

Genesis 39:1-18

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Introduction

The story of Joseph up to now has been pretty slim. Essentially we know he was the first son born to Rachel, Jacobs favourite wife, and he was Jacobs favourite son. Other than that we know nothing of Joseph until he is seventeen years old other than that he helped to look after the livestock with his eleven brothers. Then the narrative about Joseph picks up steam and we hear of his dreams and his brothers hatred resulting in him being sold into slavery as we heard last week.

Part 1: Potiphars House (1-6)

Joseph was brought by Potiphar, an Egyptian, an official in Pharaoh's court and the captain of the guard. I think it would safe to assume that this man was relatively wealthy and there is nothing in the narrative to suggest that he mistreated his slaves. But more importantly we also see God's hand at work here. Joseph went to Egypt as a slave. Many, if not most of the people sold as slaves ended up doing manual labour on build projects etc where the life expectancy was not great. Joseph on the other hand was sold into slavery to an Egyptian official so that he could start to learn some of the Egyptian culture. If God wants us to do a particular job he will normally equip us for it – sometimes in ways we would much prefer he didn't....

Also, the world and the devil may be able to take much away from us – in Joseph's case his family and friends – but it cannot take away the gracious presence of God in our lives.

We Are A Blessing To Others:

However, God was with him and blessed him and as result Potiphar and his household were blessed. The blessings of God extend beyond us to those around us. This is why in times of revival crime takes a nose dive. But notice also that it was Josephs conduct that resulted in him being promoted. We cannot expect God to bless us or the company we either own or work for if we are slacking off. As Paul tells us in 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12:

Even while we were with you, we gave you this command: “Those unwilling to work will not get to eat.” 11 Yet we hear that some of you are living idle lives, refusing to work and meddling in other people’s business. We command such people and urge them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and work to earn their own living.

Have you ever thought that perhaps your being in a company is part of the reason why the company is doing well – providing of course you trying to be like Joseph and doing your best. I think it is true to say that as a generalisation the more a person, or group of people, or even nations, try to follow what God's law requires (even if they have no idea that is what they are doing) the greater they will be blessed. That is why even families that do not believe in God who implement God's commandments in their family will have better lives than Christian families where although they believe they do follow God's commandments about marriage. Note that this is a generalisation and as such we shouldn't push it too far.

I think it is also important to note the Potiphar noticed that he was being blessed through Joseph. Maybe if we had the opportunity to ask Potiphar himself about this he would have phrased it very



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differently, we don't know, but we do know that he recognised at some level that the increased prosperity he was seeing with Joseph being around was a result of Joseph and in those days by association the God they worshipped. In that sense it was very different to today. Today we do not see God or gods as having any association with our prosperity or lack thereof.

As a result Joseph was raised to position of manager of the household which was a very important position and only those who were trusted ended up in that position as they dealt the finances of the household as well as the managing of the staff – the other slaves. Hard work and honesty pay off – most of the time.

Part 2: Potiphars Wife (6-20)

In verse 6 and 7 we are told:

Joseph was a very handsome and well-built young man, and Potiphar's wife soon began to look at him lustfully. "Come and sleep with me," she demanded.

Josephs Position:

Joseph at this stage was probably around 20 – in the prime of his life. We need to recognise though what a precarious position Potiphar's wife trying to seduce him put him in. A slave, no matter how respected and trusted, was a slave and as such had no rights. If he did sleep with Potiphar's wife and was found out the result would almost certainly have been death. On the other hand not sleeping with Potiphar's wife meant that the one person who could have a significant influence on Potiphar's view of Joseph was going to not be on his side.

However, Joseph didn't look at it that way – he knew what God required of him and did that and let God take care of the consequences. It would be really nice to have more insight into what Joseph was actually feeling at this point in this life but the Bible doesn't tell us. All we do know is that Joseph remained true to God. Joseph, through faith, was able to see any situation he found himself in as being in the will of God. Very much like Paul who wrote in Philippians 4:10-13:

How I praise the Lord that you are concerned about me again. I know you have always been concerned for me, but you didn't have the chance to help me. 11 Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. 12 I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. 13 For I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength.

This does not mean that we just resign ourselves to whatever position we find ourselves in. Joseph didn't do that. Neither did Paul. Or Jesus. But if situations beyond your control put in you places you normally wouldn't have chosen for yourself then getting depressed and anxious about the situation does not help. Rather trust God that he knows what he is doing. That is very easy to say but I know from my own experience that that is not what I do naturally. It is sometimes very hard to maintain a sense of balance in situation where things have just not gone your way. Romans 8:28 comes immediately to mind:

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

Easy to read, easy to understand, much harder to put into practice. But we see this as very much the



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case in the life of Joseph.

Potiphar's Wife:

So what can we say about Potiphar's wife. Very little. All we know about her is that she was Potiphar's wife. We don't even know if she was his only wife or not. We don't know if she was loved by Potiphar like Rachel or like Leah. All we do know is that she was a very determined woman – day after day she pestered him to have sex with her. But what we can say is she did at least two things wrong.

1. She look with lust on another man. These things always start with our eyes. Job was a wise man when he said in Job 31:1:

“I made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust at a young woman.”

