

God is with the Righteous: Even Suffering Servants Genesis 39

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I. With God in Egypt

Please turn in your copy of God's Word to Genesis 39. Today, Moses reintroduces our main character, Joseph, after taking a detour in the previous chapter. Joseph has several days to think on his journey in a slave caravan from the humble pastures of Dothan down to magnificent Egypt. He misses the warmth of his colorful robe, but he's more distraught over the likelihood that he'll never see his beloved father, the man that gave him that robe, ever again. He reflects on his celestial dreams, how he gloated over his brothers, and how they burned with jealousy and hatred for him. This conflict made it tough to live in Canaan with his family, but the prospect of being a slave in idolatrous Egypt is downright frightening. Yet, he's not alone, for his God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—is not bound by geography or politics. He is with Joseph.

II. Joseph is Taken Captive (v.1-10)

1 Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. 2 The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. 4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. 5 From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. 6a So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

A. His Household is Blessed (v.1-6a)

Joseph arrives in Egypt and a government official named Potiphar purchases him from the merchants. He's put to work like any other slave and quickly proves his worth. Potiphar takes notice and promotes him from outdoor labor, to working in the home, to the role of personal attendant, to overseer of his estate, and ultimately, to complete control over all his possessions. Joseph's ascension is surprising and would've been extremely improbable given the Egyptians' general contempt for Hebrew people.

But our narrator clues us in on two spiritual realities that enable him to overcome such unlikely odds. First, the Lord is completely responsible for Joseph's success. Yes, he's a skilled administrator and works hard, but it's God who endows him with the ability and grants fruitfulness. Second, the Lord opens Potiphar's pagan eyes to see that He is the reason for Joseph's effectiveness.

The relationship between these two men happened several thousand years ago, but it's important to know that God works similarly in personal relationships today. When Christians experience difficulty, God still enables faithful service. People see God at work in our diligent effort in the midst of adversity, and they come to understand why we live the way we do when we tell them. This is where worship and evangelism intersect in everyday life. There's no indication that Potiphar turned away from any number of the Egyptian deities to worship the Lord, but it's clear that he trusted Joseph because of the success God worked through him. Later on in our narrative, Potiphar may have even watched out for him for this same reason.

So, despite the trauma of being sold into slavery and losing a position of prominence with his father, Joseph's new future as an accomplished and trusted slave in Egypt appears rather bright. But, his resolve to worship and obey the one true God in this idolatrous nation will be tested by the deceptive words of a seductress.

6b Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. 7 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." 8 But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. 9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" 10 And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

B. His Resolve to Obey (v.6b-10)

Joseph is a good-looking man, and just as we learned from his great-grandmother, Sarah, before him, external beauty can lead to particular challenges and temptations.¹¹ Potiphar's wife lusts after him, and when her desire conceives, it gives birth to the sin of sexual enticement. Joseph refuses, but given his role in the house, he's a captive audience and she hounds him every single day.

How exactly does he rebuff such persistent advances? Joseph consistently resists sexual temptation through desires to honor Potiphar and obey God. He understands Potiphar's trust in him, an insignificant Hebrew slave, to run all of his affairs, and he knows it's wrong to betray that trust. More importantly, he makes a moral judgment about infidelity, calling it, "wickedness and sin against God." This short exchange tells us that although Joseph is immersed in the world of Egypt, he hasn't bought into the pantheon of gods or idolatrous ways of living. He is exclusively devoted and obedient to the Lord. But the seductress isn't deterred and she traps Joseph in a vulnerable position.

III. Joseph is Trapped (v.11-21)

11 But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, 12 she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. 13 And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, 14 she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. 15 And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house." 16 Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, 17 and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. 18 But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house." 19 As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, "This is the way your servant treated me," his anger was kindled. 20 And 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 prison. 21 But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.

A. He Flees Temptation (v.11-15)

Potiphar's wife is an opportunist, and she traps Joseph when the master is away and there are no witnesses to come to his defense. Her enticements are forceful; the idea here is that she grabs his clothing with the intent to disrobe him for a sexual tryst. Joseph realizes sin is crouching at his door and immediately runs out of the house, but she snags his clothes and sees that she has the upper hand. If she can't get what she wants, then she'll exact revenge by falsely accusing *him* of attempted rape. She tells her story to the other male slaves in order to strengthen her case, but their silence in the text makes you wonder if this sort of thing has happened before.

