

Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church

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DHW

LESSON 30

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Chapter 39

INTRODUCTION

The opening verse of this chapter picks up the narrative of Joseph from chapter 37. Joseph's brothers *sold* him to the Ishmaelites, who brought him to Egypt. And in the opening verse of chapter 39, Joseph, who was now in Egypt, was *bought* by Potiphar, a military officer of the Egyptian army. Joseph was now alone and being sold as a slave. We learn of his two dreams which he told his brothers and his father Jacob. He believed that he was destined to be highly exalted. But as things appeared at this moment he was at the lowest rung of society. However, the divine narrator declared that *the LORD was with Joseph* (v. 2). This phrase is repeated four times in this chapter (2, 3, 21 & 23). So, he was not alone, but the LORD God was with him! This is the over-riding theme of this chapter. And the divine

narrator also testifies that wherever Joseph was and whatever works which were given to him, he was successful.

This chapter is a classic testimony of what the Apostle Paul states in his letter to the Romans 8:31 - *If God be for us, who can be against us?* This thought is similarly expressed by the writer of the book of Hebrews (13:6): *The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.* Many Christians look at the adverse circumstances in their life and become despondent and complaining instead of believing in the Word of God, and looking to the Lord Jesus Christ. The important point is whether the Lord is with the Christian, especially when he is experiencing sufferings and sorrows in life. If the Lord is with him, he does not need to fear. Joseph is the perfect example, and the account of his life is here recorded for our learning.

The chapter can be divided into the following sections:

- 1) The LORD was with Joseph bringing success in all his work (39:1-6);
- 2) Joseph resisted to sin against God and man (39:7-12);

- 3) Joseph was falsely accused of attempted rape (39:13-20);
- 4) The LORD was with Joseph even in prison (39:21-23).

STUDY THE WORD

The LORD Is with Joseph

The Ishmaelite merchants brought Joseph to Egypt to be sold in the slave market. They must have made a profit out of *the twenty pieces of silver* which they had paid for him. Potiphar, who was Pharaoh's chief military officer, bought Joseph to be his servant in his house. This is providential in that Potiphar was not an ordinary person. He had great influence and power in Egypt. The divine narrator expressly mentions that Joseph now in a foreign land surrounded by so many Egyptians, who were idolatrous, was not alone for *the LORD was with Joseph* (v.2). The LORD was not only with him but he was also *a prosperous man*. The word "prosperous" does not refer to material wealth. The word in the original Hebrew language (*tsalach*) means to be successful and effective. Joseph, therefore, excelled in his new master's house. He performed so well in his conduct and work that his master saw that the LORD was

with him. How long Joseph had worked there it is not mentioned, but long enough for Potiphar to observe him and conclude that Joseph's God was with him. The word *LORD* was the covenant personal name of God - YAHWEH. God was working out His plan and promises to Abraham to bless His chosen people and other nations too (Genesis 12:2, 3).

Joseph was so competent and trustworthy that Potiphar made him to be the head-servant of his household, and to be in full charge of everything in his house (v.4). Interestingly *the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake* (v.5). The blessing of the LORD was also upon all that Potiphar had as well as his farmland! What a wonderful thought that when the LORD is with us, others are blessed because of us.

Joseph Resists Sinning Against God

Joseph is described as a *goodly person and well favoured* (v.6b). No other male is described as such in Scripture. His mother Rachel was described with the same adjectives.¹

¹ **Genesis 29:17** *Leah was tender eyed; but Rachel was beautiful and well favoured.* The word "beautiful" (Hebrew, yapheh) is the same word as "goodly" which is used of Joseph.

He was then about twenty-seven or twenty eight years of age—young, well-built, and attractive.² He had been serving Potiphar for no less than eleven years. Mrs Potiphar then *cast her eyes upon Joseph*. The word “cast” (Hebrew, *nasa*) is “to lift up to” and the context suggests that she lifted up her eyes looming at Joseph with a lustful desire for him (v.7). She commanded him with two words in Hebrew (*shikah immi*) *Lie with me*. She was not merely asking Joseph to lie beside her but ordering him to sleep and have sexual intimacy with her. Her demand was direct and there is no other record in Scripture of a woman, who so openly made such a proposition to a man! Joseph flatly refused and explained that his master had not kept anything secret from him, and had also committed everything to his care and charge except his wife. Joseph then expressed that it would be committing a great sin not only against Potiphar, his master, but also against God (v.9). It would be an abuse of the trust, which his master

had bestowed on him. It would hurt and cause him much pain. It was morally wrong. Moreover, it would be a sin against God. Joseph exemplified himself as a godly person, who feared the LORD God, and who was ever conscious of the presence of God in his life.

