

DREAMS VERSUS REALITY

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



Catalog No. 20210124
Genesis 39:1-23
Fourth Message
Scott Grant
January 24, 2021

Genesis 39:1-23

For many of us, life turned out to be a lot harder than we thought. Moreover, for many of us, life in the last twelve months turned out to be a lot harder than we thought.

Joseph had dreams—God-given dreams, by all appearances. In his dreams, he was reigning. Then those dreams crashed into reality. First, his brothers threw him into a pit. Then, they sold him into slavery. What happens when dreams crash into reality? We find, in Genesis 39, that Lord is with us. We even find that he is with us when we're tempted sexually.

The author of Genesis, after telling the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, picks up where he left off in Genesis 37.

The second descent

Genesis 39:1-6a:

Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. 2 The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. 4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. 5 From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. 6 So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

Joseph's trip to Egypt marks the second of his three descents. First, his brothers threw him into a pit (Genesis 37:20-24). Now, after having been sold by his

brothers to passing Ishmaelites, he is "brought down" to Egypt and sold to Potiphar. Nevertheless, "the Lord was with Joseph," even if the Lord did nothing to prevent him from being thrown into a pit and being sold into slavery.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Lord often promises to be "with" his people before giving them an all-but-impossible task. The Lord called Abraham's family to bless all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3). The Lord is with Joseph in that he helps him succeed as a slave and bless Potiphar, an Egyptian. Remarkably, Potiphar, a pagan, can see that "the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands."

Potiphar therefore promotes Joseph to overseer, putting him in charge of his house. The move pays off: "the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake," even to the extent that "the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had." Joseph has earned the trust of Potiphar, who concerns himself only with "the food he ate," a reference to his private affairs, which probably includes his wife.

The narrator depicts Joseph along the lines of Adam, who was given "dominion" over God's creation, which is depicted in Genesis 1 as God's house, and who was put in the garden of Eden to "work it and keep it." Adam could eat of "every" tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 1:28, 2:15-17).

Join yourself to the Lord

If you are a follower of Jesus, the Lord is with you. One of the names for Jesus is Immanuel, which means "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Jesus appointed his disciples first "so that they might be with him" (Mark 3:13-15).

It's important for us to know what that means and what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that the Lord promises to protect you, for example, from being thrown into a pit, from being sold into slavery, or worse. It does mean that he promises to be with you if you are thrown into a pit, sold into slavery, or worse.

If the Lord is with us, that means first of all that we can relate to him and he can relate to us. We can share

our hearts with him as he shares his heart with us. This, whether we know it or not, is what we need, because this is what we were made for: relationship with the Lord.

We don't need the Lord to prevent us from being thrown in a pit or sold into slavery. Neither do we need the Lord to rescue us from a pit or from slavery. We need the Lord to be with us no matter where we are, no matter what we're doing, and no matter how much we're suffering—and he is.

When dreams crash into reality, you need to know that the Lord is with you. Indeed, when dreams crash into reality, you have a special opportunity to join yourself to the Lord, not least because you are more likely to sense your need for him.

The prophet Samuel anointed David king, and the Spirit came upon him. Nevertheless, David didn't immediately rise to the throne. Instead, he had to run from his enemies and ended up hiding in a cave. I have drawn much encouragement from David's prayer in that cave: "I cry to you, O Lord; / I say, 'You are my refuge, / my portion in the land of the living'" (Psalm 142:5). David has nothing—but he realizes he has the Lord, which means he has everything.

Frederick Buechner writes of the Lord, "Anyone who has ever known him has known him perhaps better in the dark than anywhere else because it is in the dark where he seems to visit most often."¹

Because the Lord was with Joseph, things didn't turn out too badly for him. Yes, he was sold into slavery, but he ended up being a successful slave. Then again, Potiphar has a wife.

One attribute too many

Genesis 39:6b-10:

So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. 7 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." 8 But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. 9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor

has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" 10 And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

Joseph is not only successful, he's also good-looking, an attribute that doesn't go unnoticed by Potiphar's wife. Up to this point in the book of Genesis, when a woman's beauty was noted, her life was threatened. Such was the case for Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, Jacob's mother. Joseph's appearance, by the way, is described with same words used to describe his mother's appearance (Genesis 29:17). Now a man's attractiveness places him in peril.

