
Fleeing Sin

Genesis 39

Introduction Long is the dusty road from sonship to slavery, from home with father to Egypt. Joseph enters the fabled land lightly bound as a commodity, a slave. Egypt was a dazzling place of wonders and wickedness. Huge buildings and monuments, wide avenues bordered by graceful palms all white in quarried stone spoke of its vast wealth and place in the world. The Egyptians were immersed in a pantheon of idolatry that governed almost every aspect of life. Each region had its own signature god. The gods were awakened each morning. They were bathed in pure water and perfumes. They were fed sumptuous breakfasts and offered sacrifices.

Into this whirling bewildering world, Joseph is plunged. From the simple naivety of a rustic shepherd's life to the thrumming pace and complex intrigues of the largest commercial city in the world, he comes with quiet heart. Yes, all that follows tells us that he is humbled and bowed in head to his Egyptian masters and in heart to his sovereign God.

While Judah is involved in the sexual shenanigans of Genesis 38, Joseph is rejecting worldliness and sexual temptation in Genesis 39. The sordid story of Judah is the dark shadow against which the bright obedience and faithfulness of Joseph shines.

This is a stunning story of a fierce commitment to righteousness and a false accusation of rape. Yet at each step, God's guiding hand is moving his being humbled servant and his being trained leader ever closer to the Pharaoh's court.

Faithfulness Leads to Greater Responsibility (v.1-6a)

Our scene opens with our main character standing on an auction block, far from home. Here, his *TRUST* in God enables him and encourages him.

In a Difficult Place, Slavery

Imagine yourself as a seventeen year old teenager being sold by your siblings to traders. You are brought to a different country, with a different language, culture and religion. There you are bought by a high ranking military official who serves as the commander of the palace guard. Your master is prestigious, powerful and prosperous. He takes you home and puts in household service.

This is the situation of Joseph. He has fallen from a favored son to a humbled slave. He is another man's possession. He has none of the comforts of his home, neither the encouragement of his family nor the hope of a bright future. For most of us, we would be grumbling and crumbling. We can hardly stand the adversity of a bit of health trouble, a hard boss, a demanding spouse – how would we possibly bear up under such crushing circumstances?

With a Rising Position, Authority

So Joseph begins to labor in Potiphar's household. As he works, it soon becomes evident that he is not the norm for slaves. He is faithful and diligent to all the tasks he is given. He is cheerful, respectful and successful in all he does. Potiphar notes that and in conversations with Joseph learns of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Yahweh, the Lord. Joseph must be attributing his attitude and ability to the Lord, for Potiphar sees what is happening as the blessing of God.

Step by step, Potiphar entrusts Joseph with more and more responsibility. As Joseph serves and leads, God blesses what he puts his hand to. Soon, Potiphar has placed Joseph in charge of the whole household. He has become the household manager, overseeing all the laborers and slaves, both in the fields and in the home. Potiphar is being freed from all the grind of daily details so that he can concentrate, presumably, upon his work in the Pharaoh's court.

To a Growing Prosperity, Blessing

Under Joseph's hand and with God's blessing, Potiphar prospers even more. He was already a rich and important person. But it was evident and plain to all that the upsurge in wealth and the lowering of worry were all the result of Joseph's growing personal skill and attendant Divine blessing. Moses is highlighting the connection between Joseph's faithfulness and God's blessing. Joseph is growing in authority and responsibility, a blessing in its own right. But his faithfulness is bringing riches, not to himself, but rather to his master. Potiphar's household is a preparation time and proving ground for the skills he will need later. God is at work to prepare him for what God will thrust upon him in a national calamity.

God's people need to learn three important lessons.

Faithfulness is best exhibited in the midst of severe difficulty.

The measure of your Christian character and maturity is not in how well you do when all is well, but in how faithful you are in the midst of hardships. We are a soft lot. Where is the tough endurance that will simply keep grinding at the hard tasks of life and ministry? Where is our joyful enduring faithfulness?

Faithfulness is most blest when it brings good to others.

We should aim to be faithful so that God's blessing may bring good to others. Selfishness, not faithfulness, will stay at a task and expect that it will bring the blessing of benefit to me. Will we be faithful when others primarily seem to be benefiting?

Faithfulness in small things is training for and qualification for responsibility in larger things.

