

Jacob's Descendants

Joseph in Potiphar's House

Genesis 39:1-23

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February 18, 2018

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Scripture

Last week I began a series of sermons that I am calling “Jacob’s Descendants,” based on Genesis 37-50. In our last lesson, we read about young seventeen-year old Joseph sold by his brothers to Midianite traders on their way to Egypt. The brothers then deceived their father Jacob into thinking that a fierce animal had devoured Joseph. The narrative ended with a teaser in Genesis 37:36, “Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.”

Let’s read about Joseph in Potiphar’s house in Genesis 39:1-23:

¹Now 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. ²The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. ³His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. ⁴So 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. ⁵From 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. ⁶So 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.

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.

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. 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. (Genesis 39:1-23)

Introduction

We love to read about rags-to-riches stories. In many ways, it epitomizes the American dream. For example, think about Henry Ford. He was a farm boy who was interested in mechanics from a young age. At the age of 15 he dismantled and reassembled a pocket watch his father had given him. A self-taught watch repairman who graduated to be an apprentice machinist, Ford started his personal experiments on gasoline engines, which was the beginning of his vast Ford motor vehicle empire.

Seventeen-year old Joseph, son of Jacob, actually seemed to have the opposite story. He was a naïve, favored son with a very bright future. However, when his brothers sold him to traveling Midianite traders, who in turn sold him in Egypt, it seemed from all appearances that his future now was very bleak. He must have felt that he had been abandoned by God and man. But, in fact, that was not the case.

Lesson

Joseph in Potiphar's house in Genesis 39:1-23 teaches us that God is with his people in both prosperity and adversity.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Joseph Was Purchased by Potiphar (39:1)
2. Joseph Was Prospered by God (39:2)
3. Joseph Was Promoted by Potiphar (39:3-6a)
4. Joseph Was Tempted by Potiphar's Wife (39:6b-18)
5. Joseph Was Imprisoned by Potiphar (39:19-20)
6. Joseph Was Loved by God (39:21)
7. Joseph Was Promoted by the Prison Keeper (39:22-23)

I. Joseph Was Purchased by Potiphar (39:1)

First, Joseph was purchased by Potiphar.

Verse 1 says, **“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 [also known as the Midianites] who had brought him down there.”** Joseph's dreams of grandeur were shattered. He was now a lowly slave of an Egyptian master. Three times Moses stated that Joseph's master was an Egyptian (in verses 1, 2, and 5). How far Joseph had fallen: from his father's favorite son and designated heir to a lowly slave in the land of Egypt, far from the Promised Land.

II. Joseph Was Prospered by God (39:2)

Second, Joseph was prospered by God.

Remember that earlier, back in the Promised Land, God had given Joseph two dreams in which his family would bow down to him. Joseph really believed that God had given him the two dreams, and so he was certain of their fulfillment. In his naivety, he shared his two dreams with his brothers and his father. His brothers hated him for it, and so they sold him to

the Midianites, who in turn sold him to Potiphar in Egypt. Verse 2 says, **“The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master.”** Four times in this chapter it is said that **“the Lord was with Joseph”** (in verses 2, 3, 21, and 23). So, even in his adversity, **“the Lord was with Joseph.”** One commentator says, “Although all human supports have failed, and Joseph is far removed from the community of faith and the land of promise, God stays with him. God’s presence, neither localized geographically nor dramatic or spectacular, is an unobtrusive, working-behind-the-scenes kind of presence.”¹ And as a result of God’s presence with Joseph, **“he became a successful man.”** In fact, three times in this chapter Joseph is said to be **“successful”** or to “succeed” (in verses 2, 3, and 23). Commentator Sidney Greidanus says, “Right at the outset, [Moses] informs us that Joseph becomes successful not because of his innate wisdom or ability but because the *Lord* is with him.”² It is important to keep that truth in mind for this narrative.

III. Joseph Was Promoted by Potiphar (39:3-6a)

Third, Joseph was promoted by Potiphar.

Verse 3 says, **“His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands.”** Notice that it was an unbeliever who saw that the Lord was with Joseph. And so, it is not surprising to read in verse 4, **“So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended**

¹ Quoted in Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 387.

² Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 387.

him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.” Joseph became Potiphar’s chief overseer of his entire household. Moses then writes in verse 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.”** Isn’t that amazing? **The blessing of the Lord was on all that Potiphar had,** and all because of Joseph. It was as if Joseph adapted Colossians 3:23–24a as his motto, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.”

Moreover, this passage is an initial fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. Here, through Joseph, God’s blessing flows to one family, and a Gentile family at that! It is not surprising then to read in verse 6a, **“So [Potiphar] left all that he had in Joseph’s charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.”**

IV. Joseph Was Tempted by Potiphar’s Wife (39:6b-18)

Fourth, Joseph was tempted by Potiphar’s wife.

