

## Genesis 39:1 – 23

<sup>1</sup> Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there. <sup>2</sup> The LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. <sup>3</sup> Now his master saw that the LORD was with him and how the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand. <sup>4</sup> So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge. <sup>5</sup> It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; thus the LORD'S blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field. <sup>6</sup> So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. <sup>7</sup> It came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, 'Lie with me.' <sup>8</sup> But he refused and said to his master's wife, 'Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. <sup>9</sup> There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?' <sup>10</sup> As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her. <sup>11</sup> Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside. <sup>12</sup> She caught him by his garment, saying, 'Lie with me!' And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside. <sup>13</sup> When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, <sup>14</sup> she called to the men of her household and said to them, 'See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed. <sup>15</sup> When he heard that I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled and went outside.' <sup>16</sup> So she left his garment beside her until his master came home. <sup>17</sup> Then she spoke to him with these words, 'The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me; <sup>18</sup> and as I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside.' <sup>19</sup> Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, 'This is what your slave did to me,' his anger burned. <sup>20</sup> So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail. <sup>21</sup> But the LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. <sup>22</sup> The chief jailer committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. <sup>23</sup> The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made to prosper.

### Historical and Cultural Background

- 'Joseph's position as a house slave conforms to documented Egyptian practices. An Egyptian papyrus from 1833 – 1742 B.C. details the names and occupations of nearly eighty slaves in an Egyptian household. In that list, Asian slaves were given superior status and skilled jobs over the Egyptian slaves, who were usually assigned strenuous field labor.'<sup>1</sup>
- 'His moral excellence can be appreciated all the more if one remembers that he is a slave and that sexual promiscuity was a perennial feature of all slave societies.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p.519

<sup>2</sup> Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p.273

- Joseph would have been aware of his family's stories, especially involving sin and sex in foreign lands, and God's protection over them:

<i>Joseph's family members</i>	<i>Sin and sex in foreign lands</i>	<i>And God blesses them nevertheless</i>
Abraham & Sarah	Egypt; Abraham lies about Sarah not being his wife (12:10 – 20)	Abraham and Sarah emerges still very rich (13:1 – 2)
Abraham & Sarah	Gerar; Abraham lies again about Sarah not being his wife (20:1 – 13)	Abraham and Sarah were given livestock, servants, and silver (20:14 – 16)
Isaac & Rebekah	Gerar; Isaac lies about Rebekah not being his wife (26:1 – 11)	Isaac and Rebekah emerge richer than ever (26:11 – 14)
Jacob, Leah, Rachel	Paddam-Aram; Jacob rushes into Laban's trap of marrying Leah in addition to Rachel (29:20 – 23)	Jacob, Leah, Rachel become exceedingly prosperous (30:43)
Joseph	Egypt; Joseph is faithful to God and doesn't sin (39:1 – 23)	Joseph's expectation: <i>I will be especially blessed!</i>

## Questions

1. Recall the context
  - a. In Bible: We are studying God's mission to restore humanity, and His shaping of human partners for that mission and in that mission.
  - b. In Genesis: We go from all of humanity at Babel, to God selecting Abraham and Sarah to be the beginning of a new humanity that will bless the world. Genesis follows that family through four generations: Abraham and Sarah gave birth to Isaac. Isaac and Rebekah gave birth to Jacob. Jacob had two wives and two maidservants, who gave birth to twelve sons. So we are watching how this 'chosen family' becomes a 'chosen people' and how God keeps reminding them of His desire to bless the nations, not just their family.
  - c. In Joseph's story: Joseph is the 11th of 12th brothers. Jacob favored Joseph, so Joseph was somewhat spoiled. When Joseph was 17, his brothers tricked Joseph and sold him into slavery; they told papa Jacob that he was eaten by wild animals; and papa Jacob thought he died (37:1 – 35). We pick up Joseph's life now in chapter 39.
2. As you study the passage, think about what Joseph might have been feeling about God and others at each stage in his story. His emotional life is strangely absent from the narration, and the narrator has reasons for including or excluding those elements. Perhaps to require us to explore our own feelings?
3. Keep in mind that Joseph was the favorite son. What could his emotional life been like at the early stages of his time in Egypt?
  - a. Angry and bitter at his brothers for doing this to him
  - b. Angry and bitter at his father; he learns that being favored wasn't a good thing
  - c. Angry and bitter at God
  - d. Self-pity
4. What about when he wins the trust of Potiphar?
5. What does it mean that 'the LORD was with Joseph' in v.2?
  - a. Where else does that idea appear?
  - b. What does it seem to mean?
  - c. Do you think Joseph's emotional life is connected to this phrase or not? It's more likely that Joseph's emotional life goes up and down. Having the Lord 'with you' doesn't mean that life 'feels good.'
6. What about when Potiphar's wife advances on him?
  - a. Tempted?
  - b. Maybe disgusted?
  - c. Illus: C.S. Lewis talks about how the forces of evil might exploit us when we are going through 'troughs' or low points in life, like Joseph was going through at this point. Written from the perspective of a senior demon to a junior one:

I hope my last letter has convinced you that the trough of dullness or "dryness" through which your patient is going at present will not, of itself, give you his soul, but needs to be properly exploited. What forms the exploitation should take I will now consider.