Joseph Is Charged for Attempted Rape

Mrs Potiphar is the kind of woman who would not take “no” for an answer. She did not respond to Joseph’s reasoning. Instead her tactics were to keep pestering Joseph until he gave in. One day as usual Joseph went into the house to do his daily chores. There was no one in the house for the other servants had all gone off. She might have sent all the servants away so that the house was empty except for Mrs Potiphar and Joseph. Since her verbal overtures had failed, she resorted to physical ways. She caught Joseph by his garment. This garment was a large T-shirt and very loosely over one’s inner clothes. Suddenly, Mrs Potiphar caught Joseph by his garment and repeatedly telling Joseph to lie with her. She must have been forcibly pulling him towards her. But Joseph managed to pull himself away from her

² He was taken to Egypt when he was 17 years old (37:2). At the age of 30, he was promoted to serve in Pharaoh’s palace (41:46). He spent 2 years in Pharaoh’s prison (41:1). Therefore, subtracting 2 years from 30, gives 28; now subtract 17 from 28, that leaves 11 years.

leaving his outer garment in her hand. Joseph fled for his life (v.12).

This temptation which Joseph faced was particularly strong and subtle. Many people would have succumbed to the temptation for there was much to gain and the opportunity was perfect. Agreeing with Mrs Potiphar would secure his advancement and get her as a powerful ally, for she was an important woman. The temptation was strong because it came to Joseph repeatedly. Then the opportunity was perfect because there was no one around at that time. But Joseph repeatedly said “no.” Being confronted with temptation is not morally wrong, but surrendering to temptation is sin. Joseph’s answer to Mrs Potiphar teaches us how to overcome temptation.

First, he recognised the nature of the temptation. It was a temptation to sin. He did not try to rationalise the situation or try to minimise its nature by explaining it in more acceptable terms like, “Well, it is an alternative lifestyle”. Secondly, he knew the presence of God. He was fully aware that God was present with him wherever he might be, although no other persons were present except him and Mrs

Potiphar. As a man who feared and loved God, he would not sin against Him. He put into practice what he believed. He openly shared his belief with Mrs Potiphar. Finally, he ran away from sin. Say “No” and exit. So when we are faced with temptation to sin, let us remember these three principles: call a sin, a sin; fear God and know that He is present; flee from sin. One addition, sin enters through the eye-gate. Mrs Potiphar *cast her eyes* upon Joseph. In the Garden of Eden, *the woman saw that the tree was good for food* (3:4). Achan *saw* and he coveted and he sinned (Joshua 7:21).

Joseph was prepared to keep his loyalty to God and not to soil his character in exchange for keeping his career and pleasing his human master. This kind of disposition does not come at the spur of the moment. It is built and pre-determined. Like Daniel, who *purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat* (Daniel 1:8), Joseph had already predetermined and prepared in his heart that he would be faithful and obedient to the LORD no matter what. This is another principle which we, as Christians, ought to learn well. Our Christian life is not

strong and victorious because we have been found wanting in our purpose and preparedness in the face of temptations, tribulations, and troubles in life. We need to consider seriously who God is, who we are, why we are here, where we are going, and what we must do. We must search and be a diligent student of the Word of God.

As far as Mrs Potiphar was concerned, she was a woman scorned. Hell has no fury like a woman scorned. She had Joseph's outer garment in her hand. She called out all the men in her house and told them that her husband had *brought in an Hebrew unto us to mock us; he came in unto me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice; and it came to pass, when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried, that he left his garment with me, and fled, and got him out* (v.14, 15). She lied. She was wickedly shrewd to incite the men servants in the house to support and sympathize with her. An Hebrew at that time was looked down by the Egyptians as they prided themselves for being more progressive and powerful than the Hebrews who were mostly shepherds.

The word "mock" means to make jest or to laugh at. When Potiphar returned home, he was confronted with the outburst from his wife blaming him for bringing in *the Hebrew servant* (slave), who *came in unto her to mock me* (v.17). Earlier she had told the male servants that her husband had brought the Hebrew *unto us to mock us*. Now the Hebrew was referred to as *the Hebrew servant . . . to mock me*. To be mocked by a Hebrew was bad enough, but by a Hebrew slave was even worst. Moreover, Mrs Potiphar deliberately placed Joseph's garment beside her as evidence (v.16). All these things were intended to incite Potiphar to be angry and to descend on Joseph with the severest form of punishment. In those days, attempted rape carried a capital penalty by execution.

