Joseph: Tempted But Faithful

Focal Text
Genesis 39

Background
Genesis 37; 39–41

Main Idea
Recognizing our place in God’s purposes and remembering the trust that others have placed in us can help us do what is right when faced with temptation.

Question to Explore
How can we faithfully do what is right when doing wrong seems so easy and looks so attractive?

Quick Read
When we pay the price of integrity, God uses us for eternal significance.

Commentary
It has been said that great people plant trees they’ll never sit under. Consider some modern examples of this timeless truth.

Oswald Chambers (1874-1917) died in relative obscurity in Egypt at the age of forty-three without ever seeing any of his words in print. His wife wrote his talks down in
shorthand and used them to create *My Utmost For His Highest*, a devotional classic that continues to be available in forty languages.\(^1\)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, was executed by his Nazi captors at the age of thirty-nine. Jim Elliott was twenty-eight when he and four fellow missionaries were murdered by Auca Indians in the jungles of Ecuador in 1957.

Neither of them ever saw the full legacy of their faithfulness to God, but their examples still move and lead us today. So it is with the story of Joseph. This young man had no way to know that his faithfulness under temptation would make his story valuable nearly forty centuries later. We cannot measure the future significance of present faithfulness. But God can.

During this week’s study in Genesis, you will have the opportunity to invite and challenge your class to live godly lives, refusing the moral standards of their culture for “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14, NASB). Their faithfulness to God today will enable God to use them for eternal purpose.

**Put integrity first (39:1-6a)**

Our previous study in Genesis found Jacob and Esau on the path to conflict and reconciliation. The text then describes Jacob’s twelve sons (Genesis 35:22b-26). His eleventh (and first by his beloved wife Rachel) was named “Joseph,” which means *the Lord adds* (Gen. 30:24). Joseph drops out of the Genesis narrative for the next six chapters, but resurfaces as a teenager in Genesis 37.

Here we watch Jacob honor him above the other brothers as Joseph bragged about his dreams of future superiority. His jealous brothers (Acts 7:9) sold him for twenty pieces of silver (the customary price of a slave) to a band of Ishmaelites traveling through the area (Gen. 37:12-28). These were descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar who became the father of twelve tribes living in the desert region east of the Jordan river (25:12-16). These wandering nomads in turn sold him into slavery in Egypt (37:36). Genesis 38 then tells the sordid story of Judah’s incestuous relationship with his daughter-in-law Tamar and the consequent births of Perez and Zerah.

In the context of such immorality, our text begins: “Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there” (39:1). This pharaoh may have been Sesostris II (1897-1879 B.C.). The “guard” was Pharaoh’s personal army, the elite of the nation. Potiphar was their “captain” or leader, the highest-ranking military official in the greatest military nation the world had ever seen. In addition, he served as Pharaoh’s chief executioner.
It would seem that things had gone from bad to worse for Joseph, but “the LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master” (39:2). “He prospered” translates a Hebrew phrase that describes a man who has prosperity, usually given by the Lord.

What’s more, “When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned” (39:3-4). The text does not imply that Potiphar believed in Joseph’s God as his own, but that he recognized in this young slave the presence and blessing of divine providence. Ancient Egypt was a profoundly religious culture, albeit one dominated by idolatry.

When “Potiphar put him in charge of his household,” he made Joseph his personal overseer. This position corresponds to the work of Eliezer in the house of Abraham (24:2, where he is called his “chief servant”). Ancient Egyptian records describe such servants in wealthy homes; Joseph would have such a servant himself after his exaltation to power (43:16, 19; 44:1).

With this result:

From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So he left in Joseph’s care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate (39:5-6).

The reason Potiphar continued to be concerned with “the food he ate” was that the caste system of their culture would not allow him to eat with a Hebrew (see 43:32: “Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians”).

My wife often told our sons to live a life God can bless. Why was God able to bless Joseph so fully? Because he lived with the integrity that positions us to receive all that God intends to give.

Webster defines “integrity” as “firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values.” This adherence Joseph demonstrated in abundance. If he were writing this commentary today, he would say to us: put your integrity first. Why is it so important?

