

Genesis Chapter 39

Genesis 39:1 "And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him of the hands of the Ishmaelites, which had brought him down thither."

"And Joseph was brought down to Egypt": By the Ishmaelites (Genesis 37:28); as in a following.

"And Potiphar an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian": As his name also shows, which signifies the fruit of Pot or Phut, that is, the son or grandson of one of that name. Which might be common in Egypt, since it was the name of a son of Ham (Gen. 10:6), from whom the land of Egypt is called the land of Ham (Psalm 105:23).

Of this man and his offices (see Gen. 37:36).

"He bought him": That is, "Joseph":

"Of the hands of the Ishmaelites, who had brought him down thither": What they gave for him we know, but what they sold him for to Potiphar is not said; no doubt they got a good price for him, and his master had a good bargain too, as appears by what follows in the next verse.

"Potiphar" (see note on 37:36).

"Ishmaelites" (see note on 37:25).

Now, we see an officer of Pharaoh's buying Joseph as a slave boy, and bringing him as a servant into his home. Egypt, as we mentioned before, is a type of the world?

Verses 2-4: "Prosperous ... overseer over his house": This involved the authority and trust as the steward of the whole estate (verse 5, "house and in the field" and verse 9, "none greater"), one of the criteria for which was trust. No doubt Joseph was conversant in the Egyptian language (see note on 29:9).

Genesis 39:2 "And the LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian."

The key to Joseph's whole life is expressed in the words "the Lord was with him" and "the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand".

Any and all ideas that Joseph, twice a victim of injustice, had been abandoned by the Lord are summarily banished by the employment of phrases highlighting God's oversight of his circumstances, e.g.:

"With him" (verses 3, 21),

“Made all he did to prosper” (verse 3:23),
“Found/gave him favor” (verses 4, 21),
“Blessed/blessing” (verse 5), and
“Showed mercy to him” (verse 21).

Neither being unjustly sold into slavery and forcibly removed from the Land (37:28), nor being unjustly accused of sexual harassment and imprisoned (verses 13-18), were events signaling even a temporary loss of divine superintendence of Joseph’s life and God’s purpose for His people, Israel.

God blessed Joseph, even while he was a servant in Potiphar’s house. We see whatever circumstances we find God's people in, He will bless them.

Genesis 39:3 "And his master saw that the LORD [was] with him, and that the LORD made all that he did to prosper in his hand."

"And his master saw that the Lord was with him": He knew nothing of the spiritual and gracious presence of God that was with him, he was no judge of that. But he perceived by the ingenuity of his mind, by his ready and speedy learning the Egyptian language, and by his dexterity in business.

And by the prudence and faithfulness with which he did everything, that he was highly favored by the divine Being, and had great endowments bestowed upon him, and was an extraordinary person for his age.

"And that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand": And though Potiphar might have no knowledge of the true Jehovah, whose name he uses, yet he might have a notion of a Supreme Being, and that all outward prosperity was owing to him.

And knowing Joseph to be a Hebrew, as it is plain his wife did (Genesis 39:14); and Jehovah to be the God of the Hebrews, he imputes all the prosperity that attended Joseph and his services unto his God.

The blessings God showers on His people do not go unnoticed by the world. Even this man of Egypt knew where the blessings came from.

Genesis 39:4 "And Joseph found grace in his sight, and he served him: and he made him overseer over his house, and all [that] he had he put into his hand."

"And Joseph found grace in his sight": In the sight of his master, as he did in the sight of God, he had favor both with God and man. His master had a high esteem of him, and a great value for him, and showed him much kindness and respect.

"And he served him": Readily, willingly, cheerfully, and faithfully. Or he served him personally; his master took such a liking to him, that he selected him from the rest of his servants

to wait on his person. And to be what we now call a "valet de chambre", whose business was to dress and undress him, to wait upon him at table, etc.

"And he made him overseer over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand": That is, after he had served him some time, in the capacity of a valet, he advanced him. And made him the head servant, or steward of his house, and committed all his business, cash, and accounts to his care, and put all his servants under him.