Verse 6b says, **“Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.”** Joseph is the only man in Scripture to be described as **“handsome in form and appearance.”** And his mother, Rachel, is the only woman in Scripture to be described as “beautiful in form and appearance” (Genesis 29:17).

But, Joseph’s good looks brought the attention of Mrs. Potiphar, who **cast her eyes on Joseph and said, “Lie with me”** (v. 7). This was not a request; it was more like a command. She was his master’s wife, and so how could he refuse? Also, as one commentator said, “Sexual promiscuity was a perennial

feature of all slave societies.”³ And furthermore, given his current situation, it could have had some benefit to him.

Verses 8-9, **“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. 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?’”** This is Joseph’s only recorded speech in this chapter. Basically, Joseph refused to sin against (1) the trust given to him, (2) Potiphar, and (3) God. Joseph was profoundly aware that God was with him. That is why commentator Kent Hughes writes, “The grand deterrent to Joseph’s sinning was the awareness that God sees all and that a sin that no one knows about, committed behind locked doors in a dark room, is actually done in the presence of a holy God. Joseph believed this. And I am convinced that the personal realization and conviction of this truth is the strongest deterrent to sin that there is.”⁴

But Mrs. Potiphar would not give up. Verse 10 says, **“And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.”** She was hoping to wear him down. But he refused her every time.

One day, however, Mrs. Potiphar ambushed Joseph, as it were, when no one else was in the house. Verses 11-12 say, **“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, she caught him by his garment, saying, ‘Lie with me.’ But**

³ Quoted in Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 389.

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 463–464.

he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.”

Mrs. Potiphar was not only rebuffed and probably angry, but she was also in a predicament. It is possible that Joseph could have reported her to his master. So, she gathered the men of her household and told them that Joseph had tried to assault her, and the proof was Joseph's garment. Then, when Potiphar came home, she told him the same story.

V. Joseph Was Imprisoned by Potiphar (39:19-20)

Fifth, Joseph was imprisoned by Potiphar.

Understandably, **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** (v. 19). The usual punishment for adultery in Egypt, as in later Israel, was the death penalty. Interestingly, however, **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** (v. 20). It is possible that Potiphar did not really believe his wife. But, he had to do something. So, he had Joseph put into the prison.

Commentator Sidney Greidanus captures our sentiments about Joseph, “As we hear this, we are enraged at the injustice of it all: Joseph refuses Potiphar's wife's advances, he rejects evil, he follows God's law, and he is the one to end up in prison as a common criminal. This is flagrantly unjust! Where is God when his loyal servant suffers such injustice?”⁵

⁵ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 391.

VI. Joseph Was Loved by God (39:21)

Sixth, Joseph was loved by God.

Verse 21a says, **“But the Lord was with Joseph.”** God was at work in Joseph’s life when he prospered in his father Jacob’s house. God was at work in Joseph’s life when he experienced adversity at the hands of his brothers and was sold as a slave. God was at work in Joseph’s life when he prospered in Potiphar’s house. And God was still at work in Joseph’s life when he was put into prison. God was with Joseph in both prosperity and adversity.

But more than God being with Joseph in prison, verse 21b says that God **“showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.”**

VII. Joseph Was Promoted by the Prison Keeper (39:22-23)

And seventh, Joseph was promoted by the prison keeper.

As a result of God’s presence and steadfast love for Joseph, verses 22-23 say, **“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. 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.”**

Joseph succeeded, not because of his hard work, wits, or wisdom. He succeeded because **“the Lord made it succeed.”**

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Joseph in Potiphar’s house in

Genesis 39:1-23, let us be assured of God's presence with us in times of prosperity as well as times of adversity.

Joseph went through adversity and prosperity. God was always with Joseph in every situation. It took many years in Egypt before Joseph was finally elevated to Prime Minister. And it took many more years before he was finally reunited with his father and brothers.

It may seem that you are going through good times and that God is with you. He is! But never forget: God is with you when you go through adversity as well. This is the promise that Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew 28:20b, "... And behold, I am with you *always*, to the end of the age."

Do you know the poem, "Footsteps in the Sand"? The poem writer wonders why there were two sets of footprints when he prospered (God was walking beside him) but only one set of footprints when he suffered. Had God abandoned him when he suffered? He asked God about it and God replied:

My son, my precious child,
I love you and I would never leave you,
During your times of trial and suffering,
when you see only one set of footprints,
it was then that I carried you.⁶

If you are a Christian, be assured of God's presence with you in times of prosperity as well as times of adversity. Amen.

⁶ Author unknown.

Mission Statement

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and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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