

Chapter 4: The Lord was with Joseph

Genesis 39:1–23

The story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 was a necessary insertion to fill out the entirety of Jacob’s family history (cf. Gen. 37:2). Now that Tamar has given birth to Judah’s sons, though, the narrative returns to focus on Joseph. Indeed, in the first six verses of Genesis 39, Joseph’s name will appear with unusual frequency (vv. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 (x2)) to reestablish “his prominence and centrality in the narrative.”¹ As we previously observed, there are a number of links between Genesis 38 and Genesis 39, so that the narratives are constantly drawing parallels and contrasts between Judah and Joseph. Where Judah failed miserably in his own sexual temptation, now we see Joseph succeeding admirably against repeated sexual temptations—but nevertheless suffering for his innocence. In this chapter, we see that *the Lord is with his people, even in their suffering*.

Flourishing in our Labors (Gen. 39:1–6a)

This theme of Genesis 39 appears at the beginning of this chapter, and then will be restated again at the end of the chapter: “The Lord was with Joseph” (v. 2, 21).² In light of the incredible suffering that Joseph faces here, this theme may seem ironic at first glance. Nevertheless, this passage “perfectly expresses God’s quiet control and the man of faith’s quiet victory.”³ As a subtle punctuation of this point, we should observe that God’s personal, covenantal name *Yahweh* appears in this chapter alone within the whole of the Joseph story.⁴ This is a remarkable observation, since the name *Yahweh* appears in every other chapter of Genesis through Genesis 36, except for Genesis 1 (where the title “God” gets at sovereignty over creation) and Genesis 23 (the story of Sarah’s death and burial). From Genesis 37 onward, though, *Yahweh* appears only in Genesis 38 (where *Yahweh* puts to death Er and Onan; Gen. 38:7, 10) and in Genesis 49:18 (in Jacob’s brief prophetic prayer for Dan).

This passage, then, overlays the deep suffering of Joseph with clear illustration of the Lord’s faithfulness to his promises and to his people.⁵ Joseph’s suffering is not an argument against the Lord’s faithfulness, for the suffering becomes the backdrop for how we see the faithfulness of the Lord at work. John Calvin captures the comforting message of this passage well: “Let us then learn, even amidst our sufferings, to perceive the grace of God; and let it suffice us, when anything severe is to be endured, to have our cup mingled with some portion of sweetness, lest we should be ungrateful

¹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 458.

² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 210.

³ Kidner, *Genesis*, 201.

⁴ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 459.

⁵ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 210–11.

to God, who, in this manner, declares that he is present with us.”⁶

This chapter begins with a reminder of the suffering that Joseph experienced at the hands of his brothers, who sold him into slavery (v. 1). Nevertheless, the Lord is not only “with” Joseph in Egypt, but the Lord also made Joseph “successful” in the house of his Egyptian master (v. 2). The Lord’s blessing upon Joseph becomes so obvious that even his master “sees” that the Lord is with Joseph, and that the Lord causes everything Joseph does to succeed (v. 3). Accordingly, Joseph found favor in Potiphar’s eyes. “*Seeing* and *eyes* were important parts in the previous chapter, so that, over the course of the story, Judah’s blind eyes were opened so that he could see rightly. Here, *seeing* will also play an important role, so that v. 3–4 gives us the first of three visual evaluations of Joseph. Potiphar rightly *sees* Joseph, so that Joseph finds favor in Potiphar’s *eyes*. From this favor, Potiphar promotes Joseph from a mere servant to an “overseer” of his house, giving Joseph charge over all that was “in his hand” (v. 4). This same term for “overseer” will appear later in the Old Testament to describe the personal service that Joshua gave to Moses (Ex. 24:13; Josh. 1:1) and that Elisha gave to Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:21).⁷

As Joseph served Potiphar, the Lord blessed Potiphar’s house for Joseph’s sake (v. 5). Therefore, Potiphar confidently gave all he had “into the hand” of Joseph (v. 6). The phrase “in the hand” of Joseph appears three times in these first six verses (3, 4, 6; ESV: “charge”), and this phrase will take a bitterly ironic turn later in the story. We do not know how long this period of flourishing lasts, but again, John Calvin draws out a key pastoral point from Joseph’s time of success, in noting that this season of flourishing gives Joseph “time to breathe” between his suffering he experienced from his brothers and the suffering he will experience from the false accusations of Potiphar’s wife: “the Lord, though he often plunges his own people into the waves of adversity, yet does not deceive them; seeing that, by sometimes moderating their sufferings, he grants them time to breathe....And truly for this end, God meets with us in our difficulties, that then, with collected strength, as men refreshed, we may be the better prepared for other conflicts.”⁸ Joseph’s life does not move from here to a “happily ever after”; however, the Lord uses this time to assure Joseph of his care and presence, in order to equip Joseph’s faith for the trials ahead.

