

If God is For Us: The Life and Trials of Joseph

The LORD Was With Him (Genesis 39:1-23)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on October 5, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ We recently jumped back into the book of Genesis. With the goal of finally preaching all the way through it by the end of the year. Three years ago, we did a series through the first eleven books. A year later, we did a series on the *Life of Abraham*. Then, earlier this year, we had a series on the *Life of Jacob*. And now, we're wrapping up, Lord-willing, with a series on the *Life and Trials of Joseph*, covering chapters 37-50.
 - **It seems like this section of Genesis is unrelenting in giving us awkward passages to preach.** Last week, we tackled some cringy verses involving Judah, his sons, and the woman Tamar. This morning, we've got a story about a lascivious woman exhibiting predatory behavior, assaulting our main character, falsely accusing him of sexual harassment. I just want to preach a G-rated passage next time, please.
 - But that's Genesis for you. **The first book of the Bible is not afraid to offer a raw portrayal of the depravity of man in order to highlight the graciousness of God.** Who remains faithful to his covenant promises despite the unfaithfulness of his covenant people.
- ❖ But my impression is that most people only turn to Genesis 39 when looking for a good example of how to resist temptation and sexual sin. I admit it does provide helpful advice. **But I want to resist the tendency to treat the Bible like a reference book.** Just going to it looking for advice on certain topics.
 - While there is some value in that, a topical approach tends to overlook the context and the larger story being told. **You see, I would argue that there's a much bigger theological message being conveyed in Genesis 39. It has to do with the LORD's presence and his steadfast love being *with* you.** Even in the lowest points, even in the darkest times in life, he is *with* you.
- ❖ But our instinct is to assume the opposite. We assume that times of adversity and suffering – when we're bombarded by **unrelenting temptations**; peppered with **untrue accusations**; exploited by **unjust treatment** – we assume these are times in life when God is angry with us. Or worse, he's abandoned us. In times of suffering, we can't make sense of our circumstances. **If he loves me, then why would he lead me here to the lowest of lows?** Why would he leave me to rot in this pit?
 - I can't answer the exact reason why. I don't know what comes next in your story. Unlike Joseph's story, ours is not in front of us recorded in a nicely bounded book. **But if there's one certainty that God's people can draw from Joseph's story, it's that God is with us in the lowest of lows as much as he is in the highest of highs.** The text describes the LORD being with Joseph, in v2, while he reigned in Potiphar's house. And then the same words appear, in v21, while he languished in a royal prison.
- ❖ I can only imagine how confusing it must have been for Joseph to navigate the ups and downs of his story. **Triumph gives way to defeat; defeat leads to triumph; then back again to defeat.** What if – at the end of Genesis 39 while stuck in prison – what if Joseph drew the conclusion that God must've abandoned him?

- ❖ Sure, that's what his circumstances are saying. But we would want to tell him that you're actually right where God would have you. **You can't see it right now, Joseph, but you being in prison is instrumental for the next step in God's redemptive plan for your life.**
 - Well, what if that's also true for you? What if that's what you need to hear? Maybe you identify with Joseph. With the ups and downs. With the oscillating uncertainty of life. **But if the LORD is your God and you are his, then you can rest in this truth – that, just like in Joseph's case, the LORD is with you in the valleys as much as he is with you on the mountaintops.** He and his steadfast love are always with you.
 - That's the encouragement I want to offer you this morning as we walk through this chapter. We're going to see how the LORD God is (1) With Joseph in the blessings of Potiphar's house, (2) With Joseph in the temptations of Potiphar's wife, and (3) With him in the pits of Pharaoh's prison.

With Him in the Blessings of Potiphar's House

- ❖ The chapter begins with Joseph finding himself in Egypt, in Potiphar's house. And we're told that the LORD was with him there – in the blessings of living and serving in that house. Now chapter 39 picks up right where we left off in Genesis 37:36. There the Ishmaelites (also known as the Midianites) – who purchased Joseph from his brothers – they arrive in Egypt and subsequently sell him to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.
 - He's a high ranking official in the royal court. With that status comes an abundance of slaves. Especially, household slaves to pamper and meet his every need. That's the kind of slave Joseph was purchased to be. He had no choice in the matter. **It was all by God's design that Joseph ended up a household slave in Potiphar's house.**
- ❖ That was a blessing! Had he been assigned to serve in the fields as manual labor, then perhaps he would never have a chance to demonstrate his administrative skills. He would never have risen in the ranks of Potiphar's house or in Pharaoh's kingdom later on.
 - **So this is evidence of God's hand of providence at work in Joseph's life. Ensuring that he's a household slave laboring under the watchful eyes of Potiphar.** Who notices how effective Joseph is in managing his household. Look at vv2-3, *"²The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. ³His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands."*
- ❖ **I think it's worth noting that the divine name of *Yahweh* is used multiple times in this chapter.** You'll see it in your English translation with the word LORD in small caps. Besides one other place in Genesis 49:18, this is the only place in Joseph's story where God's personal name is used. **In other words, it's significant that the text doesn't just say that *Elohim* was with Joseph.** That's the more generic term for God.

