

Gen. 39: Joseph and Potiphar's wife

*Let us pray...*

One of the blessings of modern technology and media is that you and I can learn more about the world around us than has ever been possible. Even 20 years ago when the Internet was just taking off, no one could have envisioned the far-reaching impact it has had, especially when coupled with television and print resources. One downside to this, however, is that we are frequently exposed to violence and corruption of every kind, and can become desensitized to how awful some things truly are. We have heard so many stories of philandering politicians and unfaithful pastors that we may be disappointed or disgusted for a few moments, but the influx of news continues and we are soon carried along to the next calamity.

Today's passage from Genesis 39 is reminiscent of a soap opera. As dramatic as it is, its abiding power for us lies in Joseph's positive example of faithfulness to the Lord when faced with sexual temptation, lies, and unjust treatment. More importantly, though, we hear four times that "the Lord was with Joseph," and the same is true for Christians today.

**Genesis 39**, entire

<sup>1</sup> Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.

<sup>2</sup> The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup> When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. <sup>5</sup> From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. <sup>6</sup> So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome,<sup>7</sup> and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

<sup>8</sup> But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care.<sup>9</sup> No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"<sup>10</sup> And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

<sup>11</sup> One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside.<sup>12</sup> She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.

<sup>13</sup> When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house,<sup>14</sup> she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed.<sup>15</sup> When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

<sup>16</sup> She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home.<sup>17</sup> Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me.<sup>18</sup> But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

<sup>19</sup> When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger.<sup>20</sup> Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.

But while Joseph was there in the prison,<sup>21</sup> the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden.<sup>22</sup> So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there.<sup>23</sup> The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

*This is the Word of the Lord.*

I was hired at my first job when I was 15. My friend Tammy mentioned to me that her boss at a local pizza shop wanted to hire someone, so she put in a good word for me. Workers there were expected to be able to do whatever needed to be done, whether it was

sweeping and mopping, preparing vegetables, running the cash register, or throwing the pizzas. There was a lot to learn and I enjoyed it, and was even more pleased to be taking home some money for college.

One day the owner's wife called me aside to tell me she was letting me go. Apparently since I had been there, the cash register kept coming up short. Since the more experienced workers all said they were innocent, I had to be the culprit. But I wasn't. I told her I was not the one, and if she fired me she'd still have the same problem, but be short one worker. I didn't change her mind.

This rocked my teenage world. Here I was, an A student, being wrongly accused of stealing, something that had never crossed my mind. But I was more hurt that Tammy, my friend since the first grade, had not stood up for me. A few months later, lo and behold, Tammy was fired for stealing from the cash register.

Because we live in a fallen world, everyone encounters situations from time to time that are just plain unfair. Perhaps you have been wrongly accused as I was. Maybe you have been discriminated against because you are a Christian, and you're not hesitant to witness for Jesus. Sometimes, people are treated unfairly because other people enjoy abusing the power they have, simply because they can. But when we consider Joseph today, we'll see first of all that Joseph was careful to use the power he was given responsibly and fairly. And we'll see that when we experience injustice, whatever shape it may take, like Joseph we can respond with trust in the Lord and personal integrity.

Our passage last week from Genesis 37 described how Joseph's brothers threw him into a pit, then sold him to a caravan of merchants who were heading for Egypt. We fast-forward now to find that Joseph was purchased by Potiphar. Joseph must have learned the Egyptian language quickly, and adapted to his difficult circumstances well. From one vantage point, Joseph is alone, a Hebrew far from his family and homeland. He seems to have an uncertain and dim future as a slave. But from God's perspective, we're told four times in this chapter that Joseph actually was never alone. Whether he was prospering as a steward or being falsely accused by a seductress, Joseph could be confident that God was right there with him.

The Hebrew that is used here to state that the Lord was with Joseph implies that Joseph had been specially chosen by God and received the Lord's protection as a result.

The language involves a sense of guidance and provision based upon the Lord's presence. This is the same language that is used in Psalm 23, which many of you are familiar with. In that Psalm the Lord is our shepherd, who provides so we are not in want, leads us to green pastures and quiet waters, and guides us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. He protects us and guides us with His rod and staff, and even when things look grim, He provides a table for us. When David says, "I will fear no evil, for you are with me," he states what Joseph would also have testified. He faced evil and injustice, but did not have to fear anything because God was with him.

When we study this story more closely, we learn that from a human standpoint Joseph did have reason for fear when Potiphar's wife accused him of rape. The customary punishment for rape or even an accusation of rape was death. Joseph was at an even greater disadvantage because he was a foreigner as well as a slave. So we need to ask, Why didn't Potiphar have Joseph executed? In fact, Joseph wasn't even sent to the worst prison, but to the king's cells for political prisoners, which would have been comparatively cushy.

We have to think that the woman's behavior did not surprise her husband. Since he was an Egyptian official whose wife made a serious accusation, Potiphar would have been expected to carry out some kind of punishment against Joseph. But the leniency of the punishment shows that Potiphar's wife was behaving in a way he was familiar with. Note that verse 19 states that Potiphar was incensed, but it does not say who he was angry with. My guess is that Potiphar liked Joseph, and he was angry with his wife for blowing what had been a very good situation in the management of Potiphar's business.

