

# Nightmare Job

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



## Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, as we turn to your Word for us,  
may the Spirit of God rest upon us.  
Help us to be steadfast in our hearing,  
in our speaking, in our believing,  
and in our living. Amen.

## Scripture: Genesis 39:1-23 (NRSVue)

Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. <sup>2</sup> The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup> His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. <sup>4</sup> So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.

<sup>5</sup> From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. <sup>6</sup> So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and with him there he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. <sup>7</sup> And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." <sup>8</sup> But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. <sup>9</sup> He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" <sup>10</sup> And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. <sup>11</sup> One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house,

<sup>12</sup> she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand and fled and ran outside. <sup>13</sup> When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, <sup>14</sup> she called out to the members of her household and said to them, "See, my husband <sup>[a]</sup> has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice, <sup>15</sup> and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me and fled outside." <sup>16</sup> Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, <sup>17</sup> and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me, <sup>18</sup> but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled outside."

<sup>19</sup> When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, "This is the way your servant treated me," he became enraged. <sup>20</sup> And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison.

<sup>21</sup> But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. <sup>22</sup> The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. <sup>23</sup> The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care because the Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## SERMON – “Nightmare Job”

In the fascinating book *Adam’s Return*, Father Richard Rohr describes how our American society has a lot of voices telling us how to be happy and successful, and yet these voices are often confusing. They don’t help guide and mentor our young people into mature, responsible, God-fearing people.

He says a main reason for this is that we lack rites of passage that help our young people transition into healthy adults with a deep spirituality.

He has spent much of his life researching initiation rites and spiritual challenges that cultures around the world practice to help raise children into adults and strong leaders. He found five essential messages of initiation that can empower each new generation. They are:

1. Life is hard
2. You are not that important
3. Your life is not about you
4. You are not in control
5. You are going to die

In many ways, Joseph has been going through a crash course in these five relational initiations and spiritual challenges in his young life. Something changed in Joseph between his time in the bottom of the pit and reaching Egypt. He has come a long way—literally and figuratively. Gone is the technicolor toga. He now is a slave.

But there’s a deeper change. He’s become a man. Gone is his boyish narcissism. Hardship matured him, bettered him.



He became a successful man. Rising from being a slave, he found favor in Potiphar’s eyes. Everything he did was blessed and prospered in his master’s home and estate. But the real reason for his success is a phrase we hear four times in the story: *“The Lord was with Joseph.”* Twice in the beginning, twice at the end we hear this.

Hear the good news: God is a God who goes before us AND abides with us, wherever we are. King David says in Psalm 23, “you are with me.” And we receive this promise of presence from Christ at his departure for heaven, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age.” Always. God’s good presence prospers us, even in the face of the very real dangers we face in the real world.

God remained with Joseph not only in the pit, but when a slave, when thrown under the chariot, and when a

prisoner. God doesn't abandon us when we find ourselves in our own dark and dank places. In fact, God's favor even increased. God's kindness. God's loyalty. God's *chesed*. "Thy loving kindness (*chesed*) is better than life."

This is the secret to our success: God has the power to act through not only the good, but the bad decisions humans make. We don't know how God does it, but it's true. God is with us, especially in our trials and tribulations and temptations. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Year in year out. Wherever we are. When life is unsettled and uncertain, with God we are assured deep down that things *are settled*. And this blessing, this true success, is not just for ourselves, as God promised Abraham. Others will be blessed through us. We will be a conduit of blessing to Potiphar, Egypt, and the nations of the world. It's our destiny. This enables us to keep getting back up and not losing hope. "Fall six times, get up seven."

**There's another secret to our spiritual success here.** Did you notice HANDS are mentioned SEVEN times in this story? And so we must ask ourselves:

*What kind of hands do we have?*

- All that we have is a gift, placed in our hands by the loving hand of God.  
And so we have to make a decision:

*How will we use what has been entrusted into our hands?*

- Will we have trusting hands?
- Diligent hands? Loyal hands? Healing hands?
- Or will our hands be used for grasping?
- Will we have idle hands?
- Hands that harm, that point fingers?
- Hands that take what isn't ours?

It's a choice we must make in the good times and especially in the hard times. By our attitude, demeanor, and responsibility, people see something special about us. Responsible hands show the quality of our work and who we ultimately do it for.

Paul in Colossians 3:17 puts it this way:

*"Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."*

Everything was entrusted into Joseph's hands—except Potiphar's wife. And here is another sign of Joseph's newfound maturity: He knew his boundaries, his limitations. He didn't overreach. "This is someone else's wife. Not my wife." Here he thought beyond himself for the first time. Power didn't corrode his character or get to his head. He had reasons to though. He was "handsome and good-looking." In other words, Joseph was a "hottie." Now I'm a Gen-Xer, that's how we'd put it. Gen Zers might put it this way, Joseph was "snack." He was "drip," had "swag"—you get the picture.

Physical descriptions like this are not usually mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures, so it's important to point out. In this case, it impacted how his Master Potiphar's wife would look upon him. The one thing forbidden to Joseph is what is sought by Potiphar's wife.

