

**Genesis 39:1-21**  
**Joseph and his boss's wife**  
**Christ Church Liverpool**

**1 How Joseph's life looks: humiliation, injustice and slavery (v7-20)**

You would think, after being sold into slavery by his own family, that somebody might cut Joseph a bit of slack. But, it appears, fate has it in for Joseph.

He works incredibly hard, gains the just reward for his labours and what happens? He gets chucked into prison. It's no wonder his next song in Lloyd-Webber's musical has these lyrics:

Close every door to me,  
Hide all the world from me  
Bar all the windows  
And shut out the light  
Do what you want with me,  
Hate me and laugh at me  
Darken my daytime  
And torture my night.

Let's not beat about the bush here. Joseph gets a rotten deal; let's take a closer look at the story and see how it happens.

Joseph is, along with David, as far as we know, the only and handsome man in the Bible – so ladies if you think the men in the church are a bit disappointing I have to tell you that's how it's always been!

Seriously though it does seem that all sorts of things that are not Joseph's fault cause him problems. First his father treats him as the favourite son, which is why he ended up being got rids of by his brothers. Then the simple fact that he's a looker, which he really has no control over, means Potiphar's wife is all over him.

And, whatever Mrs Potiphar's weaknesses, you can't say she isn't persistent! Day after day she makes her lewd advances. In the Hebrew "come to bed with me" is just two words – perhaps "have me" would be a good way of putting it. She is out of control with lust.

Put yourself in Joseph's position. He has lots and lots of reasons for sleeping with her. She was probably beautiful. After all Potiphar was a powerful man and, especially in very patriarchal societies, the most powerful men usually get the most attractive women. She certainly fancied him and, as we all know, being desired is a pretty powerful aphrodisiac in itself. Not only that but she was in a position of power over Joseph. No doubt being in the wife's good books was likely to result in further career advancement and in generally having an easier life.

Joseph has all sorts of reasons for giving in to the temptation. But he doesn't. Joseph stands firm and strong. And he has clearly thought hard about all the reasons why he shouldn't do this. There are two.

Firstly, Joseph says, it would be a breach of trust. Potiphar leaves the whole house to Joseph. Everything; the furniture, food, drink, services of other slaves, swimming pool, plasma TV, Range Rover and helicopter are all

available to Joseph – Potiphar has 'withheld nothing from him.' So it would be a terrible breach of trust, Joseph says, to take the one thing that belongs exclusively to his master.

It's a great piece of reasoning. A wise conclusion in the circumstances. We have to respect Joseph for that; because it would have been quite easy for him to deceive himself. After all he could have reasoned like this instead:

"With me in charge my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me. I have earned the right to all the privileges that Potiphar has. So actually it's quite legitimate for me to have you as well. Let's go to bed."

That's how lots of wickedness gets justified in people's heads isn't it?

I am a Member of Parliament. I work really hard (and they mostly really do). I have earned the right to take the most I can from the allowances system.

I am a doctor. I have slogged my guts out in A levels, degree, portfolios from F1 and F2 and as an SHO. I have earned the right to be demanding of the nurses and health care assistants now I'm a Registrar. Even if that does mean embarrassing them in front of others.

I am a student. These three years are part of my growing up. A bridge between living under the authority of my parents and the adult world. So I am entitled to be lazy, selfish and irresponsible, even if that does mean nobody in my church can predict whether I'm going to turn up to anything or not.

Do you see how it works? Our reasoning goes I am special. Therefore I am entitled to special moral privileges. Most of the ways in which we sin are not things we think are OK. We mostly don't justify them by thinking they are not wrong. We justify them by thinking they are not wrong for us. But Joseph doesn't do that. He stands with integrity.

But then disaster strikes. Something to do with his duties requires Joseph to go into the house when there's nobody else around but Mrs P. We don't know why that is. Perhaps she deliberately gave them all the afternoon off trying to engineer exactly this situation. Hoping that if nobody could possibly know that Joseph would yield to her entreaties.

