

# Joseph: God's Ways Are Not Our Ways

*Locked Up with Nowhere to Go*

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**Bible Text:** Genesis 39

**Preached on:** Sunday, April 19, 2020

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*Gracious God and ever blessed Father, as we turn now to the Scriptures, we ask for your blessing. As we read, as we study, as we seek to find what you would have to say to us in this season of our lives, we pray that by the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit you would minister to us individually and corporately as a church family. And we ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Now if you have a Bible at hand, I would ask you to turn to Genesis 39. Genesis 39. As I was indicating at the beginning, I'm trying to think of what would be useful and appropriate in this strange season in our lives that we will never forget, for sure. It came to me but there were eight or more episodes in the Scriptures where one of God's people found themselves in prison and this morning it's Joseph and he finds himself in prison, locked up with nowhere to go, and the question that I want us to ask is: what did Joseph learn in this season? What did he learn about himself and more importantly, what did he learn about God? And that's my prayer for you in this season, that as you find yourselves discombobulated by this virus and all of the effects of it, that you might learn from it; that it might be one of the most profitable seasons in your Christian life.

Now if you've found Genesis 39, I'm going to read the chapter.

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. 6 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. 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.

Well, so far God's holy and inerrant word.

In the year 1660, England had been in a period where they had tested out what it would look like to be a Republic for about a decade. Oliver Cromwell was in charge but there was no king. Charles I had been executed in 1649 but in 1660 Oliver Cromwell had died, his son was inept, and the country decided that they needed a king after all and Charles II became king. And all of the advances of Puritan worship, worship like we do here at First Presbyterian Church, all of those advances over the last 25 years were now subjected to persecution and among those who were persecuted almost immediately was a young John Bunyan, and Bunyan refused to conform to the dictates of the king with regard to worship and he was arrested. The judge at his trial had also been arrested and had spent the last 12 years in prison at the mercy of the Puritans, and now it was time for payback and John Bunyan was sentenced to imprisonment, first of all for a few months but it last for 12 years. Then he was released in 1672 but only to be re-arrested again within months and would spend another two years in prison, spending altogether 14 years incarcerated. In

that period, a period where he saw, for example, the loss of his blind teenage daughter that he was unable to go to the funeral, he learned something about himself and he learned something about God and he wrote "Pilgrim's Progress," a book next to the Bible that up until this century, at least, was the most published and read book in the English language, and may that statistic return again in our generation, and maybe that's something that you could turn to and read just now in this strange period in our lives.

Well, just as John Bunyan learned something and made that period of incarceration meaningful and purposeful, so Joseph too. We read four times in this chapter in verses 2 and 3 and 21 and 23 that the Lord was with Joseph. It's a very very important statement and it's one that Moses has used elsewhere as we shall see in a moment. And as we navigate this chapter, chapter 39 of Genesis, I want us to see three things. First of all, that God was with Joseph in providential preserving.

We need to go back a little to when Joseph was 17 years of age, and he was a stay-at-home, self-absorbed, mother's boy, given to selfishness and arrogance and God is going to change him. He's one of Jacob's 12 sons of four different women, to be sure, and he is the son of Jacob's old age through his favorite wife, Rachel, for whom he had worked, you remember, with his tricky uncle Laban for 14 years. This is one dysfunctional family and some of you are learning about dysfunctionality as you're trying to homeschool your children, one more reason I was glad that I didn't even attempt to homeschool my children.

Joseph was the favorite and all of the trials and all of the implications of favoritism now are dispelled in Jacob's family and in the life of Joseph. He was given this multi-colored garment that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament refers to it as a multi-colored coat, a multi-colored garment. He was exempt from farming. He was ostentatious. He lacked wisdom. He was a tale-bearer, telling tales about his brothers that only incensed them further. And then that moment came when Joseph had a dream and in that dream he saw that his family, including his father Jacob, would bow down before him and that ticked off his brothers but it also ticked off his father Jacob.

He is sent one day to find his brothers in Midian and as he makes this journey to Midian to find his brothers, his brothers now devise a plot to kill him, and if it hadn't been for Reuben and Judah who intervened and suggested instead that they not kill their brother Joseph but sell him as a slave to a passing band of Ishmaelites. And Joseph finds himself in Egypt and the mention of Egypt here is important because Moses, who's writing this story, is in Egypt hundreds of years later and he's telling his readers this is how it came about, that we found ourselves in Egypt.

And in verse 2, "The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man." William Tyndale in the 15-16<sup>th</sup> century translated the Bible for the first time into English and he translated this verse, Genesis 39:2, he translated this verse that Joseph was a lucky man. Yes, that's the word he used. He was a lucky man. Now that doesn't mean to say that Joseph didn't believe in the sovereignty of God, he most certainly did, but there was a sense at least from the perspective of this world that he was lucky, he was successful,

everything that he did seemed to prosper despite his nature. But the phrase that Moses wants us to capture the most is this one, that God was with Joseph. In circumstantial preserving, he was with him. He was with him to protect him. He was with him to ensure his success. He was with him for the purposes of providence.