Integrity enables us to withstand temptation. Joseph’s character gave him the strength to refuse perhaps the greatest temptation a man can face. We’ll see how in a moment.
Integrity enables others to trust us. Potiphar saw something in Joseph he had not seen in anyone else in Egypt, whether a native Egyptian or foreign slave. So he turned the affairs of his house over to this young Hebrew. Integrity inspires the confidence of others.

Most of all, integrity enables God to use us. Joseph’s character was the reason God could use him. The Holy Spirit can use only a vessel yielded to him in godly integrity. Four times this chapter says, “The LORD was with him” (39:2, 3, 21, 23). Why? Joseph didn’t earn or merit such blessing; he simply received it because the integrity of his heart could. A cracked pot cannot contain much water.

When we are faithful, others may benefit as well: “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25); “the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it” (2 Timothy 4:17). As it was with Joseph, so it can be with us.

The world condemned Joseph, but God celebrated him. And soon the world would know the truth, on that day when Joseph became Egypt’s prime minister and Potiphar’s boss and his wife had to honor the slave she had condemned. All because of the hand of God on his life.

Guard your heart (39:6b-20a)
Our story continues: “Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master’s wife took notice of Joseph and said, ‘Come to bed with me!’” (Gen. 39:6b-7). Ancient Egyptian records describe the immoral behavior of women in their society. Unlike other Middle Eastern cultures, they were not required to stay in seclusion but were permitted an active social life. It seems likely that this encounter was not the first time Potiphar’s wife sought such a liaison.

If this were a Hollywood movie or television show, we all know what would happen next. But it’s not—it’s the story of a man of great moral courage and personal integrity. Consider Joseph’s response: “But he refused. ‘With me in charge,’ he told her, ‘my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care’” (39:8). This was Joseph’s first reason: he had been given power over the entire house, including Potiphar’s wife, and would not betray such trust.

His second reason was even more profound, however: “No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” (39:9). Joseph understood a fact later Scripture would make clear: all sin is ultimately against God. David was forced to confess after his adulterous, murderous behavior, “I have sinned against the LORD” (2 Samuel 12:13); he would admit to God, “against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Psalm 51:4).
As a result, “though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her” (Gen. 39:10). Unfortunately, his diligence was not enough to prevent further temptation: “One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside” (39:11). Seizing this opportunity, “she caught him by his cloak and said, ‘Come to bed with me!’” (39:12a). This “cloak” was his long robe, typical dress for the period. Rather than debate or dispute with her, “he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house” (39:12b).

If Satan cannot tempt us to sin against God and others, he will tempt others to sin against us. So it was with Joseph:

When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, she called her household servants. “Look,” she said to them, “this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house” (39:13-15).

In this way she made a public record of her charges against Joseph.

So “she kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. Then she told him this story: ‘That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house’” (39:16-18).

Consider Potiphar’s response: “When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, ‘This is how your slave treated me,’ he burned with anger. Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined” (39:19-20).

According to Egyptian law (and Jewish legal statutes as well), Potiphar could have punished Joseph with 1,000 blows or even executed him for this crime if he had believed his wife. Jail was never the result of such sin by a slave against his master, especially when that master was the chief of Pharaoh’s executioners. Potiphar put Joseph in jail because he knew he didn’t deserve to die, but he couldn’t have him in his house around his sinful wife. Joseph’s integrity saved his life, because Potiphar believed him. It enables others to believe us as well.

From this young man’s example we learn how to guard our hearts from the “Potiphar’s wives” who surround us. First, refuse to be alone with someone who tempts you.

Note verse 10: “He refused to go to bed with her or even be with her” (italics added for emphasis). The latter made the former possible. It was only when he was alone with her through no fault of his own that the situation became a crisis. If others had been in the
house, she could never have made her accusations and cost him his position. Refuse to be alone with anyone who tempts you.

Second, never say “maybe.”

Proverbs 5 is a chapter-long warning against the adulterous woman (or man). It offers this excellent advice: “Keep to a path far from her; do not go near the door of her house” (Proverbs 5:8). Stay away. Paul agreed: “Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22). Never say maybe.

