

Genesis 39:1-23

Joseph in Potiphar's House

It has been some time, but you may recall that when we last looked at Genesis, we studied the sordid narrative of Judah and Tamar. In considering that sordid account, we learned that the selfishness of Onan, the sensuality of Judah, and the disgraceful actions of Tamar did not stand in the way of God unfolding His plan for His people. Through it all God was sovereign, and superintended the actions of wicked men and women to establish the line of the Messiah.

Today we return to the main character in the Joseph narrative, Joseph himself. Chapter 39 resumes the account where chapter 37 had left it; with Joseph being sold into slavery after being assaulted and threatened with death by his jealous brothers. Let's recall the events of chapter 37. The sons of Jacob, Joseph excepted, had been out grazing the herds in Dothan, some fifty or sixty miles from the home base. Jacob, not having heard from his sons in some time, sent Joseph, wearing the multi-colored cloak that his father had made for him, to discover how things were going and report back to him. Joseph was good at this, we must remember, and often gave his father the worst news regarding his brothers.

When his brothers saw Joseph coming, and how could they not in that cloak, they plotted to kill him. The dreams of his future lordship over the family, the tattling to father about their work ethic, and the general fact that he was clearly the favorite in the family all conspired against Joseph. The brothers unceremoniously attacked him, stripped him of the cloak, and threw him in a well. It was only because Reuben intervened that they did not kill him outright. They simply dropped him in an empty well and waited for him to die of thirst and starvation. But as they sat around retelling what had happened, each no doubt praising himself for the role he had played, they saw a caravan of traders heading their way. This permutation caused them to change their minds and profit from their treachery. Joseph was pulled up out of the well, sold into slavery, and disappeared into the horizon.

Joseph is Blessed

This passage marks the beginning of the Joseph narrative in Egypt. The resulting events, over the next several years, brought into fulfillment the promise of God to Abraham that "know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years" (Genesis 15:13). Though Abraham could not have understood the implications of that promise centuries before, God nevertheless worked to bring about His sovereign plan.

"Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there" (v. 1). This text replicates the account that ended chapter 37, "meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard" (Genesis 37:36). In the first case, the perspective is from the buyer rather than the seller. It is Potiphar, not the Midianites who are the focus. Potiphar is described as "the captain of the bodyguard," a phrase which could mean "chief steward" or literally "chief of the butchers." Although much later (about the first millennium BC) that word referred to a eunuch, since Potiphar is married it cannot mean that in the present account.

This brief narrative gives three observations of Joseph while he was under Potiphar's control. "The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian" (v. 2). First, Scripture points out that God kept his promise of presence to the chosen line. Joseph was never alone, no matter how much he may have felt so. He had not been alone at the bottom of the empty well, and he was not alone as a slave in Egypt. We will see that this will not be the last time, though, that Joseph may have felt abandoned. Second, Joseph prospered. This was the effect of God's presence and, as we will soon see, it was noticed by Potiphar. Third, Joseph was not a field hand. Rather, he served in Potiphar's household. This gave Potiphar a first-hand opportunity to observe Joseph, and measure both his abilities and their cause.

As we mentioned, God's presence in the life of Joseph was evident. We are not told specifically what Potiphar observed, using modern terminology, we might say Joseph seems to have been blessed with the gift of administration, but Potiphar clearly "saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord made all that he did prosper in his hand" (v. 3). It is important to notice that Potiphar recognized not just that Joseph was successful, however that may have been measured, but that the source of his success was the presence of Joseph's God. There is no reason to believe that Potiphar, a member of Pharaoh's staff, was a believer in Yahweh, but somehow Potiphar made the connection. Whatever natural abilities Joseph may have had, his success was a gift from God.

As a consequence, and not surprisingly, "Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and put him in charge of all that he owned" (v. 4). This was an all encompassing responsibility. Joseph was not only in intimate contact with his master, something only the most trusted servant would have been permitted, but was given authority over Potiphar's possessions and lands as well. In addition, Joseph was put in charge of the other servants, some of whom had no doubt been with Potiphar for years, perhaps decades. He assigned their tasks and commanded them as they fulfilled their duties. How these other servants regarded this newcomer is not stated, but it can be assumed that Joseph's success was not welcomed by all, as we might infer from later in the passage.

We cannot overlook the fact that this turn of events was a continuation of the promises of God made to Abraham [then Abram] in their original encounter.

"And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Since Potiphar was apparently a good master and treated Joseph kindly, God allowed him to prosper.

"It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; so the Lord's blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field. "So he left Joseph in charge of everything that he owned; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate" (v. 5-6).

