

Genesis 39 & Lord's Day 33 >> Joseph 2: Run, Joseph, Run!

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“Sex is like dynamite. If it is used in the right place and at the right time, the results can be beneficial, but unless proper regulations are observed, there can only be a disastrous explosion. Those people who indulge in sexual activity as casually as they would down a couple of cocktails are always the sort of people who would find it amusing to play with matches in a bomb factory.”¹

Today Joseph is tempted with something that, had he succumbed, would likely have resulted in a disastrous explosion.²

Here is a young man in his late teens or early 20s. He comes from what we might call dysfunctional family, filled with hatred that has been fuelled by passivity, jealousy and favouritism. Despite having dreams suggesting otherwise, Joseph is sold as a slave to a man named Potiphar, far from home in foreign Egypt.

Joseph's life suddenly becomes very difficult. Maybe you easily empathize. But as we'll see, despite being at a very difficult point in his life, God remains very real as far as he is concerned, allowing him to successfully fight off temptation. I have been praying this past week that if you're in difficult and/or tempting circumstances, you'll be able to say the same thing – maybe in small ways, maybe in a big way that the presence of God is nevertheless real in your life.

Trouble in Potiphar's Home

Looking specifically at Joseph's difficult circumstances, Genesis 39 opens with Joseph being sold by the Ishmaelites (who bought Joseph from his brothers) to an Egyptian named Potiphar. The Bible refers to him as an official of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt; more specifically, he is “the captain of the guard” (39:1). Another translation says Potiphar is “captain of the bodyguard” (NASB); he is the leader of those personally responsible for the security and safety of the king of Egypt, the international superpower of the day. At least one historian notes this also makes Potiphar the chief executioner of Egypt.³ You've heard of the Surgeon General? Potiphar is the Executioner General! He's the one who decides whether your act against Pharaoh or the country ends up with you losing your life; if your action is worthy of death, he's the one who executes you. Do you get the picture? “Potiphar [is] nobody to fool around with; he [is] a man of seasoned military experience with power over life and death” in his hands.⁴

¹ Susan Howatch, *Ultimate Prizes*. Quoted by Peter Slofstra and Peter Schuurman in *Follow Me: Daily Readings for Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2007), 53.

² I wanted to compare Joseph's sexual purity with his brother Judah's sexual impurity in Gen 38, but ran out of space. A number of my resources on Genesis comment how Judah serves as a literary foil for Joseph. It's also in the sordid events of Gen 38 that Judah begins to recognize what righteousness looks like (*cf.* 38:26).

³ The historian is Alfred Edersheim. See Charles R. Swindoll, *Joseph: A Man of Integrity and Forgiveness* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 24.

⁴ Swindoll, 24.

I imagine Joseph is intimidated by this man, but he also experiences great success under him. We read that “the LORD [is] with Joseph so that he prosper[s]... The LORD bless[es] the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph... So Potiphar [leaves] everything he ha[s] in Joseph’s care” (39:2, 5, 6).⁵

This regularly puts Joseph in regular contact with Mrs. Potiphar. This woman is “lonely and bored.”⁶ The text notes that with his home under Joseph’s care, Mr. Potiphar “[does] not concern himself with anything except the food he [eats]” (39:6). This may be a subtle reference that he is not all that concerned about his wife, who has become “an emotional and spiritual vacuum waiting to be filled.”⁷

Now Joseph is carrying around baggage of his own. I cannot even begin to imagine the devastation of having been sold into slavery by one’s brothers. What did that do to Joseph psychologically? Imagine “how easy it would have been for [Joseph] to become embittered and hate-filled (like his brothers).”⁸ What’s more, who would blame him for rejecting the God of his father Jacob, grandfather Isaac, and great-grandfather Abraham? Who could blame him for thinking, *If this is how the God of my fathers treats the people of families with whom He has repeatedly made covenants, I don’t want anything to do with Him.*

So here we have Joseph and Mrs. Potiphar – “two vulnerable people in daily proximity.”⁹ One day Mrs. Potiphar makes a move on “well-built and handsome” Joseph: “Come to bed with me!” (39:6, 7). She is, shall we say, to the point: Five words clearly express her intentions – five English words that is; in the original Hebrew, her invitation consists of only two words.

