

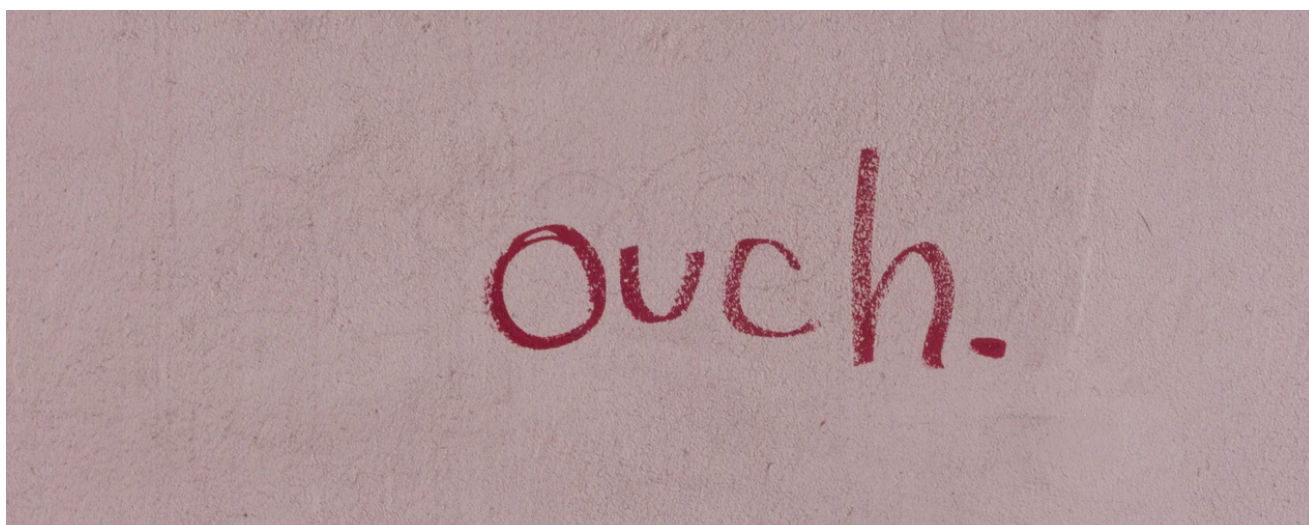
LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: GENESIS 39:1-23

To learn about Joseph's role in Potiphar's house.

Staying the Course

The New Testament gives us several warnings of the probability that we will be persecuted to some degree for our faith as followers of Jesus. Even Jesus Himself said, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the



world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you" (Jn. 15:18-19). The Apostle Peter wrote, "But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God" (1 Pet. 2:20b). We are all but guaranteed some turbulence for our faith. The question is, "How will we suffer?" Will we decry our unfortunate circumstances? Will we complain about the inequity we face? Or will we continue to make the next right choice that honors God?

In Genesis 39, we have a great example of what it looks like to honor God, live an upright life, and continue to do the next right thing in the midst of completely unfair circumstances. Joseph was attacked by his brothers, thrown into a hole in the ground, and then sold into slavery to some Ishmaelite traders. Now, having been sold again to the captain of Pharaoh's guard, Joseph finds himself a captive in a foreign land and a servant to Potiphar, and yet his actions demonstrate a mentality that, as Peter said, is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

Potiphar's House

Chapter 39 begins with Joseph's new life as a servant to an Egyptian man named Potiphar (meaning, "Dedicated to Ra," a nod to the Egyptian sun god), the captain of Pharaoh's guard (Gen. 39:1). Below is a brief outline of some of the interesting details regarding his circumstances.

REASSURANCE

While it doesn't come across as dramatic, it would have been quite unnerving to read of such an unfortunate demise for an Abrahamic heir. Up to this point, Abraham and his chosen offspring have all been protected by Yahweh and blessed in all of their endeavors. Abraham had his own run-in with Pharaoh, and the LORD protected him even when he wasn't fully honest (Gen. 12:17). Isaac is protected from a great famine, warned not to travel to Egypt, and Rebekah is protected from advances made by men in Gerar (Gen. 26:1-11). Jacob is protected from the deceptive schemes of Laban (Gen. 31:1-3). All of these men had potential threats come upon them, but none of them materialized because Yahweh's Hand was upon them.

Perhaps one of the reasons Joseph's story feels so different is that for the first time, we are seeing one of the so-called patriarchs fall into a plot that is meant for his harm. Yet, one thing has not changed; God's Hand is still upon him. Verse 2 indicates, "The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man." His blessing was noticeable by Potiphar, and seizing an opportunity to be blessed as well, Potiphar put him in charge over his whole household, a rare honor bestowed upon a servant (Gen. 39:3-6). While it may seem like Joseph has been abandoned by God, he is in fact still under His Divine protection and blessing.

