

Saying No . . . When Others Say Yes

Genesis 38, 39

Introduction

Today, we are going to talk about a subject that everyone faces sooner or later in life – usually sooner than later. It is a subject that is no respecter of persons. It comes to the wealthy and it knocks on the door of the poverty stricken. It makes itself available to the young and to the old; to the spiritually immature and to the spiritually mature.

It is the subject of temptation. And no one more than Joseph gives us principles on how to say, “No,” when everyone else is saying, “Yes.” We discover the story in Genesis, chapter 39.

Joseph Arrives In Egypt

Turn to Genesis, chapter 39, and let us begin with verse 1a.

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; .

..

You may remember this was also basically the last phrase of verse 28 of chapter 37. Joseph’s brothers sold him to the Midianites for a price that would have a contemporary value of about fifty dollars. Each of the brothers got about \$4.50 out of the sale. That was fine with them because they were rid of this “dreamer” that they hated.

The brothers were incensed by Joseph’s dreams for one reason – they knew his dreams were going to come true. They were not about to bow at Joseph’s feet, and they were incensed that God had, in effect, chosen him rather than them.

Verse 1 of chapter 39, says,

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

Egypt in the 15th dynasty is a 1,000 year old world power

I think it would help our understanding to take a brief look at Egypt. We are talking about a far away country that we know little about.

Historians tell us that Joseph went to Egypt during the 15th dynasty (there were thirty-one dynasties in all). This was the Hyksos dynasty, which means that Egypt is a one thousand year old world power at the time of Joseph’s story.

Egypt, at this time, is the dominating force; it is the wealthiest nation in the known world. Egypt was astounding its contemporaries with its architecture as the pyramids of Giza had already been built. It was astounding everyone with its creativity because the sphinx had already been carved. By the time Joseph arrives in Egypt, it was astounding architecturally, mathematically, and in the field of medicine. Egypt was the marvel.

I cannot help but imagine what it must have been like for Joseph. He was a wanderer, the son of a nomad, living his life in a tent. Now he was being introduced to this magnificent civilization, this developed culture of Egypt.

The colorful words of one expositor concerning Joseph being taken by Potiphar are helpful. F. B. Meyer writes these words,

Potiphar was an Egyptian grandee, a member of a proud aristocracy, high in office and in court favor. Joseph would, no doubt, live in a splendid palace covered with hieroglyphs and filled with slaves. The young captive must have trembled as he passed up the pillared avenue through sphinx guarded gates into the recesses of that vast Egyptian palace where they spoke a language of which he could not understand a word and where all was so new and so strange.

While I cannot imagine it, I have certainly tried.

Joseph Begins Service For Potiphar

It would be helpful as well, to better understand who Potiphar is. The text says that he was, “the captain of the bodyguard.” That means Potiphar was perhaps, the most trusted man to Pharaoh. He was the individual responsible for the Pharaoh’s livelihood. The fact that he was the captain meant that he had somehow reached the top of the heap. He was also a

very wealthy man; a man whom Pharaoh had entrusted with great wealth. He had many slaves, undoubtedly, and this man had purchased Joseph.

I can see Joseph trembling on the auction block as this man of rank and distinction comes to purchase him. The captain of the guard would have been something like the head of the CIA. He probably would also have been representative of the head of the KGB because this man was also, historians record, the chief executioner. Potiphar was responsible to take care of the heinous criminals who would come into this civilized kingdom.

So here was Potiphar, a man with incredible power and authority; who perhaps ranked among the very top, and Joseph is selected by him. In all of this, I believe, the hand of God can be seen.

Joseph Encounters Persistent Temptation

Now let me lead you to the temptation that Joseph is facing. Let us look at verse 2 of chapter 39.

The Lord was with Joseph . . .

You should underline that phrase in your text because it occurs seven times. It is a theme that runs throughout this chapter. Verse 2a says,

The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. . . .

Did you catch that? Joseph was successful with God before the scriptures would record he was a successful man. Verse 2b says,

And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

This is a little confusing because we miss the chronology. We are told “he became a successful man.” Until this point, Joseph was probably sleeping and quartering with all of the rest of the slaves. But he became successful; he distinguished himself as a slave of great promise, so Potiphar, according to the text, moves him into his house.