God intends smaller spheres of life to be the preparation and proving grounds for larger spheres of responsibility. You cannot be an elder unless you have learned to manage your own home well. Elders are primarily trained, not by intense theological instruction, but by practical faithfulness at home.

So faithfulness in the midst of hardship brings ever increasing responsibility and the blessing of good for others.

Faithfulness Enables Sin's Resistance (v.6-18)

God's purposes and plans also include *TESTS*. Joseph has been faithful to his master, now will he be faithful to his God?

Against a Persistent Temptation, Refusal (v.6-10)

In a ironic twist, Joseph has been so responsible that Potiphar's only concern at home was his food. But evidently, he should have been paying attention to his home more carefully. He really should have been concerned about his wife.

Joseph was a handsome man. He was not only good looking, as Moses puts it, but evidently his character and personality were winsome and attractive. Potiphar's wife casts her eyes upon him in lust. She tempts him, inviting him to come lie with her. She begins with an invitation, words of persuasion.

Joseph refuses her. He is in a position of trust, not just authority. He has been given responsibility over everything in the household, except Potiphar's wife. Not because necessarily it ever occurred to Potiphar to exclude her, but rather because she was his wife. Potiphar trusts him and he will not violate that trust.

Joseph also refuses her because he will be faithful to God. He knows that this is a great sin. He knows that God has forbidden adultery. He will not sin against God. It might be possible to hide this from Potiphar, but not from God. Notice how he phrases this as a question, a question of amazement and reverential fear. "How can I possibly do this and sin against God?"

But she was constantly trying to get him to bed her. Wisely, he not only refuses in the face of this persistent temptation to not lie with her, he also refuses even to be with her. He refuses to spend time with her even in casual interaction. You would think that this would be noticeable to Potiphar. My guess is that her flirtatious manner and seductive ways were no surprise to him. But faithful Joseph is trusted implicitly.

In an Aggressive Seduction, Flight (v.11-12)

We all know the little saying about "a woman scorned..." Joseph is about to find out. One day when Joseph is in the house doing his work, Mrs. Potiphar notices that there are no other men in the house. They are effectively alone. Whatever happens now, there will be no one to catch them and no one as a witnesses. She has been scheming to waylay him, to overcome his avoidance of her and his resistance against her.

On this day, I think we have more than words. Now, she is aggressively seducing him. She reaches out to grab his garment, to get his attention and maybe even to undress him. Her former attempts have persistent, but more demur. Not now – she has grabbed him and ordered him, this slave, to lie with her. In the face of this aggressive seduction, Joseph turns to leave. But she has hold of his garment. She won't let go and he can't break loose, so he shucks it off and runs from the house.

With a False Accusation, Ruin**(v.13-18)**

She cannot believe he has done this to her! How dare he? Who does he think he is? She is going to destroy him. With the coat in her hand, a plan forms in her mind. See her follow him out to the porch, her clothing in disarray and maybe even torn, her makeup mussed, one sandal missing, face flushed and breath short. Ah, the very picture of an innocent wife assaulted in her own home. As he flees away, she calls out to the men who were working nearby. Listen to her disdain for Potiphar. “He has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us.” Do you hear? It is becoming evident that her attempt to seduce Joseph was in some way aimed at Potiphar.

Listen to her accusation against Joseph, “He came in to the house to lie with me and I cried out and defended myself. Look, I have his clothes right here in my hand.” So here is the evidence: he took advantage of no one being in the house and his special position as being the household manager, he was seen running from the house. No one responded to her cry for help. He left his garment (some think this may well have been the wrapped undergarment that Egyptian men wore under their tunics).

She repeats this to Potiphar. She, who has acted with depraved dishonor stands with affronted righteousness. Through it she is challenging Potiphar’s judgment, blaming him for creating the situation. She is accusing Joseph of attempted rape, destroying his character. This is one crafty, wicked woman worthy almost any soap-opera.

Let’s consider the following before we move on.

Faithfulness will not guarantee that you will never face temptation even powerful ones.

Walking with God in daily faithfulness is no guarantee that He will not allow you to be tempted. Jesus lives a perfectly holy life and is besieged by temptations from without.

Faithfulness in temptations will focus primarily on not sinning against God, as well as not violating the trust of others.

Living “before the face of God”, that is, the fear of God, will strengthen our resolve and sustain our righteousness even in the midst of the most provocative of temptations.

Faithfulness in temptation may incur the anger and false accusations of others.