Joseph kept this advice. The text is clear—he never considered her offer. He didn’t even stay and talk with her. He left immediately. He refused to compromise with sin, whatever his courage might cost him. The late United Nations leader, Dag Hammarskjold, said it well: “He who wants to keep his garden tidy doesn’t reserve a plot for weeds.” Say no, now.

Third, fear the results of failure.

If Joseph had failed here, how different would the rest of Genesis be? The rest of Scripture? Would there have been a Hebrew nation and Messiah? The future of God’s plan to redeem all of humanity was at stake.

Count on it—if the enemy thinks this issue is worth tempting you over, it’s worth resisting. It’s graver than you know. Satan is a great economist. He always tempts us at the place that will cause the greatest devastation. That’s why government officials are tempted at the point of character and leadership, bankers at the point of financial integrity, and ministers at the point of morality. If you’re being tempted, know that the enemy is up to something disastrous. Every time.

Please remember: sin will always take you further than you wanted to go, cost you more than you wanted to pay, and keep you longer than you wanted to stay. Joseph knew it. Do you?

Last, trust the results of integrity.

Joseph’s refusal of Potiphar’s wife cost him dearly, but God redeemed his integrity for an even greater purpose. Notice the little phrase in verse 20: “Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined” (Gen. 39:20, italics added for emphasis). This was a special jail, where Joseph would meet prisoners who knew the king.
What if Joseph had not gone to jail, and specifically this jail? He would never have met Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker, and interpreted their dreams. He would never have been known to Pharaoh. He would never have become “second-in-command” in the nation (41:43), saved Egypt from starvation, and restored his family. He would simply have died the faithful slave of an army captain. And we would never have heard of him.

When we pay the price of integrity, God redeems our character for a far greater purpose than we can know.

**Conclusion**

Joseph suffered for his commitment to character. The psalmist later described his initial prison experience in the tower of Heliopolis:

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[God] called down famine on the land
and destroyed all their supplies of food;
and he sent a man before them—
Joseph, sold as a slave.
They bruised his feet with shackles,
his neck was put in irons,
till what he foretold came to pass,
till the word of the LORD proved him true (Psalm 105:16-19).
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But Joseph would not stay in such a degraded position long: “While Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden” (Gen. 39:20b-21). What God had done with Joseph and Potiphar he did again with the prison official: “So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph’s care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did (39:22-23).

Soon Joseph would meet the cupbearer and baker of Pharaoh in this prison; by interpreting their dreams he would earn the privilege of interpreting Pharaoh’s own dreams as well (Gen. 40:1—41:36). In response, Pharaoh would free Joseph and elevate him as did his previous masters: “You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you” (41:40). When the famine Joseph predicted came to pass, his wise stewardship saved the Egyptian people and eventually his own family from starvation (41:53-57).

Throughout Joseph’s life in Egypt, God used him as the representative of his chosen people. Through him the Lord would continue to fulfill his covenant promises made three generations earlier to Abraham. Responding to his faithfulness, God showed that he redeems all he allows and uses all who will pay the price of integrity.
Now, who is “Potiphar’s wife” in your life? Is she a person? a job? possessions? goals? Anything that wants you to compromise your integrity is your enemy, and the enemy of your home, family, and ministry as well. Seeking the help and leading of the Spirit for character and integrity is essential to a life well lived and blessed of God.

In 1948, many evangelists were active, and a number of them had already begun committing the sins and experiencing the failures we often associate with this work. So it was that a little-known evangelist asked the three members of his team to meet with him in his hotel room during a crusade in Modesto, California, in November 1948. The four resolved to handle their offerings with integrity and draw only a salary; to count the crowds based on the lowest numbers produced by objective sources; and never to criticize local clergy or leaders.

Then they determined most of all to maintain absolute moral integrity. They would never meet alone with a woman; they would never get on an elevator alone with a female; the evangelist would even send an associate into his hotel room first to be sure no women were present.

As I said, this evangelist was just one of many active in the country, and little-noticed. But the next year, I believe as a direct result of his integrity and character, his Los Angeles crusade catapulted him to international fame. You know his name, of course—Billy Graham.

Today, Billy Graham and Joseph would give us the same message: guard your heart, whatever it costs to do it. Your integrity is your greatest possession. This is the warning, and the promise, of God.
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