Now one of our members and friends, actually the moderator of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, sent me an email. I think it was yesterday, it might have been Friday, I'm losing track of days, but it was a link to a headline in the New York Times and the headline in the New York Times drew attention to an Islamic scientist in Pakistan who said this, "God created the virus and now he has lost control." And my friends, that cannot possibly be. God has not lost control. Even in the midst of all of this chaos, world chaos, who would have thought it, God is still providentially ruling and reigning in the macrocosm and in the microcosm of our lives.

God was with Joseph. You remember the words of Jesus in the Great Commission, some of the final words that he ever spoke, "I will be with you always to the end of the ages." Palmer Robertson who was a former teacher of mine, a professor of mine, and known to many of you and has written a wonderful book studying the covenants of God in the Scriptures, refers to this expression that God was with Joseph as the Immanuel principle. God with us, Immanuel. God with us. And here in Genesis 39, God, Immanuel, Jesus, if you like, is being displayed through the lens of providence; that as Joseph's life is being navigated in a certain direction by circumstances that are beyond his control, God is ensuring that his redemptive purposes for saving his people are being kept.

It was important that Joseph be kept because he is in the line and lineage of Jesus. God had made a promise in Genesis 3:15 that the seed of the woman would crush the head of Satan. He had made promises to Abraham that through his seed the Gospel would spread to all the world. And he'd made similar promises to Isaac and to Jacob and now Joseph is being kept even as he's being sold into slavery in Egypt. There's a broad sense in which God is saying, "I'm keeping my promise, do you see?" And he wants the readers of Genesis to understand, yes, even now, even in these strange circumstances, God is working out his plan and purpose but also in the details of Joseph's life. He was a lucky man. He was being providentially preserved because God has a purpose.

William Cooper, we've referred to this in previous weeks now but it's one of my favorite hymns, "

"God moves in a mysterious way,  
His wonders to perform,  
He plants His footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines,  
Of never failing skill,  
He treasures up His bright designs,  
And works His sovereign will."

You are familiar, perhaps, with the hymn of Joseph Gilmore. Joseph Gilmore was a Baptist minister in Philadelphia during the time of the Civil War and he began a series on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "He leads me beside still waters," but he couldn't get past that text and just as he's preaching this text, it comes to mind that there's a hymn here and we sing it,

"He leadeth me: O blessed thought!  
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!  
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,  
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me."

Well, I want you to see that. I want you to understand that. I want you to know that. I want you to take courage from that. I want you to be lifted by that thought, that whatever the circumstances, God is with you. God is leading you. God is beside you. He's going before you.

Well, that's the first thing. God was with Joseph in providential preserving but, secondly, God was with Joseph in persistent temptation. Joseph finds himself in the services of Potiphar who is the leader of the Egyptian Pharaoh's guard, so he's the chief military officer in Egypt, an important position, for sure. And Joseph finds himself prospering in this household. He's the chief servant in this household and such is Potiphar's trust of him that he leaves everything at his disposal. He is in charge of everything. Nothing happens in this household that isn't governed and supervised by Joseph. But then something happens. I reminded you a few minutes ago about John Bunyan, and John Bunyan at one point before his imprisonment, he was riding to church to preach on a horse, it was raining, and he saw a member of the church, a woman by the name of Ann Beaumont, and the rain was such that John Bunyan without thinking perhaps, stopped and offered her a ride, and she got on the horse and rode to church but people saw it and all kinds of gossip emerged about Bunyan's relationship with Ann Beaumont, none of which, of course, was true. And then her father refused permission for Ann Beaumont to attend the church and then suddenly he died, and the county sheriff failed, I mean, prevented the burial of this man, Ann Beaumont's father, on suspicion that Bunyan himself had something to do with the death. He was cleared, of course, but he was wrongly accused.

Well, something similar happens to Joseph. It comes in the form of Joseph's temptation from Potiphar's wife who day after day urges him, we're told, that he was strong and handsome. You have to understand that chronologically some 20 years have passed since the time of Joseph being sold into slavery and this point here. And he finds himself dealing with temptation and I want us, we don't have time this morning to look at this in detail as it requires and really necessitates a very detailed examination, but I want us, first of all, to see a number of things about this temptation and, first of all, it came in the way of duty. It came in the course of his duty to his servant, and for that matter his duty to God. Joseph didn't go out looking for this temptation, it just came upon him, and temptations come upon us suddenly. We are busily engaged in doing what it is that we're doing and then suddenly we are tempted, thoughts come into our heads, circumstances

sort of come together and there's an opportunity to do something or say something or think something that is contrary to the behavior of a child of God.

