

God Can Turn Failure Into Something Good

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Genesis

Joseph's brothers, who had sold him into slavery and labeled him as dead, came to Joseph in Egypt seeking relief from a severe famine that now threatened their lives and livelihoods. The brothers did not recognize Joseph, and Joseph did not reveal himself to them.

Joseph's behavior was shrewd. He used his power to test this group, who he knew could be untrustworthy. He used methods which bordered on deception, in order to discern the present character of the people he was dealing with. The Hebrew word for shrewdness (*ormah*) is also translated as “good judgment,” “prudence,” and “cleverness,” indicating it may take foresight and skill to make godly work possible in difficult contexts. Joseph had suffered greatly at his brothers' hands over twenty years prior, and he had every reason to distrust their words, actions, and commitment to their family.

Joseph's brothers demonstrated newfound integrity when they return the silver Joseph had secretly packed in the baggage, and when they fail to fall into animosity over Joseph's preferential treatment of their brother Benjamin. Joseph saw that they were changed men – not the same characters who had sold him into slavery all those years ago.

His brothers' penitent words when Joseph reveals himself lead to one of the finest theological points of Joseph's life and, indeed, much of Genesis.

Joseph said, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.” (Genesis 50:20). Joseph’s reference to “numerous people” echoes God’s covenantal promise to bless “all families of the earth” (Genesis 12:3). From our vantage point today, we can see that God enabled, through the preservation of this family, far more blessing than Joseph could ever have asked or imagined.

God’s work in and through Joseph had real, practical, serious value—to preserve lives. If we ever have the impression that God wants us in the workplace only so we can tell others about him, or if we get the impression that the only part of our work that matters to God is building relationships, Joseph’s work says otherwise. The things we make and do in our work are themselves crucial to God and to other people. Sometimes we lose sight of the effects of our labor, because our work is only one piece of a bigger whole. Joseph took a larger perspective on his work, and he was not discouraged by its inevitable ups and downs.

This is not to say that relationships at work aren’t also of the highest importance. Christians have the special gift of offering forgiveness to people in our workplaces. Joseph’s reassurance to his brothers is a model of forgiveness. Following the instruction of his father, Joseph forgave his brothers and thus verbally released them from guilt. But his forgiveness—like all true forgiveness—was not just verbal. Joseph used the extensive resources of Egypt, which God had placed under his control, to support

them materially so that they could prosper. He acknowledged that judgment was not his role. “Am I in the place of God?” (Genesis 50:19). He did not usurp God’s role as judge but helped his brothers to connect with God who had saved them.

There will always be plenty of hurt and pain in life. No company or organization is immune from that. Joseph knew the harm that people were capable of, and he knew that the story of his family was one of faith mixed with doubt, of faithful service mingled with fearful self-preservation. But Joseph also knew of the promises God made to Abraham, of God’s commitment to bless his family, and of God’s wisdom in working with people as he refined them through the fires of life. Joseph did not gloss over people’s sins; rather, he absorbed them into his awareness of God’s grand work. Our awareness of the inevitable, providential successfulness of God’s promises makes our labor worthwhile, no matter the cost to us.

Of the many lessons about work in the book of Genesis, this one in particular endures and even explains how we are to live out our faith in the workplace. Our places of work provide contexts in which our values and character are brought to light as we make decisions that affect ourselves and those around us. In his wise power, God is capable of working with our faithfulness, mending our weakness, and forgiving our failures. Through his grace, God is able to accomplish what he himself has prepared for all of us who love him.