

GENESIS

39:1-23

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Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 29th January 2024 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: 1 Peter 2:18-25

Introduction

What a chapter we have ahead of us this morning, for in chapter 39 we're going to see Joseph trusted, tested, falsely accused and imprisoned! And through it all, we're going to see a man of godly character. And given that we will each face trials, difficulties, bad weeks, temptations and frustrations — this chapter is going to be very relevant to us. This is more than a mere story.

Overview of chapter thirty nine

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- **v1-6** — Enslaved in Egypt
- **v7-12** — Tested in purity
- **v13-18** — Accused though innocent
- **v19-23** — Imprisoned but trusted

In the opening 6 verses, we will see recorded how (having been sold by his brothers to a group of Ishmaelites and Midianites), Joseph ends up in Egypt and sold into slavery into the house of a man called Potiphar. Things initially go very well — and Joseph is trusted, being put in charge of the whole household. And this trust was well placed, for we then see in verses 7-12, that Potiphar's wife tried to entice Joseph into bed, but he *refused*, even distancing himself from her as far as possible. However, in verses 13-18, we then see that he is falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, and perhaps with little option, Potiphar throws Joseph into prison, which the final 5 verses tell us about.

Now, again, as we study this chapter, we should remember that this isn't just a story, but history — that this is a series of events that actually took place. But also, we should watch for all we can learn from Joseph's actions and attitude — for there is a *lot* to learn.

Chapter thirty nine

And before we get into verse 1, it's good to remind ourselves of all that Joseph had *already* been through. He had grown up in a family where one of his granddads never wanted to see the family again, and his family had no permanent place they called home. His mother had died when he was around 10 years old, his sister had been raped, two of his older brothers had become mass murderers, and another one of the had slept with his mothers maid. He was hated brothers and rebuked by his father for dreams he had received from God, then 10 of his brothers plotted to kill him before they decided to sell him into slavery. And now, he entered a foreign land he'd never been to, and that spoke a foreign language that no doubt he had to learn from scratch.

And we pick up the record of his life in verse 1, which says:

Genesis 39:1

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there.

And so, Joseph, still only 17 years old, was sold into the hand of Potiphar — an officer of Pharaoh (a minister of state, if you will), who was effectively chief executioner, in charge of the police — and Joseph was now forced to work for him with no hope of pay (let alone a pay rise), likely only given the provisions needed to keep him alive. And we sometimes think we have it tough!

And reading this, we might too quickly conclude that God had abandoned Joseph. But look at what we read next:

Genesis 39:2

The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.

So first, the Lord was with Joseph. What a lesson to us, that when our lives seem to be falling apart, it does *not* mean that God has abandoned *us*. But also, that when we see others lives falling apart, we must not conclude that they must have sinned in some horrible way, and somehow *deserve* their circumstances — that somehow the Lord has abandoned *them*. Of course, there are *many* consequences to our sin that we *must* live with, but the presence of trials is not a *confirmation* of sin. For it wasn't the case here with Joseph, nor was it the case with Job — whose friends unhelpfully concluded that he *must* have done something wrong, when that was not the case.

Indeed, Jesus suffered terribly at the hands of sinners, even though He committed no sin Himself.

Now, second, we read that a Joseph was a successful man. What does that mean? Well, it didn't mean he had great wealth, or a great career, a wife or children, a great social life, or a thousand Facebook friends — for he had none of those things at this time. Rather, it meant that he was successful in what how he conducted himself — he was a good worker, and he had good results to his work. Why? Because the Lord was with him, and he was a godly man, as we shall see. In other words, he was obedient to the Lord in how he acted.

And that is so clearly evidenced in his attitude. For, with all he had been through, he could have easily shaken his fist at God, shouting "why have you let me go through all this?!" He could have thought, "what good is it living rightly when I still end up treated like this?!" But no, we see no stamping of his feet, no rebellion toward God, no ill treatment of others (despite all he had gone through, and despite being just 17 years old). Let us take note of that.

Genesis 39:3

And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand.

What a testament to this young lad, that this powerful man could see not *only* that there *was* a difference in him, but that the *difference* was that *God* was with him, and that it was *God* that made all Joseph did to prosper. Indeed, it wasn't open to interpretation, but rather, Potiphar specifically saw it was the Lord — Yahweh — that was at work in Joseph's life as he worked.