Genesis 39:5 "And it came to pass from the time [that] he had made him overseer in his house, and over all that he had, that the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the LORD was upon all that he had in the house, and in the field."

"And it came to pass from the time that he had made him overseer in his house, and over all that he had": How long he was in this office is not certain; there must be some time for the following observation; and during all the time he was in it, it was easily discerned.

"That the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; That is, much more than before": everything under his hands succeeded before, but now much more abundantly. Potiphar's family was blessed with health, his substance increased, he grew rich and wealthy, and abounded with all good things.

"And the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had in the house, and in the field": His domestic affairs prospered, his fields brought forth plentifully, his cattle were fruitful and stood well. Everything belonging to him within doors and without happily succeeded, through the blessing of God upon it, and all for Joseph's sake.

"Blessing of the Lord": Joseph as experiencing fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, even at that time before Israel was in the Land (see 12:1-3).

Genesis 39:6 "And he left all that he had in Joseph's hand; and he knew not ought he had, save the bread which he did eat. And Joseph was [a] goodly [person], and well-favored."

"Save the bread which he did eat": Since Joseph proved trust-worthy enough to need no oversight, his master concerned himself only with his own meals or his very own personal affairs. Joseph himself remarked that Potiphar had delegated to him so much, that he no longer knew the full extent of his own business affairs (verse 8); in fact, he knew only what was set before him (verse 6).

It seems that Joseph's blessings from God had won him favor with Potiphar. In fact, Potiphar had so much confidence in Joseph that he turned everything over to Joseph. Joseph's success had been so great that Potiphar didn't even keep account of what he had.

He let Joseph do that. He had learned to trust Joseph in everything. Joseph had shown him he was a man of character. His goodness showed in everything he did.

Genesis 39:7 "And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me."

“Lie with me” were the words of his master’s wife. Joseph’s reasons for refusing (verses 8-9), were those that another man might have given for yielding.

That he was free from supervision, that he had made a rapid rise in authority which had corrupted other stewards (Isa. 22:15-25; Luke 16:1), and his realization that only one realm was forbidden to him were all arguments for his being disloyal.

You see, Joseph was young and handsome. He was in the house regularly where this worldly woman lived. The master was not there, because Joseph had taken so much of the responsibility off Potiphar it was not necessary for him to work at home. The Bible does not say, but we might assume that Potiphar was older and more occupied away from home.

His wife is pampered and bored. That usually causes problems. Idleness brings sin. She could see in Joseph the things she wished for in her husband. She tried to seduce Joseph to sleep with her, which is adultery (a terrible sin in the sight of God).

Genesis 39:8 "But he refused, and said unto his master's wife, Behold, my master wotteth not what [is] with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand;"

"But he refused, and said unto his master's wife": Reasoning with her about the evil nature of the crime she tempted him to, which to commit would be ingratitude, as well as injury to his master, and a sin against God.

By which it appears that Joseph was a partaker of the grace of God, and that this was in strong exercise at this time, by which he was preserved from the temptation he was beset with.

"Behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house": What goods or money are in it.

"And he hath committed all that he hath to my hand": Such confidence did he place in him, wherefore to do such an injury to him as to commit adultery with his wife, would be making a sad return, and acting a most ungrateful part for such favor shown him.

Genesis 39:9 "[There is] none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou [art] his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

“This great wickedness”: Joseph explained, when first tempted, that adultery would be a gross violation of his ethical convictions which demanded (1) the utmost respect for his master and (2) a life of holiness before his God.

Far more was involved than compliance with the letter of an ancient Near Eastern law-code, many of which did forbid adultery, but rather obedience to the moral standards belonging to one who walked with God, and that long before Mosaic law-code prescriptions applied (Psalm 51:4).

He called the proposition “wickedness” and said it was “sin against God”. But she persisted “day by day” (Samson twice in his career in Judges 14:17; 16:16).

Joseph did what we must do when we are tempted to sin. Just simply say no! He told this wicked woman that Potiphar had been good to him. A man would not, and should not, share his wife. This was the only thing that he had withheld from Joseph, and rightly so. I love this last part.