It came in the way of duty and the power of this temptation, she was, after all, the most powerful woman in Egypt next to the Pharaoh and his wife, and it was persistent and Moses says day after day. It wasn't just one temptation, it came day after day after day, and I want you to see what Joseph does here and it demonstrates that Joseph has grown. He's probably now in his 30s but he has grown. He's not the 17 year old anymore. There's a wisdom about him. There's a maturity about him. He reasons, he uses his mind, he says to her, "How can I do this thing? I have the trust of Potiphar. It would be in denial of him. It would be offensive to him. Moreover, you are his wife and that too would be wrong. But more especially, this would be contrary to the will of God. This evil, this transgression would be contrary to the will of God because sin in whatever form it comes is an offense against God." You remember the words of David, "Against you, you only have I sinned and done this evil in your sight." Notice the decisiveness of Joseph, that when the temptation reached its peak, he fled leaving his garment behind, and she cried rape. Yes, it was a me-too moment. And Joseph finds himself imprisoned, falsely accused.

There's a time to run from temptation, not to reason with it, not to dabble with it, not to say, "Well, I'll meet it halfway because I have inner strength to resist when the pressure gets too much." And my dear friend, that's a road to wreck and ruin. Ralph, Ebenezer Erskine once said, "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the flesh." He's quoting Peter and he went on to say that there comes a time when you need to implement the fight or flight attitude to personal temptations. You can fight it but there comes a moment when you need to flee from it, and that's what Joseph did. He fled from it. This is an important lesson that he learned. You see, what's happening here in this event that would lead to his imprisonment, Joseph has grown. He understands himself. He understands his wretched sinfulness. He understands his heart. He understands his affections. But more especially he has grown in his affection and love and trust and loyalty to his God and to his Redeemer. John Owen who wrote a marvelous book on sin and temptation, volume 6 of his collected writings, once said this, "Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of your sins and you will, you will in God's providence live to see your lust dead at your feet if you look to Jesus, if you run to Him."

Well, we see that God was with Joseph in providential preserving, God was with Joseph in persistent temptation, and then, thirdly, God was with Joseph for a purpose he did not yet know in his imprisonment. Once again to use the words of Tyndale, he was a lucky man. God was with him. And first of all, he was with him in the relationship he had with his jailer, but all of that was to lead to his relationship with the Pharaoh. Joseph has a skill set. He can interpret dreams and he interpreted the jailer's dreams, and then when Pharaoh has a series of dreams that he cannot understand about fat cows and thin cows and you remember the story, it is Joseph who comes to the Pharaoh's aid and he foresees a time in the near future when there would be a drought and a famine, and Joseph who then is put in charge of all of Egypt and the granaries and so on, sets in motion an event that would

save Egypt but it would also save Israel, filling the storehouses with grain so that when the famine and drought came they would have plenty of food. And eventually, of course, Joseph's brothers and Joseph's father, Jacob, would come down to Egypt and they would be rescued and they would spend 400 years, the family lineage would spend, Israel would spend 400 years in Egypt only later to be delivered. You remember the words Joseph uses in Genesis 49 when his brothers come to him and they don't recognize him, "You meant it for evil but God meant it for good." Their actions were morally accountable. They were accountable for their actions and their actions were evil. They sold him into slavery and their intent was evil but God was overruling. It's a compatibilist view of divine causality and governance, or to put that in simpler words, in every moment, in every action, even in sinful actions, God is still in charge. God is still overruling.

John Flavel, the Puritan from Dartmouth in England, wrote a wonderful little book called "The Mystery of Providence," and in that book he says something that's very true. He says that providence needs to be read in the same manner that Hebrew is to be read, backwards. You don't understand what's happening now but from the perspective of distance, looking back over the years you can see the hand of God at work.

God was with Joseph but in a manner that he didn't fully understand right now, and that's probably where you and I are just now. I range from one view to another as to what we're doing just now. I've thought everything from A to Z about it. But one thing is sure: while we are in this very strange set of circumstances, in prison, if you like, with nowhere to go, may we use this opportunity to learn as Joseph learned, to learn about ourselves, to learn about our weakness, to learn about frailty that we are jars of clay, and to learn about God who is the same yesterday, today and forever, to learn about our Savior Jesus, to love him more, to follow him more closely, to spend time in prayer, to catch up on reading that we promised to do years ago, to catch up with our family and our children and our parents and our siblings, to reach out to our community, to reach out to our church family in texts and prayers and letters and thank you for what you're doing in terms of sending all of those to the pastoral staff here at the church. God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform.

Elizabeth Elliot once wrote, and Elizabeth was the wife of her first husband, Jim Elliot, who was murdered and massacred and cannibals ate him, and Elizabeth Elliot would later write, "The experiences of my life are not such that I could infer from them necessarily that God is good, gracious and merciful. To have had one husband murdered and another one disintegrated body, soul and spirit through cancer, is not what men would call proof of the love of God. In fact, in our experience there are many times when it looks like the very opposite to God being loving. My belief in the love of God is not by inference or instinct, it is by faith." And may I urge you and myself this morning not to look at these circumstances and infer anything else about God but what he reveals himself to be in Scripture to his children, to those who love him, "I will never leave you nor forsake you. I will be with you to the very end." We'll get out of this one way or another. We will, I promise you, and in the meantime stay strong and stay safe.

*Father, we thank you, thank you for your word, bless you that it is infallible and inerrant. We pray, Lord, this morning that we might learn in these seasons of our lives what it is that you want to teach us when we are locked up with nowhere to go. Bless us, we pray. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*