Can that be said of us? Do people see that God is with us in our work? Do they see Jesus in our character, in our demeanour, in our work ethic, in our values? Do they see us not cheating our employer out of time, or taking things from the office? Do they see our Saviour in how we handle our expenses, or are we instead the most lavish when travelling for work, or the most wasteful of our employers money? Do they see that God is with us when it comes to our timekeeping, or our tone of voice? Do they see Jesus in how much respect we show others in meetings or tricky situations? Do our customers see Him in us when we handle their complaints?

What people think about God will be determined a lot by what they think about us which in turn will be determined a lot by what *we* think about God, how *much* we think about Him, and whether we obey Him in all things, such as that which we read in Philippians, that says:

Philippians 2:14-15

Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,

Is *that* how we act at work? Is it? This, of course, is not the only place in the Bible which teaches us how to act in our workplace, for we read in Colossians chapter 3:

Colossians 3:22-24

Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye-service, 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.

Is that how we approach our work? Do we do it heartily, serving the Lord? And are we obedient to those who manage us? We don't just read here in Colossians that we should be, for Paul instructed Titus to *teach* that we should be, *and* he wrote to the Ephesian church, saying:

Ephesians 6:5-8

Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.

Joseph was evidently the sort of man that did these things, who worked with sincerity of heart, *even though* he was a slave, even though he had dreamt dreams from God that his brothers (and even his father), would bow down to him. Despite that, he didn't serve begrudgingly. He didn't have a chip on his shoulder.

And in that we have such a picture of another Man, who served, even though He one day He will receive all honour and glory — and that, of course, is Jesus; our *ultimate* example in serving — not only in our workplaces, but importantly in our homes, and in the church.

Now, Joseph himself would *one day* be a great leader (even Pharaoh's right hand man, second in command of the greatest nation on earth at that time), but he was a great servant first. And again, that's the pattern for us. He who wants to be the greatest must serve the most, as Jesus said.

Take ministry for example; if you want to lead in some capacity, show how you are willing to serve. If you want to teach Bible studies, show up to prayer meetings, take out the rubbish, be here first, and go home last. Let *nothing* be considered beneath you. Have time for everyone and anyone who walks through these doors. Look for who you can talk to, who needs an ear or an encouraging word, not because you find it easy, but because you know that we need to love (including, sometimes, the unlovely). For one of the key Biblical qualifications for leading, is serving.

I know of several pastors who have had people come up to them and ask if they can teach one of the Sunday morning studies soon, but balk at the idea of attending the car park, or putting out chairs. Milton Jones, as I've said before, captures this sentiment well, noting:

Some people say "I really want to be used!" But if you ask them to put the chairs out they say "Now I'm just being used!"

Milton Jones

The reason Joseph was successful in all he did, was because he walked with God, and was obedient to Him, having a *servants* heart — knowing that he was serving God, and not man. And likewise, when we walk with God in obedience to Him, we will become ever more like Him. And when we become more like Him, we will be willing to serve, no matter the cost. No matter how little thanks or recognition we receive.

So then, Joseph, with God by his side, and honouring Him in all he did, clearly impressed Potiphar, for we read:

Genesis 39:4

So Joseph found favour in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority.

Joseph's God-fearing and God-honouring attitude had paid off, for Potiphar was able to see a consistency in his character that made him dependable.

Genesis 39:5

So it was, from the time that he had made him overseer of his house and all that he had, that the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had in the house and in the field.

And, you know, this makes me wonder if our behaviour at work is *that* exemplary, that God would bless not only the work *we* do, but even bless our *employers* because of us?! It certainly would be a wonderful testimony if all Christians acted at work as they ought to act, for I am certain that we would be the most employable people on the planet. Why? For business and corporations spend thousands, even millions each year, dealing with poor employee behaviour — and that's just the cost of trying to prevent it!

For example, each year, my employer — like many — runs annual ethics courses that inform staff not to take bribes, or act in questionable ways that would bring the company into disrepute. To not conduct ourselves online in a poor way, and to treat other employees with kindness and respect. And I have no problem with that. But there is nothing that is ever said that surpasses what the Bible already compels me do or not do as Christian. In fact, the Bible holds me to a higher standard, and higher Authority than such a course ever could.