Joseph told her, that even if it was alright with Potiphar, it would not be alright with God. Joseph knew this was wickedness in God's sight. He would not sin against God.

Verses 10-18: Her incessant efforts to seduce Joseph failed in the face of his strong convictions not to yield or be compromised. At flash-point, Joseph fled! Based on false accusation, Joseph was deemed guilty and imprisoned (see 2 Timothy 2:22), for a New Testament picture of Joseph’s attitude.

Genesis 39:10 "And it came to pass, as she spake to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her, [or] to be with her."

“And it came to pass, that as she spake to Joseph day by day”: Continually, incessantly, hoping in time to prevail upon him to comply with her desires. So that the temptation, as it was strong, and very ensnaring, it was urgent, and frequent, and pressed with great importunity; which required the more grace and spiritual strength to resist.

"That he hearkened not unto her": Not only did not yield to her, but would not give her a hearing, at least as little as possible he could, lest he should be overcome by her persuasions.

"To lie by her, or to be with her": She might tempt him to lie by her, if he would not lie with her; or to lie, as Aben Ezra interprets it, in a place near her, in a chamber next to hers, in hopes by degrees to gain her point.

But he would not yield to either, nor to be in her company, and have any conversation with her, at least as little as possible, that he might not be in the way of temptation, and be led into it. Though these phrases may all signify carnal copulation with her, which was what his mistress solicited, and he would not hearken to her in, and comply with her.

Evidently, he would not even “be with her.”

This temptation, it seems, was every day. She was persistent. Joseph had to tell her no every day.

Genesis 39:11 "And it came to pass about this time, that [Joseph] went into the house to do his business; and [there was] none of the men of the house there within."

"And it came to pass about this time": About a week, or a month, or rather a year, as Aben Ezra thinks, after she first began her solicitations to him. According to Josephus, it was a public festival, at which women used to attend.

But she excused herself, pretending illness; and so Jarchi takes it to be some noted day at the idol's temple, to which all used to go. But she pretended she was sick, and could not go, knowing that Joseph would not be there, but at home, and therefore judged this a fit opportunity to attack him once more.

"That Joseph went into the house to do his business": To inspect the accounts, as the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan paraphrase it, and settle them.

"And there was none of the men of the house there within": Being all gone to the public festival, or however there were none in that part of the house where Joseph was.

Genesis 39:12 "And she caught him by his garment, saying, Lie with me: and he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and got him out."

"His garment" (see 37:31-35), for the other time one of Joseph's cloaks was used in a conspiracy against him.

Joseph's actions are to be contrasted with Reuben's (35:22), and Judah's (38:16). Her first approach involved flattery (verse 7), then the drawn-out enticing (verse 10), and finally the ambush (verse 12).

Joseph fled, not like a coward, but in the preservation of his honor, which the New Testament commands (2 Tim. 2:22; 2 Peter 1:4).

First of all, it would be dangerous to be in this house alone with her. There is nothing more vindictive than a woman scorned. He should never have gone in that house without someone else there. Now, she had his garment. How could he prove he had not slept with her?

Genesis 39:13 "And it came to pass, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, and was fled forth,"

"And it came to pass, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand": And so all hopes of succeeding in her addresses to him were over.

"And he was fled forth": Into the streets or to somewhere out of the house, where business was carried on by servants under him.

Genesis 39:14 "That she called unto the men of her house, and spake unto them, saying, See, he hath brought in a Hebrew unto us to mock us; he came in unto me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice:"

"That she called unto the men of her house": Of that part of the house which belonged to her; her eunuchs that waited upon her or that were in another part of the home, at some distance.

"And spake unto them": When they came to her.

"Saying, see, he hath brought in a Hebrew unto us to mock us": She means her husband, whom through contempt, and in her passion, she names not, having lost all affection for him, as her addresses to Joseph showed.

And so the Targum of Jonathan supplies it, "your master hath brought", etc. And Joseph she calls a Hebrew by way of reproach, and with a view to set her servants against him.

