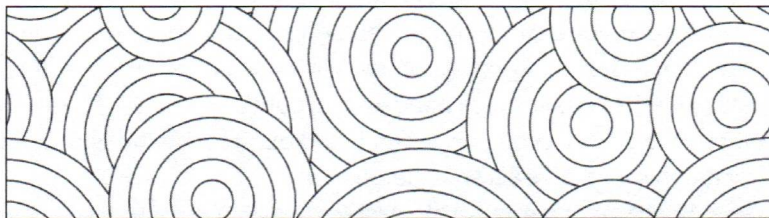


LESSON 8

JOSEPH AT POTIPHAR'S HOUSE

GENESIS 39:1-23



OPEN IT UP

Something happened to Joseph between his departure from Dothan and his arrival in Egypt. His status had changed. No longer was he the favorite son of a wealthy father; he was now a slave—human property—robbed of his special coat and his high status. But his self-awareness had changed as well. His brothers robbed him of his dignity by betraying him and selling him as they would one of their sheep. *They*—his own family—had determined to treat him like an animal.

We can imagine that Joseph found such trauma difficult to process. Perhaps, at first, he felt confusion at what had happened to him; then he felt anger toward his brothers; then he felt grief for himself, his father, and the uncertainties of his future. Finally—and this is what separates Joseph—he found resolve. Some of the godliness trained in him from youth made its way to the surface, puncturing his ego and filling his character. The Joseph we meet in Genesis 39 is not the brash young lad we find in Genesis 37. He has changed, and his brothers' choice to throw him out like trash is what has made the difference. Joseph's life is proof that we are more than what happens to us; we are who we decide to be.

JOSEPH THE OVERSEER • GENESIS 39:1-6

The Ishmaelites who enslaved Joseph sold him at one of the ancient slave markets in Egypt. Slavery was quite common in Bible times, and although slaves could come from any people group (not just a particular race), Canaanite slaves in particular seem to have been common in Egypt. Most slaves came as a result of war indemnities and were imported from conquered peoples. Still, it may be assumed that healthier and therefore better slaves could be purchased at a slave market. Joseph was handsome, young, and male—all reasons for him to fetch a premium price at market. That may be why one of Pharaoh's own officials snatched him up.

Shortly after arriving in his master's house, Joseph proved himself valuable. Scripture specifically lists two reasons for Joseph's success. First is the repeated statement that "the LORD was with Joseph" (Genesis 39:2). This statement will be a familiar chorus in the chapter (see verses 3, 5). It is hardly possible for anyone to accomplish anything without God. As Moses teaches the Israelites not to "say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.' And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day" (Deuteronomy 8:17–18). No one does anything without God.

Second, Joseph was naturally talented to be sure, but he was also willing to work hard. Joseph "served him" (Genesis 39:4), or literally "waited on him." The same word describes the role Joshua played in the life of Moses (Exodus 24:13; 33:11; Joshua 1:1). The impression given is that Joseph was Potiphar's right-hand man. Of course, it does not require much intelligence to figure out that Joseph was not a lazy slave slacking on his work, nor a deceitful servant seeking a way of escape from his bondage. Joseph accepted what life dealt to him and did his work to the best of his ability. As Paul advises, "Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ" (Colossians 3:22–24).

JOSEPH TEMPTED • GENESIS 39:7-15

Joseph attracted attention not only from Potiphar, his master, but also from his master's wife. Sex with slaves was commonplace in ancient times, although it was almost always the master directing his affections toward a female slave. Here the traditional roles are reversed, and it is the mistress of the house pursuing Joseph. People often assume Potiphar's wife was beautiful and, thus, Joseph would have been physically attracted to her. This may be, but it is important to note the Bible gives *no description* of the woman. She was attracted to Joseph's appearance (Genesis 39:6), but Scripture gives no indication that he was attracted to her. In either case, the emphasis is on Joseph's honor as a slave rather than his denial of sexual urges (verses 8–9).

Scripture tells us that Potiphar's wife would not take no for an answer. She continued to proposition Joseph "day by day" (Genesis 39:10). Still, Joseph refused to compromise his integrity. The woman did not understand why he refused her, assuming he feared being caught. Sinners often cannot understand why righteous people live righteously. But she soon learned Joseph's "no" meant "no" when he fled half naked from the house (verse 12). Finally getting the point, the affection the woman felt for Joseph turned suddenly into an irrepressible rage.

JOSEPH CHARGED • GENESIS 39:16-23

Fabricating a story that matched the evidence she held in her hand, Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of attempted rape. It is remarkable how similar her story is to Joseph's brothers when they present their father with Joseph's special coat (Genesis 37:32–33). Both stories involve clothing, a lying accuser, an affectionate superior, and Joseph in the role of victim. The truth would never come out as far as we know. Potiphar likely never learned that his wife's story was a lie and that Joseph had done nothing wrong. When we are mistreated or falsely accused, sometimes we never live to see our justification. That does not mean we should avoid doing the right thing. It just means we should realize justice does not always fall our way this side of eternity.

Incensed by the story of Joseph's brazen assault, Potiphar threw him into prison (Genesis 39:20). The Bible does not explain his action, but it is unusual for a master to imprison a slave in the ancient world. First, a master owns the slave and therefore has total authority over his life. Most slaves accused of such a heinous act would be executed without delay. Second, prison was not a form of punishment in the ancient world. It was a place of waiting where one was held before trial. Joseph as a slave would not have received a trial. So the only reasonable conclusion is that Potiphar suspected Joseph was innocent. He secretly tucked him away in prison without his wife's knowledge assuming the full truth would one day present itself. As far as we know, it never did.

Still, even though the circumstances of Joseph's life grow worse, Joseph does not despair. Again we read, "The LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy" (Genesis 39:21). As a result, the story of his success duplicated itself in prison. "The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper" (verse 23). Joseph proves his trustworthiness by gaining full command of the prison even though he was himself a prisoner!

WRAP IT UP

Joseph's life is a story of tragedy and disappointment. But Joseph does not excuse himself from living. He does not blame God for his problems. He just keeps working, trusting that God would make a way even in the worst of circumstances. As Christians, our lives are not always perfect; in fact, some things we must face are downright miserable. But we must trust God and keep working. Had Joseph given up, he would never have been in a position to save his family in the famine. Sometimes our present sufferings are preparing us for future glory. We just don't know it yet.



THINK ON IT

1. What changed in Joseph between Genesis 37 and Genesis 39?
2. Why was Joseph successful in Potiphar's house?
3. What is the Bible's point of emphasis in Joseph's refusal of Potiphar's wife? How does this emphasis differ from many modern retellings today?
4. Why is Joseph's imprisonment confusing? What might the Bible be hinting at by recording he was imprisoned?
5. Why do you think God allows bad things to happen to good people? What is at least one potential answer that the Joseph story exemplifies?