If that is what she was hoping it doesn't work. Joseph, realising that there is no reasoning with this woman just legs it. At this point she realises that Joseph really is not going to give her what she wants and feels hurt and rejected. And, as we all know, hell has no fury like a woman scorned!

She put first the household servants and then her husband in a position where they really have no choice but to

believe her. Almost all ancient legal systems provided that if a woman screamed during an attempted rape she was innocent of adultery. She also plays the race card and blames her husband – That *Hebrew slave you brought to us*.

And she has a piece of evidence – the cloak Joseph left behind. For the second time his coat is used to say something about Joseph that is untrue; first that he was dead and now that he is a rapist.

Potiphar is not impressed! It is interesting that the story doesn't tell us that he burned with anger against Joseph. And whereas the punishment for attempted rape in almost every ancient society was death Potiphar only puts Joseph in prison and, since he ends up in the king's prison, probably a rather nicer prison than the Egyptian average.

All of which suggests that, perhaps, Potiphar doesn't entirely believe his wife's story and that his anger is as much directed at her for depriving him of the very efficient and effective man who ran his household as at Joseph for getting himself in a situation where, to save face, Potiphar had to punish him.

Let's face it Joseph's life is rubbish. Before he did get to run the household; but he was a slave. Now, with no due process, he is thrown into the slammer and, I'm sure, even the best prison in Egypt wasn't a bunch of fun.

Joseph has been humiliated. He has suffered a massive injustice. All he did was work really hard, do his job conscientiously, uphold the ethical standards of the Lord by not sleeping with his master's wife. And where did it get him? Chained up in a cell in a foreign country.

It would have looked to Joseph as if all the good things that happened to him were the result of hard work, diligence and dedication. And as if all the bad things were cruel turns of the cards against him.

And that's often the way with us too isn't it? We work hard and do well in our degree. We put in the overtime and get a promotion at work. And then somebody else lies in their portfolio and get the job at the Royal while you end up in the Isle of Man. Some muppet banker loses billions and the company can't get a loan and has to cut jobs – including yours.

Life for us, as for Joseph, so often looks like humiliation and injustice at the hands of dark forces totally outside our control.

But even in this section of the story there are a number of hints that actually things are not as simple as they seem. A number of hints that beneath what looks like a story of Joseph's positive efforts and lots of bad luck there are other powers at work.

In particular there are a lot of things that remind us of stuff that has already happened in the story of Joseph and his family and, in particular, the one story about Joseph's family that we know about but he doesn't!

The only thing we have learned about what happened amongst his brothers after Joseph was sold into slavery is

chapter 38; the story of Judah and Tamar which we looked at two weeks ago. In that story Tamar, cheated out of her right to a son and heir by her Judah, her father-in-law, disguised herself as a prostitute, got Judah to be a customer. When she was accused of selling herself for money she produced items that indisputably belonged to Judah to identify him as the truly guilty party and father of her twins.

Judah is, in every respect, the opposite of Joseph. His lust is out of control. Joseph is self-controlled. In fact Judah isn't like his brother; he's like Potiphar's wife.

And just as in the previous story a personal item was left behind that identified guilty Judah so too, in this story, a personal item is left behind that wrongly convicts innocent Joseph.

The writer is deliberately drawing our attention to the similarities in the story to remind us that this is one family. One family whose fate is bound together and whose destiny is controlled not by their hard work or by random twists of fortune but by the Lord.

Because although Joseph's life looks like humiliation and injustice the reality is that God remains in control. A reality that is made clear at the beginning and end of the story...

## 2 **How Joseph's life is: the promise keeping God is always with his people (v1-6 & 21)**

I wonder if you noticed how many times God got a mention in the first 6 verses. Let's have another look at them (read v1-6 emphasising **Lord**). But he isn't mentioned again until v21 and the Lord hasn't been mentioned at all so far in Joseph's story.