Then look at verse 3 to learn what happened next.

Now his master saw that the Lord was with him . . .

It is interesting that the master “saw that the Lord was with him”. Underline that because Joseph did not tell him that the Lord was with him. I do not think Joseph knocked on his door and said, “I want you to know that I am the servant of the living God.”

No, Joseph, lived such a distinguishing life that sooner or later, Potiphar took note that this man was led by his God. Perhaps at some point, Joseph was able to explain to Potiphar what had happened. Look at the last part of verse 3 and the first part of verse 4.

. . . and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant;

This is another promotion. Joseph moves out of the slave quarters into the home of Potiphar. Now among all the servants in that home, he is the personal slave, the personal attendant to Potiphar himself.

That is not all, however. Potiphar, according to verse 4b,

. . . made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge.

“Overseer” could be translated, as in the Septuagint, “steward”.

Now I want to stop at this point, because the same thing happened when we studied the life of Daniel. You may remember that Daniel and Joseph are the only two individuals recorded in the Bible who have nothing negative written about their lives. They had similar lifestyles as both were taken from their homes and deposited in a very pagan, immoral society. Yet they both lived their lives in such a way that God prospered them. This is fascinating in light of the fact that both Joseph and Daniel had every reason in the world to chuck their jobs; they had every reason in the world to do all kinds of sabotage to try to bring down the pagan kingdoms in which they were forced to live.

If I had been Joseph, I would probably be tunneling out; I would be creating some way to escape. However, at some point in all of this, Joseph resigned himself to the fact that this was God’s plan. Rather than be the slave who goofed off; rather than being the servant who worked at getting out of work (have you ever worked around someone like that?), Joseph was determined to be diligent.

As a result of Joseph’s diligence, his master promoted him. Note verse 5.

It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house on account of Joseph; thus the Lord’s blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field.

We know that behind the scenes, God is responsible.

As soon as Potiphar gives Joseph the promotion, his cattle reproduce more rapidly and the crops are bumper crops. "This is great," he thinks, so Potiphar, who is no dummy, in verse 6,

. . . left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate. . . .

In other words, Joseph is no menial slave; Joseph is responsible for every activity of this bustling palace. If anyone needed anything, Potiphar would say, "Go see Joseph." If anyone needed time off, "Go see Joseph." If anyone wanted a raise, "Go see Joseph." If there was a skirmish, "Go see Joseph." Joseph handled all of the details of this wealthy, powerful, influential man.

Now the text is about to set us up. Look at the next phrase in verse 6,

. . . Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

That is the biblical way of saying, "Joseph was handsome and well built." He was handsome in form; that is, this man was good looking and well built. There is nothing wrong with being good looking and well built – it is just not fair! This was Joseph; this guy had it made! However, the text inserts this so that we begin to cringe at the thought of what will happen next.

Three kinds of temptation

Now, let us stop for just a moment. Let me give some very helpful words that one commentator wrote concerning the temptations that Joseph will face. There are three kinds of temptations that we face and they can be categorized. I doubt this is comprehensive, but most of the temptations we face in our daily lives come from one of these three categories.

Material

1. The first kind of temptation is material; that is, a lust for things.

This can be a lust for something as small as a ring to something as large as a new home. It can be a lust for something as shiny as a brand new car or something as dusty as an old antique. But there is a

flame that burns; there is a lust; there is a desire to have more things. We all feel it and all face it.

Personal

2. The second kind of temptation is what we could call personal temptation.

This is a lust for fame, for prestige, for honor, for position. This kind of individual will make sure that he shakes the right hands and is seen with the right people. He does everything possible to somehow claw and scratch his way to the top of the heap because, "That's where I want to be." This is a lust for preeminence. We battle with that too, don't we? To have our way!

Sensual

3. There is a third kind of temptation and that is the sensual temptation.

This is the gratification of one's physical desires; lusting after someone else.

As I tried to apply this to Joseph, I found that these types of temptations matched in all three counts.

