

Genesis 39:1-23, No. 63
“A Life of High Adventure”
August 13, 2017
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We have been hearing a lot about “Genesis 39” of late, since it became the title for our monthly sexual purity class in the Sunday School. There is that subject, of course, in this chapter, but there is more than that, as we shall see. With the beginning of chapter 39 we pick up the interrupted narrative of Joseph in Egypt from the last verse of chapter 37, the first verse of chapter 39 being a recapitulation of what was said there.

Text Comment

v.2 “The Lord was with Jacob...” This is the key phrase in the chapter. It appears four times, twice near the beginning and twice at the end. It is the explanation for everything, as we will see. Just as the Lord had been with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he was with Joseph. But Joseph did not receive a direct word from God that God would be with him, as the patriarchs had. God told them directly, “I will be with you.” But the narrator is telling us that God was with Joseph just as surely as he was with the patriarchs and that this explains what follows. But Joseph, as we today, knew that God was with him only by faith.

The fact that Joseph served in the house of Potiphar is significant. He was not sent, as most slaves would have been, to the fields. It was not unusual for slaves to occupy management positions or to do skilled work. Having a position in the house gave Joseph the opportunity to impress his master, but it also exposed him to temptation.

v.3 Much is not said, but Joseph must have said enough to convince Potiphar that *Joseph’s God* was the source of the blessing he was enjoying with Joseph in his house.

v.7 There is no suggestion of love or affection here; only desire. He was a slave; she expected him to obey. Sexual promiscuity has been a feature of all slave societies, so there is nothing particularly surprising here. [Sarna, 273]

v.10 There was a prolonged period of temptation, which, of course, made Joseph’s resistance more difficult and more notable.

v.12 The precise description of Joseph’s action at the end of verse 12 helps us to picture the scene. He turned abruptly away and hurried out of the house, but once outside he proceeded at a normal pace so as not to draw attention to himself. [Sarna, 274]

v.14 Referring to Joseph as a Hebrew served to remind the others in the house that he was an outsider and to appeal to what was no doubt an Egyptian prejudice against non-Egyptians.

- v.15 Fearing exposure and probably also furious over his rejection she now plots her revenge, fabricating a story that is a tissue of lies but calculated to elicit maximum sympathy for her and fury at Joseph.
- v.17 Again she put it in a way calculated to get results. She stings her husband with the implication that he was partly to blame (the slave *you* brought us), and appeals to both class and racial prejudice (he is only a slave and a Hebrew one at that) and his assault against their household (“us”).
- v.20 Imprisonment was not a form of punishment in the ancient near east generally but was in Egypt at that time. In this particular case, significantly, the prison was apparently located on Potiphar’s estate; he may indeed have been responsible for it. We are told that in several places, notably 41:10.

This has always struck careful readers as a surprisingly mild punishment for such an offense committed by a slave against a free woman who was the wife of an important official. It would have been even more striking to an ancient near eastern reader. The assumption seems to be that Joseph’s protestations of innocence, which are not recorded here, were enough to raise suspicions in Potiphar’s mind that his wife might not be telling the truth. He had to do something as the report of Joseph’s attempted rape of his wife had been reported to his staff, but he had his doubts. He knew Joseph and he knew his wife, after all. That would indicate that Joseph’s splendid faithfulness through this entire episode was not unrewarded even though he was thrown into prison. The reader of Genesis knows, of course, that the prison was to be his path to the second highest office in the land!

I said that the statement “the Lord was with Joseph” serves as an *inclusio* in this chapter. We find it at the beginning and at the end. In a day before tables of contents, chapter headings, or italicized type *inclusios* were used to identify the theme or the main point of a paragraph or section. *This chapter, therefore, is about what happens when the Lord is with someone.* The Lord was with Joseph in Potiphar’s house; but he was also with Joseph in the prison. Joseph’s circumstances changed dramatically, but God’s presence with him remained the same. [Waltke, 519]

It is amazing how universal the biblical narrative is. We encounter in its narrative the situations of human life everywhere and at all times. It is universally relevant because it is the story of human beings and human life and that life is, at bottom, everywhere the same and at every time the same. The story of the spurned woman who takes revenge on an upright male is one of these universal stories, a situation that recurs in every generation, in every society. Some very successful films have told that story in recent years. Genesis is not at all concerned to suggest that men are more upright than women. After all, Judah was placed in the most unfavorable light in the previous chapter, while Tamar was presented as the heroine, the only one in any way faithful to the obligations of family and covenant. Genesis, like the entire Bible is splendidly evenhanded in presenting the failures and the virtues of each sex and it shows far greater respect for and concern for women than was customary in that ancient near eastern world.

