

**“Working in a Foreign Kingdom”**  
**Genesis 39: 1-23**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
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How do you function in a foreign land? Advertisers often times have difficulty answering this question. When Kentucky Fried Chicken entered the Chinese market, to their horror, they discovered that their slogan "finger lickin' good" came out as "eat your fingers off"

Chinese translation also proved difficult for Coke. They first tried Ke-kou-ke-la because when pronounced it sounded roughly like Coca-Cola. It wasn't until after thousands of signs had been printed that they discovered that the phrase means "bite the wax tadpole" or "female horse stuffed with wax" (depending on the dialect)! Things weren't much easier for Coke's arch-rival Pepsi. When they entered the Chinese market, the translation of their slogan "Pepsi Brings you Back to Life" was a little more literal than they intended. In Chinese, the slogan meant "Pepsi Brings Your Ancestors Back from the Grave". In Italy, a campaign for "Schweppes Tonic Water" translated the name into the much less thirst quenching "Schweppes Toilet Water".

How do you function in a foreign land? Those who have lived abroad know this question more deeply. Even I, having come from Texas, felt like a foreigner seeing all these “geaux” signs everywhere! And Joseph was certainly asking this question. He was a slave in a place that was not his home. The government was different. The religion was different. The culture was different. He had to figure out what it meant to live well in this foreign place.

The truth is, if you are a Christian, you, like Joseph, are living in a foreign land. The Bible tells us that Christians are strangers living in exile. Paul says in Philippians 3:20, “...our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” We are members first and foremost of the Kingdom of God. And that kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. Since Jesus our king has come, the Kingdom of God has ceased to be an earthly kingdom and rather a spiritual one. Modern Israel is not the Kingdom of God and neither is America. Nor is

Syria, Kenya, Germany, etc. Christians, the Bible says, are those whose primary identity belongs to the Kingdom of Christ but who now live in a foreign place.

So the question for us this morning is “how do you function in a foreign land?” How do you live as a member of the Kingdom of Christ but now living in a foreign kingdom? How do we live our lives with this kind of dual citizenship? I think this story of Joseph in Potiphar’s house gives us some great insight for how to live as Christians in the foreign kingdom we live in now.

Here’s the first thing we see from this passage: if we are to function well in a foreign land, we have to first remain faithful to our King. That’s rule number one. No matter where you live, your allegiance is first to Christ as King. Joseph is a great example for us here. In this story, when temptation comes to him, he holds firm to what he knows to be God’s law. Not the laws of the pic-and-choose gods of Egypt, but the transcendent and never-ending Law of the One True God. Joseph had a great deal of freedom in Potiphar’s house. He could have abused that freedom by taking what was not his—Potiphar’s wife. After all, she was willing. But Joseph saw his devotion to God as his primary identity.

Another wonderful example of this comes in Daniel. Late in Israel’s history, Daniel would find himself in a similar situation to Joseph. He was in a foreign place, forced to serve the King of Babylon. And for the most part, he served him well. But when asked to bow before a statue of the king, to worship him as god, Daniel refused. He was willing to die to remain faithful to his One True King. Furthermore, both Joseph and Daniel seemed to freely proclaim their faithfulness to God. Daniel gives all credit to the Lord for any of his work, and the Bible tells us here in verse 3 that “his master saw that the Lord was with him...” Joseph is letting those around him know exactly where his primary identity is found.

If you are a Christian, you must remember that your identity belongs to Jesus Christ. We are first members of the Kingdom of Christ and only secondarily members of the earthly kingdoms in which we live. We are called to remain faithful to Jesus even when the culture we are in is not.

Let’s talk about ways we can get this mixed up. Sometimes we can equate being an American with being a Christian. “I’m an American. My parents taught me good,

moral, American values. So that means I'm a Christian." For those who grew up during times in our country when Judeo-Christian values were more prevalent in society, identities could be easily confused, and faithfulness to Jesus was seen as simply being faithful to the culture one was raised in. That's a confusion of primary identity. But because we are primarily members of the Kingdom of Christ, our membership in HIS kingdom must always drive our identity.

When our primary identity is confused, we forget our primary allegiance. Christians have at times been so intertwined with culture that it's been hard to see where one begins and the other ends. Because of that, faithfulness to King Jesus gets swallowed up in whatever seems to make the most cultural sense at the time. This happened in the south for many years. Conservative Christian churches were so tied to their cultures; so in step with the economic and societal flow of life that they turned a blind eye to the atrocities of slavery and of racial injustice. Instead of proclaiming the law of the King that was in conflict with the law of the land, they simply went along with cultural norms. They claimed Christ, but their primary identity was Southern, Conservative American, not Christian.

Likewise, many liberal Christians today have simply put their boats into the steady flow of secular culture and moved right along with its path. They have refused to stand up for the Law of God and have gone willingly with the law of the land. Instead of proclaiming the law of the King that was in conflict with the law of the land, they simply went along with cultural norms. They claim Christ, but their primary identity is Liberal, Progressive, American, not Christian.

We cannot live faithfully as God's people this way. If we are going to live as Christians in this world, no matter where that is, we must first remain faithful to Christ, our King, even when His rule comes in conflict with cultural norms.

Secondly, if we are going to function well as members of the Kingdom of Christ living in a foreign land, we must remain for our place. We have to be those who are FOR the land in which we live. We seek its good. We desire it's flourishing. We serve its people.