Joseph is a man who is facing the material temptation. You may remember what it was like back with his family tending the sheep – there was nothing nice; there was rarely anything fancy. That lifestyle was just plain old living – comfortable, but not affluent. Now, Joseph is taken from that and deposited in this wealthy, civilized world that offers all kinds of luxuries. Perhaps he faced the temptation of wanting, of desiring to have what these Egyptians had.

I am sure that Joseph was facing personal temptation as well. He was probably a bit heady at times when Potiphar calls him in and says, "Joseph, I want to promote you. You won't live with the rest of the slaves anymore; you will live in my home now." And then, Potiphar gives him the elevated position of steward. I can imagine Joseph looking in the mirror and saying, "You are really something! You're coming up fast. You're quite a guy!" He is human.

Then the sensual temptation, the gratification of physical desires, is about to knock at Joseph's door. Let us see how he handles it. Look at verse 7 of chapter 39.

It came about after these events . . .

Pause here for just a moment. It has now been seventeen years. Joseph is, I believe, thirty-two years of age when this happens. He is no longer a teenager; he is a grown man. So after these events, meaning after all of these promotions, we read,

. . . that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me."

Now this attack makes me blush to even preach this text. We are not even given her name, but we know she has no scruples. Notice at the end of her comment, there is just a period. Note further, however, in verse 12, there is an exclamation point. I think that is significant because the first is more like a suggestion, but the latter is an imperative; it is a command.

Joseph Remains Steadfast In Resisting Advances

The first time Potiphar's wife approaches Joseph, she probably, although the text does not tell us, gave him the standard operation of the temptress, according to Solomon. I imagine that she buttered him up and used flattery, perhaps. She may have approached him and said, "Joseph, I have noticed you. You're quite a young man. You have risen through the ranks. And on top of that, you're very handsome. You're quite a young man."

As history records, Egyptian women were probably more liberated than women of any other nation at that time. This woman goes on to tell Joseph what she really wants, as she says in verse 7b,

. . . "Lie with me."

Verse 8a tells us,

But he refused . . .

Three reasons for saying "No"

Verse 8 will give us the nature of his refusal. Note that this time, Joseph stands and talks with Potiphar's wife, perhaps because she approaches him without the demanding that will come later. He basically gives her three reasons why he will not sin, and I love this.

"I would break the trust of my master"

1. The first reason Joseph gives for not sinning with Potiphar's wife is basically, "I would violate or break the trust of my master."

Look at verse 8 again.

But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge."

In other words, "He's left everything up to me. He's given me great responsibility. I can't violate the trust of this man in my life."

Joseph had professional integrity. That is incredibly rare.

"I would violate my character"

2. He does not stop at that, however. Joseph says, "Not only would I violate my master's trust, I would also violate my character."

Look at verse 9.

"There is no one greater in this house than I, . . .

(I think that could be translated, "There is no one with greater responsibility than I, . . ."),

“. . . and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin . . .?"

One man wrote that he is about to lose his coat, but he will keep his character. I like that.

Joseph would not violate his character and do this great – compromise? – fudge a little bit? – alternate lifestyle – romantic affair? No. While our society today gives all kinds of clever little phrases about things that go on, Joseph nails it down. He says, "this great evil" is "sin". He says, "I cannot violate my character. It is worth more to me than you."

By the way, that is a good grid, especially for young people, as we are tempted with things. Perhaps it is stealing something small and just slipping it into your pocket or maybe it is cheating a little on an exam. Growing up, my father would often say to me, "I hope your character is worth more than that."

That grid is helpful even now, because I ask myself the question, "Is my character worth less than stealing something small? Is my character worth less than a hundred dollars on my income tax? Is that all my character is worth?"

What is the price tag on your character?

“I would forfeit my fellowship with God”

3. Joseph goes on to say a third reason, and I think the most powerful element in this refusal; that is, “I would forfeit my fellowship with God.”

Look at verse 9 again.

“There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?”

So, in other words, Joseph says, “I would violate the trust of my master. I would violate the nature of my character. And I would violate or forfeit the fellowship with my God.”