Resisting sin, particularly when we are resisting a temptation offered by someone, may well put us in their cross-hairs. Do not be surprised when sinful people try to destroy you for refusing temptation.

So the faithfulness of God’s people, to God and to others around them, enables resistance to sin and persistence in righteousness.

Faithfulness is not Always Rewarded (v.19-23)

So, what will happen now? Will God intervene to expose the false accusation? Will Joseph's faithfulness be rewarded? Not as it appears at this point. The transforming work of God's providence allows another fall, a fall from slavery to prison.

In an Unjust Punishment, Humility (v.19-20)

When Potiphar hears the words, "Your servant has treated me this way," Potiphar is angry. Who he is angry at is ambiguous. Presumably, he knows what she is like. He doubts her story. He may well be angry with her for putting him in his situation. How do we know that? Because the normal punishment under Egyptian code, for any rape by a slave, was execution by the master's hand. But this is not what Potiphar does. He puts him in the court prison. If he is truly angry with Joseph, then confine him in the Pharaoh's prison?

Just as Moses had repeated several times about Joseph's going down to Egypt, down to Egypt as a slave, he repeats that Joseph now goes down to prison. He is in a prison where the Pharaoh's prisoners are kept. It is unjust and humiliating. It seems to be another step down. It reminds Israel of their own history. They went down to Egypt. They became slaves in Egypt. They were prisoners in Egypt. All these steps down though are in God's plan, guided by His providential care.

In a Terrible Circumstance, Grace (v.21-23)

But even in prison, Joseph is a faithful man. There he is given more and more responsibility. Again, I take this as confirmation that Potiphar is somewhat looking after him. It is a cruel mercy, but better than death. Soon, he, as a prisoner, is second-in-charge of all the wards. The jailor, like Potiphar, trusts Joseph so much that he needs to pay little attention to the running of the prison.

How does Joseph do this? The Bible attributes his amazing maturity and success to three key elements:

Faithfulness is encouraged by recognizing the steadfast love of God.

Here is God's covenant love, unfailing and unfading even in the loneliness and unloveliness of an Egyptian prison.

Faithfulness is enabled by the strengthening grace from God.

Everywhere that Joseph has served, God has given him favor in the eyes of his masters. This showing favor is an Old Testament way of speaking of the enabling grace of God. Its effect is to energize hard work in difficult circumstances and to cause even unbelievers to acknowledge it and respond to it.

Faithfulness endures when it is seen as serving labor for God.

Joseph sees himself as serving God. He resists the seductive power of both a lady and laziness. Here in prison, he could have succumbed to the self-pity of laziness and indolence. But he does not. He simply moves forward with faithful diligence even in the midst of the most terrible and trying of circumstances.

So, faithfulness may not be rewarded by preserving us from trial or trouble.

As we have moved through the text this morning, we have illuminated some important lessons we need to learn. As we close, let us again highlight these for our growth and change. **Lessons**

- Faithfulness is best exhibited in the midst of severe difficulty.
- Faithfulness is most blest when it brings good to others.
- Faithfulness in small things is training for and qualification for responsibility in larger things.
- Faithfulness will not guarantee that you will never face temptation even powerful ones.
- Faithfulness in temptations will focus primarily on not sinning against God, as well as not violating the trust of others.
- Faithfulness in temptation may incur the anger and false accusations of others.
- Faithfulness is encouraged by recognizing the steadfast love of God.
- Faithfulness is enabled by the strengthening grace from God.
- Faithfulness endures when it is seen as serving labor for God.

Jesus is faithful in all that God gave him. He was severely tempted, falsely accused and put to death. His faithful service to God and righteousness brought good to others, that is, our salvation. Joseph then points us to both the person of the Lord and a pattern of Christian living to be embraced with joy.

Are you a faithful person? Let's examine ourselves carefully:

Are regularly and diligently doing your work at home?

Are you faithful to all your tasks and responsibilities at work or school?

Are you doing all the work of one another, serving with your gifts, diligent to care about others, attending to your Bible reading and prayer?

Are you resisting sin, faithful to God? What destructive temptations are being offered you and how are you refusing and running?

Are you faithful when it is hard: when there are difficult trials, setbacks, opposition, false accusations, loss of status, place, position, power?

May God raise up many Josephs among us: believers who are faithful in being trusted, while being tested and faithful in the midst of trials.