

When Others Squash Our Dreams

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Genesis

From a young age, Joseph believed God had destined him for greatness. In dreams, God assured Joseph that he would rise to a position of leadership over his parents and brothers. From Joseph's point of view, these dreams were evidence of divine blessing, rather than his own ambition. From his brothers' point of view, however, the dreams were further manifestations of the unfair privilege that Joseph enjoyed as the favorite son of their father, Jacob. Being sure that we are in the right does not absolve us from empathizing with others who may not share that same view. Good leaders strive to foster cooperation rather than envy. Joseph's failure to recognize this put him at severe odds with his brothers. After initially plotting murder against him, his brothers settled for selling him to a caravan of traders bearing goods through Canaan to Egypt. The merchants, in turn, sold Joseph to a high official in Egypt named Potiphar. Joseph's dreams seemed squashed.

Joseph's stint in Potiphar's employ gave him a wide range of fiduciary responsibilities. At first, Joseph was merely "in" his master's house. We don't know in what capacity he served, but when Potiphar recognized Joseph's general competence, he promoted him to be his personal steward and "put him in charge of all that he had" (Genesis 39:4).

After a time, Potiphar's wife took a sexual interest in Joseph. The sexual harassment by this woman took place in a power relationship that disadvantaged Joseph. Although she believed that she had the right and power to use Joseph in this way, her words and contact were clearly unwelcome to him. Joseph's work required him to be at home where she was, yet he could not call the matter to Potiphar's attention without interfering in their marital relationship. Even after his escape and arrest on false charges, Joseph seems to have had no legal recourse. Although he had been climbing in Potiphar's employ, Joseph's dreams of greatness were again arrested.

The similarities between Joseph's experience and modern-day sexual harassment drive home lessons for the workplace today. As in Joseph's story, the whims of those in power are what often count in practice. Workers are reluctant to come forward with claims of sexual harassment because they know the risk of retaliation. Joseph's moral uprightness did not rescue him from expulsion from his job and from imprisonment. If we find ourselves in a parallel situation, our godliness is no guarantee that we will escape unscathed.

But Joseph did not give up on his dreams. In prison, Joseph carried on with the work God had given him, becoming a model prisoner, and waiting for God to make it right in the end. While this story is a realistic recognition that standing up to sexual harassment in the workplace may

have devastating consequences, it is also a story of hope that by God's grace, good may eventually prevail in the situation.

No matter what we face at work, we can trust that we belong to the Lord and that he defends the weak. When we truly believe this promise, there is no injustice or difficult situation that can completely squash our dreams.