I think it is interesting that seven times, you hear the phrase, “His God was with him,” - somehow, some way. Joseph lived with the sense that God was involved in his life. I think that strikes at the very core of personal purity, of saying, “No,” to temptation. That is having a relationship with God that we fear, more than anything else, we would violate.

Plato used to tell a story to his students of a shepherd boy who discovered a ring out in the field. When he would slip the ring on, it would make him unknown or unrecognizable to anyone in his village. As a result, he was given anonymity. The shepherd, prior to this discovery, was a very moral young man; an upstanding, hard worker. But he began slipping that ring on and soon, Plato says, he became a terrible, wicked sinner.

With that thought in mind, I have thought of Joseph, who has been given anonymity. Nobody knows him in Egypt. Nobody! If there is a perfect time to sin, it is now. No one recognizes him. All of his family is back home – way over there, somewhere. He does not think he will ever go back. And, “Listen, I can come up with some good reasons why I should do this. I’m young; single. God has, it seems, abandoned me. This is the lifestyle; this is accepted. And no one will know.”

Yet, even in the light of anonymity, Joseph says, “No.”

Joseph Is Rewarded By Imprisonment

Well, you come to the last part of that verse, verse 9, and you kind of think, “Whew! Wow! I’m glad that’s over.”

However, look at the next verse, verse 10.

As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her, or be with her.

What a woman! But, Joseph makes it clear now that not only will he not say, “Yes,” but he is going to try to steer clear of this woman because every time he sees her, there is another proposition.

So Joseph tries to stay away; he tries to steer clear. But it does not work very well because it says that she spoke to him every day. So somewhere along the line, she corners him.

In terms of a woman who does not know God, Joseph had every reason to be attractive to her. Handsome, young, moral, upright, hard working, Joseph was “a catch”. It is interesting, if you study Proverbs, chapters 6 and 7, who does the temptress or the tempter seek after? It is the what? The precious life. It is people like you. It is the one who is seeking to glorify God. It is the individual who is seeking to live an upright life. That is the kind of person who is attractive to a needy and lost world that has no moral bearing. You are a very attractive person to the world system.

Finally, in verse 11, Potiphar’s wife sets the stage – and I think she planned this, the little rascal.

Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside.

In other words, she had gotten rid of all of the servants; no one else was inside the house. Continue to verse 12a.

She caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me!” . . .

This time there is an exclamation point; this was a demand. I have tried to understand why she felt she had the right to demand. I think, if you go back into that culture, you have to remember that he is still a slave. She feels like she owns him; as if, “He belongs to my household.”

Undoubtedly this woman was involved with other slaves. She felt like she had rights. I imagine that Satan could also whisper in Joseph’s ear, “She does have rights! She owns you.”

Joseph may have been a slave, but she did not own his soul. Look at verse 12b.

. . . And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside.

The Hebrew indicates literally, “to the street.” Joseph left his garment in her hand and ran out into the street. I have often wondered what he did out there. He probably just stood there, waiting for who knows what to happen because of what she would do next. I like the King James version of this,

. . . he . . . fled, and got him [self] out.

It is as if he was thinking, “Nobody else will get me out of here, so I’ll get myself out of here!” and he ran out into the street.

Potiphar’s wife is not finished though. Continue to verse 13.

When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside,

She begins to literally, scream.

Was Joseph, by the way, a coward in this situation? Should he have stayed there and claimed a verse? It is interesting that for this particular kind of temptation, we have a very clear command in the New Testament. It is to do what? To “flee” – run, take off, get out. That is what Joseph did.

Note what Potiphar’s wife does. Look at verse 14.

she called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed.”

She says, “This Jew boy . . .” – she is bitter. Continue to verse 15.

“When he heard that I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled and went outside.”

In other words, “He’s out there in the street.”

Continue to verse 16.

So she left his garment beside her until his master came home.

She is waiting for her husband to come home. Look at verses 17 and 18.

Then she spoke to him with these words, “The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me; and as I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside.”

Look at Potiphar’s reaction in verse 19.

When his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, “This is

what your slave did to me,” his anger burned.

Do you know what is missing? Who was Potiphar’s anger burning against? Let me conjecture with you for just a moment, that his anger is not against Joseph. Potiphar is the chief executioner, so if this young slave had attempted rape, he would be dead.