But that is all backdrop. What we have here is the account of a man, who is in covenant with God, enjoying God's blessing, but falling into great peril, in this case, into the hands of a woman who was capable of doing him serious harm. God was with this man, but the divine presence did not shield him from risk. God was with him, but that did not mean that Joseph would not have to exercise his will in a most heroic way. What God's presence meant was that Joseph's faithfulness would have its reward in due time. Indeed, what God's presence seems to have meant is that Joseph's life would be a life of great blessing amidst trial and temptation. Indeed, for a time, it appeared that God's presence would be no help to Joseph at all. He was falsely accused and thrown into prison. But it will turn out that prison is precisely where he needed to be for God to bless him as magnificently as God intended.

To put it another way, that "God was with Joseph" tells us that things are settled and secure from the theological viewpoint; ultimately all is well and all is safely in God's hands; but as we look at life and at our own lives, as we must face our own circumstances from day to day, we may face risk, danger, difficulty and even the deepest disappointment

The Bible paints the Christian life characteristically in these bold strokes and bright colors. In a hundred ways it teaches us to "work out our salvation in fear and trembling" because God is with us, because the Devil and his minions are against us, because we are beset by enemies both within and without. But you and I are also beset by a tendency to make much less of our lives than that, to see them as if painted in much fainter strokes and paler colors. The Bible speaks of our lives as a warfare, but day after day we can live largely unconscious of being surrounded by adversaries, of being in the thick of combat, of living on a battlefield strewn with the carnage of this spiritual fight to the death. The Bible speaks of our lives as a pilgrimage, but we can meander through the world day by day largely unconscious that we are going anywhere in particular or that the journey on which we have embarked is difficult and dangerous.

A large part of our problem, of course, is that we live among people who have no such thoughts about their lives. They don't see themselves as soldiers in a desperate battle; they don't see themselves as pilgrims *en route* to another country; they don't see themselves as citizens of a heavenly kingdom whose lives are to be lived for their King. And their typically modern, bourgeois life rubs off on us.

It is one of our worst problems as Christians; a fundamental problem, by which I mean the cause of many other failures and weaknesses. We stop thinking that our lives are as large, as consequential, as so much the adventure and the perilous journey that the Bible is always telling us they are. And because we think of our lives as so much more ordinary things than truly they are, we pass through days and weeks and years blissfully unaware, like deaf and blind men walking through a battlefield, of that contest for our souls that must be won if we are ever to reach the heavenly country.

Now, I know that I am speaking, by and large, to a congregation of principled Christians. But, it is precisely because of my confidence in your desire to be what you ought to be for your Savior's sake, that I am urging you this morning to take stock; to be brutally honest with yourselves. How much of yourself do you find in this recent description of modern American life?

“Making a career of nothing – wandering through malls, killing time, making small talk, watching television programs until we know their characters better than our own children – robs the community of our gifts and energies and shapes life into a yawn at the God and Savior of the world. The person who will not bestir herself, the person who hands [himself] over to nothing, in effect says to God: you have made nothing of interest and redeemed no one of consequence, including me. C.S. Lewis has the devil Screwtape explain to the junior devil Wormwood that the man he is after can be drawn [away] from God by nothing. ‘Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man’s best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them, in drumming of fingers and kicking of heels, in whistling tunes that he does not like... The only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the enemy... Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the safest road to hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.’” [C. Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, 188]

Not so Joseph, he knew that his life was a great matter, that monumental issues were being joined in his daily behavior. That in matters both small and great he had to do with Almighty God himself. And it was this fact, this theological conviction that made Joseph the hero of a man he was in the face of this temptation from Potiphar’s wife. He had a robust worldview, so robust that when it was challenged suddenly, out-of-the-blue, he knew precisely what he should say and said it with conviction.