So then, as Christians, may each of our examples be ones that not only cause our managers and employers to have trust and confidence in us, but may our examples be such that God would even bless the places we work because of us. May it be so evident that God is with us, and in our work, that we might be trusted implicitly too. And as that trust is placed in us, may we prove that to be well-placed trust, as it was with Joseph. We read on in verse 6:

Genesis 39:6

Thus he left all that he had in Joseph's hand, and he did not know what he had except for the bread which he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

We see then, that incredible trust was placed in Joseph. And I guess therefore that no auditors were brought in to check his work. Indeed, Potiphar was even unaware of how much he had or didn't have, for he simply trusted Joseph with it all — such was the character of this man.

But then, we read what might seem like an odd footnote, if it were *not* for what comes next, for we read that Joseph was handsome in form and appearance — using some of the same Hebrew words as used to describe his mother, Rachel, back in Genesis chapter 29 (so evidently he got his mum's looks!). And it is these looks that caught someone's eye. We read:

Genesis 39:7

And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me."

It doesn't get much more direct than that! An no, she wasn't encouraging Joseph to tell fibs, at least that's not *all* she was suggesting. Rather, she wanted Joseph in her bed. And in this moment, Joseph had a choice. Would he take the opportunity to fulfil any lust of his own flesh, yielding to her suggestion, or would he yield to God?

Of course, we know the bigger picture. We see how God was working in this young man's life. But let us not forget, that here was a young, 17 year old man that had lost his mum, been hated by his brothers, and sold into slavery in a different nation that spoke a different language. He had not had an easy time at all, and the open arms and freshly made bed of a woman who was no doubt complimenting him and certainly trying to seduce him, would have been far more attractive than we might first think.

But (we read)...

Genesis 39:8-9

But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, my master does not know what is with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand. There is no one greater in this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

So then, unlike his brother, Judah, who following his trials found comfort in a sinful relationship, Joseph refused point blank. He didn't ponder it. He didn't entertain or play with the idea. But *refused*. His reason? Well, it was threefold. First, he explained to her the high level of trust that Potiphar had placed in him — that it would not be morally right to betray that trust. Second, he had a high view of marriage, that the marriage bed was to be honoured in all cases — in other words, he understood the sanctity of marriage, even if Potiphar's wife did not.

But third, he then goes on to say "How can I do this great wickedness" — but crucially, he doesn't say this wickedness would be sin against her *husband*. But rather, it would be sin against *God*. That is, his greatest concern wasn't what any man would think, but what God would think. And wow, what an example of fidelity and faithfulness toward God that was!

We must learn from this, for it's a certainty that you and I *will* be faced with temptation — whether of this nature or not. And in those moments we also must consider not what *people* might *think*, but what God *knows*. Joseph, is a wonderful example here.

But was this the end of the matter? Well, no, certainly not, for Joseph continued to be faced with the temptation *and* the opportunity on a *daily* basis. And that's a good reminder that living righteously doesn't stop further temptation from coming. In this instance, we read:

Genesis 39:10

So it was, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her.

So, it seems that Potiphar's wife was relentless in her pursuit of Joseph. But Joseph acted very wisely, for not only did he not listen to her enticement to join her in bed, but he didn't listen to her requests to spend time with her. That later point, shows great wisdom, for there would have been nothing wrong per se in talking with her, passing time of day, having conversations about this and that — but Joseph clearly saw the danger in spending any time with someone who wanted him to compromise. Whether it was due to the strength of her demands, or any weakness he saw in his own flesh, he chose wisely and kept his distance.

And by not spending time with Potiphar's wife, it dramatically reduced the opportunity for her to tempt him. And believe me, that's a decision that we'll need to make too. Indeed, it may be that you or I will need to keep our distance from someone intent on getting us into their bed. But it may also be that we will need to keep our distance from someone intent on getting us drunk, or into drugs. It might be that we need to keep off social media, knowing that what we find there will lead into covetousness and jealousy. Or it might be that we need to think very carefully about our internet access so that we don't fall into the sin of watching pornography.