However, do you know what Potiphar does? Look at verse 20.

So Joseph’s master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail.

Whose jail did he put Joseph in? Potiphar puts him into the prison that he is responsible for. He puts him in with those in bonds that he oversees. He allows him to live.

I think if we could pull back the pages of history and observe that occasion, I think we would see that Potiphar was very angry with himself. I have no doubt that he knew his wife well. In fact, she indicates her disrespect of him, in verse 14, when she says, “‘See, he has brought in a Hebrew . . .’ slave, this husband of mine.”

This is an indication that there were problems. I think Potiphar is very angry that he has allowed something that he knew might very well happen. I think he is also angry at her. He allows Joseph to live.

Note what happens, in verses 21 through 23a.

But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph’s charge all the prisoners who were in jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph’s charge because the Lord was with him; . . .

It is as if the chief jailer gave Joseph a key ring and said, “Joseph, you look over everything and make sure everything is in order.”

So God promotes Joseph, even in jail. Look at the last part of verse 23.

. . . and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper.

Application – An Honest Look At Temptation

What a story! Familiar and yet so applicable. In fact, let me give two applications today.

Let us take an honest look at temptation. Any kind of temptation, whether it is material – you are struggling with something you want to purchase or to have, or personal – you perhaps feel God is not dealing the right deck to you, so you are going to scrape your way to get just a notch higher, or sensual – you are struggling with the gratification of physical desires. Let us take an honest look and I will give two applications.

Temptation, once resisted, may not disappear

1. First, from this story we learned that temptation, once resisted, may not immediately disappear.

This is the reason I said we would take an honest look – I do not really like this. We would like to think that if we resist once, God goes, “Poof,” and the temptation is gone. Then we can say, “Whew, took care of that one! I’ll never face that again in my life.”

No, that temptation does not immediately disappear. In fact, with Joseph, it was a recurring theme for perhaps fifteen years.

Temptation, successfully resisted, may not bring expected results

2. Secondly, temptation, successfully resisted, may not bring expected results.

This is obvious. We want to say, “Okay, Lord, bless this guy!”

Seventeen years of turning down this woman. Seventeen years of uprightness and character. Now is the time to let Joseph step into his role as prime minister. But, not yet. In fact, as a result of successfully resisting temptation, Joseph is thrown in prison. I can imagine him sitting there in a heap, saying, “Lord, thanks a lot!”

We are built that way. We like to think that if we find a thousand dollars in a wallet and we return the wallet that the owner is going to split the money with us as a reward. We like to think we are going to get a thank you.

I recently read of a young fellow who was riding on his paper route and discovered a sack that had somehow been separated from, I have no idea how, a Brinks armored truck. The sack contained sixty thousand dollars! The guy returned it – what a guy! Brinks gave him five hundred dollars. The newspaper quoted him saying, “I wish I had kept it all.”

There is something in my heart that says, “Yea, I think I would have too.”

I might have called them on the telephone and said, “Look, I’ll return this if you . . .” and then, given them a figure.

We would like to think that when we resist, God will reward us. It is time for thanks. But Joseph feels the dampness of a prison cell and is surrounded by legitimate criminals.

One phrase makes it worth it all, however. Joseph does not know this right now, by the way, but you and I can read it. Look at verse 21 again.

But the Lord was with Joseph . . .

He will discover it very soon.

Look back at verse 2 also.

The Lord was with Joseph . . .

In other words, as a successful servant rising in the ranks; as a steward with responsibility for all that his master has, God was with him. We might say, “It’s obvious that God was with him.”

However, verse 21 tells us that God was with him in the prison cell.

What character this individual had, and we have just scratched the surface. I think only God can produce that character. That kind of character is a result of the supernatural.

You and I cannot resist the constant bombardment of temptation apart from the phrase, “The Lord was with him.” That is the cultivation of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is found in a person; that is, the Lord. And I trust that, even today, you can say, “The Lord is with me. He is in control of my life. He is giving me the strength, when others say, ‘Yes,’ to say, ‘No.’”