

Average Joes

Faithful When Tempted:
Genesis 39

God's Blessing on Joseph

Genesis 39:2 establishes the overall theme of the narrative: "The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered." Verses 3-6 relate the theme to the specific series of events to follow: Joseph's blessing from the Lord is recognized by his Egyptian master, and Joseph is put in charge of his household. Joseph's sojourn in Egypt, like that of his father, Jacob (30:27), has resulted in an initial fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (12:3). Thus we are told that "the Lord blessed the house of the Egyptian because of Joseph" (39:5). Such a thematic introduction alerts the reader to the underlying lessons intended throughout the narrative. This is not a story of the success of Joseph; rather it is a story of God's faithfulness to his promises (John H. Sailhamer, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis*, Zondervan, 234).

These verses describe Joseph's rise in Potiphar's esteem. First, he was promoted to work indoors, "in the house of his Egyptian master" (39:2), instead of being sent into the fields to work. Next, "he pleased his master" and became his personal attendant. And ultimately, he was put in charge of his household and was entrusted with all his possessions (39:4-5).

But this paragraph is not just about Joseph's success, but also about the reason for that success: because "the LORD was with Joseph." The use of the divine name "the LORD," "Yahweh," is rare in the Joseph story. This theme of Yahweh-with-Joseph forms the theological entrance piece to the Joseph story which finds its counterpart at the end with the concluding words of Joseph, "God brought me here" (45:5-8; 50:17-21). Chapters 39-41 are the story of a rise, but a rise made possible because Yahweh was with Joseph. This is what the passages that frame it, 39:1-2 and 21-23, intend to say, and it is to this that the concluding words return (45:5-8; 50:17-21) (Gordon Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 373).



Digging
Deeper

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*You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for
good to accomplish what is
now being done, the saving
of many lives.
Genesis 50:20*

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Potiphar's trust in Joseph led to great blessing on him and his estate, because God was with Joseph. Here the blessing that Joseph will bring to Egypt and the neighboring nations when he is entrusted with governing all Egypt is evidently being anticipated. 39:2-6 shows particularly clearly the meaning of blessing in the OT. God's presence and blessing belong together, though they are distinct. Blessing encompasses both men and other creatures. So the narrator simply assumes that the blessing on the one who the LORD is with can overflow to a foreign people and adherents of a foreign religion because of God's presence with that person. Thus, in Joseph's experience here we begin to see how all the families of the earth are to find blessing (see Gen. 12:3) in Abraham's descendants (Wenham, 374).

Potiphar

Potiphar was an important official in Pharaoh's court. The two titles given to him, "official of Pharaoh" and "captain of the guard," are both fairly general in nature. The former uses a Hebrew word that is sometimes translated "eunuch" but can be used broadly for a courtier. Eunuchs were not customary in Egypt so it's unlikely that this is the intended meaning.

In the second title, the first word ("captain") is clear and undisputed. The second, which the NIV translates "guard," is more controversial. However, a military identification is favored by the reference to the prison being in the house of the captain of the guard (Gen. 40:3) (John Walton, *NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, Zondervan, 671).

Potiphar responds to his wife's accusations by "burning with anger" (39:19). Given his wife's slander of his own motives, the proven trustworthiness of Joseph, the fact that he is going to lose the services of a competent slave, and his knowledge of his wife's character or lack of it, his anger arguably burns at his wife, not at Joseph. This is further suggested by the fact that Joseph is only put in the king's prison. If Potiphar believed his wife and was truly angry with Joseph, Joseph would probably have been executed on the spot, no questions asked. In contrast, the king's prison was a place for political prisoners and would hardly have been expected to accommodate foreign slaves guilty of crimes against their masters. Potiphar is in a difficult position here- he cannot discount his wife's accusation without publicly humiliating her even if he were certain she is lying. The action he takes against Joseph is as minimal as it can be and still retain his family's honor (Walton, 672).

It also appears that the prison is on Potiphar's premises, for 40:3 identifies it as "in the house of the captain of the guard," using the same title previously given to Potiphar (39:1). The end result of this incarceration is that it puts Joseph in a place where he will become acquainted with members of Pharaoh's court. It also offers another opportunity for the text to draw attention to the favor that Joseph enjoys with everyone he encounters despite hardships (Walton, 672).