If you are an American, you live in a really wonderful place. It's a place we should be very thankful for. Our system of law is just. Our government is not corrupt. (I

know some of you might scoff at that statement but go ask MacGregor Magruder what it's like to get a driver's license in Kenya! We live in a place where technology flourishes. We have free and easy access to good food and clean water. We have a real rule of law and the protection of our government from those who would seek to do harm. As we celebrate the birthday of our country, it's right to be thankful for the blessings we receive in living here. Not everyone around the world has such a blessing.

But what we see from Genesis 39 is that even when those things are not in place, we are still called to be FOR the place in which we live. Joseph was a slave in a foreign place. In a pagan place. But look at how he acted toward that place—he was for it. The Lord used Joseph to bless those around him. He had favor with his master and he served him well. Potiphar liked Joseph and Joseph worked hard for him. He was trustworthy and faithful to his master and he worked for the good of his house and his land. When Potiphar's wife tempted him, Joseph rejected her not only because it was a great wickedness against God, but also because it was a sin against Potiphar, his master.

We mentioned Daniel earlier. And we talked about Daniel's unrelenting devotion to God in the face of cultural pressure. But within the bounds of God's law, Daniel was exceedingly faithful to the pagan king under whose control he lived. He worked for the King. He served him well. He seems to have liked him. And both Nebuchadnezzar and Potiphar here see the love that their servants have for them and for their God. Their faithfulness to the Lord is evident as is their faithfulness to the people God has put them under.

This is a good reminder for us. We are to always be for our place. Christians are to serve their nation, their state, their neighborhood, and their neighbors. We are to work for the good of the place we have been called. In America, that means we get to vote, to run for office, to use our money faithfully, and to influence our culture broadly. But it also means we have the opportunity to be for our place in smaller ways. To love our neighbors—even the ones who have very different lifestyles and beliefs than you.

If you were at the 9:00 service last week, you heard an amazing example of this. The warden of Angola Prison and one of its prisoners came and gave testimony to

what the Lord has done in that prison. Many of these prisoners have simply begun to proclaim their primary identity as members of the Kingdom of Christ. They remain faithful to their King and they have begun to work for the good of their place. Even as prisoners. The Lord has transformed the prison through their work.

Thirdly, if we are going to live well in the foreign land in which we've been placed, we have to remain hopeful in the Lord's care. For the prisoners at Angola, it can often feel overwhelming. Like no hope exists in such a dark place. And for Joseph and Daniel, I'm sure it felt at times like the Lord had simply left, had decided he didn't care anymore and had given up on them. We can look back at the history of our country and the ways in which our culture has come in deep conflict with God's revealed will and begin to think that hope is lost. Many of you may be thinking something like that now, in light of recent political changes. But let me draw your attention to Genesis 39. On the heels of Joseph's sale into slavery, the hatred and neglect of his brothers and the abandonment of the only people he knew and loved, it would be easy to think that God had left him alone. But do you see what is repeated over and over here? "The Lord was WITH Joseph!" Five times it's written in the first six verses, and another three times in the last two verses. "The Lord is with Joseph!" The Lord showed him steadfast love and blessed him.

Our safety, our final success, and our eternal hope rests not on the decisions of judges or of kings or of militant groups or of slave masters but on the eternal and sovereign power of the almighty God! Jesus, our King, is on his throne and he will not be moved!

As many of you know, one of my favorite radio programs is This American Life. In last week's episode, there was an amazing example of what it means to hope in the sovereign reign of Christ. The story was about a group of what we would call Girl Scouts, who were living in China at the time WWII broke out. Most of these girls were American and European missionary children, and when the Japanese invaded China, their school was taken and turned into a concentration camp. But much like what has happened at Angola, many of the women teaching in that place—really the Girl Scout leaders—began transforming the place from the inside by holding firm to a hope of God's care and provision even in the midst of the horrors of war. They would sing. And the words they sang were transformative.

Listen to this quote from one of the girls who was there, a woman named Mary Preville:

“... one of the things that we sang when the Japanese were marching us into concentration camp was the first verse of Psalm 46. ‘God is our refuge, our refuge and our strength.’ And on it goes. ‘In trouble, we will not be afraid.’ All of these words just sung into our hearts. That sticks. It's like you've got a groove sticking in the gramophone record. . repeating ‘I am safe. I am safe. I am safe.’”

There are some here this morning that see the direction of our country as progressively good and others who see it as progressively bad. For all of us, what we need to remember is that our safety and our security does not rise and fall on the whims of culture or of politics. It rests exclusively on the Lord's care. If you are frightened by the direction of our culture, sink these words into your heart. Let them create a groove like a gramophone record—God is my refuge and Strength. In trouble, I will not be afraid. I am safe. I am safe. I am safe.

We are safe because we have a good King. We have a savior who, when tempted, remained faithful. He remained faithful to the perfect Law of God on our behalf. We have a King who is for us. Us, who were once his enemies, he has made his friends. And we have a King who gives us hope eternal. Not simply that life might go with for us here and now, but that all might be well in eternity.

Christians, over the history of this nation, have at different times, asked the question, “has God left our nation?” I don't think that is the right question to be asking. Jesus is not the King of America. But he is the King of the Church. The better question to ask is ‘has God left the church?’ Has Jesus left his throne? Of course, the answer is a resounding NO. What we need to ask ourselves is, “is the Church going to leave America?” Because what God's Word says is that as we remain faithful to our King, as we remain for the place he's called us to, and as we remain hopeful in his care, He is working to bring His kingdom to bear not just here but over this world.