We might wonder whether Joseph was unwise or naïve to put himself in the position of being alone with Potiphar's wife. Early on in his ministry, Billy Graham decided that he and every man on his staff would never be alone with a woman. This was first of all to ensure that fleshly temptations never got the best of them. But it also ensured that Graham and his staff would never give even the appearance of impropriety. Even the most innocent of circumstances can turn into nasty and destructive rumors when others make assumptions and then speak out of turn. Throughout his entire career, Graham made every effort to avoid risking the slightest hint of sexual scandal, and his diligence and wisdom have paid off.

In Joseph's case, the situation is a bit different. Even though Joseph has been given a lot of responsibility, he's still a slave. The text suggests that the wife attempted to seduce him repeatedly, and he repeatedly rebuffed her. It may have been that the nature of his work, or the woman's brashness, made it difficult for him to avoid her. Joseph had authority over everything in the household except her, and she mistakenly assumes that he would desire what he could not have. When he demonstrated more loyalty to her husband than she did, she would have no more of him.

Joseph's situation here is an excellent example of how doing the right thing can sometimes confound or infuriate those whose hearts are bent against the Lord. Presbyterian pastor and abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy left his Illinois pulpit to work full-time at his printing press, so he could reach more people with his message against slavery. After observing one lynching, Lovejoy was committed forever to fighting racial prejudice and bondage. Many threats and attempts on his life failed to deter him. His printing presses were repeatedly destroyed, and he repeatedly rebuilt them. He said, "If by compromise is meant that I should cease from my duty, I cannot make it. I fear God more than I fear man. Crush me if you will, but I shall die at my post." And that he did, when a mob shot him in cold blood on November 7, 1837. Lovejoy was just 35, and his martyrdom deeply affected a recently elected Illinois congressman named Abraham Lincoln.

When you and I face unjust circumstances, they may not be over great causes such as abolition, and they probably aren't life-and-death. But as with Joseph, unfair treatment can impact our employment, our reputation, our place in the community, and certainly our own spirituality. One trap we need to be careful to avoid is a false teaching some churches and TV evangelists propagate called the "health and wealth" Gospel. The gist of this unbiblical idea is that if you are a Christian, you will succeed, be prosperous, get rich, and everything will be honkey-dorey. And the flip side to that is that if you are not rich, if things are going wrong for you, if success and stability seem to elude you, then you must not be a very good Christian. There may even be some secret sin that you need to unearth, because God might be punishing you for it.

This view of God's blessings is just as much a lie as the lies told by Potiphar's wife. Success in God's eyes is much different than worldly success. Joseph was a Hebrew

slave in Egypt, which in that society made him the scum of the earth. But he was faithful to the Lord, and used the gifts God gave him to take lemons and make lemonade. Joseph was falsely accused by a lusty, manipulative woman, but he triumphed by resisting her seduction, staying loyal to Potiphar, and above all remaining faithful to his Lord. As the Lord later tells Samuel, "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart," and Joseph's heart was blameless, which is the greatest success we can attain.

In our society, success often means doing whatever it takes to get ahead, even if that means stepping on other people in the process. On the other hand, Senator Mark Hatfield has told of touring Calcutta with Mother Teresa. She took him to the so-called "House of Dying," where sick children are cared for in their last days. Watching Mother Teresa minister to these people, Hatfield was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the suffering she and her co-workers faced daily. "How can you bear the load without being crushed by it?" he asked. Mother Teresa replied, "My dear Senator, I am not called to be successful, I am called to be faithful."

As powerful as Mother Teresa's ministry was, she joins us in taking our cue from a tremendous failure named Jesus Christ. Humanly speaking, He started out with such promise. As Marianne showed in her sermon a few weeks ago, He was a highly inquisitive student who hungered to know the Scriptures. He came from good stock, a descendant of King David. Yet He grew up to be a blasphemer, a rabble-rouser who was disrespectful of the Pharisees and Saducees. He went so far as to call Himself a king, claiming to be the Son of God.

Only the most despicable, pathetic failures were crucified outside the city walls on a tree. No one has ever had more unjust accusations thrown against Him than our perfect, holy Savior. As our earlier passage from 1 Peter declares, we should not be surprised when we suffer doing the right thing, because Jesus did exactly that. He died to pay for our sins, and on top of that gave us the premier example of faithfulness to God at any cost.

You and I don't face the severity of persecution that other Christians face around the world, but our trials are just as real to us. And, they can be used by God just as well for His glory and our own benefit. When we face temptations, when we are seduced by

people or situations, when we are abused or impacted by deceit and unfairness, our Christlike response is a shining example to others about the reality of God in our lives. Joseph did his best at whatever work the Lord placed before him, making lemonade from lemons. He was eager to be faithful to his earthly master, Potiphar, but only so long as his prime loyalty to his Lord God was not compromised. Though he seemed weak as a foreign slave, Joseph possessed tremendous spiritual power in integrity that was grounded upon the Lord's presence with him.

Like Joseph, you and I can be faithful regardless of the difficulties we encounter because we know the promises of God. We will not be tested beyond what we can bear. The trials we face are used by God to strengthen our faith, which is far more precious than gold. When we suffer temptations, we can be sure that there is always a way out through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. God is always with us, and will never forsake us. Whether you face unfair treatment now, or when you do in days to come, remember that even in the valley of the shadow of death, our Good Shepherd is with us.

There may be times when we don't feel the Lord's presence, or we can't see the Lord at work in our circumstances. But just as God was with Joseph through thick and thin, Jesus tells us plainly that He is with us always, even right at this moment, and to the end of the age.

*Let us pray.*

Benediction: Col 3

<sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.