“Joseph’s lengthy speech contrasts her brute proposition,” observes one commentary writer. “His refusal, though spontaneous, is well thought-out from the world and life view of people of faith.”¹⁰ In short, Joseph is prepared ahead of time. His reply reflects his deep respect for his master (cf. 39:8-9a) and his reverence for God (cf. 39:9b). Despite what he has been through with his family, he still sees himself as being part of God’s covenant blessing and he is determined to live that way, even far away in Egypt.

Well, you know what they say: “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”¹¹ Very quickly Mrs. Potiphar’s passion mutates into revenge. Having his cloak (but, unfortunately for her,

⁵ Bruce Waltke in *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 518, comments how the fivefold repetition of the name יהוה (the LORD) in 39:2, 3 (2x), & 5 (2x) “signals the crucial role of God’s providence in directing Joseph’s life.” Waltke, 522, later adds: “The theological narrative credits God with all of Joseph’s advancements.” Terence E. Fretheim in “The Book of Genesis” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (vol. 1; L.E. Keck, ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 610-611, writes: “Not since Gen 35:1-15 have God’s presence and action been so directly reported... Although all human supports have failed, and Joseph is far removed from the community of faith and the land of promise, God stays with him. God’s presence, neither localized geographically nor dramatic or spectacular, is an unobtrusive, working-behind-the-scenes kind of presence.”

⁶ Slofstra, 50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 50. The suggestion that Potiphar is not concerned about his wife comes from Fretheim, 609.

⁸ Bill Crowder *Overcoming Life’s Challenges: Lessons from the Life of Joseph* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 2007), 30.

⁹ Slofstra, 50.

¹⁰ Waltke, 520.

¹¹ Often attributed to William Shakespeare, this quote is actually from a play entitled *The Mourning Bride* written by William Congreve in 1697. See the entry for this quote in “The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy” at www.bartleby.com/59/3/hellhathnofu.html.

nothing else) in her hands, she cries, “Rapist!” Once more in the story of Joseph, his garment is used “in a deceitful way against him.”¹²

When Mr. Potiphar re-enters the pictures and hears his wife’s tale, “he burn[s] with anger” (39:19). The text doesn’t say *towards whom* he burns with anger... Is he angry with Joseph for the way Joseph has allegedly betrayed his trust? Or is he angry that he has to get rid the man who has been such a tremendous blessing to his household? Remember, Potiphar is “the captain of the guard,” likely the chief executioner of Egypt. In his day, the penalty for rape is death.¹³ Potiphar could have quickly seen to it that Joseph is killed for his alleged indiscretion. Instead, Potiphar sends Joseph to prison. This “milder punishment suggests that Potiphar does not altogether believe his wife. He probably knows her character”¹⁴ and he also perhaps has to admit how he has not been a very good husband, concerning himself only with the food he eats and not so much his wife. But he also realizes that he somehow has to “save face” in this situation.¹⁵ No wonder Potiphar is angry!

Genesis 39 ends with Joseph once more in a bad situation: The chapter opens with him being sold as a slave, and it closes with him being stuck in jail as a prisoner. However, just as the chapter opens with Joseph quickly prospering in Potiphar’s house, so the chapter closes with Joseph quickly prospering in the prison. This isn’t because of Joseph’s good looks, quick tongue, confidence, or wisdom. God repeatedly gets the credit: “The LORD [is] with [Joseph]; He show[s] him kindness and grant[s] him favour in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put[s] Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison... The LORD [is] with Joseph and [gives] him success in whatever he [does]” (39:21-22, 23).¹⁶

And Joseph’s stint in prison actually becomes the stepping stone to an assignment God has for him that’s even greater than his work in the house of Potiphar...

Trouble in our Lives

Like last week, we have a story filled with pain and trouble. No one in this chapter of Genesis is exempt. Maybe you easily empathize.