- ❖ No, it says *Yahweh* was with Joseph. The covenant-keeping God who made an **unconditional promise to his great-grandfather Abraham**. To be his God and to make out of him a people, through whom would arise the promised Messiah, who would rescue God's people from sin's wages and redeem God's world from sin's curse. *This* faithful, promise-keeping God is the One who is *with* Joseph in Potiphar's house.
 - **And notice it's only the narrator using the name *Yahweh*.** When Joseph arrives in Egypt, in the eyes of others, he looks to be in the worst of situations, far from home, sold into slavery, separated from family, all alone. Or is he? Only the narrator, at this early stage, recognizes that *Yahweh*, the covenant-keeping God, is with Joseph.
- ❖ And because *Yahweh* (the LORD God) is with him, Joseph prospers. Despite his dire circumstances, he continues to advance in positions of greater trust and responsibility. I'm sure his work ethic and administrative skills helped him tremendously. **But the narrator tries to make it clear, in vv2-3, that it was the LORD's presence in his life that made the ultimate difference.** The LORD blessed Joseph and gave him favor in the eyes of others.
 - Potiphar being one of them. Look at v3, "*His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands.*" **His non-believing master could not help but acknowledge that the LORD was with Joseph.**
- ❖ **Wouldn't that be amazing if that happened in your workplace?** You conduct your work in such a way that results in such success for your company – **that your non-Christian boss and co-workers don't just praise you but undeniably recognize that the LORD is with you.** Or for students, imagine if your teacher and classmates cannot but acknowledge – through the way you handle your studies and the academic success that results from it – that God must be with you. That's the kind of witness we want in our workplaces or classrooms.
 - **But, of course, that presumes they know you're a Christian.** Otherwise how would they connect the dots. How would they know to ultimately attribute your success to God? **If you're not clear and open about being a Christian, then how will people in your life ever give credit to the LORD for your success, like Potiphar did?**
- ❖ It's not spelled out in the text, but Joseph must've been open about his faith. Which explains why he's so clearly labeled a *Hebrew* later on when Potiphar's wife tries to slander him before others (v14). **Apparently Joseph made it clear that he worships Yahweh and any success that comes by his hands is ultimately derived from the gracious hands of God.**
 - And Potiphar responds by continuing to advance him. Until Joseph becomes overseer of the entire house. V4 says he was put in charge of all that Potiphar had. And v5 says the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake. **According to v6, he was so competent in all his tasks and reliable in all affairs, that Potiphar's only concern each day was to decide what to eat for his next meal.** What a life! He could leave every other matter up to Joseph.

- ❖ **Now, let's be honest, at this point in the story, it reads like a morality tale.** If you work hard, if you treat people right, if you're not ashamed of God, then he'll turn around and treat *you* right. He'll prosper you. He'll give you success in your studies. Or success at work. He'll bless all your business efforts.
 - **But when you move into the next section of the narrative, that bubble will immediately burst.** This is not that kind of story. **There is no tit-for-tat promise that hard work and faithfulness will always be rewarded with success.** I know that's the kind of story we like to hear – ones that have a moralistic happy ending. But that's not the story of faith. That's not how Joseph's story goes.

With Him in the Temptations of Potiphar's Wife

- ❖ The narrator masterfully leads us, in the first six verses, into thinking we're reading a morality tale, but then in v7, the story takes a hard left. We suddenly realize that the story is not going to end on a mountaintop. **We're about to take a nosedive into the darkest of valleys. But the whole point is that God's not going anywhere.** He's still with Joseph. As much as he was with him in the blessings of Potiphar's house, he is with him in the temptations of Potiphar's wife.
- ❖ Look back with me at the end of v6. We're told that Joseph was "*handsome in form and appearance.*" **It's another way of saying that he was well-built and good looking.** The only other person described that way in Genesis is his mother Rachel (29:17). Joseph took after her in physical appearance. Well, his good looks caught the attention of Potiphar's wife.
 - Listen to v7, "*And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, 'Lie with me.'*" **Notice how there's no attempt at seduction. There's simply a command issued by a superior to a social inferior.**
- ❖ **Now it would've been easy for Joseph to justify submitting to her demands.** He was a slave after all. And she was his superior. He could say he was following orders. No one in the household would've cared. **Sleeping with your slaves was common practice in the Ancient Near East.** Granted, it was usually between male masters and female slaves, but this would not be the first and only instance of a female superior taking advantage of a male slave.
 - But Joseph would have none of it. He refuses her demands and spurns her advances. He tells her that his master has placed everything in the house in his hands except for her. **Joseph knows his place before Potiphar, but more importantly, he knows his duty under God.**
 - Look at vv8-9, "*8But 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. 9He 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?'*"

