



what to do with the

by Bobby
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upper hand

Joseph was gifted. He was gifted by his father with an *ornamented tunic* or a *coat-of-many-colors*, depending upon the translation, and he was gifted by God with the ability to interpret dreams and deal with the affairs of administration.

Regardless of this, there is a story about him in Genesis 47 that some may legitimately find disturbing. It occupies verses 13 through 36—very little space at all. I’ve never heard it preached from the pulpit.

Let me quickly summarize. This piece of scripture occurs near the end of the Joseph story. Those familiar with the story know that Joseph rises to be second in power

grateful to him because through him they have been saved. They have exchanged everything for their lives, and more than that, they have exchanged the freedom of their children and their children’s children and so on.

This is something that should stir emotions, inspire thought and create the opportunity for discussions. Indeed, I presented this in a Bible study where it did all of those things. One member of the group, who is a successful businessman, pointed out a hard, inarguable fact that bleeding-heart academics like myself would like to ignore. Had it not been for Joseph’s action, these people would have died along with

esis dare trod. He simply laid out the facts of the matter for the perusal of later generations. However, I must ask myself—if I were like Joseph, finding myself in a place where I had the upper hand over a group of individuals in the same way he did, what would be the appropriate action? Should I press my advantage to achieve maximum benefits for myself and my descendants? Or is there another path to take?

We are no longer, of course, in the position to take people into physical slavery. In the West, at least, humans are no longer legally allowed to trade their bodies for survival in such a direct way. On the other hand, there are still jobs in which one trades one’s health and physical well-being in order to provide food for one’s family, and, similar to the case under discussion from Genesis, the people involved are glad for the chance.

Instead of taking someone into slavery, employers offer workers the opportunity to trade wellness for survival. And to be fair, the workers do have a choice, and often take the opportunity because they have nothing better.

Each of us, like Joseph, is given a particular set of gifts by God. God is all powerful, but along with his power comes his grace. Though God may give us the upper hand with our brothers, he also gives us the grace not to press an advantage to our brother’s detriment. Gaining the wisdom to balance power with grace is growing in righteousness and favor with the Lord.

Perhaps Joseph exercised as much grace as he could with the task he was given. Even he had to answer to Pharaoh. Each of us also has to answer to our Pharaoh, but ultimately we have to answer to God. Finding out how to do each is what we are to be about. □

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in all of Egypt, exceeded in authority only by Pharaoh himself. During the time of plenty, he is in charge of saving a portion of the grain, and during the time of famine, he is in charge of distributing grain to the hungry. In Genesis 47:13-26, it is made clear that the grain is being sold, not given.

At first, those who come for the grain only give silver in exchange for it. When the silver is gone, they exchange their livestock. After the money is gone and the livestock is gone, they only have themselves left which they exchange for enough food to survive.

At the end of the process, they are slaves to Pharaoh, but they are

their children, and their children’s children would never have been born. Those who were slaves generations later owed their lives to Joseph’s foresight.

We know from the book of Exodus that the Israelites were brought out of Egypt, and history tells us that the serfdom of those in the Egyptian empire eventually came to an end, so it might be tempting for some to say all’s well that ends well and use this as a lesson for the “prosperity gospel.” However, those who know me will realize that is not where I am headed.

It is not for someone like me to judge Joseph. This was ground where not even the author of Gen-