

Horsley Evangelical Church ([www.horsleyec.org.uk](http://www.horsleyec.org.uk))

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### Genesis 39 In the house of Potiphar.

We are not going to consider chapter 38 of Genesis, but chapter 38 serves least two purposes in the story of Joseph. First it underlines why the Lord will take the family of Jacob down into Egypt. Jacob's sons were tempted to intermarry with people who worshipped other gods. And if that had happened, the tribes of Israel would have lost their distinctiveness as worshippers of the Lord. And so the Lord will take his people down into Egypt through Joseph, for there they would be despised by Egyptians who would not want to intermarry with them.

But secondly, the story of chapter 38 show us the immoral behaviour of Judah with his Canaanite wife Shua and daughter in law Tamar. But Judah's behaviour is now contrasted with the moral uprightness of Joseph that we see in chapter 39. Joseph will triumph in the same area that Judah had failed. And Joseph's behaviour today will point us forward to the Lord Jesus Christ, who resisted every temptation and was made our Saviour through the suffering God sent into his life.

Let's consider this next part of Joseph's life under three headings. First in verses 1-6, we see Joseph **servicing well**. **Read verses 1-6a**. These verses then describe how Joseph served his new master well. Indeed, Joseph served *so well* that Potiphar promoted him to be the chief steward over his whole household.

Joseph's circumstances had completely changed from the time he was the privileged son of a rich father in Canaan. And yet we see no bitterness in his life. Even though his brothers had hated him and sold him into slavery. Even though in this foreign land Joseph would have been despised by Potiphar's whole household initially, Joseph does not become bitter or resentful. No complaint comes from his lips. Instead he gives himself to the new situation, working with all his might to serve well.

But the reason Joseph was able to do this is found in verse 2. For there we are told that *the Lord was with Joseph*. It's such an important truth, and one we shall keep reading in the story of Joseph. *The Lord was with Joseph*. And this made all the difference in the world. His circumstances might have suggested the Lord had forsaken him, as his brothers had. But this was not so. For the Lord was with Joseph – God never forsook him. Just as the Lord had been with Joseph back home in Canaan in much better times, just as he had been with Joseph when his brothers treated him cruelly and threw him into a pit, and just as the Lord had been with Joseph on the long and difficult journey down into Egypt, so now the Lord was with him in the house of Potiphar.

And Joseph knew that. Not just by the fact that things turned out well in his service for Potiphar, but also in his communion with God. The Lord drew near to Joseph and assured him of his love and care. That's not to say that Joseph found his situation easy – quite the reverse. Yet he knew the presence of the Lord and that somehow these circumstances were all part of God's plan for his life. And Joseph trusted the Lord so that his serving Potiphar well was really his serving the Lord well.

We read relevant verses to this a few weeks ago in Paul's letter to the Colossians. **Read Colossians 3:22-24**. And Joseph knew that it was really the Lord he was serving – the Lord who was always with him. And we read that the Lord's blessing was on Joseph and everything he did. Again and again we are told this. It was obvious for everyone in the household to see. The young Hebrew had a good attitude – he was helpful, polite and obedient. He willingly learned the new culture. He quickly learned the new

language. He went the extra mile. He was blessed by God with gifts of administration and wisdom, but he also worked hard. And Joseph was a blessing to the household of Potiphar.

This takes the reader back to the promises of God to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. [Read 12:2,3](#). The Lord's promises to Abraham are being worked out in the life of Joseph. God blessed Potiphar *through* Joseph. And these promises to Abraham would be fulfilled through the Lord Jesus Christ and by his death upon the cross. But the promises continue to be worked out today through the church of Jesus Christ - through you are me. Our lives will be a blessing to others in different ways, for we will be salt in the world's moral decay and light in the world's spiritual darkness as we point people to the Lord Jesus.

And we have the promise of God in the New Testament, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." And so we too trust in the Lord's providence just as Joseph did. The key thing is not our *circumstances*. At times, our circumstances will be easy and favourable and pleasant, yet at other times they will be difficult and challenging. But when difficulties come, that's not a sign God has left us or is against us. It just means that this part of the 'walk' is challenging. But the Lord is always with us, and there is a *reason* for the difficulty. God is working out his plan for our lives. And that plan is good, so we must trust him and continue to do what is good.

Then secondly in verses 6-12 we have **fleeing temptation. Serving well** but now **fleeing temptation**. [Read verses 6b-12](#). We may well ask. "If the Lord was with Joseph then how does the temptation of Potiphar's wife fit into this?" Well, the Scripture tells us that the Lord tempts no one, nor can he be tempted. But clearly the Lord allowed this woman to tempt his servant for a time. Joseph was being tested by the Lord. But we shall see, even the actions of Potiphar's wife were part of the Lord's providence for Joseph. For even in this, the Lord would work out his purposes for Joseph's life and also the salvation of the Israelites!

Now the behaviour of Joseph here is an example of how to deal with temptation. We can do the maths. If Joseph was 17 years old when he was sold by his brothers and if he was 30 years old when he was released from prison, and if he was in prison for 2 years after he interpreted the cupbearer's dream then it means Joseph must have been in the household of Potiphar for about 9 or 10 or 11 years. His promotion within the household therefore was not immediate. Nor was his being noticed by the lady of the house. But at some point, the wife of Potiphar *noticed* Joseph and propositioned him.

Not that this was the first time she had acted in this way to another man – nor would it be the last time. But her behaviour was a strong temptation for Joseph. He was a young man in his 20s at the time. He was not married. He was alone in a foreign land far away from his father and home. Potiphar's wife was probably not unattractive, and no doubt she could be quite persuasive. We are told that her propositioning went on for a long time, trying to wear down Joseph's resolve. Joseph knew she was a woman who could potentially do him a lot of harm if she became upset. She was in a powerful position, whereas he at the end of the day was only a slave and a foreigner.