If Joseph is like Adam, Potiphar's wife is like Eve. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was desirable to Eve's "eyes," just as Joseph was desirable to the "eyes" of Potiphar's wife (Genesis 3:6).

However, whereas Adam "listened to the voice" of his wife and partook of the tree, the only thing that God withheld from him, Joseph "would not listen" to the voice of his master's wife and lie with her, the only thing his master withheld from him. Whereas Adam partook of the tree of the knowledge of good and "evil" (*ra'*), Joseph refused to do this great "wickedness" (*ra'*). Whereas Adam was unfaithful in God's house, Joseph was faithful in his master's house. Adam sinned against God, but Joseph refused to "sin against God."

Moreover, whereas Joseph's brother, Judah, sought out a prostitute, Joseph resists the rather insistent overtures of Potiphar's wife. Despite the woman's daily propositions, Joseph not only refuses to lie with her, he also refuses to lie beside her or even to be with her.

In Genesis 37, Joseph flaunted his status as the favored son. In Genesis 39, however, Joseph refuses to exploit his status as the favored slave, not to mention his favored appearance. It looks as if being thrown into a pit and being sold into slavery—and experiencing the Lord's presence—has changed him.

Stripped of his garment—again

Genesis 39:11-12:

But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, 12 she caught him by

his garment, saying, “Lie with me.” But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.

Potiphar’s wife becomes more brazen and grabs Joseph. Joseph concludes that the best way to resist Potiphar’s wife this time is not to reason with her but to run from her. Thus, he successfully resists her, and all she’s left with is his garment.

Potiphar’s wife strips Joseph of his garment, just like his brothers stripped him of his robe. His brothers sold him into slavery, dipped his robe into goat’s blood, and showed it to their father Jacob, thus allowing Jacob to conclude that Joseph had been killed by animals (Genesis 37). Now, Potiphar’s wife, having stripped Joseph of his garment, uses it to frame him.

Framed

Genesis 39:13-18:

And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, 14 she called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. 15 And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house.” 16 Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, 17 and she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. 18 But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.”

Potiphar’s wife calls in the men of the household and tells them her story. First, she seeks to enlist their sympathy by reminding them that Joseph is an outsider, a “Hebrew,” not an Egyptian like them. Second, she depicts Joseph’s supposed offense as a crime not only against her but also against “us,” thus portraying him as a threat to everyone. Third, she notes the presence of Joseph’s garment, which supposedly proves her case against him.

Potiphar’s wife then tells her husband the same story but in a way that blames him, calling Joseph a servant “whom you have brought among us.” In this respect, she’s like Adam, who blamed God for his sin: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Genesis 3:12).

Clothing likewise played a key role in Genesis 38. Tamar took off her widow’s garments and concealed her identity with a veil, and Judah, showing none of the restraint that Joseph shows, had sex with her, concluding that she was a prostitute. Tamar used clothing to deceive Judah—but for a noble cause. Potiphar’s wife uses clothing to deceive both the men of the house and her husband—but for an ignoble cause.

Tamar was able to show the evidence of her encounter with Judah: his signet ring, his cord, and his staff. Potiphar’s wife is also able to show evidence of her encounter with Joseph: his garment. The difference, of course, is that Judah was guilty and Joseph was innocent.

The third descent

Genesis 39:19-20:

As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, “This is the way your servant treated me,” his anger was kindled. 20 And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison.

When Potiphar hears his wife’s accusations, he burns with anger—but against whom? Potiphar doesn’t order Joseph’s execution but instead throws him in prison. The narrator leaves open the possibility that Potiphar doesn’t believe his wife and that he imprisons Joseph only to save face. If that’s the case, then Potiphar is angry not least with his wife, especially because he has lost the services of a servant who has blessed him.

Even so, Joseph, though he has done everything right, resisting the advances of Potiphar’s wife, has suffered for it. This marks Joseph’s third descent. In his first descent, his brothers “took him and threw him into a pit.” In his third descent, Potiphar “took him and put him into the jail,” which Joseph later refers to as “the pit” (Genesis 40:15).