When he was safe at home, daddy's favourite boy, the Lord was not mentioned. But now he is a slave, far away in a foreign land, the Lord is all around. When all the circumstances look as if God is a million miles away, the writer of Genesis is telling us, the reality is that he is present with his people.

I'm sure that on a day to day basis Joseph's experience was that he got up, worked really hard for his master and received the due reward for his efforts. Who knows if Potiphar told Joseph that he was keeping on promoting him because he thought the Lord was with him? He might have done. But it's equally likely that he might not have mentioned it, or even thought it himself. He might well just have thought "this is a really, really capable man. I have got to make the best use of his talents." But we, the readers, know better. We know that what Potiphar was observing was not the natural brilliance of Joseph so much as the blessing of the Lord.

Joseph gets five promotions in this story.

- First he is bought by a wealthy and important man; which might well not have happened and Joseph certainly can't claim any credit for that!
- Next he moved, v2, to live in the house; household slaves were much more important than manual workers in the fields.
- Then he became Potiphar's attendant.

- Next the head of the household.
- Finally he is given so much authority that Potiphar has no concerns at all apart from his personal needs.

And there are five mentions of the Lord:

- The Lord was with Joseph
- The Lord was with him
- The Lord gave him success
- The Lord blessed the household
- The blessing of the Lord was on everything

Whatever turns for the worse Joseph's life is going to take in the future we are quite clear that the Lord is with him.

And this is not just 'God.' Not some vague generic deity. The Lord is God's covenant name. The name he uses in promise making with his people. And the writer of Genesis makes it particularly obvious in this story that what is going on here is the fulfilment of the Lord's promises to his people.

Because what God had promised to do through his chosen people, the descendents of Abraham, was to bless the nations. Joseph goes to a foreign nation and what does he bring? Blessing! God's man comes to the house and everything goes well. God is blessing Potiphar not because God thinks he's a good bloke but because Joseph is in his house. In a few verses time we're going to see exactly the same thing happen in the king's prison and then for the whole nation of Egypt.

It all looks rubbish for Joseph. But in fact God is using Joseph to bring blessing to the world. It all looks out of control. But actually God has everything utterly in hand. It all looks totally unjust. But in reality God is bringing about exactly the right outcome that he desires.

Even at the end of the story, when Joseph ends up at what is possibly an even lower point in his life than being sold as a slave; being a slave locked up in a foreign prison, what does the writer of Genesis tell us? "While Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him."

In the middle of a chaotic looking world where, if your life is anything like mine and most people I know well, there is often pain and confusion and uncertainty, this passage teaches us two vital things – one about us and one about our saviour.

**a) God is behind your success and present in your struggle.**

Let's think what this passage has to teach us about ourselves first.

One of the problems that many of us have is that we analyse good and bad things in our lives from two very different perspectives. Let me explain what I mean. We go to the gym a lot. We are fit and healthy. And so we live productively. We congratulate ourselves on our hard work and effort that has got us to where we are. We get ill. We become much less productive and lose our job. We blame God because he has taken away something we worked incredibly hard to get.

But just think about that for a minute. What happened to make sure that you were healthy enough to start with to go to the gym? Who made you the kind of person motivated to persevere with exercise? Who ensured you were born in a culture where people have leisure time and in a family and educational background that meant you were able to appreciate the importance of healthy living? Was it not God?

You see it simply won't do to live as if all the good things we think we have worked hard for are our work and all the disasters are God's work. The salary you get for your job as a teacher is as much money that God has given you through giving you the opportunities, motivation and ability to get and do that job as it would be money that God had given you if you bought just one lottery ticket and won the euro-millions.

Just as God stood behind Joseph's success, so he stood behind Joseph's imprisonment. And God was using both of those things to bring about his purposes for Joseph, the people of Israel and the world.

I guess the precise implications of this will vary for us a bit depending on whether we feel life is going well or badly.