- ❖ That phrase a “*great wickedness*” uses language that was applied to other sinful encounters previously mentioned in the narrative. Those of a similar sexual nature (cf. 6:5; 38:7, 10). **But what’s more significant in Joseph’s speech is his recognition that sleeping with Potiphar’s wife would not only be a sin against her husband – an act of betrayal against his master – but more importantly, it would be a sin against God!**
 - That’s a biblical principle that we can’t stress enough. These days, sin has been redefined to something less offensive than how it’s portrayed in the Bible. Many will define sin in terms of oppression and victimization. **In this case, sin is largely understood as an offense on a horizontal level against your neighbor.** Which it is. **But Joseph viewed sin, first and foremost, as a vertical offense against God.**
- ❖ King David shared the same outlook. After he was confronted with the great wickedness he committed against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah, David repented and expressed great remorse. Capturing all his emotions in Psalm 51. Remember what he did. He committed sexual sin against Bathsheba. Found out he impregnated her and tried to cover it up by colluding to get her husband killed in battle.
 - **David sinned greatly against this family.** He abused his power and ruined their lives. But now listen to **Psalm 51:3-4**, “³*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.*”
- ❖ **If I were Uriah’s brother or Bathsheba’s father, I don’t think I’d appreciate hearing David confess to God, “against you, you only, have I sinned.”** Are you kidding? Are you trying to minimize or even deny what you did to Uriah and Bathsheba?
 - No, I think we would be misreading David to draw that conclusion. He’s not denying the depths in which he hurt that couple and their family. **His point in Psalm 51 is to acknowledge that God is the ultimate Judge who will hold us all accountable for all our actions in this life.** Emphasizing *that* doesn’t minimize the seriousness of our sins against other people. If anything, it exacerbates the offense of those sins and compounds our guilt before man with guilt before God.
- ❖ This idea that all sin is ultimately an offense against God needs to be stressed more in our day. **Because so many have uncritically embraced a *harm ethic*.** That’s an approach to morality that defines right and wrong mainly in terms of whether an action causes harm. Instead of asking, “Is this action virtuous?” a harm ethic asks “Does this action hurt anyone?”
 - **So when you apply it to sexual ethics, the only moral concern in any sexual encounter is the question of consent.** Within this framework, any sexual behavior is acceptable as long as it is consensual. As long as it doesn’t cause anyone any harm.
- ❖ **But it wouldn’t have mattered if the circumstances were changed.** It doesn’t matter if Potiphar was a horrible, abusive husband who cheated on his wife all the time. It makes no difference if she was routinely neglected and emotionally abandoned. It doesn’t matter if she and Joseph were in love and all their sexual encounters were consensual and romantic.

- ❖ All of those factors put together might win the sympathy of people today. They might even celebrate that as a love story. **But none of those factors will change the fact that sleeping with someone you're not married to is a great wickedness and sin against God.**
 - That's why Joseph's and David's similar perspective on sin is such a needed corrective in our day. **There is *no* such thing as a harmless sin.** All sins offend God. All sins incur his righteous judgment. But, at the same time, all sins can be confessed like in Psalm 51. And all sins can be forgiven by the mercy of God, as David can tell you. But the first step is to recognize that every sin is ultimately a sin against God.
- ❖ **Now because he understood that, Joseph understood the gravity of giving into sin.** Which explains his reaction when, one day, Potiphar's wife tried to force herself on him. Look at v10, *"¹⁰And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. ¹¹But 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, ¹²she 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."*
 - So one day, while he was just going about his business, doing his work, he happened to be in the house when none of the other slaves were around. In the heat of the moment, she grabbed him by the garment. But Joseph immediately left his garment in her hand, fled, and got out of there.
- ❖ **Now there is some practical advice we can draw from this for how to resist sin.** Notice how Joseph didn't engage Potiphar's wife in dialogue. He didn't try to negotiate with her or talk it out. He just ran. He fled from temptation. He got as far away as he could.
 - **Friends, in the same way, don't try to talk yourself out of tempting situations.** You can't negotiate with sin. Don't test yourself to see how close you can get before crossing the line. **Be like Joseph and just run.** If you know being in *this* situation; with *this* person; at *this* hour – will be a temptation for the two of you to sin. Or if being alone in *this* context; with *this* device – will be a temptation for you to sin.
 - Then why would you stay in that situation and try to rationalize it? **Why try to convince yourself that it'll be different this time around?** That this time you'll be stronger. You probably won't be. **The better recourse is to be like Joseph and run.** Avoid the situation all together. Don't test yourself. Don't think you can talk each other out of it. Just flee from temptation.