And this is where we see Joseph's manhood revealed: Joseph knew "all that glitters isn't gold." Something that looks good, feels good, that's handed to you on a silver platter, is something that can really hurt you down the road. And unlike Adam, Joseph didn't take a bite out of that juicy forbidden fruit that was dangling right in front of him. When Potiphar's wife speaks to Joseph, the only word she says in the whole story is this, "lie with me." That's all she says. This is not an invitation, this is a command. And it is repeated day after day.

Joseph was in a "darned if you do, danged if you don't" moment. And this is how he responded. He didn't preach, he didn't condemn. He didn't even get angry. He just shared that he could not do such a thing. Jumping in the sack was wrong. An evil against Potiphar his master, against his wife, even against his own self. And most importantly, it was a sin against God—falling short of God's good and holy expectations of us.

Joseph remembered his childhood lessons from his father. He didn't forget how he was raised. Adultery is wrong. It is a breach of trust. It breaks the great commandment. The two loves, to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. It was wrong then, it's wrong now. Sexual character, self-control is another secret to success. And so it's God's wisdom, God's powerful presence that guides us away from situations like this.

In this story, it's Joseph who is the victim. But we know much more often than not, it's women who are put in these places of vulnerability and exploitation by men and it is wrong. Power should never be used to exploit anyone. Some of us have been in Joseph's sandals in our lives. Others of us have been in the slippers of Potiphar's wife. No matter what has happened to us, no matter what we have done, what we have decided for good or for wrong, whether we have been true to God in the difficult and tempting situation, true to ourselves, or if we have failed miserably, we all need God's grace and forgiveness in our lives. And it's offered to us. A new start—forgiveness, grace, hope—we can move forward. We can learn, we can grow. We can grow from the successes we have in life, but I tell you, the lessons that you learn from most are your failures. And they can be redeemed.

So rather than making advances, we read that Joseph fled. He ran away. Paul talks about this: He says: *"flee from all sexual immorality."*

Hebrew scholars think that Joseph ran out when that garment was grabbed from him, that he was maybe just in his skivvies, maybe even less than that, but he ran in the opposite direction outside. Only his garment, not his body, was firmly in her grasp. He did the right thing. But he suffered mightily for it. We do the right thing in our lives because it's right. Not for the rewards we might get or we might not get. We do it because it's what God wants us to do.

And then of course we read that she becomes bitter and angry that he didn't follow her command and so false accusations, framing, and mockery ensue against Joseph... and so once

again this theme of deception comes up that runs throughout the book of Genesis. Once again, deception is directed at Joseph and it revolves around his clothing. When it comes to Joseph's clothing, he has terrible luck. First, with his brothers dipping his ornamented robe in goat's blood to deceive Jacob making them think that he was killed by wild animals. Now Potiphar's wife. She steals his robe to make false accusations of sexual misconduct before Potiphar, his master, and the whole household.

Clothes were important to Joseph. He was a bit of a fashionista really. We learn later, that when he's summoned before Pharaoh, he gets out his Gillette razor, he shaves, gets a change of clothes, and then he faces Pharaoh. But clothes aren't what make a man or a woman, it's character, and Joseph knew this.

Paul gives us some wardrobe counseling as well saying,

*"clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience,  
and above all love."*

In other words, clothe yourselves with Christ.

So each morning, when we look into the mirror, it's our spiritual attire that is most important. Make sure that's in order in your life. It never goes out of style, it doesn't wear out, and it can't be taken from us. We don't outgrow it. Be clothed in Christ.

It's interesting that Joseph wasn't put to death in a situation like this. Either Potiphar didn't fully believe the accusations against Joseph or maybe God's unseen hand was protecting our hero Joseph from certain death. Maybe both. So Joseph was "only" sent to prison...for doing the right thing.

It's also interesting that the Hebrew word used for *prison*, is the same word used for the pit that Joseph was thrown into by his brothers. He would be lifted up from this new pit as well.

God's presence and favor leads Joseph to not be a broken man in a terrible situation, but instead, he rises to a leadership position in the prison. So in no time, Joseph was a leader in prison, just as he was in Potiphar's home. Like his father, Joseph would not let go of the blessing in the midst of his cursed situation, and God's hand remained upon Joseph.

...

Let me close with a story. The rabbis have a story about Joseph, later in his life so fast forward to when he's older. When he goes back to Canaan carrying his father Jacob's bones for a proper burial back to the promised land. And along his journey, he passes by the very pit his brothers threw him into, and he stops. And he makes a blessing over that pit. He realized that the very pit he was thrown into saved his life from being killed by his brothers. Even the curse was a blessing.

God has the power in our lives to transform the dark places into places of hope and deliverance. God can turn our prison into praise. God can turn our misfortune into fortune.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *"Joseph and Wife of Potiphar/Joseph is Cast into Prison Owing to the Evil Report of Potiphar's Wife,"* French manuscript Illumination, c. 1250.

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