Jesus was a bit more blunt about it in Matthew 5:28:

27 “You have heard the commandment that says, ‘You must not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

2. She allowed that lust to take root and grow. Affairs begin in the heart long before they reach reality. The problem is that once something like this takes root in our hearts it skews our perspectives. I'm sure Potiphar's wife was seeing all the bad things that Potiphar was doing and none of the good. We call it justifying our behaviour. It is interesting that from a brain psychology point of view the first phase of being in love fires the neurons in the same areas of our brain as addictions.. That is why young lovers are so focused on each other to the detriment of everything else around them. In couples that is not necessarily a bad thing but in this case it was a recipe for disaster.

Obviously behind all this was the devil. We need to both recognise that and make sure that it doesn't just become an excuse. No matter who is behind it – we are responsible for our behaviour. God doesn't take the devil make me do it as an excuse.

How Joseph Handled It:

However, back to the point at hand. Joseph now found himself as trusted by his master, yet seduced by his master's wife.

Notice what Joseph did:

1. He reasoned with himself (and her). Note Joseph's answer to Potiphar's wife:

But Joseph refused. “Look,” he told her, “my master trusts me with everything in his entire household. 9 No one here has more authority than I do. He has held back nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How could I do such a wicked thing? It would be a great sin against God.”



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Note:

- Joseph recognised the trust Potiphar has put in him and he didn't want to break that trust. Trust is hard to build, very easy to break down.
 - Joseph calls it for what it is – how could I do such a wicked thing? I'm sure that didn't go down well with Potiphar's wife – she knew what she was doing was wrong as well but was still determined to go ahead with it anyway. Generally with people doing that the last thing they want to hear is being told that actually what they are doing is wrong.
 - Joseph also recognises that at the end of the day it is not a sin against Potiphar's wife, against Potiphar, or even against himself – it is a sin against God. This should be one of the most powerful reasons we have for not sinning. In reality it is often one of the least.
2. He kept away from her or made sure there were other people in the room. This is always a very good idea. You are far less likely to do something if there are other people around. Hence the usual rule for young courting couples not to spend too much time together but rather to go out with friends. The problem is that our human nature often thinks that we can handle it – but the reality is we can't. And don't fool yourself into believing that you are somehow better. Or it gives us some sort of excitement so we walk as close to the line as we can without actually crossing over. Unfortunately that doesn't work either – sin is like a black hole – get too close and there is no escaping. Proverbs 5:1-11 spring to mind here:

My son, pay attention to my wisdom; listen carefully to my wise counsel. 2 Then you will show discernment, and your lips will express what you've learned. 3 For the lips of an immoral woman are as sweet as honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil. 4 But in the end she is as bitter as poison, as dangerous as a double-edged sword. 5 Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave. 6 For she cares nothing about the path to life. She staggers down a crooked trail and doesn't realize it. 7 So now, my sons, listen to me. Never stray from what I am about to say: 8 Stay away from her! Don't go near the door of her house! 9 If you do, you will lose your honour and will lose to merciless people all you have achieved. 10 Strangers will consume your wealth, and someone else will enjoy the fruit of your labour. 11 In the end you will groan in anguish when disease consumes your body.

We also need to make sure we don't put ourselves in situations where it gives other people reason to talk about us. We need to be particularly careful of this if we have friendships with members of the opposite sex. Honour, like trust, is also one of those things that is very easily lost and difficult to get back.

The Breaking Point:

We notice that Potiphar's wife didn't give up. Day after day we are told she pestered him to sleep with her. But he managed to keep out of her way. Eventually though she managed to get him alone and rather than stay he ran – which is the right thing to do. The issue was he left his cloak behind and now she was really angry with him. So she told the servants and her husband that Joseph had tried to rape her. Just because you are a Christian and do the right thing doesn't mean that everyone is going to like you. Some will hate you and will do everything in their power to tarnish your reputation. This would happen a lot more if it wasn't for the fact that God is for us and he only



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allows what he sees fit.

We also notice that the lust had now turned to hatred. In reality it was probably disgust and hatred for herself but as she was “not to blame” it was redirected outwards at Joseph. Probably if Joseph had had slept with her she would have ended up despising him, again because she was despising and hating herself. When it comes to our emotions it is much easier to blame someone else than to take responsibility for them ourselves.

Part 3: Pharaohs Prison (20-23)

What is fascinating here is that Porphar didn't have him killed. He was well within his right to. I wonder if suspected it was more about his wife than Joseph and so put him in prison instead. Note however that he was put in the prison where the king's prisoners were kept. Essentially what we could a maximum security prison these days. We can also see God's hand in it as well – firstly that he was not killed and secondly that he was put in the prison with people who had had access to Pharaoh. I am sure that Joseph learned much while he was in the prison about Pharaoh and how his court ran. This information would serve him well when he finally ended up in Pharaohs court. And we are explicitly told that the Lord was with Joseph and showed him his love and he became the prison warden's favourite. And again Joseph was given put in charge and basically ran the prison for the prison warden.

In Conclusion

Do as Joseph did. Joseph is an example that it is possible to walk with integrity in difficult and demanding situations. Note I didn't say easy. I'm sure it wasn't easy for Joseph. But it is possible. And it is possible not because we are great and know the right thing to do. It is possible because God is gracious and he walks with us and helps us.

As Paul says in Philippians 4:13:

13 For I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength.