Who before this might not have any great regard to him through envy at him, for the favors he enjoyed, and the authority he had. And because he prevented their doing wrong things to serve themselves, and hurt their master.

And holding up his garment in her hand, which they knew full well, bid them look at it, and observe, that this was the issue of his Being brought into the house by their master.

That though it was not with such an intention, which can hardly be thought to be her sense, yet this, was the event of it. An attempt to abuse, spoil and corrupt her. And so bring contempt upon the whole family. And expose them to the scorn and mockery of men, for their mistress to be abused by a base foreigner.

"He came in unto me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice": Both lies for it was she that solicited him to lie with her, and not he. Nor did she cry out at all; and if she did, how was it she was not heard by them when she called unto them.

Thus, her impure love was turned into hatred, which put her upon framing lies and slanders.

Genesis 39:15 "And it came to pass, when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried, that he left his garment with me, and fled, and got him out."

"And it came to pass, when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried": He attempting to ravish her, as she would have it understood, but afraid, lest upon her outcry those that were in the house should come in to her assistance, and seize on him.

"That he left his garment with me, and fled, and got him out": But why should he strip himself of his garment, and leave that behind him? He might have fled with it.

She had set Joseph up by lying to the other men servants. She had to tell that she cried out for help, or she would be stoned to death. There is no one more anxious to get revenge, than a woman scorned. She was out to get even with Joseph for turning her away. She now was going to try to get Joseph in more trouble with her husband.

When a woman wants to get even with a man, and cries rape, he has no way to prove it is not so.

Genesis 39:16 "And she laid up his garment by her, until his lord came home."

"And she laid up his garment by her": As a proof of what she laid to his charge, and as a testimony against him.

"Until her lord came home": Or until his lord came home, for the pronoun refers to Potiphar, and so Jarchi interprets it; who either was gone on a journey, or gone to court that day, being an officer of Pharaoh's, or to the public place where the festival was kept that day, if there was such a one.

Genesis 39:17 "And she spake unto him according to these words, saying, The Hebrew servant, which thou hast brought unto us, came in unto me to mock me:"

"Hebrew servant": This term was used by Potiphar's wife as disapproval, intended to heap scorn upon someone considered defiantly unworthy of any respect. Its use may also suggest some latent attitudes toward dwellers in Canaan, which could be aggravated to her advantage.

Potiphar's wife also neatly shifted the blame onto her husband for having hired the Hebrew in the first place (verses 16-18), and stated this also before the servants (verse 14).

Genesis 39:18 "And it came to pass, as I lifted up my voice and cried, that he left his garment with me, and fled out."

"And it came to pass, as I lifted up my voice and cried": For help from the servants, and frightened at his insolent attempt.

"That he left his garment with me, and fled out": Then she brought it forth, and showed him it.

Verses 19-20: The death penalty for adultery may not have applied to a charge of attempted adultery, attempted seduction or rape (verses 14, 18), so Potiphar consigned Joseph to the prison reserved for royal servants. From where, in the providence of God, he would be summoned into Pharaoh's presence and begin the next stage of his life (chapters 40-41; see note on 40:3-4).

Genesis 39:19 "And it came to pass, when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spake unto him, saying, After this manner did thy servant to me; that his wrath was kindled."

"And it came to pass, when his master heard the words of his wife": The story she related concerning Joseph, which was her own invention, and a lie.

"Which she spake unto him, saying, after this manner did thy servant to me": Attempting to violate her chastity, as she pretended.

"That his wrath was kindled": That is, against Joseph, without strictly examining her words, which they would not bear up, her story being but badly put together, and without hearing Joseph's defense.

One thing a man will not stand for is anyone making advances to his wife. Potiphar had no way of knowing that she was lying, so he became furious with Joseph.

Genesis 39:20 "And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners [were] bound: and he was there in the prison."

"And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison": Which was in or adjoining to his house (Gen. 40:3). He had power to do this, as the captain of the guard; and as he was the chief of the executioners, as some take his office to be. It is much he did not, in his passion, deliver him up into their hands to put him to death at once.

