

## **Just Say No!** **Genesis 39:1-20**

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. The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. 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. 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. 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. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." 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. He 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?" And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

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, 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. And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, 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. 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." Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, 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. But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house."

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. 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**

**Introduction** — At the center of this episode of Joseph's life is the issue of temptation and how it must be faced by God's people. To say that this passage is timely would be a gross understatement. That's because each of us are constantly faced with the desire to act in ways that are contrary to the Lord's commands and standards. If saying that seems a bit archaic, there's a reason for it. It's because our culture is now dominated by the idea that most, if not all, standards are at the very least negotiable. Not only that, I or my group has a right to immediate gratification, no matter how it affects anyone else. Nonetheless, standards of right and wrong do exist, and with them comes the temptation to dodge the rules and do it my way. That's one reason Joseph's story is so important.

Before we get into that, I want you to consider Dietrich Bonhoeffer's spot-on description of temptation:

"In our members there is a slumbering inclination towards desire which is both sudden and fierce. With irresistible power desire seizes mastery over the flesh. All at once a secret, smoldering fire is kindled. The flesh burns and is in flames. It makes no difference whether it is sexual desire, or ambition, or vanity, or desire for revenge, or love of fame and power, or greed for money, or, finally, that strange desire for the beauty of the world, of nature. Joy in God is in course of being extinguished in us and we seek all our joy in the creature. At this moment God is quite unreal to us, he loses all reality, and only desire for the creature is real; the only reality is the devil. Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God.... The lust thus aroused envelops the mind and will of man in deepest darkness. The powers of clear discrimination and of decision are taken from us.... It is here that everything within me rises up against the Word of God."

There has never been a person, including Jesus Christ, who has not faced this. And there is not a single person, except Christ, who has not at some point yielded to temptation and suffered the consequences. Temptation is an integral part of our fallen world and fallen humanity. We cannot escape it.

Temptation, of course, comes in many forms. There is *material temptation*, which is the lust for things. There is *personal temptation*, which includes a lust for fame, authority, power, or control over others. There is *sensual temptation*, which is the lust for another person; specifically, the desire to have and enjoy that which is not your own, either legally or morally. Because Joseph engaged in a struggle with this third category of temptation, I will limit my thoughts to this third category.

**I. Joseph in Egypt** — So, where are we in this amazing saga? Jacob has accepted the reports that Joseph, his son, was dead. Joseph's brothers, who had brought that false report, may have also assumed that by now this was the case. At the very least, he was supposedly gone for good. But actually, Joseph was very much alive.

“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” (**v. 1**).

And so, Joseph found himself in a country and culture he didn't know, surrounded by a language he didn't understand. As for duration, there is no mention of how long Joseph served in Potiphar's house before the events cited here began to unfold. It could have been two months or two years. In addition, nothing is said about the adjustments Joseph had to make. Keep in mind that he had come from a rural culture, an unsophisticated people, and a home where he had been the pride and joy of his mother and the favorite child of his doting father.

Then, without warning, Joseph was grabbed by his brothers, stripped of his prize robe, and dumped into a pit. Though he was rescued from that, it was only to be sold to slave traders and carted off to a distant land, where he was again sold as a cheap piece of merchandise. Talk about culture shock! But through it all, Joseph not only kept his integrity, but he grew as a godly person.

**II. Joseph in Potiphar's House** — We are told that he was finally sold to a man named Potiphar, who is described as the “captain of the bodyguard” or “captain of the guard.” Some scholars have interpreted this to mean that the man was the warden of an Egyptian prison or even the “chief of executioners.” Whatever the case, Potiphar was a high-ranking official with years of experience and nobody's fool. But in his role as Potiphar's servant, Joseph didn't merely adjust to his role,

he flourished in it—and for one primary reason. As **verse 39** puts it: “the Lord was with Joseph.”

There’s a much meaning in that short phrase: God was intimately involved in Joseph’s life. Joseph was guided by God. God enabled him to adapt to the Egyptian culture and language. On top of it all, God helped Joseph to find favor in the eyes of Potiphar. In short, God was the secret to Joseph’s success. Mere luck had nothing to do with it.