With Him in the Pits of Pharaoh's Prison

- ❖ That's what Joseph did. He got out of that compromising situation as fast as he could. **Now if his story were merely a morality tale, then at this point in the narrative, you'd expect Joseph to be vindicated for his faithfulness in the face of unyielding temptation.** He should be applauded and awarded for his virtuous actions.
 - But this is *not* that kind of story. **In this story, it's *because* of his faithfulness – it's *because* he was virtuous – that's why Joseph is falsely accused of attempted rape and thrown in prison.** That's the kind of story we're reading.

- ❖ **But don't forget, it's also a story where the LORD is with you in the lows as much as he's with you in the highs.** He was with Joseph in the blessings of Potiphar's house and in the temptations of Potiphar's wife. Lastly, we'll see how God is still with him in the pits of Pharaoh's prison.
- ❖ If you look back in v13, Potiphar's wife is now a woman scorned. And just as Joseph's brothers had previously used his garment as evidence of his alleged death – to deceive their father – **now Potiphar's wife uses his garment as evidence of his alleged assault in order to deceive her husband.** And her plan pretty much works. Look at v19, *“¹⁹As 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. ²⁰And 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.”*
 - But the fact that Potiphar didn't execute Joseph on the spot – but instead threw him in the royal prison – leads commentators to think that Potiphar probably had doubts about his wife's story. **He didn't fully believe her accusations.**
- ❖ **But even still, this marks yet another downward turn in Joseph's story.** He keeps doing the right thing. And yet it doesn't always translate to upward mobility and career advancement. He ends up in the pits, literally.
 - But look at 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.”* And just as God blessed him with advancement and greater responsibility in Potiphar's house, he succeeded in the same way in Pharaoh's prison. And all of that is explained by the same language about the same presence of *Yahweh*, the LORD God.
 - But notice, in v21, the mention of the LORD's steadfast love (*hesed*). That's a unique word in Hebrew. It doesn't just mean love. It means covenantal love. Covenantal loyalty. **God's steadfast love is describing his undeterred, unbreakable affection for and commitment to his covenant people.**
- ❖ **But at this point in the story, no casual observer would've looked at Joseph and drawn the conclusion that he was an object of God's steadfast love.** It would've been more reasonable to assume he was the object of God's anger and wrath. But that's where looks can be deceiving. Where we can't be too quick to draw conclusions about God and his love simply based on our circumstances.
 - **Joseph had to learn that the LORD's presence and steadfast love is with you even in the lowest points and darkest times in life.** He's working even through the evil intentions of those who want to harm you. All in order to put you right where you need to be for the next phase of his redemptive plan to unfold. Which we'll see next week in Genesis 40.

- ❖ Friends, what if that's true for you as well? What if this low point in your life right now is not what it seems? **Your flesh is telling you it's the worst possible thing that could happen. But faith is telling you that it's merely your prison moment.** Like Genesis 39, it's that scene in your story where God is merely positioning you for the next phase of his unfolding redemptive plans. And that's not wishful thinking. At least not for those in Christ Jesus.
- ❖ **Like we see in every chapter, Jesus always ends up being the focal point.** Just think about how Joseph's experience of unrelenting temptation, unjust treatment, and untrue accusations just points us forward to Jesus's experience of temptation in the wilderness, of false accusations before the Sanhedrin, of unjust treatment by Roman soldiers.
 - **But the big difference in Jesus's situation compared to Joseph's – is that when Jesus hung there on the cross – God the Father was *not* with him.** He *did* forsake his Son. But he was *not* with Jesus so that he could be *with us* and with us forever.
- ❖ I get it that even Christians – when faced with adversity – we're tempted to think that maybe God is angry with us. **But the gospel reminds us of the good news that his anger towards us has been spent.** It was unleashed and satisfied on the cross. **Which assures us that all of our present adversities and sufferings must have only good redemptive purposes behind them.** What others might mean for evil; God means for our good. That's a comfort and assurance for all who trust in Jesus as their Savior and Lord.