

GENESIS

In the beginning God...

The Story of Joseph – Part 2

After focusing on the life of Judah and the incident with Judah and Tamar (concurrent with the story of Joseph) the narrative now returns to Joseph, who remains the focus for the rest of the Book of Genesis. The story picks up where chapter 37 ended “*Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.*” (Genesis 37:36 ESV) The first verse of this chapter refers to these men as Ishmaelites, indicating again that the two terms were essentially synonymous.

The Egypt into which Joseph entered was a very ancient nation already. Egypt during this time was a highly civilized and organized empire, yet one which was polytheistic and immoral in its faith and practice. Egyptologists have never come to full agreement about Egyptian chronology; most scholars believe this was during the reign of the Hyksos kings in Egypt. They were foreign invaders, who came from the East and conquered Egypt about 1720 B.C. The Hyksos were expelled from Egypt prior to Moses’ time.

Chapter 39

- V1** *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. (ESV)*
- V2** *The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. (ESV)*
- V3** *His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. (ESV)*
- V4** *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. (ESV)*
- V5** *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. (ESV)*
- V6** *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. (ESV)*

Potiphar was captain of Pharaoh bodyguard, and also probably in charge of political executions ordered by Pharaoh. He is also called an officer of Pharaoh, the Hebrew word *saris*, meaning “eunuch,” or “chamberlain.” It was often customary in ancient

pagan countries, beginning with Sumeria, to require prominent officers associated closely with the king's court to be castrated. Since Potiphar was a married man, it would seem if he was castrated, that either Potiphar had consented to such an operation after he was married in order to acquire his high office or else that his wife had married him for political or financial reasons rather than for normal marital relations. In either case this could help explain, but not justify, her adulterous behavior.

Joseph was a highly intelligent and personable young man, and Potiphar soon recognized his abilities, placing more and more responsibilities on him. Joseph was indeed of high moral integrity and the Lord prospered his work for Potiphar in an extraordinary way. It is not unusual that unbelieving employers, though themselves indifferent to God, recognize that earnest Christians make the best employees and hence desire to have them in their organizations. Honesty, integrity, faithfulness, sobriety, and similar characteristics are genuine assets to an employer; and such are the fruits of Christian faith and obedience.

It may even be that, because of these attributes, the employee will occasionally have opportunity to give a word of testimony to his boss as to the true source of the blessing that attends his activities. This seems to have been the case with Joseph and Potiphar, since "his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand." More and more responsibility was given to Joseph, until everything in his household and business affairs were under Joseph's oversight. Potiphar eventually came to trust Joseph so implicitly that he no longer even bothered to check up on his own business.

It is interesting that three times (See verses 1, 2, and 5) Potiphar is specifically called an Egyptian. Since Joseph was in Egypt, this would seem unnecessary, except on the supposition that Pharaoh and most of the rulers of Egypt were themselves not Egyptian, as would be the case if this was the time of the Hyksos dynasties.

V7 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." (ESV)

V8 *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. (ESV)*

V9 *He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (ESV)*

V10 *And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. (ESV)*

Joseph certainly would have behaved politely and considerately toward his master's wife, but he soon must have realized she was taking more interest in him personally than was fitting. Finally impatiently decided that, since a subtle seduction was proving ineffective, she would overwhelm him with a bold invitation to her bedroom. It would have been natural to yield to her invitation.

However with Joseph there was one consideration, which overshadowed all others, He knew that such actions were contrary to God's revealed will. In rejecting her invitation, Joseph tried not to offend her. It was not that she herself was unattractive or undesirable, or that he was condemning her as immoral for making such a proposal, but that there were greater considerations, which must take precedence. His master, and her husband, trusting him fully; it would be a terrible betrayal of his trust for Joseph to take the one thing he had kept from him, his own wife. Even more importantly, such an action would be a great sin against God Himself. Therefore Joseph refused the invitation. Potiphar's wife continued day after day trying to attract him to her bed. Joseph not only continued to refuse, but began to avoid her altogether, trying not even "to be with her."

V11 *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,* (ESV)

V12 *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.* (ESV)

V13 *And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house,* (ESV)

V14 *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.* (ESV)

V15 *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."* (ESV)

The situation came to a climax one day when Potiphar's wife apparently determined that she would actually pull Joseph to her side by force. The time was opportune, since everyone was gone. She may have been thinking that if she could get him intimately close to her, his resistance would be overcome and he would be impelled by passion to continue. Joseph, however, realizing the danger of the situation, pulled himself away from her and rushed out of the room and even out of the house. She, however, clung onto his garment as he fled from her presence.

At this point, the desire of Potiphar's wife suddenly turned into rage. Knowing that her desire for Joseph was now completely impossible, her only thought was to humiliate him as deeply as possible for his rejection of her. Joseph's garment (Hebrew word *beqed*, apparently a form of long cloak or robe) was still in her hand. She knew it would be interpreted as evidence incriminating her unless she quickly took the initiative by accusing Joseph. She began to make a loud outcry, calling for the men servants to come help her. She cleverly appealed to their latent jealousy of Joseph and resentment of Potiphar, by suggesting it was her husband's fault for bringing in an outsider "a *Hebrew*" who would come in and endanger all the women of the household "to laugh at us" (or "to mock me," KJV). Now sure enough, this man, elevated so quickly above all the other servants, had actually attempted to rape the very mistress of the household! She had only saved herself by screaming so loudly that he was frightened away, leaving his garment in his haste.

- V16** *Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, (ESV)*
- V17** *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. (ESV)*
- V18** *But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.” (ESV)*
- V19** *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. (ESV)*
- V20** *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. (ESV)*

When Potiphar returned home, his wife repeated her story to him, embellishing it with the same prejudicial words and lies which she had used with the servants. In effect, she seemed to place the blame on Potiphar himself for giving a foreign slave such authority and freedom around the house that he would try to take advantage of his own faithful and long-suffering wife.

On hearing this story, Potiphar’s “*anger was aroused,*” (NKJV) If his wife’s story was true, he indeed would be fully justified in his wrath and in taking severe retaliation on Joseph. The severest penalty of law, capital punishment, would be appropriate. Rather than having Joseph slain, he merely put him in that part of prison reserved for political, rather than criminal, prisoners. It almost seems that Potiphar also knew both his wife and Joseph too well to really believe he had heard the whole story.

There is no indication that Joseph made any effort to defend himself from these charges. Though they were untrue, and he was being punished unjustly, he still apparently kept quiet. It is noteworthy that this was the same prison over which Potiphar himself was in charge (See Genesis 40:3); so that it may be that Potiphar hoped he would one day be able to bring Joseph back to resume his previous duties.

- V21** *But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. (ESV)*
- V22** *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. (ESV)*
- V23** *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. (ESV)*

Once again God began to bless Joseph. He had allowed him to be unjustly accused and punished, no doubt for purposes of developing his character for the great work He had for him to do in the future, but He would still acknowledge His approval of Joseph by blessing and prospering him in those difficult circumstances. Now in prison the prison keeper made him the manager, everything again prospered under Joseph’s hand.