The text is explicit and leaves no room for another interpretation: Potiphar prospered because God blessed him because of Joseph's presence. And the prosperity was complete. Everything "in the house

and in the field” flourished under Joseph’s guiding hand. Potiphar’s crops grew abundantly. His business dealings were profitable. His livestock stayed healthy and reproduced prolifically. We can recall a similar situation from the life of Joseph’s father that perhaps Joseph recalled from a story he was told growing up in Canaan.

“²⁷But Laban said to him, “if it pleases you at all, stay with me; I have determined by divination that the Lord has blessed me on your account. . . . ²⁹But Jacob said to him, “you yourself know how I have served you and how your livestock have fared with me. ³⁰For you had little before I came, and it has increased to a multitude, and the Lord has blessed you wherever I turned” (Genesis 30:27, 29-30).

In that case, even though Laban was unfair in his dealings with Jacob, God chose to bless Laban, through Jacob, anyway. In this passage, however, we have no reason to think Potiphar was a cruel or unjust master.

It may seem curious that Potiphar did not give Joseph responsibility for the food he ate. It seems unlikely that this was a matter of lack of trust. After all, as a personal servant, Joseph had sufficient access to Potiphar and to his belongings (personal weapons, tools, kitchen implements) to do him harm had he wished. More likely it reflects that fact that Egyptians considered it improper to have foreigners touching what they ate, as we will see later in the narrative when Joseph’s brothers go down into Egypt and unknowingly dine with Joseph. “They served him by himself, and Joseph’s brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; because the Egyptians could not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians” (Genesis 43:32).

Joseph is Tempted

Ironically, in addition to his many natural abilities and achievements, Joseph had one blessing too many. He “was handsome in form and appearance” (v. 6). So much so that the older wife of his master “had her eyes on Joseph, and she said, ‘sleep with me’” (v. 7). Her attraction must have burned for some time since the phrase “it came about after these events” (v.7) indicates a passing of time. That is, over the course of months, she noticed her husband’s new servant, watched him as he went about the business of running the household, grew attracted, and determined to have him as her lover.

Her seduction was not subtle. She simply insisted that they go to bed together. Perhaps she assumed that Joseph could not resist such an opportunity. Perhaps she was used to commanding the servants in her household and believed Joseph would simply obey. As the wife of Potiphar, it seems likely that the woman was very used to getting what she wanted in life, and Joseph was to be no exception. In any case, she was mistaken.

Scripture relates that Joseph resisted her advances and, as he did so, he offered three points in objection. “⁸He refused and said to his master’s wife, ‘look, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put me in charge of all that he owns. ⁹There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?’” (v. 8-9). His argument was as follows. First, he pointed out that to take her as his lover would be an abuse of the trust in which he had been placed. Potiphar had

placed him in charge of his entire household. Joseph had been given great responsibility and a position of immense trust. It was impossible for Joseph to consider betraying that trust by going to bed with Potiphar's wife. Second, Joseph reminded her that she was married, so to take her to bed would be an offense against her husband. In Egyptian culture marriage was not seen as the sacred act that it was in Hebrew culture. There were provisions for brothers to marry their sisters and even a father to marry his own daughter. And of course, there was the institution of the harem. However, these were customs that benefited the man in the relationship. In Egyptian culture, as in most, legitimacy of a child was paramount to maintaining the integrity of the family line. Therefore, while a man might be adulterous, a woman could not be. Finally, Joseph insisted that to do so would greatly offend his God. Even the polytheistic Egyptians understood the importance of not offending the gods. Their sacrificial system was devoted to maintaining right relationships with the deities who controlled the weather and disease. Surely, Potiphar's wife would understand that Joseph could not commit such an offense against his God.

We can see that Joseph's argument progressed from the least, to the most serious, ethical objection. To betray his master's confidence was one thing. To take his master's wife to bed was another. But to offend his God was the greatest wrong he could do. "This great evil" (v. 9) is the same wording used to describe the 'wickedness' of humanity before the Flood when "the Lord saw that the wickedness of mankind was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). Committing an act of adultery would eventually be prohibited by Israel's law and faced the most severe of consequences, "if a man is found sleeping with a married woman, then both of them shall die, the man who slept with the woman, and the woman; so you shall eliminate the evil from Israel" (Deuteronomy 22:22).

But, importantly, Joseph recognized that the offense was not only against Potiphar, but against God. It reminds the reader of David's mournful prayer after his episode with Bathsheba.

"Against You, You only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight" (Psalm 51:4).

Despite Joseph's refusal to go to bed with her, Potiphar's wife was not discouraged. In fact, she persisted in her entreaties. But Joseph stood his ground, "Though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her" (v. 10). The text implies that, since Joseph worked in Potiphar's house, his wife had virtually constant access to him and never gave him a moment's rest. She was constantly flirting, making hints, brushing up against him, and cornering him when the other servants were not around. But Joseph was as persistent in his refusal as she was in her pleadings. Not only did he not go to bed with her, but he adjusted his schedule and working arrangements so that he avoided her as much as possible.