Joseph's Response to Temptation

This story about Joseph reverses a well-known plot in the patriarchal narratives. Whereas before it was the beautiful wife of the patriarch who was sought by the foreign ruler, now it was Joseph, the handsome patriarch himself who was sought by the wife of the foreign ruler. Whereas in the earlier narratives it was either the Lord (12:17; 20:3) or the moral purity of the foreign ruler (26:10) that rescued the wife rather than the patriarch, here it was Joseph's own moral courage that saved the day. Joseph's reply explicitly laid bare his motives: "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (39:9).

The purpose of this reversal perhaps lies in a change of emphasis on the part of the writer in the Joseph narratives. Whereas in the preceding narratives, the focus of the writer had been on God's faithfulness in fulfilling his covenant promises, in the story of Joseph his attention is turned to the human response.

The Joseph narratives are intended to then give balance to the narratives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Together the two sections show both God's faithfulness in spite of human failure as well as the necessity of an obedient and faithful response. The theological emphasis is remarkably similar to that of the "new covenant theology" of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:22-32 where the two themes of divine sovereignty and human responsibility are woven together by means of the concept of God's Spirit giving man a "new heart" - a heart given to man by God that responds with obedience and faith. It can hardly be accidental, then, that in all the Book of Genesis only Joseph is described as one who was filled with the Spirit of God (41:38). The same theological emphasis can be found in Deut. 30:6-10, where Moses grounds his hope in the future of God's covenant promises in the divine work of giving man a new heart. Joseph was imprisoned through no fault of his own. In fact, the narrative is explicit in its emphasis on the total uprightness of Joseph throughout the attempted seduction by the Egyptian's wife. He was in jail because of false witness laid against him (Sailhamer, 234-35).

Undoubtedly, Joseph is here portrayed as a model, the wise man who fears God (Prov. 1:7), who is totally loyal and dependable, and who thus enjoys "favor and good repute in the sight of God and man" (Prov. 3:3-4) and is not seduced by "the lips of the loose woman" (Prov. 5:3), the "adulteress (who) stalks a man's very life" (Prov. 6:26). In a similar way, Potiphar's wife is an example of the foreign woman whose morals are suspect.

Similarly Joseph's unfair dismissal and imprisonment may be seen as typical of the sufferings the righteous often must endure. "For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again" (Prov. 24:16). Moses, Job, Jeremiah, and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 are examples of this career pattern in the OT, while Jesus is the supreme model in the NT. On a national level, Joseph's slavery in Potiphar's house foreshadows Israel's Egyptian bondage, an apparent setback to the people's fortunes that ultimately leads to the fulfillment of the patriarchal promises (Wenham, 378).

Genesis 38

When Genesis 37 draws to its conclusion, Joseph is sold as a slave in Egypt. What is going to become of him? Will we ever see him again? Does he still have any role in the covenant people? These are normal questions to ask if you have never read the story before. At first reading, the inclusion of Gen. 38 seems odd. What is it doing here in the middle of the Joseph story? Why should we care about this disturbing tale of Judah's family history?

Not only does Genesis 38 have a literary link to the previous narratives, but it also serves as a small picture of the way Joseph's story will surprisingly conclude. On the surface, Gen. 38 appears to end abruptly with an odd detail about the circumstances of the birth of Judah's twins. But it is precisely when the narrative seems odd that we must pay closer attention. By concluding with the account of the birth of Perez and Zerah, the text portrays a situation in which the younger son triumphs- makes a breach for himself. Though Judah currently occupies a privileged position in the family, Joseph is going to emerge on top, even if after Genesis 37 all seems lost. We are left only to anticipate what sort of breach Joseph will make for himself as the narrative unfolds (Walton, 691).

Home Group Questions

1. How do we see that God has blessed Joseph even though he is in slavery?
2. What reason does Joseph give for why he will not have an affair with Potiphar's wife?
3. Can this be our motivation as well? Why or why not?
4. What other things do we learn from Joseph about how to deal with temptation?
5. Read 1 Corinthians 10:13. How is this promise helpful when dealing with temptation?
6. Have you ever experienced negative consequences for doing good? Did you regret doing the right thing?
7. How does Joseph's story influence the way you think about God's blessing in your life?

Questions for Personal Application

8. How prepared are you to overcome temptation when it comes in your life?
9. What temptations are you currently facing? What tools has God given you to overcome them?