If you feel like your life is going well what you need to remember is that it is only because God is blessing you.

If you are not a Christian you need to realise that what you are doing is taking God's good gifts and utterly failing to appreciate them. The world is full of people who act as if everything good in their world is a right, something they have earned and then respond with bitter hostility to God as soon as anything bad happens. But that is a perverse way to live.

If, and I guess most of us here this morning are Christians, we need to ask some hard questions about whether we have become functional atheists. Do we think as if the good things we 'earn' are because of our brilliance and the bad things that 'happen' are dark twists of cruel providence? When you get a job do you tell you LifeGroup how much you are thanking God but think in your heart how pleased you are you were brilliant in that interview? Maybe you were brilliant. And who gave you those gifts? It's time to thank the giver. Time to give glory and honour to the God who is with his people and blesses them.

If, on the other hand, you feel like your life is a disaster you need to remember that the promise keeping God is with his people.

If you are not a Christian and you are struggling in any way would you not much rather be facing those things knowing that the God who made and rules the universe is your God? Would you not much prefer to be confident that the Lord is with you? Like Joseph you might still end up falsely accused and in prison. You might still be sick, unemployed, depressed or poor. But the promise keeping God is always with his people.

If you are a Christian please, please take comfort from this passage. Sometimes the world is a dark place. Terrible things happen. And, although for most of us here the worst things that happen are not all that bad – not when

you switch on the news and hear what it's like to live in Nigeria or Sudan or Afghanistan or Iraq or Haiti or even Greece – sometimes the cumulative effect of a thousand little stresses – work, colleagues, family, children, house, money and church – just seems like too much for us. Whenever you feel like that remember that the Lord is with his people. The covenant making, promise keeping God will not fail you. He is more than capable to leading you through whatever dark valley he chooses and out the other side.

We, of course, can be even more confident about that that Joseph could because this passage also teaches us something about the saviour...

**b) God's saviour resists temptation and suffers for his goodness**

One of the things we've been seeing throughout this series in Genesis is that God, in his word, is always giving us shadows of what is going to happen in the future. That shouldn't be any surprise to us of course because Jesus' own understanding of the Bible was that all of it was about him.

And Joseph's life, in particular, points us to important things about Jesus, because Joseph, like Jesus, is the son God has chosen to bring about a great salvation for his family.

Here's how the writer of Hebrew's puts it: For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Can you imagine the pressure on Joseph, day after day, to go to bed with Potiphar's wife. He would have got up every morning knowing that as soon as he saw her she would be making come-to-bed eyes at him. How much easier would it have been just to give in.

Well that is just a pale imitation on of the pressure faced by the Lord Jesus. Imagine suffering exactly the same temptation to sin that you do, the same desire to make your life easier by taking a short-cut; by taking somebody down a peg or two, by just doing what you want, but never giving in to it.

Jesus, like Joseph before him, resists temptation. But not just in one aspect of his life, like Joseph, but in every single way, every single day. And, unlike Joseph, Jesus knew where that would lead. For Joseph being thrown into prison, suffering for his righteousness, must have been a very unpleasant surprise. For Jesus Christ going to the cross, suffering humiliation, injustice and death because of your goodness was the purpose of his whole ministry. Jesus knew the immense suffering that being righteous would lead to. And he did it anyway.

This morning we should be thankful for Joseph. God brought about great salvation so that the story of the people of God could continue through his determination

to stand against sin. But we should be infinitely more grateful for Jesus. His determination to live a life of righteousness, to stand against sin in every way, brought about salvation from sin and death for every single person in the world who will put their trust in him. It is the obedience of his son, Jesus' refusal to give in to temptation, at infinite cost, that means that this morning you and I can, with utter confidence, know we are rescued from death.

However your life looks, and our lives do look like a big mess an awful lot of the time, the reality is that the Lord is with everyone who puts their trust in Jesus, the sinless saviour. And that is great news.

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