You may have thought of this yourself, as the chapter was being read, but Potiphar’s wife is precisely the picture of the adulterous woman painted by the father in conversation with his son in Proverbs 5, 6, and 7. Her lips dropped honey, her speech was smoother than oil. But Joseph was prepared. He saw through her allurements to the real issue, to what really mattered, just as the father prepares his son to do in Proverbs.

Here is always the way for a Christian. There is a theological reality that motivates, that persuades, that inspires. And there is then biblical wisdom that forms a plan and wards off the temptation. But, without the former, without the theological conviction, the sense of one’s life as a life to be lived for God, the sense of pilgrimage and spiritual warfare, one never gets to the wisdom, the sensible plan by which to deal with the temptations of life. “*God was with Joseph and Joseph knew it. That was his theology.* Inspired, strengthened, and nerved by that, he acted accordingly.

You know, of course, that this is one of the great pictures of a man resisting temptation given to us in the Bible. Next to our Savior himself in the wilderness at the beginning of the ministry, and again at the very end of his ministry in the Garden of Gethsemane, this is the greatest of those pictures. We are, of course, also given instruction in a negative form in accounts of men who fall prey to temptation – David or Peter for example – and we find those men invariably failing to do precisely what Joseph did so well here. We must learn from him as we are clearly intended to do. See what Joseph’s theological conviction enabled and empowered him to do.

I. First, he fashioned a clear and forceful argument.

You must also do this with Satan or other people. Many times you must do this with yourself. There are reasons not to sin, however beguiling sin may be. There are reasons so weighty that no Christian who considers them seriously will sin in the face of them. We sin, precisely because we forget, or, sometimes, refuse to remember what we know. Joseph made those arguments, so we read in vv. 8-9. The sin Potiphar's wife was proposing would have been, he said, an outrage against his Master's kindness to him and confidence in him. And, then, still much more, it would have been for that reason and many others, an offense against God himself.

And a Christian can think of countless other arguments: some of them specific to the certain sins you are tempted to commit, but many of them reasons not to commit any sin at any time in any way. The love of God, the cross of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit and the danger of grieving Him, the damage to your own soul, the unworthiness of it all, the fruitfulness of your life, the tendency of sin to beget more sinning, giving the Evil One – who hates you – a victory, the judgment day, what you will think in heaven, and on the arguments go. Joseph, animated by his theological conviction that his life was from God and through God and to God, that God was with him, made those arguments and kept making them through the long-drawn-out temptation. He did just what our Savior did in the wilderness, who used argument after argument with the Devil as well. There is no shortage of arguments, each of which is entirely adequate by itself, but how much more powerful when joined with others. But there is a shortage of Christians making those arguments! Far too many of us, far too much of the time, take our cue not from Joseph, but from Oscar Wilde, who quipped, "The best way to get rid of a temptation is to give in to it." Wilde knows better now.

II. Second, Joseph avoided occasions.

You see that in this case in v. 10. Joseph not only refused Potiphar's wife's offer, he did all that he could to avoid her altogether. "Do not go near the door of her house," the Father in Proverbs admonishes his son. Because of the attraction of sin, the sensual pleasures that are anticipated, even while you are telling yourself that you will not succumb, you will try to get as close to the temptation as possible without actually giving in. Such is the power of sin, even our love of it; such is the pain of separation from it, for sinners such as ourselves.

"Satan often tempts me to go as near to temptations as possible without committing the sin. This is fearful – tempting God and grieving the Holy Ghost. It is a deep-laid plot of Satan." So wrote Robert Murray McCheyne, as holy a man as there was or is. And it is as true of all manner of other temptations as it is of sexual ones. We know we shouldn't gossip, so we insinuate instead; we bring the conversation around to a person, a name, a subject; perhaps someone else will bring up the rumor, will make the unkind remark. We know we ought not to spend, but we find ourselves shopping anyway – only looking – we tell ourselves. Sharp-sighted Christians, honest with themselves, know how much time they spend approaching sins they tell themselves they will not commit. No wonder we fall so regularly! We are offering Satan our help.