This shows maturity, and of course God's grace, far beyond Joseph's youthful years. We must remember that Joseph was a young man entering adulthood. It is not possible to think he was not tempted. By now in his late teens or early twenties, remember that he had been sold into Egypt when he was seventeen (Genesis 37:2), and experienced the sexual urges of any young man. And while no mention is made of the attractiveness of Potiphar's wife, we can assume that as a high ranking member of Egyptian society and a close associate of the Pharaoh, Potiphar had his choice of potential wives and must have selected a

woman who had some degree of beauty. Certainly, she was older than Joseph, but that does not mean her beauty had diminished. So the test to which Joseph was put daily was significant. We can be reminded that “temptation is not a part-time experience of the believer,” as Calvin wrote. Joseph was wise to set such a defensive boundary that he avoided her presence.

Unfortunately, despite his precautions, his role as head of Potiphar’s household required him to come into contact with the wife of his master on at least some occasions. As Scripture relates it, “¹¹now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the people of the household was there inside. ¹²So she grabbed him by his garment, saying, ‘sleep with me!’ But he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside” (v. 11-12). The house was empty except for Potiphar’s wife and Joseph. She sensed her opportunity and took it. Potiphar’s wife had gone from seducing and coaxing to force.

Let us note that the account makes it clear that Joseph was doing his daily business; he was not simply loitering within the house. He had stayed away as long as he could, but he was responsible for his master’s entire household. That there were no other servants nearby, undoubtedly prompted the rash actions of Potiphar’s wife. They would not be seen; they would not be caught. Motive and opportunity were at hand.

The word for the ‘garment’ Joseph abandoned in his haste to get away is generic, but it was probably simply his outer garment. Though the word can also refer to an under garment, there is no reason to think that Joseph had started to undress himself in the presence of Potiphar’s wife, though that was the case she would make later. Interestingly, the word for ‘grabbed’ is the same used for the rape of a virgin. Scripture is being explicit in that Potiphar’s wife, having failed in her seductions, is physically forcing herself on Joseph. And Joseph did the only right thing he could do. He ran. Not bothering with the cloak she had taken from him, he simply ran out of the house.

Joseph is Accused

For Potiphar’s wife, this act of ultimate refusal turned her lust into vengeance. Scorned by Joseph’s flight, she determined to ruin him, and perhaps cost him his life.

“¹³When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, ¹⁴she called to the men of her household and said to them, ‘see, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make fun of us; he came in to me to sleep with me, and I screamed. ¹⁵When he heard that I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled and went outside’” (v. 13-15).

She thought quickly and planned carefully. First, she called loudly to the servants. Since none of them were in the house, this was the best way of calling attention to herself. Also, had she just run outside with Joseph’s garment to tell the story to the servants, they might have wondered why she had resisted his assaults so quietly. To add reality to her story, and to alarm those outside, she yelled.

To begin, she reminded the servants, as if they needed reminding, that Joseph was a foreigner. While intermarriage with foreigners was not unusual among the Egyptians of the time, it was expected that the foreigner entering into such a relationship adopt the customs and morals of the new culture. Clearly, Joseph had not done so. He was distinguished by the fact that Yahweh was with him. Notice also that she

did not refer to her husband personally or with a title, but simply by pronoun. And she implicated him in the act by suggesting that Joseph had been brought into their household to mock them.

Notice also another detail of her lie. She claimed that Joseph “left his garment beside me” (v. 15). In fact, it was she who had grabbed it. But to suggest that she had done so would imply that she had removed his clothing. Her version, insisting that Joseph removed his garment and casually tossed it aside, suggested that he was the initiator of the act. We do not know what the servants said in response to this, if anything, or even if they believed her tale, but now she had witnesses who would be compelled to corroborate her story when her husband arrived home.

Eventually her husband returned. Scripture does not relate how long she waited, but in the intervening moments she certainly rehearsed her story. “¹⁶So she left his garment beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷Then she spoke to him with these words: ‘the Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make fun of me; ¹⁸but when I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside’” (v. 16-18).

There were some subtle changes to her version. To the servants, Joseph had merely been “a Hebrew” but to her husband he was “the Hebrew slave.” Clearly she wanted to make certain Potiphar knew of his power over Joseph. She also took the opportunity to remind her husband that this was his fault, since he had purchased Joseph and given him a privileged position in the household. She got the result she hoped for. “Now when his master heard the words of his wife which she spoke to him, saying, ‘this is what your slave did to me, his anger burned” (v. 19).