Furthermore, Joseph didn't have to tell Potiphar that the Lord was with him; Potiphar could see it for himself (**v. 3**). Also note that Joseph didn't use his spirituality as a manipulative tool to get benefits from his boss. Simply because the Lord was active in Joseph’s life, Joseph found favor with Potiphar. Joseph didn’t have to *ask* favors from Potiphar; he found favor *with* Potiphar. This eventually led Potiphar to place virtually everything he owned under Joseph’s jurisdiction—which, by the way, anticipates what Pharaoh will also do.

Here was a slave who had earned the right to be trusted and respected. We are told, “So [Potiphar] left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate” (**v. 6**). I take this to mean that Joseph determined his own schedule, organized all of Potiphar’s estate, and even administered all of the man’s finances. But keep in mind that such trust and responsibility also brings increased vulnerability—in this case, to a temptress who was ready to pounce!

**III. Joseph Tempted** — As we have noted, Joseph had a lot going for him. His many attributes included strikingly good looks: “Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance” (**v. 6**). Of course, there is nothing wrong with physical attractiveness. But with it comes specific temptations. Scripture wastes no words, nor did Mrs. Potiphar: “And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, ‘Lie with me’” (**v. 7**). So much for the subtle approach!

Many other men in a similar situation would have been caught off guard and at least momentarily flattered by such a proposition. That would certainly include the men in Joseph’s extended family (cf. **Gen. 38**). But he stood apart. Without a moment’s hesitation, Joseph responded to the woman with equal boldness.

“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. He 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?" (**vs. 8-9**)

Now, we must clearly understand what's going on here. Don't think that some supernatural force or cloud of divine protection caused Joseph's resistance. Just look at the evidence. Here was a upper-class Egyptian woman offering her body to a young, upwardly mobile male servant. That's not just temptation, but high octane temptation. But Joseph refused. without deliberation, he just said "NO!"

There are two reasons he could do that. First, there was his loyalty to his human master. Simply put, Joseph would not be betrayed Potiphar's master's trust. But the second reason was even stronger: Joseph's loyalty to the Lord. He said, "How could I do this great evil, and sin against God?" Please note that Joseph's entire response perfectly matches what Jesus calls the first and second greatest commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor [in this case, Potiphar] as yourself'" (**Lk. 10:27**)

But Mrs. Potiphar refused to take no for an answer—especially since Joseph was, in a sense, her captive. And besides, the woman cared nothing about either marital faithfulness, the trust between her husband and this young man, or Joseph's religion. The only thing concerning Potiphar's wife was satisfying her sensual desires a.s.a.p.

Another thing we learn from this account is that *temptation will not vanish after we have once resisted it*. Either the same offer or attraction may reappear, or another lure will take its place. And with the temptation will come its three cousins: denial, concealment, and rationalization. And once the embers of lust begin to smolder, the James 1 scenario goes into action:

"Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (**Jas. 1:13-14**).

Keep in mind, however, that the sin is not that you are tempted. After all, Jesus himself was tempted in all ways as we are, according to **Hebrews 4:15**. No, the sin is committed only when we *yield* to temptation. But Joseph repeatedly stood his ground. In fact, not only did he refuse the woman's advances, it got to where he tried avoid her whenever he could. But finally, she set a trap for him.

"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, 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. And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house." (**vs. 11-12**).

Joseph entered the house to do his work. He noticed that the place was unusually quiet, and that the other servants were absent. This time the so-called "lady of the house" went beyond mere verbal advances. She physically grabbed Joseph and held on so tightly that, when he jerked away and dashed outside, his outer robe remained in her hands.

Joseph's response was entirely correct. Whenever Scripture lingers on the subject of sensual temptation, it gives us but one command: run for the nearest exit! We are not to reason with the tempter, or see how close we can get without giving in. God tells us to flee. And that's precisely what Joseph did.

**IV. Joseph Framed** — This, however, does not mean that there will never be a price to pay. In fact, many people suffer simply because they *did* the right thing. Joseph serves as Exhibit A.