Again, note the contrast between Genesis 38 and Genesis 39. Whereas Tamar is able to produce tokens that prove Judah’s guilt, Joseph has nothing to prove his innocence but a garment that is perversely used as evidence against him.

The way of escape

Is the Lord with Joseph as Potiphar’s wife tempts him, assaults him, and falsely accuses him? Of course

he is. Again, the Lord doesn't prevent Joseph from being tempted, assaulted, or falsely accused, but the Lord is with him as these things are happening. If you are tempted, the Lord is with you. If you are being assaulted, the Lord is with you. If you're being falsely accused, the Lord is with you.

Consider sexual temptation, which Joseph successfully resisted. The Lord was with him. The Lord is also with us.

Listen to the apostle Paul: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Paul is not talking specifically about sexual temptation but more generally about the temptation to worship other gods. Nevertheless, sexual temptation is a kind of temptation—a temptation that comes from worshipping other gods, in fact—and Paul promises that the Lord will "provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

Joseph escaped. He endured it. What can we learn from him—and from Paul?

Four suggestions

First, Joseph "would not listen to" Potiphar's wife. Why not? Because she spoke contrary to God's voice. First, then, listen to God's voice—especially as he speaks to you in the Scriptures. Let his voice sink deep into your heart and address your deepest longings.

Second, Joseph refused to "lie beside" Potiphar's wife or even to "be with her." Although sexual temptation will come looking for us, we can determine not to go looking for it. For example, whatever you need to do to your devices, or whatever accountability you need to build into your life to keep you from walking into temptation, do it.

Third, when everything Joseph did to resist temptation still prevented the temptation from coming to him, he didn't reason with Potiphar's wife. Instead, he "fled and got out of the house." Don't reason with temptation. Instead, run from it. Paul commands what Joseph illustrates: "Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18).

Fourth, married couples, to avoid being tempted, should have sex regularly if they can. Listen to Paul:

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (1 Corinthians 7:3-5)

What you're looking for

Nevertheless, the best sex in the best marriage is never satisfying enough, not least because it is only an illustration of the love that God wants to share with us. Paul, after warning us against joining ourselves to a prostitute, challenges us to join ourselves to the Lord (1 Corinthians 6:15-19).

Finally, then, and most importantly, whether you're married or single, join yourself to the Lord. The Lord is with you. Join yourself to him. Pour out your heart to him. Open your heart to him. What we're looking for in sexual temptation—a little exhilaration, a little validation—we can find to a greater degree in an ever-deepening relationship with the Lord. Remember, the Lord, not sexual fulfillment, is your portion in the land of the living.

Augustine, who indulged himself sexually, joined himself to the Lord and finally said in his famous *Confessions*, "How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose! . . . You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure."

And if you've failed—and who among us hasn't?—we not only have the story of Joseph in Genesis 39, we also have the story of Judah in Genesis 38. Judah joined himself to a prostitute—rather, a woman he thought was a prostitute—but later confessed and began to be transformed.

Consider, though, what happens to Judah and what happens to Joseph. Sexually, Judah does everything wrong, confesses, and lives in freedom. Sexually, Joseph does everything right, is betrayed, and is thrown into prison. Why does the Lord allow each to be treated each

differently? The answer has to be that the Lord knows each intimately, knows what each one needs, and has unique plans for each.

Now that Joseph is in prison, is the Lord still with him?

In the prison

Genesis 39:21-23:

But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. 22 And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. 23 The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.

Just as the Lord was with Joseph when he was brought down to Egypt, the Lord is with Joseph when he is thrown into prison. The Lord didn't prevent Joseph from being sold into slavery. He didn't prevent Joseph from being thrown into prison. Nevertheless, the Lord has been "with" Joseph, in the house where he was a slave and the house where he's a prisoner. Literally, Joseph was put in the "house of imprisonment."

Oftentimes, the Lord doesn't prevent evil. Instead, he outflanks it. We especially see this divine strategy in the story of Joseph.