III. And, then, finally, Joseph fled, he took flight. The act of his will was deliberate, abrupt, and decisive.

In Joseph's case, of course, the temptation gathered terrible strength from the fact that he could not entirely avoid it. He could not entirely avoid "the door of her house" as the father's son is advised to do in Proverbs 5, because he lived and worked in her house. This is what makes Joseph such a perfect Christian man here and what made the Lord Jesus a still more marvelous man. They beat back temptations that could not be avoided and kept coming at them relentlessly.

Anyone here who remembers what it is like to resist a strong, a powerful, a subtle temptation to the very end of that temptation, knows a little of what spiritual fortitude that requires; how much it takes out of a man or a woman's heart: whether that temptation is lust, or envy, or greed, or anger, or drink, or drugs, or laziness, or indifference to others.

Here was Joseph at the moment of absolute crisis doing what we are to do as soon as we can. "Flee youthful lusts" Paul wrote, and that is what Joseph did long before Paul. He ran out of that house leaving his cloak behind him. He fled. As Spurgeon put it, "The best answer to many temptations is a good pair of legs and the king's highway." Joseph fled, without regard to any other consideration but holiness! Did he wonder, as he left the house what that woman would do, whether he had just burned his bridges with Potiphar?

Listen to this, from Martin Luther, in a letter to his organist friend Matthias Weller:

"If you allow one thought to enter, and you pay attention to it, [The Devil] will force ten additional thoughts into your mind until at last he overpowers you. Therefore, the best thing you can do is to rap the Devil on the nose at the very start. Act like the man who, whenever his wife began to nag and snap at him, drew out his flute from under his belt and played merrily until she was exhausted and let him alone."

There is the wise man and the wise woman: always making arguments, keeping fresh in mind and heart the ugliness and evil of sin, the danger of it, the cost of committing it, the bitterness it engenders afterward; as well the obligation of a Christian to love and serve the Lord, to do his will, to keep his commandments, and to preserve himself or herself fit and holy for his or her Master's service; as well the blessing of obedience, the promise of reward, the fruitfulness of a consecrated Christian life and the satisfaction of doing God's will.

And, while making arguments, avoiding occasions. Taking steps, removing sources of temptation, staying away from tempting people and situations and stimuli, while the mind is clear and the heart convinced; before sin has set its hook. It is so much easier to beat a temptation beforehand than at the moment! I suspect Joseph had thought with some care about what he would say if Mrs. Potiphar confronted him again.

And, finally rapping the temptation on the nose and heading off in the opposite direction at one's first sight of the temptation, while one still has one's wits about him.

You remember Thomas a Kempis' famous description in *The Imitation of Christ* of the successive steps of a successful temptation. There is first the bare thought of the sin. Then, after that, there is a picture of the sin formed and hung up on the secret screen of the imagination. A

strange sweetness from that picture is then let down drop by drop into the heart; and then that sweetness soon secures the consent of the whole soul, and the thing is done.

Well, best is to avoid the entrance of the thought in the first place by so avoiding those things that produce such thoughts. Next best is to reduce the bare thought to rubble when it first enters the mind with the arguments of faith and the exercise of the will. After that, while the screen is being put up, turn out the lights in your soul by active argument and a turning away. Few temptations are resisted that get past that point.

It is work, oh yes. It is the hardest work in the world, as anyone knows who has tried it and kept at it. It is the work of every minute of every hour of every day. But, tell me, you who have Christian blood in your veins: where would you rather be and what life would you rather have stretching before you: the life of Joseph with his torn conscience in the bed of Potiphar's wife, or the life of Joseph with his clean conscience in that Egyptian prison? Remember too what Samuel Rutherford said: "A Christ bought with strokes is the sweetest of all Christs."

But most of all remember this. *God was with Joseph*. That was the key to everything. You can do what Joseph did if God is with you. You may not see precisely how the future will unfold – Joseph certainly couldn't as he was being led away to prison – but if God is with you, you needn't worry. He can bless you in the prison as surely as anywhere else. Is God with you? He is if you are in Christ, his Son. To those who trust in him Jesus said, "Behold I am with you always, even to the end of the age."