After hearing his wife, Potiphar imprisoned Joseph instead of executing him right away. For being loyal to his master and for not sinning against God, Joseph was put in prison. How can that be? Where is God? Why did God not strike Mrs Potiphar dead for her lies? But

God's ways and thoughts are not our ways and thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).³ Bad things do happen to Christians, and when it happens, it does not mean that there is something wrong with them, although sometimes it may mean that. In the case of Joseph, it is definitely not because he had sinned against God. In His plan and purpose, God had permitted Joseph to be treated in this manner and had him put in prison. Joseph should have been put to death for the alleged attempt to rape Mrs Potiphar. It was a serious crime to cause such shame to a high-ranking and important family. Moreover, he was a slave too. Potiphar had every right and power to put Joseph to death, but he just put him in prison. The only explanation is the providence of God. God was in control and Potiphar did not execute Joseph but imprison him. Some think that Potiphar knew about his wife and that was why he did not execute Joseph. But we believe that it was God's providence working His plan and purpose.

³ Isaiah 55:8 *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

The LORD Is With Joseph Even in Prison

But the LORD was with Joseph in prison and that is the most important thing. The LORD was merciful to him. The LORD caused the prison warden to show favour and kindness to him. Joseph behaved well in prison. For sure he did not grumble or question and blame God. He kept his trust in the LORD. God honoured him. The prison warden promoted and trusted Joseph one hundred percent. How was it possible? The divine narrator explained that *the LORD was with him*. And the LORD granted success in everything that he did!

Practical Value

Joseph portrays the man that is mentioned in Psalm 1. Its opening declaration paints a man who is blessed of the LORD because he does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, nor does he stand in the way of sinners, nor does he sit in the seat of the scornful but his delight is in the Law of the LORD. And the promise is given to him that whatsoever he does shall prosper. This psalm may summarize the life of Joseph. We see him blessed by the LORD in whatever he did

because the LORD was with him. This is a valuable lesson which we can all learn that to be successful in life we must know that the LORD is with us.

Another precious lesson is when we are in difficult and adverse situations. It is not the situation that we should be worrying. We should be thinking whether the Lord is with us. If He is with us, then we can rise not once but every time in such situations which would have crushed others. It makes all the difference between failure and success, pain and pleasure, sorrow and joy. And how can we know whether the Lord is with us? Many years ago, the Lord God promised Joshua that He would be with him, He would not fail him, and He would not forsake him, if only he would diligently keep His Word. If he did that, he would be successful and prosperous (Joshua 1:5-8).⁴ The Lord Jesus

⁴ Joshua 1:5 *There shall **not** any **man** be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will **not** fail thee, nor forsake thee. 6 Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I sware unto their fathers to give them. 7 Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn **not** from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest. 8 This book of the law shall **not** depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written*

Christ, while He was on earth, taught that if we keep His Word, He will abide in us, and whatever we ask shall be done unto us. Our Father in Heaven will be glorified because we are His disciples and bear much fruit (John 15:7-8).⁵

One good question is: Why would Mrs Potiphar, who had everything, seek to seduce Joseph? Although the text does not explain to us, we may safely suggest the following reasons. She was lonely. She was bored most of the time. She had no children. Where was Potiphar? One may surmise that he was busy working. He might have spent more time in his place of work than at home with his wife. He worked long hours to climb further up the corporate ladder. He saw his chance to stay away for longer periods from home and wife when Joseph came and could take charge of everything. He left behind an unfulfilled woman. Does this not tell us about some of us? How many of us have neglected our wife and children in order to opt for better career, for more money, for better

therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.

⁵ John 15:7 *If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. 8 Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.*

social status, for bigger houses, when the real and important things in life are people rather than possessions, the home rather than the house, the spiritual rather than the physical, of things eternal rather than temporal? How many homes have been broken because of the pursuits of these things? How many children who need the attention, care, concern and love of their parents have been shipwrecked in the sea of life because parents are not there when they need them? Success as a result of our human efforts and endeavour is surely desirable. But when it is achieved at the expense of things eternal and approval of God, it is not good. It is bad. It is a failure. We must set our priorities right. We must please God and be blessed by Him above everything else!

We should apply the precious lessons which we learn in this chapter. Be sure that we know that the Lord is with us; not in the sense that the Holy Spirit indwells us that guarantees our salvation. The LORD is with us when He approves of our conduct and behaviour, and His face shines upon us to bless us, and others will also be blessed because of us. And if God is ever

with us, we do not need to fear what man can do to us. Recognise the presence of God in our lives and keep trusting, loving, and keeping His Word. It is a true saying that one cannot wilfully sin against God and continue to enjoy His presence and His blessing. And when we are tempted, the most effective recourse is to flee from sin. Yield not to temptation for yielding is sin.

AMEN