But it may be through the great respect he had had for Joseph, which was not wholly extinguished by this impeachment of him. Especially if he heard Joseph's apology for himself before he committed him, his passion might subside a little.

Though for the credit of his wife he might take this step. Or however things were so overruled by the providence of God, who has the hearts of all men in his hands, that he should do what he did.

"A place where the king's prisoners were bound": Such as were guilty of high treason, or however of high crimes and misdemeanors against him. And so was a prison in which men were strictly kept and used hardly, as was Joseph at first, as appears from (Psalm 105:18).

"And he was there in the prison": he continued there, some of the Jewish writers say ten years, others twelve. And so long he must be, if he was but one year in Potiphar's house; for there were thirteen years between his being sold into Egypt, and his appearance before Pharaoh.

He was seventeen when he was sold, and he was thirty when he stood before Pharaoh, being taken out of prison (see Gen. 37:2). But it is more likely that he was a longer time in Potiphar's house, and a lesser time in prison.

Potiphar was in charge of this prison. Joseph had no way to defend himself. Potiphar, in his anger, jailed Joseph. Why he did not kill him was not explained. God protected Joseph, even in this. Joseph was innocent.

Genesis 39:21 "But the LORD was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison."

"And the Lord was with Joseph": Comforting him with his presence under his afflictions; supporting him with his right hand; sanctifying all his troubles to him, and so causing him to bear them patiently and cheerfully.

"And showed him mercy, and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison": who was the underkeeper to Potiphar; God so wrought upon the heart of this man, that he was merciful to him, and took off the iron fetters, which hurt his feet, and gave him liberty to walk about. And many other favors and kindnesses he showed unto him.

Wherever God's people are, even in prison, God takes care of them.

Verses 22-23: Once again Joseph, though in circumstances considerably less comfortable than Potiphar's home, rose to a position of trust and authority and proved to be trustworthy enough not to need any oversight.

Genesis 39:22 "And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that [were] in the prison; and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer [of it]."

"And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that were in the prison". Who, as they were state prisoners, were a considerable charge; and this gave Joseph great honor, credit, and influence in the prison.

"And whatsoever they did there, he was the doer of it": Not that he learned and exercised every trade the prisoners were of, to get a living by, which is the sense of some, as Aben Ezra relates. Or that he in fact did everything that was done in the prison.

But the meaning is, that he gave orders for the doing of everything, and there was nothing done without him. All that was done, as the Targum of Jonathan paraphrases it, he commanded it to be done. Or as Onkelos, all that was done was done by his word; by his authority and command.

Genesis 39:23 "The keeper of the prison looked not to any thing [that was] under his hand; because the LORD was with him, and [that] which he did, the LORD made [it] to prosper."

It did not take the jailor long to realize the character of Joseph. He, like Potiphar, turned everything over to Joseph. The work done by these prisoners had even begun to prosper, because the Lord (Jehovah), was with Joseph and prospered whatever he put his hand to, even here in prison.

Genesis Chapter 39 Questions

1. What country was Joseph taken to?
2. Who bought him?
3. What office did this man hold in Egypt?
4. What did the Lord do for Joseph in this house?

5. What did Joseph's master see?
6. What job did he elevate Joseph to?
7. What else did God bless, besides Joseph?
8. What was the only thing Potiphar was concerned with?
9. Describe Joseph?
10. What sin did the Potiphar's wife try to get Joseph to do?
11. What is the first thing she did, that was similar to what Eve did, that caused her to want to sin?
12. Did Joseph cooperate?
13. How often was he tempted?
14. What did Joseph remind her that she was?
15. What was the only thing Potiphar withheld from Joseph?
16. Who was Joseph more concerned about not sinning against?
17. What did she grab in her hand of Joseph's as he fled?
18. Who did she first tell the lie to?
19. What nationality did she call him?
20. What did she claim she did to save herself from punishment?
21. When she told Potiphar, what did he do to Joseph?
22. Did Joseph have a fair trial?
23. Who did God give Joseph favor with?
24. What did the keeper of the prison commit to Joseph?
25. What happened in the prison, because of Joseph?