The pain and trouble Joseph experiences is obvious: First he’s sold as a slave to someone who kills people for a living, second, he’s thrown in prison on false charges. “We protest, ‘It isn’t fair!’ And that’s true. Often life is not fair. [It’s a tough lesson here,] but our responsibility is to do right and leave the consequences with God.”¹⁷

¹² Fretheim, 610. For observations on the significance of clothing throughout the story of Joseph, see Donald A. Seybold, “Paradox and Symmetry in the Joseph Narrative” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (K.R.R. Gros Louis, ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 63-65. I am grateful to Curt Gesch for lending me his copy of this book. On another note, Joseph must have been in close proximity to Potiphar’s wife for her to be able to reach and grab his cloak. Had Joseph gotten too close, putting himself in a compromising position before coming to his senses and running away? This is suggested by Paul Borthwick in *Joseph: How God Builds Character* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 21-22.

¹³ According to Crowder, 36.

¹⁴ Waltke, 522.

¹⁵ Crowder, 36.

¹⁶ See footnote 5 above.

¹⁷ Crowder, 36.

The story gives us hope that God is able to do something with the pain and trouble we experience, and even turn it into good. I don't know whether Joseph remains 100% convinced of this throughout the entire story; his pain and trouble are real, but, thankfully, so is his (and our) God.

Mrs. Potiphar also knows pain. We don't know for sure, but the text suggests that she is neglected by her husband. That would mean that Mr. Potiphar is in part to blame for Mrs. Potiphar's adulterous moves towards Joseph.

Mr. Potiphar himself experiences trouble. I imagine that his line of work is not exactly the most stress-free variety available in Egypt. And by the end of the story, he loses Joseph, perhaps the only person holding his home together as time has gone on.

The whole situation is ripe for temptation. Temptation thrives on situations where we can justify giving into our desires for things that go against God's will. *I know this wrong, but the principle doesn't apply in my case because of the things I've been through...* I've thought that. I know you've all thought that. Satan loves it when we think that: If he can't convince us that temptations don't exist, he'll become the master of exceptions, as he demonstrated already in the Garden of Eden: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?' ...You will not certainly die..." (Gen 3:1, 4). It's as though he's saying, *Yeah, that's an important rule, but it doesn't really apply to you, does it?*

We come to justify temptations of a sexual nature by saying things like, *Yeah, I know I shouldn't be doing this, but it's not hurting anybody. Yeah, I know I shouldn't be doing this, but we really love each other.*

Singer Clay Crosse struggled with pornography even as he sang very Christian lyrics at each of his concerts and won Dove awards from the Christian music industry in the 1990s. He figured he wasn't hurting anybody. He lived with a theology of cheap grace, assuming that being a Christian was like fire insurance that would keep him out of hell regardless of how much porn he looked at and how little he read his Bible and prayed. He lived a secret life that his wife knew nothing about that brought their marriage to the brink of being torn apart. And he was damaging his own mind.

Clay Crosse writes:

Pornography, like most sin, operates under the principle of diminishing returns. Over time, the magazines that once gave me a thrill and a sexual release didn't give me the same buzz, so I had to find something more graphic in order to get the same effect... Pornography by its nature acts like a cancer in the mind. The images sink deep into the inner recesses of the thought life. Then, when you least expect it, they jump back to the forefront, and it's as if you are watching them all over again. You can't just delete pornographic images from your memory or simply decide not to think about them."¹⁸

Clay Crosse came to confess how only God's grace and God's Word could begin to undo the damage he had done when he figured he wasn't hurting anybody, when he should have

¹⁸ Clay & Renee Crosse, *I Surrender All: Rebuilding a Marriage Broken by Pornography* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), 29-30, 119. I am grateful to Rick & Sarah Apperson for lending me their copy of this disturbing but also powerful and hope-filled book.

been steering clear of that pornographic cancer.

Teacher, youth leader and basketball coach Ron deBoer is trusted by the teens he works with and ministers to. In fact, he's received from these teens numerous highly sensitive emails – often about sex – giving him the opportunity to email back with a perspective of a person who loves Jesus and desires to be His disciple.