I want to pause for a moment and zoom in and out on our text. I'd like to zoom in on Joseph's method and motivation for resisting constant sexual temptation because I think they're particularly edifying as we seek to honor the Lord in the face of all types of temptation, not the least of which is sexual temptation. After that, I want to zoom out and think about how Moses uses this chapter and chapter 38 together.

First, let's zoom in on the wisdom of Joseph's method for resisting sexual temptation throughout the chapter. Joseph's obedience intensifies as temptation escalates. At the beginning, obedience involves an explanation to the seductress, but as her advances continue, he ignores her altogether. Eventually, temptation reaches a climax when she corners him alone in the house, and his only escape is to run! His flight may seem dramatic, but God-given grace often moves people to take drastic action in the fight against sin. Jesus commands a similar approach to lust in Matthew 5:29-30 and temptation in general in Mark

9:42-50. Also in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul admonishes Christians in 1 Corinthians 6 to take the same action as Joseph and “Flee from sexual immorality.”

Joseph was a captive audience to a seductress, but in our time, misuse of technology creates almost an identical situation. Are cellphones, computers, and tablets a source of sexual temptation in your life? You at least need to install safeguards and delete apps, but maybe, you need to make a clear cut and just get rid of the device altogether. God’s Word is very clear that sexual temptation and sin aren’t to be trifled with. Are certain people at school, work, or in the neighborhood a source of sexual temptation? Ask a trusted friend, mentor, or church leader to pray with you and to help navigate the relationship with objectivity and Biblical wisdom. What other types of temptation do you encounter? They don’t have to be sexual; they could be temptation toward covetousness, gluttony, gossip, and physical violence, or even greatness, esteem, and power over people. Brothers and Sisters, God calls us to do war against sin of all types by resisting and fleeing from temptation.

Methods are important as we work out our salvation, but they’re bound to fail without sufficient motivation. Notice, once again, the power of Joseph’s motivation in verse 9. For him, the joy of obeying God eclipses any pleasure offered by the seductress. On a daily basis, he weighed the momentary thrill of her embrace against the deep satisfaction of obeying God and faithfully serving his master, and every time grace-enabled obedience tipped the scales toward fidelity. We are a people who excel at methods, steps, and techniques. We adopt them, work at them, perfect them, and yet, we fail because we rely on the method for strength. It’s time we pay closer attention to our motivation for obedience and ask God to cultivate a genuine satisfaction for holiness in our lives.

Next, let’s zoom out and consider the relationship between chapters 38 and 39. Frankly, chapter 38 seems a bit out of place: it’s off the main storyline, sex features prominently, it’s full of unfamiliar cultural customs, and the heroine is a woman who intentionally gets pregnant through prostitution. But, when we read it in conjunction with chapter 39, the structure of these texts becomes clearer. Both men leave their homes for a foreign nation: Judah voluntarily and Joseph as a captive slave. Both men face sexual temptation with different outcomes: Judah willingly puts himself in the path of temptation and he succumbs to his lusts, but Joseph is surrounded by temptation, and he resists. Both men are blessed by God: Judah unknowingly through his pagan daughter-in-law, Tamar, but Joseph is a conduit of God’s blessing to pagan people in Egypt.

One thing that you’ll read in chapter 39, but not chapter 38, is the phrase, “the LORD was with Joseph.” God’s presence, or the lack thereof in Judah’s case, is the starkest contrast between these two men, and it magnifies several scenes at the end of the Book of Genesis. As it stands, they are on opposite ends of the

character spectrum. So, remember this contrast later in the summer when Pastor Russ brings it to your attention!

Let's return to our narrative. Joseph obeys God, honors his master, and one would think that his life should get better, but it actually gets worse when he's falsely accused to his master...

B. He is Falsely Accused (v.16-21)

When Potiphar returns home, the seductress repeats the same false accusations, and he throws Joseph into prison. Is Potiphar really so gullible to immediately accept his wife's story? Initially, this may seem to be the case, but there are two clues that he may have questioned her tale. First, there seems to be preexisting marital discord that would undoubtedly breed distrust between Potiphar and his wife. Notice that she uses the fabricated story twice to insult Potiphar for bringing a Hebrew into their home. She states it first to the male servants in verse 14 and again to Potiphar directly in verse 17. Obviously, she despises the Hebrew people and feels that it's disgraceful to have one in their home, but it's almost like her pursuit of Joseph has the secondary intention of tearing down her husband. Second, it's quite surprising that Joseph simply isn't put to death. He is, after all, an expendable slave accused of assaulting his master's wife. The fact that Potiphar sentences him to confinement—a very light sentence for such an offense—in the king's prison, where he could keep an eye on him, suggests that he doubted her report.