THE BLESSING HONORED

It should not go without mentioning that Joseph's blessing is more than just a fulfillment of the dreams he had in chapter 37, but a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. There are some unique features of this chapter that indicates the covenantal connection. For one, the name, "Yahweh" (or, the LORD) is not found in Joseph's narrative apart from chapter 39 (not including Jacob's blessing 49:18). The wording in chapter 39 is also similar to previous moments where the LORD drew near to the patriarchs (Gen. 26:3; 28:15; 31:13).

Consider the promise made to Abraham, and how it applies to Joseph: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Joseph has gone from his country and from his kindred, albeit against his will. And Joseph was blessed and he became a blessing, first to Potiphar, and then to Pharaoh, and then to all of Egypt. And the nation of Israel eventually becomes great in the land of Egypt (Ex. 1:9), and God eventually curses those who curse Israel (Ex. 12:29-32). It is important to see Joseph in light of the Abrahamic promise, because in Joseph we find fulfillment of such promises.

Potiphar's Wife

The next portion of chapter 39 focuses on the problems Joseph encounters with Potiphar's wife. Below is an outline of some interesting details.

ONE TOO MANY BLESSINGS

Joseph has an abundance of everything, including and to his own demise, beauty. The Hebrew description here is that he is literally, "fair with regard to form," and, "fair with regard to appearance" (Gen. 39:6b). Interestingly, this a very similar description to that which is given to David (1 Sam. 16:12; 17:42). It is also the formula used to describe the beauty of a woman (1 Sam. 25:3; Gen. 12:11; Esth. 2:7). While beauty is a coveted attribute, and one that generally is spoken of as a positive thing, it is here being posed as a negative attribute that will bring great drama into Joseph's life. Because of his physical prowess, he will be the desire of Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39:7).

SEXUAL ADVANCES

Potiphar's wife's solicitation grows in intensity throughout the passage. Verse 7 indicates that some time passes before she begins to take notice of and pursue him. Her first advancement is merely, "lie with me" (Gen. 39:7). This is a simple invitation to sexual behavior. She later continued her proposition for several days (Gen. 39:10). The text is simple and not meant to teach an in-depth discourse on sexual sin, but one can infer a simple pattern. Unchecked sin grows in intensity. Potiphar's wife is not accountable to anyone, and her desire to be with Joseph only strengthens with every denial.

JOSEPH'S RESPONSE

Joseph does not give in to Potiphar's wife's proposition, and for more than one reason. First, he recounts the trust given to him by Potiphar. As a slave, it is remarkable the level of confidence he finds in his master. Potiphar has held nothing back from him except the preparation of his food (Gen. 39:6), and his wife (Gen. 39:9). To engage in sexual activity with Potiphar's wife would be a massive violation of trust. Beyond that, he sees such an act as a sin against God Himself. God's design for marriage is one that is exclusive. To engage in adulterous behavior is to destroy the intimacy marriage is meant to promote and to violate a covenant that involves God Himself, which is why the bounds on this covenant include the admonition: "What God has joined together, let no one separate" (Gen. 2:24). This is not to say that Joseph likely didn't struggle in temptation, but that temptation did not overcome him. It would be unreasonable to assume that this was not a struggle for Joseph. On the contrary, it's the victory over the struggle that makes his actions upright.

It is interesting that the act of sexual immorality for Joseph is not mentioned. The emphasis on the sin is that the female is married to another man, not that the male is not married and yet still engaging in sexual activity. While there are plenty of passages that remark on the sin of generalized sexual immorality, this is not one of them. Joseph's rejection of Potiphar's wife seems to be anchored out of respect for her husband, which almost parallels Proverbs. Wisdom literature speaks against adultery, not because it is a capital offense (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22), but because it provokes public shame and the anger of the wounded husband. Proverbs 6 warn that adultery leads to self-destruction (Prov. 6:32), wounds, loss of respect, public disgrace (Prov. 6:33), and a husband bent on revenge (Prov. 6:34). Joseph's reasoning for abstention precludes that it would be sinful, but also indicates the practical doom that such an act almost certainly guarantees.