Listen to how he responds to one tempting situation in particular in which the excuse to sin is not so much that nobody's getting hurt, but rather more like, *But we really love each other...*

Email from student:

My boyfriend and I have been going out for three months. He's great. Up until now, we've had a blast together. All the girls think he's cool. So far we have held hands and made out in the car after a movie or youth group, but now we're finding ourselves going to the next level.

Last week my boyfriend [touched me a place I wasn't comfortable with and I asked him to stop. But] he got really mad and asked me what the big problem was. I told him I didn't want him touching me there. He asked why not. I didn't really have an answer for him, and that made him even madder.

He scared me by driving home really fast after that, and then he didn't call for two days.

We didn't talk about it all and just kinda forgave each other, I guess. Last night, we were making out again and he did the same thing. This time I let him because I didn't want a rerun of last time. He told me he really loved me after I let him, and this morning he gave me these cute little earrings.

But I feel sort of guilty about it. Did I do the right thing by letting him touch me there when I told him before he couldn't?

Ron's reply:

Thanks for writing...

Your boyfriend seems ready to go to the next level, but you aren't. Letting him touch you ... the second time has taught your boyfriend that when he wants something from you, all he has to do is get mad at you and you'll eventually cave in and give him what he wants.

I'm worried for you. Your boyfriend is showing classic signs of control and manipulation. Sex is a gift from God, but it has boundaries, and God has basic expectations for both of you. Your boyfriend broke two fundamental boundaries: He didn't respect you, and he broke your trust.

I think you know this will happen again. Giving you a gift after you gave in is further evidence that he will reward you when you please him and get mad (and put your life in danger by driving fast) when you don't.

...You need to talk openly and honestly about what happened that first night..."¹⁹

¹⁹ Ron deBoer, *Questions from the Cookie Jar: Teens and Sex* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2008), 65-66.

Glimpses of Grace

Joseph, Clay Crosse, and Ron deBoer are each challenging us to fight temptation. Joseph especially gives us this vivid image of running away from temptation. The apostle Paul has in mind that same image of running from temptation when he writes to the Corinthians:

“Flee from sexual immorality” (1Cor 6:18).

“Flee from idolatry” (1Cor 10:14).

The catechism urges us to “hate” these sorts of things more and more, calling us to “run away from [them]” (Lord’s Day 33 Q&A 89) as though they are like deadly explosives aimed in our direction.

And what then are we supposed to run towards? The apostle Paul answers that, too, in his second letter to young Pastor Timothy:

“Flee the evil desires ... and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2Tim 2:22).

Fill your mind with Godly things, things that affirm and remind you that you are a disciple of Jesus. Call on the Lord in prayer. Spend quantity time in the Word to grow in righteousness, faith, love, and peace. Surround yourself with other disciples who share these priorities.

As we fight temptation in this way, we’ll come to realize that we’re not in this alone. God gives us the gift of His Holy Spirit to guide us, encourage us, and strengthen us. He reminds us of Jesus, Someone who was most severely tempted “in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin” (Heb 4:15). His sinless life, given on the cross, paid the penalty for all the times we have succumbed and will succumb to temptation. Jesus makes it possible for us (to borrow words from the New Testament book of Hebrews) to “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb 4:16).

And then the Holy Spirit nurtures a sense of gratitude within us, helping us *want* to run away from temptation, just like Joseph did, and helping us to live Godly, holy lives instead. Our covenant God has surely been faithful to us; the Holy Spirit empowers us to be faithful to Him in return.

Maybe you’re fighting an uphill battle against a particular temptation (a temptation that might or might not have anything to do with sex). Maybe you empathize more with other pain and trouble that we also see in today’s Scripture reading. Regardless, the same Holy Spirit desires to actively work in your heart, your mind, your actions, and your words. He desires to fill you with goodness and hope, a kind of goodness and hope that ultimately comes from God.

Don’t ignore His nudges, His correction, His leading; allow Him to draw you closer to the God who loves you unconditionally, the God who desires to walk alongside you and set you free from sin.

Run, disciples of Jesus, run... into the loving arms of your Saviour and Lord.

Sung response: “O Jesus, I Have Promised” (*Psalter Hymnal* 285)