"And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, 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'" (**vs. 13-14**).

Because of Joseph's active resistance, Potiphar's wife wanted revenge. To make that happen, she built a false case against Joseph, using a convenient piece of circumstantial evidence—his robe. Notice that the woman not only lies, but passes the buck to her husband:

"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.” Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, 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. But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.’

“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. 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” (**vs. 16-20**).

What about Potiphar in all of this? Actually, he comes out looking quite good. We are told that “his anger was kindled.” But given his wife’s slander of his own motives, the proven trustworthiness of Joseph, the fact that he is about to lose the services of a competent aide, and his knowledge of his wife’s questionable character, the man’s anger seems more directed toward his wife, rather than Joseph. This is further suggested by the sentence Joseph was given; that he put in the “king’s prison.”

If Potiphar really believed his wife and truly blamed Joseph, the young man would have probably been executed on the spot. But the king’s prison was reserved for political prisoners and would have never housed foreign slaves guilty of crimes against their masters. Potiphar is, of course, over a barrel—he cannot discount his wife’s accusation without publicly humiliating her even if he’s sure she is lying. So something must be done with Joseph. But the action taken is, arguably, as minimal as it can be and still retain family honor.

It also appears that the prison is, of all places, on Potiphar’s premises, for **40:3** identifies it as “in the house of the captain of the guard,” using the same title given to Potiphar in **39:1**.

Of course, you and I know where this story is headed. The result of this imprisonment is that it will acquaint Joseph with members of Pharaoh’s court, and that will ultimately take him into the court itself. All of this also draws our attention to the favor Joseph enjoys with everyone he encounters despite the hardships along the way.

**V. Strategies to Live By** — Before we conclude this part of Joseph's intriguing story, there are five lessons to learn and and apply. They constitute a strategy for resisting temptation.

\* First, **inform your conscience.** Contrary to conventional wisdom, the conscience is not a human faculty that automatically determines right and wrong. Instead, the conscience is shaped by what the mind takes in and accepts as truth. If, by biblical standards, such input is faulty, the conscience will prompt us to violate Christian standards of morality and ethics. In cultures such as our that are decidedly secular and stress a relative view of the truth, the problem becomes especially severe. That's because biblically-based morality receives little support from the society-at-large. For Christians living in such an environment, it is especially crucial that they regularly expose themselves to God's Word as their main source for character development. **Psalm 119:11**, says it well: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." You cannot simply "let your conscience be your guide." Without proper spiritual formation, much of our thinking and behavior will be at odds with God's revealed standards.

\* Second, **do not be weakened by your situation.** By "weakened," I mean: *don't get soft*, which can especially happen when things are going well. In Joseph's case, he had gone from extreme loss and deprivation to living an Egyptian version of the good life. It was then that the seductive Mrs. Potiphar tried to have her way with him. Of course, it isn't that temptation only arises when it's "summertime and the livin' is easy." But, as Thomas Carlyle quaintly wrote, "Adversity is sometimes hard upon a man, but for one man who can stand prosperity, there are a hundred that will stand adversity."

\* Third, **do not be deceived by the persuasion.** Every day seductive voices and images threaten to compromise our standards and lead us astray. None will be ugly, and all will have a certain degree of attraction and magnetism. Otherwise, there would be no temptation. The only answer to such seduction is outright rejection—which was Joseph's final move, as he made his escape.

\* Fourth, **do not be gentle with your emotions.** In a culture obsessed with "if it feels good, do it" subjectivism, this can seem almost heretical. But Scripture never exalts human emotions but,

instead, puts truth, morality, and faithfulness way out in front. Keep in mind the words of **Hebrews 4:12**:

“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

Fifth, **do not be confused by negative immediate results**. Indeed, bad things do happen to good people—often because they do good things. This is well-illustrated by this part of Joseph’s life. But how can anyone compare the fleeting pleasure of a tryst with his boss’s wife to the enduring pleasure of faithfulness to God and Potiphar...with, in Joseph’s case, eventual national leadership eventually thrown in for good measure?