In the first place I have always found that the Trough periods of the human undulation provide excellent opportunity for all sensual temptations, particularly those of sex. This may surprise you, because, of course, there is more physical energy, and therefore more potential appetite, at the Peak periods; but you must remember that the powers of resistance are then also at their highest. The health and spirits which you want to use in producing lust can also, alas, be very easily used for work or play or thought or innocuous merriment. The attack has a much better chance of success when the man's whole inner world is drab and cold and empty. And it is also to be noted that the Trough sexuality is subtly different in quality from that of the Peak – much less likely to lead to the milk and water phenomenon which the humans call "being in love", much more easily drawn into perversions, much less contaminated by those generous and imaginative and even spiritual concomitants which often render human sexuality so disappointing. It is the same with other desires of the flesh. You are much more likely to make your man a sound drunkard by pressing drink on him as an anodyne when he is dull and weary than by encouraging him to use it as a means of merriment among his friends when he is happy and expansive. Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground [that is, God's ground]. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has

forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula. It is more certain; and it's better style. To get the man's soul and give him nothing in return – that is what really gladdens our Father's heart. And the troughs are the time for beginning the process. (C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, letter 9)

- d. Joseph responds faithfully
    - i. Paul said, 'Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body' (1 Cor.6:18). Joseph is a good example of this.
    - ii. But his 'garment' is used against him by Potiphar's wife just as his multi-colored tunic was used against him by his brothers. What an irony!
    - iii. Given that Joseph probably knew his family's stories (see table under text), he would have expected that, if he was faithful, God would bless him and allow him to leave Egypt more wealthy than before! After all, look at what happened to his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.
    - iv. Instead, he is thrown lower. He goes to a prison.
  - e. Potiphar might have suspected his wife of being unfaithful, because he *normally* would have had Joseph killed. Perhaps he threw Joseph in jail because he actually suspected his wife, or just because Joseph had been valuable.
7. Where do we see God's explicit activity?
- a. <sup>2</sup> The LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. <sup>3</sup> Now his master saw that the LORD was with him and how the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand.
  - b. <sup>5</sup> It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; thus the LORD'S blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field. <sup>6</sup> So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate.
  - c. <sup>21</sup> But the LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. <sup>22</sup> The chief jailer committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. <sup>23</sup> The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made to prosper.
  - d. Notice that Genesis does not attribute the sin of the brothers to God. When you sin, do you attribute your sin to God? I hope not! So it's not accurate to attribute the brothers' sin to God either.
  - e. God's actions are to be with Joseph, somehow causing Joseph's gift of leadership and administration to stand out. God helps Joseph care for life.
    - i. Illus: In the Dreamworks movie Joseph: King of Dreams, the character Joseph plants a small seed in a small beam of sunlight that enters his prison room. That small seed becomes a small tree in the years of Joseph's imprisonment. That's a very good interpretation of what God does. He causes life.
    - ii. This will become very important when Joseph is put over all Egypt (Gen.41).
  - f. God is redeeming human sin. He is not causing other people's sin. God stays with us.
8. Are there ways that you relate to Joseph?
- a. When we go through tough times, we have tough questions for God. What are the questions that probably went through Joseph's mind?
  - b. Does God seem to answer them?
9. What if God is just as interested in making you a blessing to other people, as He is to your comfort?
- a. Illus: personal illustration
  - b. Illus: C.S. Lewis talks about going through 'troughs' or low points in life:

But there is an even better way of exploiting the Trough; I mean through the patient's own thoughts about it. As always, the first step is to keep knowledge out of his mind. Do not let him suspect the law of undulation. Let him assume that the first ardours of his conversion might have been expected to last, and ought to have lasted, forever, and that his present dryness is an equally permanent condition. Having once got this misconception well

fixed in his head, you may then proceed in various ways. It all depends on whether your man is of the desponding type who can be tempted to despair, or of the wishful-thinking type who can be assured that all is well. The former type is getting rare among the humans. If your patient should happen to belong to it, everything is easy. You have only got to keep him out of the way of experienced Christians (an easy task now-a-days), to direct his attention to the appropriate passages in scripture, and then to set him to work on the desperate design of recovering his old feelings by sheer will-power, and the game is ours. If he is of the more hopeful type, your job is to make him acquiesce in the present low temperature of his spirit and gradually become content with it, persuading himself that it is not so low after all. In a week or two you will be making him doubt whether the first days of his Christianity were not, perhaps, a little excessive. Talk to him about “moderation in all things”. If you can once get him to the point of thinking that “religion is all very well up to a point”, you can feel quite happy about his soul. A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all and more amusing. (C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, letter 9)