IF YOU CAN'T JOIN THEM, BEAT THEM

One final attempt is made by Potiphar's wife to seduce Joseph, and she is once again rejected. This time, in fleeing from her, she grabs a hold of his garment (Gen. 39:12). Some incorrect judgments have been made regarding Joseph fleeing the scene unclothed. This was likely an outside cloak, common to men in this context. It is not, however, all that he was wearing. Joseph would have been noticeable in missing such a garment, but he likely had other clothes on as well. This is, interestingly, the second time he has lost his cloak. First, the multi-colored tunic that his father gave him (Gen. 37:31), and now this. Potiphar's wife seizes the embarrassing opportunity to exact vengeance on Joseph. She immediately calls the guards in and claims that he had come to, "laugh at us." (Gen. 39:14). She uses anti-semitic terminology ("Hebrew") to create an, "us versus them" scenario. She holds the evidence until Potiphar returns, and she says essentially the same thing to him as well, this time blaming him for the trauma: "This Hebrew servant whom you have brought among us" (Gen. 39:17). Potiphar is, reasonably, angry with Joseph. That he does not have him killed is surprising. Instead, Joseph is imprisoned for his (fabricated) crime.

CONTINUED BLESSING

The chapter seemingly ends as tragically as it began, with Joseph in bondage. Joseph was sold to Potiphar, but because of God's blessing on his life, he was entrusted with everything that Potiphar had. Now, at the end

of the chapter, he is imprisoned once again for a crime he did not commit, and yet because of God's blessing, he has been entrusted with everything that the prison keeper was in charge of. The prisoners were all under the care of Joseph (Gen. 39:22), and everything that Joseph did was blessed by God (Gen. 39:23).

One of the themes of chapter 39 is that, despite unpredictable (and quite devastating) circumstances, God is with Joseph. God does not need to rescue Joseph out of the circumstances. In fact, it is Joseph's presence in Egypt that will one day lead to the Exodus, and the important developments involving Moses and Israel. This is a great example of, "God causing all things to work together for good for those who love Him" (Rom. 8:28). Rather than rescuing Joseph out of the hands of the Egyptians, God will rescue the Egyptians by using Joseph.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Genesis 39:1-2. Who is Potiphar? Who did Potiphar purchase Joseph from? What did God do with Joseph?

2. Read Genesis 39:3-6. What made Potiphar take notice of Joseph? What did Potiphar put Joseph in charge of? What is the one thing he did not put him in charge of? How is Joseph described?

Day Two

1. Read Genesis 39:7. What did Potiphar's wife propose to Joseph?

2. Read Genesis 39:8-10. How did Joseph respond? What reasons did he give her for his rejection of her?

Day Three

1. Read Genesis 39:11-12. What did Potiphar's wife do in her final attempt to seduce Joseph? Why did no one see her do it? What did Joseph do in response?

2. Read Genesis 39:13-18. What did Potiphar's wife say happened after he ran off? Who did she tell first? What did she tell them? Who did she tell next? What did she tell him?

Day Four

1. Read Genesis 39:19-20. How did Potiphar respond? What did Potiphar do with Joseph?
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2. Read Genesis 39:21-23. How did Joseph end up under the good graces of the prison keeper? How does the ending of this chapter mirror the beginning?
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Week 31 Discussion: Sin Against Another

In Genesis 39, Joseph deflects Potiphar's wife's sexual advances. While the reasoning for this is varied, one of the clear reasons is that Joseph does not want to sin against Potiphar, a man who had entrusted him with so much. Joseph clearly cared for the emotional well-being of Potiphar, and had a level of respect for him. He rightly recognized that to sleep with Potiphar's wife would be a transgression against Potiphar. This is the reality of sin. Sin is aimed not only at God, but at others. Talk as a group about the importance of remembering how sin affects others, and what to do when it happens.

1. Icebreaker: What's the worst sin you've committed against another person? What's the worst sin another person has committed against you?
2. Read Matthew 5:23-24. How does unresolved sin affect your ability to worship with a clear conscience?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-30. How does unresolved sin affect your ability to observe the Lord's Supper?
4. Have you ever engaged in an amends making process (Eighth Step)? If so, how was the experience? If not, do you think you could benefit from making amends with people you've wronged? Why or why not?
5. Is it hard to forgive people when they ask for forgiveness? Why or why not?
6. Has anyone ever come to make amends with you for something they did wrong? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?

Takeaways:

1. Joseph is sold by the Ishmaelite to Potiphar, and he becomes indispensable to Potiphar because of God's blessing on his life.
2. Potiphar's wife falsely accuses Joseph of sexual aggression, and he is imprisoned for it.
3. Joseph maintains integrity in the face of difficult circumstances, and God continues to bless him.

PRAYER REQUESTS: