways in which the gospel can transform how we do what we do, releasing us from the cultural pressures of both an all-consuming devotion and a punch-in, punch-out mentality - in order to find the freedom of a work ethic rooted in serving Christ.

You'll find answers to some of the tough questions that Christians in the workplace often ask:

- What factors should matter most in choosing a job?
- What gospel principles should shape my thinking about how to treat my boss, my co-workers, and my employees?
- Is full-time Christian work more valuable than my job?
- Is it okay to be motivated by money?
- How do you prioritize — or balance — work, family and church responsibilities?

Solidly grounded in the gospel, *The Gospel at Work* confronts both our idleness at work and our idolatry of work with a challenge of its own to remember that whom we work for is infinitely more important than what we do.