But Potiphar isn't the only one looking out for Joseph. Most importantly, God is with him, and Joseph continues to faithfully serve whomever is in authority over him. God, in turn, blesses everyone around him.

IV. Joseph is Blessed (v.22-23)

22 And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. 23 The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.

A. With New Authority (v.22-23)

Does this story sound familiar? It should because it's almost identical to the beginning of the chapter. Joseph continues his descent in society, and one would think that his standing should diminish along the way, but thanks to God's ongoing presence, Joseph gains trust and influence with each new authority. What exactly is God doing in Joseph and what is he teaching us in this narrative?

V. Reflect and Respond

A. Growing Up While Going Down

First, Joseph has a streak of arrogance, and on at least two occasions that we know of, he boasts of superiority over his brothers and family. But, God—being a good Father—uses the sinful act of his brothers selling him into slavery, temptations from the seductress, and imprisonment to humble him...all while using these same events to hone gifts of administration and prepare him for greater influence. Time will tell how important Joseph's humility and influence are to not just the ancient world, but all of redemptive history.

Think for a moment about another man's humble path of descent. Jesus, the Son of God, left his heavenly throne and was born to a carpenter and teenage girl; he worked his father's trade and led a group of ordinary men; he was beaten, cursed, falsely accused, mocked, scorned, slandered, spit upon, tempted, and eventually, crucified naked for crimes he didn't commit. No, God The Father didn't need to purge Jesus of any pride or vanity because he didn't have any, but the path to the most influential act in all of history certainly was a humiliating one.

The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8 that Christians should expect to walk the same path of humility as their Savior. Is this how we interpret difficulty in our own lives? Do we embrace God-ordained hardship as a time to mature and grow through service to others? Or do we squirm at the thought of even the slightest inconveniences and interruption of our comfort? Can we say with the Apostle Paul, "...the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us"? Lord, help us in our weakness here!

B. Faithfulness in Hardship

A final point to consider from our passage relates to Joseph's faithfulness in the midst of serious hardship. The Bible is very clear that he lived each day before the face of God, and we see evidence of this in his personal chastity and productivity for his earthly masters. I think he "understood the fear of the LORD" and that fear produced wisdom, which enabled him to remain a faithful and obedient servant despite being harassed, wrongly accused, and punished for a crime he didn't commit. Proverbs 2 is a great passage to read in relationship to our text today. You won't see Joseph's name in Proverbs, but I think you'll see his life in the chapter.

I have two personal questions for you: do you believe that living before the face of God will strengthen your resolve and sustain your righteousness, even in the midst of what may be an inescapable temptation? Will you remain faithful to him, even when people seek to destroy your reputation and slander your character?¹² The injustices from our text testify of hard realities in the Christian life that can keep us awake at night and make us wonder whether we will be faithful in hardship like Joseph. The Bible gives us two encouragements here.

First, temptations are common throughout history and we can overcome them because God faithfully provides a way of escape. In other words, there are no

temptations unique to modern times that make sin unavoidable. How do we know this is true because sin often feels inevitable when we face certain temptations? The Apostle Paul tells Christians in 1 Corinthians 10—who regularly faced sexual temptation—to learn from the accounts of Old Testament people (like Joseph) because they faced the same sexual temptations. He warns them that pridefully dismissing these accounts will ultimately result with falling into sin. He also says that God never allows us to be tempted beyond our ability. So, when you find yourself being tempted, know that God will give you the means to endure it. And when it comes to sexual sin, especially, know that your way of escape is to just run away!

Second, we have a Savior who has gone before us and knows our weakness! God tasked him to fulfill the greatest injustice in all of history: taking sin upon himself and dying for a rebellious people, so that they might receive His righteousness by faith. The writer of the New Testament Book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus's faithfulness also enables him to sympathize with our weaknesses. And this sympathy gives Christians—yes, even those who endure relentless suffering—confidence to draw near to him for mercy and grace, so that we might live faithfully before the face of God by humbly serving earthly masters, resisting our own temptations, and fleeing from all manner of sin.

¹¹ Genesis 12:11-13

¹² Russ Kennedy, "Fleeing from Sin" (The Chapel Pulpit, Springboro, OH, 2009), 268.

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