Indeed, there will be *daily* decisions for *us* to make, that we *must* make, if we are prone to sin in any given area — whether avoiding walking past the betting shop, or walking down the alcohol aisle in Sainsbury's, or tearing up our store credit cards if we are prone to running up debt.

Whatever the temptations we face, we need to make wise choices to limit the occasions and situations where we may be faced with it. In Joseph's case, he effectively had someone at work trying to seduce him. While temptation may not be so forthright or apparent to us, there are sensible steps we can take — such as considering whether it *really* is wise to go on a work trip or work dinner with just one colleague of the opposite sex, and so on.

"Oh, but I'm not going to fall into sin by doing this or that" you might think. Well, take note of what Solomon writes in Proverbs 7 of a young man who acts the complete opposite of Joseph, and willingly turns into the path of a lustful woman, *naïve* to the fact it would cost him so much. In closing that chapter, he warns:

Proverbs 7:24-27

Now therefore, listen to me, my children; Pay attention to the words of my mouth: Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, Do not stray into her paths; For she has cast down many wounded, And all who were slain by her were strong men. Her house is the way to hell, Descending to the chambers of death.

Note how he says that it was *strong* men that were slain by her. Therein is a necessary reminder to not be confident in ourselves, but rather to go to the throne of grace for help in our time of need. Indeed, we are warned in 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 10:12-13

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

Joseph was wise. He did *all he could* to avoid further temptation, and in particular to avoid the possibility of temptation and opportunity meeting up. But when it did, he chose the path of escape, as we read in verses 11 & 12:

Genesis 39:11-12

But it happened about this time, when Joseph went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house was inside, that she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside.

So, Joseph goes into the house, unaware that he is about to be on his own with Potiphar's wife. But immediately, as she tries to entice him into bed, he says "*look, why don't we sit down and have a coffee and chat about it*". Except he doesn't, of course! No, no — he flees! We don't even see him speak a single word — he simply runs as quickly and as far as he can from the temptation. And oh, how we *need* to do the same. Rather than let our thoughts dwell on the temptation at hand, rather than let our eyes settle on the focus of our temptation, and rather than let our finger or mouse hover over the next tap or click towards sin, we need to *flee* as Joseph did.

Indeed, Paul warned Timothy, saying:

2 Timothy 2:22

Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

So, when you are sorely tempted to sin, pick up your Bible, pray, call a friend, or text another Christian and ask them to pray for you, and keep you accountable. But also, when you are faced with strong temptation, simply do whatever you can *practically* to walk away from it — whether ending the conversation, or leaving the office, or shutting down your computer, or turning off your TV, or deleting Instagram or Pinterest on your phone. Whatever it takes, it is worth it, even if it costs you something. For sin will cost you *even more*.

Simply put, we are not to be slaves of sin any more, but obedient to Christ, of which AW Tozer said:

True obedience is the refusal to compromise in any regard our relationship with God, regardless of the consequences.

AW Tozer

That true obedience to God is what Joseph chose, and as such is a *wonderful* example that we should follow. But while he obeyed, there were *still* consequences, for Potiphar's wife did not take his rejection well at all. We read:

Genesis 39:13-15

And so it was, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and fled outside, that she called to the men of her house and spoke to them, saying, "See, he has brought in to us a Hebrew to mock us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. And it happened, when he heard that I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me, and fled and went outside."

So, no doubt feeling some conviction in light of Joseph's righteousness in this matter, and no doubt feeling scorned by his rejection, she starts to set Joseph up for a fall, first of all lying to the other servants in the house about what Joseph had really done — suggesting that *he* had been the unwanted initiator in this. But also, she places blame at none other than her husband's feet, saying *he* had brought in this young Hebrew man to *mock* them. Indeed, as always happens with a guilty conscience, she is trying to cover up or make her own sin seem better, by pointing to the supposed sin of others.

And now, she waits for Potiphar to return home, so she can repeat this false accusation to him:

Genesis 39:16-18

So she kept his garment with her until his master came home. Then she spoke to him with words like these, saying, "The Hebrew servant whom you brought to us came in to me to mock me; so it happened, as I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me and fled outside."

