

That Isn't Fair! Suffering for Doing What is Right

Genesis 39

As Genesis 39 opens, Joseph is in slavery in Egypt. That's bad, but he's about to go *from the frying pan into the fire!* Anyone who has ever been punished for doing what is right will empathize with our hero this morning, and will be encouraged to trust God more.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Joseph ends up in prison

- *Joseph, in slavery in Egypt, is blessed by God (1-6)*
- *Potiphar's wife pursues Joseph for sex, but he refuses (7-12)*
- *She accuses him of sexual assault; he is imprisoned (13-20)*

P.S. Joseph is blessed by God in prison (21-23)

Lessons for Life from a Contemporary-Sounding Story

- *Joseph is a model of moral strength in tempting circumstances.*
- *Our faith in God is strengthened each time we resist sin.*
- *God rewards those who deny sin and self, and follow Him.*



- Take Bibles and turn to Genesis 39.
- Back from Australia, visit Jen's 92 yr-old mum (pic)
- Other end of life: Clarke and Judy's grandson Quade arrived Tues Oct 8 (same day we arr. from Aust.)

While life inexorably moves from birth old age, there are some things that never change. Ben Franklin said that *in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes*, but he was wrong. We all know suffering is an inescapable part of life. Those who learn to trust God in the midst of trials experience abundant life.

That brings us to Genesis 39, the fourth stop-off in our journey through the life story of Joseph. As this chapter opens, Joseph is in slavery in Egypt. Slavery was a part of life in the ancient world, but the *way* Joseph ended up there was unusual: He was sold into slavery by his own brothers! And as slavery goes, being a slave in Egypt was bad: It usually meant hard labor in the hot sun – the ruins of temples, not to mention the sphynx and the pyramids – that tourists gawk at today were built with the sweat of slaves. But God had a different plan for Joseph.

Genesis 39.1-6

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. The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. Now his master saw that the Lord was with him 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; and he made him overseer

over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge. 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. So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

Back in Gen 37, we learned some things about Joseph: He was a young man of character. In a family that was fractured by dishonesty and dirty dealing, Joseph shines as an example of honesty and integrity. So when he is sold into slavery by his depraved brothers, we feel like shouting, 'That isn't fair!'

I like the scene in the movie *The Princess Bride* when the grandfather reads his grandson that the princess marries the wicked prince Humperdinck. His grandson stops him:

"Hold it! Grandpa, you read that wrong. She doesn't marry Humperdinck. She marries Westley. I'm just sure of it. After all he did for her, if she didn't marry him, it wouldn't be fair."

His grandpa replies:

"Well who says life is fair? Where is that written? Life isn't always fair."

He's right, of course. But it's not the end of the story.

What we've just read in vv1-6 reveals that while Joseph is a slave, he 'lands on his feet' in Egypt. First, he is sold to a wealthy and influential man named Potiphar, who is the captain of the guard for Pharaoh. Joseph distinguishes himself among the servants; everything he puts his hand to succeeds. Potiphar makes Joseph his personal servant, and puts him in charge of his entire house – he trusts him completely. In today's lingo, we might say that Joseph was his 'chief of staff.' The narrator then adds a personal note at the end of v6: *Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.* The Hebrew adjective here is usually used to describe women as 'beautiful' (יָפֵיָא); Joseph was *handsome and good-looking*. He made girls look twice!

At this point in the story, we're thinking, *Alright! Joseph finally caught a break!* Three times we read that the Lord was with Joseph and making him successful. But that's not the end of the story. Things start going from good to bad in v7.

Potiphar's wife lures Joseph for sex. At first, she makes passes at him, but when he refuses, she waits for a day when they are alone in the house, she grabbed him and said, 'Come to bed with me!' There are a whole host of reasons why Joseph might have given in to temptation at this point – no doubt many men would, but Joseph does not. We read in v12 that *he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside.*

It's a breathtaking scene, and Joseph's commitment to purity and his master's trust is amazing. The audience rises as one and gives him a standing ovation! But that's not the end of the story...

Right when we're ready to hand him the gold medal, it all goes horribly wrong. In vv13-20, Potiphar's wife falsely accuses Joseph of sexually assaulting her, and claims that when she screamed, he left his garment and fled. When Potiphar hears this, Joseph is thrown in jail. Talk about a roller-coaster life! Joseph starts out as his father's favorite son, then gets sold into slavery, then becomes chief of staff in Potiphar's house, only to end up in jail, charged with sexual assault! But that's not the end of the story...

The last three verses of Genesis 39 tell us that God was with Joseph, and even in jail, he distinguished himself from all the other prisoners, and the head jailer put him in charge of all the other prisoners – in fact, he gave him complete control of the jail!

At the end of Genesis 39, there are two things we can say about Joseph: First, he gets treated badly even though he does what is right, and second, he makes the most of the bad situations he gets put in!