Fighting against our Temptations (Gen. 39:6b–18)

At the end of v. 6, we read a surprising statement about Joseph’s physical appearance: “Now Joseph was beautiful in form and beautiful in appearance” (my translation). This statement is surprising in that it reverses the plot that we have read on a number of occasions, where it is the beauty of the patriarch’s *wife* that attracts foreign attention (Gen. 12:11; 26:7).⁹ Here, it is the patriarch (Joseph) who is the beautiful one, attracting the attention of his Egyptian master’s wife. The language of Joseph’s beauty describes the attractiveness of men like David (1 Sam. 16:12, 18; 17:42), although it is frequently used to describe the beauty of women like Sarai (Gen. 12:11), Rachel (Gen. 29:17), Abigail (1 Sam. 25:3), and Esther (Esth. 2:7).¹⁰

⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 2, 292.

⁷ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 374.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:294–95.

⁹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 211.

¹⁰ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 733–34.

So, when Potiphar’s wife “lifts up her eyes,” she makes the second of three visual evaluations of Joseph in this chapter. The results of her visual evaluation are expressed clearly enough in her blunt demand for sex: “Lie with me” (v. 12). Robert Alter captures the shock of this demand: “The first appearance of dialogue in the entire story is the naked directness, without preliminaries or explanations, of the wife’s sexual proposition, presented almost as though these two words (in the Hebrew) were all she ever spoke to Joseph, day after day (verse 10), until finally the plain meaning of the words is translated into the physical act of grabbing the man (verse 12).”¹¹ When Potiphar’s eyes see the blessing of the Lord on Joseph, he wisely promotes him to a position of authority in his household. When Potiphar’s wife’s eyes see the outward beauty of Joseph, she sinfully demands that he commit adultery with her. We should remember, then, that Judah sinfully married a Canaanite and initiated the services of a prostitute (so he believed) because he first *saw* those two women (Gen. 38:2, 15). As Calvin observes, the eyes can function “as torches to inflame the heart to lust.”¹²

The blunt demands of Potiphar’s wife contrasts against the wordy, logical explanations for Joseph’s refusal.¹³ The specific reasons Joseph cites are remarkable in that Joseph acknowledges the great privileges that Potiphar has given him, observing that Potiphar has only held back his wife. As Kidner points out, temptation usually turns this logic on its head. Even in the original sin, Eve’s initial missteps were to understate the generosity of God in giving *all* the trees of the garden for food, and overstating the restrictiveness of the prohibition (Gen. 3:6; cf. Gen. 2:16–17).¹⁴ Ultimately, though, Joseph does not make his decision in relation to his human master, but in relation to God: “How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” (v. 9). In contrast to the evil of Joseph’s brothers and Joseph’s nephews (Gen. 37:2; 38:7, 10), Joseph refuses to participate in evil, since to do so would be to sin against God. Certainly, the Lord has demonstrated his covenant faithfulness to Abraham and to his offspring at many points when they did not deserve it. Here, however, we see the proper covenantal response of faith-driven obedience to the Lord.¹⁵ Even when Potiphar’s wife repeats her advances “day after day,” Joseph refused to compromise (v. 10).

Potiphar’s wife, however, does not give up. Rather, we read that she takes advantage of a particular opportunity when Joseph came to the house to “do his work,” but when the other men of the household were gone (v. 11). In that moment, Joseph finds himself in “the crisis of the combat” against his sin.¹⁶ Joseph had endured the woman’s seduction in her bold, initial approach (v. 7), her long persistence (v. 10), and now he faces her “final ambush, where all is lost or won in a moment” (v. 12).¹⁷ In this moment, Joseph does not succumb to temptation, and neither does he even stay to explain his reasons, as he had earlier. This time, he runs away, leaving his garment behind (v. 12). Joseph’s nakedness as he runs is a fitting illustration for his vulnerability and innocence in this situation.

The “garment” that Joseph leaves behind is notable for two reasons. First, the text tells us that

¹¹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 136–37.

¹² Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:295.

¹³ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 137.

¹⁴ Kidner, *Genesis*, 201–2.

¹⁵ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 211.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:298–99.

¹⁷ Kidner, *Genesis*, 202.

Joseph has left the garment “in her hand” (v. 12), a point that is repeated in v. 13: “she saw that he had left his garment in her hand” (v. 13). The phrase “in his hand” had described the trust of Potiphar for Joseph (v. 4, 6), and now the garment “in her hand” is a tangible proof that Joseph had been worthy of his master’s trust.¹⁸ Second, however, Potiphar’s wife will twist the garment into the evidence against Joseph. She lies about how she got the garment, suggesting that Joseph himself had taken it off and left it “near/beside” her (v. 15, 17), as he intended to rape her. In this, once again an item of clothing becomes a key element in deception, joining Esau’s clothes (Gen. 27:15), Joseph’s coat (Gen. 37:31–33), and Tamar’s disguise (Gen. 38:14–19).¹⁹

