

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF PURPOSE AND VISION –JOSEPH:SETBACKS OR STEPPING STONES?**

**Edited and posted by Bob Young**

### **Introduction**

I remember memorizing the poem in high school, was written by R. Lee Sharpe. I still know it. Sharpe was born in the 1870s and died in the 1950s. For years he worked with his father, Edwin R. Sharpe, who owned The Carrollton Free Press and a printing shop in Carrollton, Georgia. In his later years he traveled a lot, mostly freelancing for magazines in the '20s and '30s.

**Isn't it strange how princes and kings,  
and clowns that caper in sawdust rings,  
and common people, like you and me,  
are builders for eternity?**

**Each is given a list of rules;**

**a shapeless mass; a bag of tools.**

**And each must fashion, ere life is flown,**

**A stumbling block, or a Stepping-Stone.**

Scripture is full of promises but never hides the fact of problems, setbacks, and challenges. The difficulties can make us feel that the promises are not for us, that battle is lost, we can't go on.

Jesus promised that the gates of Hades would not prevail against the church (Matt. 16:16-18), so why do we often feel powerless? The promise is still true. Christ promised to send the HS to empower the church to do his work on earth (Acts 1:8). That power is as great as it has ever been. The church has been given a ministry or reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-21), and is as capable today as ever of accomplishing that mission.

We must think about life, church, our spiritual lives, this place, this community: **what do you see?**

Why do we remember troubles more than triumphs? Why do we see obstacles more than opportunities?

How do we say with Paul, **“forgetting what is behind and straining toward that which is ahead, I press on” (Phil. 3:12-14)?**

### **What is behind us?**

The hard experiences of life often propel people and churches backward. Does not have to be, the hard experiences of life can propel people and churches forward.

Consider Joseph. He experienced setback after setback but he maintained a sense of direction and purpose. Each setback eventually led Joseph to a higher level of responsibility and authority. When the day came that Joseph could get even with his brothers and blame them for his troubles—prison, slavery, he saw it differently. He saw the hand of God (Gen. 45:8). He knew God was on his throne even through the low points.

God is on the throne and has been there through our low points. It is time to get over the low points and move ahead. We have shared difficult experiences. God's work in this world turns difficult times into times of triumph—Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, Samson, David, Elijah, Daniel.... How does God intend to move us forward? It is time to claim the future, seize the opportunities, and reaffirm mission and values.

Some churches are so bound to the past that they resist attempts to move into the future. Some value the status quo, even if the status quo stinks. More valuable than the status quo is daily obedience.

Before Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, Joseph valued the status quo. The status quo is seldom pretty. It is amazing that we enjoy it so much. He was at home, comfortable, blessed, loved by his father. There was infighting, suspicion, distrust—the Bible uses the word jealousy. Joseph had no reason to give up his high position on the family tree. In fact, the attitude he had during that time may be what got him into trouble. The setback came, and he was on his own in a strange land, challenged to find faith, obedience, and trust in God for himself as the only way to fulfill his dreams and God's plan for his life.

Most churches do not have many opportunities to bury the unhealthy attitudes and values of the status quo and replace them with values that can transform the church into what God intends it to be. Many churches go

on for years and years and never have a “hinge point” experience that opens new doors. The “same old, same old” is repeated; little changes; unhealthy attitudes and values develop in that kind of setting. Can we see it when God gives new opportunities?

### **What is before us?**

We must ask basic questions afresh. What is God calling this church to be? What is God sending us forth to do?

Much will not change. Our values will not change. Our commitment to Scripture will not change. Our commitment to “one another Christianity” will not change. Our commitment to evangelism and mission will not change.

But some things will change and will have to change if we are to seize the day. Some changes may make us uncomfortable for a time. I assure you no change will be unscriptural. But if we want to be a vibrant, faithful church, we have to do the things faithful churches do. Thom Rainer calls these churches breakout churches.

We must evaluate where we are and where we are going. If we keep doing the same old things we will end up in the same old place. It is time to envision the future. Let me suggest three elements.

First, God is always at work in this world, John 5:17,19. The question becomes ‘where is God leading?’

Second, if we want to know where God is leading, we must put a primary focus on productive activities and the things that matter in God’s kingdom development.

Third, we will set priorities and define values so we say “yes” when we should say “yes” and “no” when we should say “no.”

We see the power of a dream or vision in the life of Joseph. God gave Joseph a dream that said God would do great things through him. Joseph held on to that dream through difficult days. The dream sustained Joseph when he was a slave, when he was falsely accused. The Bible says nothing of anger or bitterness while in prison or as a slave. Joseph overcame the fact that his problems were not of his own doing. He forgives those responsible for his imprisonment. Later in his interaction with his brothers, he responds to those who caused him trouble with love. He was working from a view that told him God was in control. **Joseph made great choices because of his awareness of God’s purpose in his life.**

### **What is our dream for the future?**

Joseph knew what he needed to do to fulfill God’s purpose. That is the question. What do we need to do? What does God send us forth to do? How do I get out of the way?

I have a dream for the church—I believe it is a vision from God, not miraculous, but informed by scripture and God’s eternal purpose. It is a dream of fat cows and prosperous times. I see needs in this world that God has uniquely equipped the church to fill. I see potential. I see future results, even beyond my lifespan. I want to provide the kind of visionary leadership that is required. I think about this 24/7. I want leaders who have a vision, who will share the vision, who will help others embrace and own the vision God has for his church. **We have to know where we are going, and how we will get there.**

The dream will require the presence of the Spirit of the Lord (Gen. 41:38). God gave Joseph a plan for saving his people and the people of Egypt. God blessed Joseph for his faithfulness. We have to hear and act. A vision is only as good as the plan that brings the vision to life. A plan that brings the vision to life is only as good as the willingness to work that plan.

**What does God want his church to do?** My vision includes a spiritually healthy church: worshiping God, evangelizing the lost, discipling believers, serving others, sharing life.

**What does God want you to do?** Identifying these things does not automatically lead us to escape our Egypt. We must accept the dream, see the potential that God is placing before us, and commitment to the new directions God is leading.