Now although this happened almost 4000 years ago, that doesn't mean it isn't applicable to us today. Temptation to commit sexual sin hasn't ended. Being falsely accused of something you didn't do still happens. And in case you haven't noticed, Christians both in America and around the world are persecuted for doing what is right.

So let's ask ourselves: What lessons can we learn from this story for our lives today?

Lessons for Life from a Contemporary-Sounding Story

- *Joseph is a model of moral strength in tempting circumstances.*

The major crisis in this story – something anyone in any generation knows – is the sexual temptation Joseph faces in his encounter with Potiphar's wife. But unlike all those romance novels and Hollywood movies, Joseph resists the temptation. Joseph exhibits strength of character and holds fast to moral integrity when almost any of us would have fallen. Sexual temptation is Satan's most effective tool for ruining the lives of Christian men – and women as well, today. And Joseph's temptation is a 'text-book' case. Consider:

- He was alone, far from home.
- He was in a position of power.
- He was attractive – handsome and good-looking.
- He'd had it tough – he deserved a break!

So what was Joseph's secret? Two things are evident in the text: First, Joseph had cultivated a submissive heart to live for God. Secondly, *he ran*. That two-step method can help anyone win over sin. In the NT, Paul exhorts his young disciple Timothy in the same way: *Flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart* (2 Tim. 2.22).

Every Christian can cultivate a heart that desires to obey God by getting in a small group that upholds each other in prayer and talks about how to live the Christian life.

But in the moment when sin comes calling, do what Joseph did: He *fled, and went outside* (v12). I once heard an old Bible teacher say, ‘The only way to fight sin is on a dead run!’ Joseph knew it. You and I know it, too.

- *Our faith in God is strengthened each time we resist sin.*

Joseph didn’t grow up in a vacuum. He was surrounded by brothers who lived deceitful and violent lives. Joseph had to dedicate himself to follow the Lord. It wasn’t easy or automatic. Sometimes we paint biblical heroes as if they were supernatural, but that’s a fallacy. Joseph had determined to put God first in his life, and that storehouse of spiritual strength enabled him to say ‘No’ to sin.

But there’s more here: Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers, but he didn’t give in to anger or despair. He instead chose to continue living his life as before, and because of his character, God blessed him with success in Potiphar’s house.

When Potiphar’s wife falsely accused him and he was put in jail, it was the same thing all over again, except that he had been through this before. God brought him through once, and He could do it again.

The principal: Every time you say ‘No’ to sin, you gain more strength to say ‘No’ the next time.

- *God rewards those who deny sin and self, and follow Him.*

But the greatest lesson in this story is about God, and the way He rewards those who follow Him. If the story of Joseph’s life ended at Genesis 39, most career counselors would consider him a failure: He went from favorite son to slave to prison. That’s a negative trajectory!

And yet woven into the narrative again and again is the Lord’s blessing (2,3,5,6,21,23): Joseph suffered for doing what was right – not once, but twice, but even in the time of his suffering, the narrator wants us to see the ‘unseen’ hand of God, always at work.

I don’t know what trials you or I will face in the coming week, or month, or year. Christians all around the world today are enduring hardship for their faith. Often, just the ‘circumstances of life’ may seem to be against us, and we wonder why, if we are seeking to follow the Lord, He doesn’t heal sickness, solve our problems, or make us happy. While we may endure hardship, however, God is not unaware of our faithfulness, and will reward us.

For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. (1 Peter 2.19-20)

Digging Deeper

1. Society today lacks moral direction. Promiscuity is the norm. 'If it feels good, do it' is the 'moral compass' for a generation. Joseph's commitment to sexual purity flies in the face of this self-destructive ethic. What factors in Joseph's life would have heightened the lure of temptation to have sex with Potiphar's wife? How did he 'fight' her tempting advances?
2. This section of the 'Joseph narrative' in Genesis develops in three 'scenes:' Rising in power and influence as a servant in Potiphar's house; resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife and being falsely accused; being thrown in prison where he rises in power and influence. Joseph is a man of godly character, as has been seen before, yet for the second time, he suffers for doing what is right. Does this seem 'unfair' to you? What purposes might God have for allowing the righteous to suffer?
3. Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of unwanted sexual advances. Where have we seen this in recent national events? How should we as Christians respond to charges of sexual assault in a "Me-too Movement" environment?
4. Have you ever been falsely accused of doing wrong, when you knew you had done what was right? How did it make you feel? Did you feel the temptation to get back at your accusers? If you did gain revenge, how did it make you feel? What life lessons can we learn through suffering for Christ?
5. Behind this whole episode is the faithful hand of God. To get a perspective on His 'unseen' role when we face suffering, read 1 Pet 2.19-20; Matt 5.10-12; James 1.2-4; and 1 Cor. 10.13. In the world today, countless believers endure hardship for their faith. Often, just the 'circumstances of life' seem to be against us, and we wonder why, if we are seeking to follow the Lord, He does not 'smooth the way' for us! What do these scriptures tell us about God's awareness of our plight, the purposes for our suffering, and the rewards for enduring trials for Him?