Just as Tamar made a cunning plan when she “saw” that Judah had no intention of giving her in marriage to Shelah (Gen. 38:14), so Potiphar’s wife makes a cunning plan when she “sees” that Judah had left his garment in her hand (v. 13). Then, just as Judah was deceived about Tamar’s identity when he “saw” her at the entrance to Enaim (Gen. 38:15), so Potiphar’s wife deceives the men of the household by instructing them to “see” her falsified evidence (v. 14). She begins by blaming her husband, who “brought” the Hebrew to laugh at them (v. 13).²⁰ In this, there may be a subtle echo of the original sin, where Adam blamed God for his wife’s actions: “The woman *whom you gave* to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12). Then, she reverses the order in which Joseph actually left his garment and she lifted up her voice: “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” (v. 15). By suggesting that Joseph left aside his garment *before* she cried out, she makes it sound as though she were the victim. For the readers of the story, the reversal of the order of events causes “the blatancy of her lie [to be] forcefully conveyed without commentary.”²¹

Faithfulness in our Suffering (Gen. 39:19–23)

When Potiphar comes home, his wife repeats the story to him (v. 16–18). Her husband is understandably angry at the report; however, his response is surprising. The expected punishment for attempted rape would have been the death penalty, but instead, Potiphar throws Joseph in prison (v. 20).²² Without question, this was a cruel punishment, as a psalm brings out: “[Joseph’s] feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron” (Ps. 105:18).²³ As Allen Ross observes, “for the second time Joseph was imprisoned for being faithful to his master.”²⁴ Still, why did Potiphar stop short of putting Joseph to death, if he really believed that Joseph had attempted to rape his wife (cf. Esth. 7:8–10)? John Walton captures the subtle difficulty of the situation well: “If Potiphar believed his wife and was truly angry with Joseph, Joseph would probably have been executed on the spot, no questions asked. In contrast, the king’s prison was a place for political prisoners [v. 20] and would hardly have been expected to accommodate foreign slaves guilty of crimes against their masters.

¹⁸ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 465.

¹⁹ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:735.

²⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 467–68.

²¹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 137–38.

²² Kidner, *Genesis*, 202–3.

²³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:301–2.

²⁴ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 627.

Potiphar is in a difficult position here—he cannot discount his wife’s accusations without publicly humiliating her even if he were certain she is lying. The action he takes against Joseph is as minimal as it can be and still retain his family’s honors.”²⁵

This lenient punishment is the final contrasted parallel between the stories of Judah and Joseph in Genesis 38–39. Judah was guilty, but yet he demanded a harsher punishment from Tamar than she deserved (Gen. 38:24). Joseph, however, is innocent, and yet he receives a lenient punishment than his alleged crimes would have deserved. Both sentences serve their own purposes—Judah’s, to open his eyes to his unrighteousness, and Joseph’s, to be preserved by “the hidden hand of God.”²⁶

Indeed, it is at this point that we come back full circle to what was written at the beginning of this story: “But the LORD was with Joseph” (v. 21). When Joseph innocently suffered by being sold into slavery, the Lord was with Joseph to cause him to flourish in Potiphar’s house. Now, when Joseph innocently suffers again by being falsely accused and thrown in prison, the Lord gives him favor “in the eyes of the keeper of the prison” (v. 21). This is the third and final visual evaluation of Joseph in this story. Just as Joseph had found favor in the eyes of Potiphar (v. 4), and in contrast to the lustful looks he received in the eyes of Potiphar’s wife (v. 7), Joseph once again finds favor in the eyes of those in authority over him.²⁷ And, just as Joseph had all things in Potiphar’s house given “into his hand” (v. 4, 6), so now the prison keeper gives Joseph all things “into his hand” (v. 23; ESV: “charge”). The Lord was with him, and the Lord made him prosper (v. 23).

Discussion Questions

- 1) How do you evaluate whether the Lord is “with” you? How much does the quality of your circumstances weigh on your determination of the Lord’s presence or absence in your life? What circumstances does Joseph face when we read that the Lord is “with” him (v. 2, 21)? How does the presence of the covenant name Yahweh in this chapter alone within the Joseph narratives underscore this point? How might this change the way we view the Lord’s work within our circumstances?
- 2) What strategies of temptation does Potiphar’s wife use in her attempt to seduce Joseph? What is the power of her blunt appeal (v. 7)? What is the power of her repeated advances, “day after day” (v. 10)? What is the power of her ambush of Joseph, when no one else is around (v. 11–12)? How should this story prepare and equip us for the temptations that we will face in our lives? To what degree are you vigilant, watching and praying for temptations that will surely come (Matt. 26:41)?
- 3) What strategies does Joseph use in resisting the temptations of Potiphar’s wife? How does he appeal to his great privileges, and why is this different from the way we usually think of our blessings (v. 8–9; cf. Gen. 3:2–3)? How does he identify God as the the One who would be offended by his sin (v. 9)? How does he flee temptation, even leaving his garment behind, to avoid sin (v. 12)? As you think of the temptations you face, which strategy do you need to incorporate into your life more?

²⁵ John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 672.

²⁶ Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:737.

²⁷ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 472.

4) How do those around Joseph see the Lord's presence with Joseph (v. 4, 21)? How does that favor translate into blessings and provision, even in the midst of suffering? What do you make of Calvin's point that the favor Joseph enjoys during his time in Potiphar's household, and then again in the prison, gives Joseph "time to breathe" before entering into further suffering? Do you take for granted times of prosperity, or do you see such times as preparations for future trials?