Potiphar seems to have accepted his wife’s version of the event. But it is worth noting that the text is ambiguous as to the direction of Potiphar’s anger. Obviously it was focused on Joseph, but there is a sense that he is also angry at his wife for the implication that he was at fault.

Joseph is Blessed Again

Since Potiphar was so incensed, it is surprising that he did not demand Joseph’s life. Clearly God was at work again preserving the chosen line and blessing His people. Perhaps Potiphar was not entirely convinced by his wife’s account of the incident. Remember that Joseph had served him for some time and been a servant of such integrity that he had been given the most privileged position in the household. Also, we know nothing of the relationship between Potiphar and his wife. This may not have been her first act of infidelity. And perhaps Potiphar is deferring judgment by placing Joseph in prison so he has time to investigate further.

Nevertheless, “Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined; and he was there in the prison” (v. 20). Joseph had gone from a privileged position in the house of a leader of the country to a prison. We do not know what prison it was, but from the events that followed we can presume it was not for the most hardened criminals. Even as a prisoner Joseph had some liberty. But it was still a prison, and Joseph had to experience a certain amount of despair. He must have felt as he did in the empty well. Hoping that this misunderstanding would be resolved, but with no means to do anything about it himself. Still, that did not mean God had forgotten him.

“²¹The Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the warden of the prison. ²²And the warden of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. ²³The warden of the prison did not supervise anything under Joseph’s authority, because the Lord was with him; and, the Lord made whatever he did prosper” (v. 21-23).

Notice that this passage parallels that earlier in the narrative when Potiphar had recognized God’s presence with Joseph and, consequently, placed him in charge of his household. Joseph was given responsibility for all the other inmates. And again, Scripture makes it clear that this was God’s doing, not merely Joseph’s managerial skills. It was God Who gave Joseph grace and made the warden take notice of him. Finally, the text makes it clear that Joseph was given as complete a dominion within the prison walls as he had been in Potiphar’s house. Circumstances had changed, but God was still providing for Joseph.

Takeaways

Throughout our study of the patriarchs, we have seen the blessed combination of divine promise and sovereign purpose. God has worked through the lives of men and women, both in their best moments and in their worst, to unfold His destiny for the line of Abraham, and through that line, the entire human race. This particular account made its way into the psalms, where the sacred writer reminded his readers of the wonderful works of God on behalf of Israel.

“¹⁶And He called for a famine upon the land;
He broke the whole staff of bread.
¹⁷He sent a man before them,
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.
¹⁸They forced his feet into shackles,
He was put in irons;
¹⁹Until the time that his word came to pass,
The word of the Lord refined him.
²⁰The king sent and released him,
The ruler of peoples, and set him free.
²¹He made him lord of his house,
And ruler over all his possessions,
²²To imprison his high officials at will,
That he might teach his elders wisdom” (Psalm 105:16-22).

We have also had the opportunity to observe the personal moral transformation of these men. Again, we have seen them make godly decisions and sin wretchedly. In this passage, it was more important that Joseph ruled himself, rather than that he ruled in Potiphar’s house or in the prison.

As I reflect on the passage at hand, there are three final biblical truths I would like to bring to our attention. First, God is always with us. No matter how dark the circumstances, we are never alone. A Christian need never fear that he or she has been abandoned. Certainly we have all experienced some form of unfair hardship. And we have been told by those who think themselves wise, that “life isn’t fair.”

That is true, but God is fair. He is just. He is holy. And He does not abandon those who are His own. “²⁷My sheep listen to My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; ²⁸and I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:27-29).

Second, even when we are blessed we will be tempted. In fact, I think it is perhaps even more so. When we are sick, or when our finances do not seem to stretch, or when some unforeseen circumstance comes before us, it is easy to call on God for help and focus our attention on Him. But when we are in good health, sufficient in our own means, and all is well with the world, we can get complacent and fall into the trap of believing that this good is all our own doing. Nothing could be further from the truth or further from the attitude of dependency that God wants of us. It is then that we are most vulnerable to Satan’s attacks. Remember that it was while David was in comfort at home, rather than in the field with his army, that he encountered Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-5)

Finally, we must emulate Joseph in how diligently we avoid temptation. We are all familiar enough with our own sins to know how to avoid them. We know what makes us angry, or lustful, or tempted to gossip. We all understand that certain behaviors or attitudes precede certain sins. We must work unceasingly at avoiding those things that lead us into temptation. We must rely upon the Holy Spirit and walk in closeness with Him to avoid the first step that leads to destruction.

“Easy is the descent to Hell.”

Virgil, *The Aeneid*

“No temptation has overtaken you except *something* common to mankind; and God is faithful, so He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).