So, she kind of suggests it was Potiphar's mistake for purchasing Joseph in the first place, but then tells this barefaced lie about Joseph. What was Potiphar's response? Well, we read:

Genesis 39:19

So it was, when his master heard the words which his wife spoke to him, saying, "Your servant did to me after this manner," that his anger was aroused.

And we can perhaps (a little too easily) make the assumption that he was angry with Joseph. But we're not told that. Yes, we'll see in a moment that he took Joseph and put him in prison, but consider what Potiphar's wife was accusing Joseph of. At *minimum*, she was suggesting that he came on to her, trying to get her to commit adultery. But *at worst*, she was suggesting that he came into the house to shame her, to rape her — and only fleeing because she raised her voice.

And so, given that Potiphar was captain of the guard, and that attempted rape would have certainly carried the death penalty in Egypt at that time, Joseph got away very lightly (if indeed he committed this crime). And the suggestion by a couple of commentators therefore is that Potiphar put Joseph in prison, not because he believed his wife, but to save face. For if he had believed a slave over his wife, and not punished Joseph in any way, he would have been ridiculed and shamed himself.

And so, perhaps, he acted with reluctance, and interestingly we see he put Joseph in prison himself — not handing him over to guards to take him there. We read:

Genesis 39:20

Then Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were confined. And he was there in the prison.

And we can only imagine the conversation that may have taken place as he took his highly trusted servant to the prison. But in another remarkable parallel, we see that Joseph offers no defence, at least not that is recorded, pointing to how Christ would also be falsely accused but not open *His* mouth. And that parallel will continue, as we'll see next week how Joseph was placed with two other prisoners, one whom was pardoned and lived, and one who was condemned.

Now, having been falsely accused and thrown into jail, Joseph might have been wondering what God was doing, or at least why he was allowing this, and where He was in the midst of it all. But, once again we find that he didn't shake his fist at God. He didn't refuse to get on with what God had for him to do in that moment. And in fact, we find that God was *still* with Joseph. We read:

Genesis 39:21

But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison.

How did he show him mercy? Perhaps by Potiphar not ordering his execution. How did God give him favour with the keeper of the prison? Perhaps by Potiphar leaving the prison guard with a good word about this man of integrity. That's speculation, of course. But what isn't speculation, is that God saw to it that Joseph was in favour with the keeper of the prison.

Genesis 39:22

And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing.

And so, incredible trust was shown in Joseph once again. Why? Because Joseph was proven to be a man of true integrity, doing the right thing when no-one was watching. The question for us of course, is are we men and women of true integrity? That is, when we're on our own, how do we act? Whether sat at our desk at work, or scrolling on our phone at home, or sat behind a steering wheel in our car — do our actions honour the Lord at all times? Indeed, do our actions honour the Lord when we've been unfairly treated?

In Joseph's case, he could have cited a dozen unfair things he had gone through to try and justify doing things his own way. But instead, he chose to live in a way that honoured the Lord. And similar to how Potiphar had trusted him, we read:

Genesis 39:23

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.

What a testimony this man has! But that's a testimony we can have too, if we also walk with the Lord, and if we are obedient to Him, despite our circumstances, and regardless of the cost.

Conclusion

As I draw to a close this morning, I want to turn your attention once again to the character of Joseph — for the world says that every man has his price. That is, everyone will cave in to compromise if offered the right incentive. But that's not true — there are some men, and some women, who will, like Joseph, and like Job, will not give themselves to sin, no matter what the cost. I'm not saying such people are sinless, for every person sins. But the fact of the matter is that these individuals walk so closely and so consistently with the Lord, that they have removed compromise as an option, even if their circumstances are not easy. Indeed, they will say "how can I do this thing and sin against God!". Let us be men and women of such character, always remembering that while we might not be responsible for how we feel, we are responsible for how we act.


Application questions


As we seek to apply this chapter to our lives, we might we ask — *where do we start?! For there is so much example for us to note in this chapter. Indeed, it would do us each good to read it again today.*

But to perhaps start some thoughts off for each of us, here are some questions to ponder:

- Are you using an unfair situation as an excuse to sin?
- Is God honoured in your work?
- Are you doing all you can to keep yourself from temptation?
- And when faced with temptation, will you flee?

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