The narrator even adds that the Lord showed Joseph "steadfast love," two words that translate the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is connected to the Lord's covenant with Abraham. Joseph, a descendant of Abraham, is the Lord's covenant partner. In the prison, the Lord continues to form Joseph into a man who embraces the sacred family's commission to bless all the families of the earth.

What happened in the house of slavery also happens in the house of imprisonment:

—Joseph "found favor" in Potiphar's "sight." Likewise, the Lord gives Joseph "favor in the sight of" the keeper of the prison.

—Potiphar made Joseph overseer of his house and "put him in charge of all that he had." Likewise, the

keeper of the prison "put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison."

—In Potiphar's house, "the Lord caused all that he did to succeed." Likewise, in the house of imprisonment, whatever Joseph did, "the Lord made it succeed."

—Because of Joseph, Potiphar had no concern about "anything" except the food he ate. Likewise, because of Joseph, the keeper of the prison paid no attention to "anything" that was in Joseph's charge.

This isn't what Joseph dreamed, is it? He dreamed that he would rule over his brothers and that his family would bow before him. He didn't dream that he would be sold into slavery, falsely accused, and thrown into prison.

Nevertheless, in both houses, the house of slavery and the house of imprisonment, the Lord has been with Joseph—with him to be in relationship with him but also with him so that he might bless others.

Seek to bless

Indeed, the Lord is with us in these ways also, first that we might be in relationship with him and second that we might be a blessing to others, even if our dreams have crashed into reality.

At the beginning of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is called Immanuel, which means "God with us." At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus commissions his disciples to make disciples of all nations and adds, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus appointed his disciples first "so that they might be with him," in relationship with him, and second that "he might send them out to preach and to have authority to cast out demons" (Mark 3:13-15). Bless the nations, Jesus tells us, and he is with us.

First things first: join yourself to the Lord. Share your heart with him and open your heart to his steadfast love. As you join yourself to the Lord, you will sense his heart not only for you but also for others. As you develop your relationship with the Lord, he will be with you so that you may bless others.

Whatever house you end up in, even if it's something like a house of slavery or something like a house of imprisonment, seek to be a blessing in that place. Insofar as he makes us successful, he does so in order that we might bless others. He blesses us that we might be a blessing.

When dreams crash into reality, you need to know that the Lord is with you. Indeed, when dreams crash into reality, you have a special opportunity not only to join yourself to the Lord but also to bless others, not least because you oftentimes become more sensitized to the needs of others.

The apostle Paul was thrown into prison and he led the jailer to Christ (Acts 16:25-34). In another prison, he did a little writing. That prison became the womb of the New Testament.

Greatness out of affliction

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned during World War II because of his opposition to the Nazis. British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge writes about what happened next to Bonhoeffer:

*In his cell . . . the theologian became a mystic, the pastor became a martyr, and the teacher produces, in his **Letters and Papers from Prison**, one of the great contemporary classics of Christian literature . . . His greatness grew directly out of his affliction, and through the very hopelessness of his earthly state, he was able to generate hope at a dark moment in history, when it was most sorely needed, comforting and heartening many.*

Would a Bonhoeffer rise up to generate hope at this dark moment in history!

I tend to pay special attention to followers of Jesus who have suffered a lot. Sometimes, it's not what they say or even how they say it; it's *that* they say it. They've walked through the valley of the shadow of death, and they're still following Jesus. In fact, they love him more than ever. Those people have my ear.

How specifically might you be a blessing? Join yourself to the Lord day by day, especially when dreams crash into reality, and you'll figure it out—day by day.

The story isn't over yet

When dreams crash into reality, the Lord is with you. Therefore, join yourself to the Lord and seek to bless others.

Joseph's dreams crashed into reality. He was sold into slavery. He was falsely accused. He was thrown into prison. But his story isn't over yet. In fact, it's just beginning. His dreams—indeed, they were given to him by God—would be fulfilled. He couldn't have imagined, though, what he had to go through for them to be fulfilled. Neither could he begin to imagine how they would be fulfilled. What a story!

When dreams crash into reality, remember: the story isn't over yet.

Endnotes

- 1 Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992).
- 2 Malcolm Muggeridge, *A Third Testament* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 184.