But Joseph chose to serve the Lord and honour him. And his reaction to the temptations of Potiphar's wife is an example to us. Joseph reminds her who she is - his master's wife. He reminds her that although Potiphar had given him access to all things in the house, he had certainly withheld his wife from him. We see too that Joseph's language to her is plain and describes the seriousness of the act she is tempting him into. "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God". Some people think that verbal cosmetics will cover up the ugliness and seriousness of sin. So they talk about *a love affair* rather than *adultery*. They talk about being *swept off their feet* instead of giving into sin and temptation. They talk about an *alternative life* instead of a sinful and perverted lifestyle. But Joseph does not do this.

Let's call sin, sin. Let's not try to dress it up and convince ourselves that it does not really matter. It does. Joseph talks not only about sinning against his master but also sinning against God. Some sin is against other people. But all sin is against God. And although men may not see us commit the sin, God does. And all sin is against him primarily. Potiphar may have been out of the house, but God wasn't.

And when the final ambush came when all was either won or lost, Joseph gives us an illustration of the New Testament's command to *flee all immorality*. [Read verse 12b again](#). It's very unlikely that Judah would have fled the same situation. Even more unlikely that Samson would have! But Joseph did. And therefore with the help of God, you can too. The promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13 comes to mind. [Read 1 Corinthians 10:13](#). So does the promise in Hebrews 4:14-16. [Read Hebrews 4:14-16](#). God calls us to resist temptation and to remove ourselves from it as far as we can. But what follows reminds us that such resistance may be costly.

**Serving well, fleeing temptation** but then **suffering injustice** in verses 13-20. [Read verses 13-20](#). And so for the second time in the story, Joseph suffers injustice. First he suffers injustice at the hands of his brothers and now at the hands of Potiphar's wife. And on both occasions his coat was used.

Potiphar's wife certainly knew how to stir things up. First she calls together the whole household to get them on her side. "Joseph wants to make sport of us all – we are all at risk. He is a Hebrew of course, not an Egyptian." It's an example of how one sin naturally leads to another. It usually has to be covered up. And it makes Potiphar's wife spiteful and vengeful. If she cannot have Joseph then she will make sure no one can have him.

You can just imagine her keeping the cloak near to her, nursing her grudge until her husband comes home. She repeats the story to her husband. Only this time she makes him guilty by reminding Potiphar that he was the one who brought the Hebrew into their house.

We are told that Potiphar burned with anger and yet it is unlikely that he believed her story. Joseph is never questioned of course – he was just a slave. But the fact that Joseph was not immediately put to death strongly suggests that Potiphar knew his wife was lying. But he was an important official and had to be seen to support his wife's story.

But again there is the providential hand of God. It was the Lord who kept Joseph from being killed. God had important work for him to do. The Lord also determined that Joseph was not put into the commoners' prison, rather into the prison where the *king's prisoners* were confined. Potiphar had access to this prison as *captain of the guard*. But this would allow Joseph to meet two important men in the story which follows - the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. God was working out his purposes in Joseph's life.

The Scripture warns the Christian that we may face injustice in this life as we seek to honour God. We need only think of the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who was without sin suffered terrible injustice from evil men. And as Christ's followers we may face the same. But Scripture teaches us to continue to trust in the Lord when such situations arise and to keep doing what we know is right. [Read 1 Peter 2:18-23](#).

But then in our final verses this morning we see how the Lord showed his kindness to Joseph in prison. **Serving well, fleeing temptation, suffering injustice** and then in verses 20-23 **knowing kindness** – God's kindness. Even in prison, Joseph continues to know the favour and blessing of God. [Read verses 20b-23](#).

These words are almost a carbon copy of the words at the beginning of the chapter when Joseph settled into the house of Potiphar. One commentator writes, “The good seed is buried deeper, still to push upward; the servant, faithful in a little, trains for authority in much.”

Once again, there is no complaint from Joseph. Once again there is no bitterness or anger against either Potiphar, his wife or the Lord. Instead, Joseph trusts the Lord. But again what precedes this is the Lord’s favour to Joseph. It would seem that as soon as he entered the prison, he knew that the Lord was there with him. Life in the prison was even harder than life in the household of Potiphar. Psalm 105 tells us about the sufferings of Joseph. [Read Psalm 105:18](#). Those irons could refer to his journey down into Egypt, but they could also describe his sufferings in prison.

And yet the Lord again made it plain that he had not abandoned his servant. The prison was not a punishment from the Lord. It was just the next step in God fulfilling his plan for Joseph’s life. I’m sure that if you had interviewed Joseph he would not have understood what the Lord was doing. But he trusted the Lord. And I think too he kept in mind the two dreams that the Lord had given him many years ago. Dreams where his family bowed down to him.

It was in the prison that Joseph would meet two important men of the king’s household. And this in turn would afford him an interview with the Pharaoh which in turn would lead him to become ruler of all Egypt after Pharaoh, and the saviour of many lives.

Joseph did not understand at this stage what the Lord would do. But he did trust him. And that meant he had a similar attitude to the one he had in Potiphar’s house. He served well in the prison. And similar to the story in Potiphar’s house, this led to the blessing of God upon the whole jail and Joseph being entrusted with more and more responsibility.

You and I have often no idea what the Lord is doing in our lives. But we know what he has promised us in eternity. And we also know that he works all things together for the good of those who love him. In Jesus Christ he has given us hope and a future.

And therefore we must trust the Lord in all our difficulties. The Lord has a reason, and that reason and plan is good. If you could see the end of your story, you would see that it is very much more wonderful even than the end of Joseph’s story. We know his kindness to us in Christ Jesus and therefore we trust him and continue to serve him.