

The Perfect Storm of Temptation

Genesis 39

INTRODUCTION: We began this section in Genesis by mentioning that there is more material proportionately dedicated to Joseph than any other individual in Genesis, more than Adam, more than Noah, more than Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. There was something about Joseph that made Moses slow the narrative. These are highly emotional chapters. We feel the pain of the pit as Joseph weeps before his brothers. It is as if the Holy Spirit invited us into the pit, the palace, and the prison with Joseph, as if to observe Joseph walk, where we might be called to walk. That is never more true than in chapter 39 as we walk with Joseph into the *perfect storm of temptation*.

Chapter 38 provides a pitiable account of Judah doing what so many do, walking headlong into sin, departing from his brethren, after the haunting decision to sell Joseph into slavery. Judah reaped the consequences of his actions - in the process, he declared that Tamar, who played the harlot, was more righteous than he. Tamar, even through deceptive means, expresses her faith in associating herself with Yahweh's covenant people. Then, in chapter 39, the Joseph narrative picks up again with the proper response to temptation.

Nothing is more real to the human experience than the fact that temptations are a real, consistent, and difficult part of life.

The Irish Poet Oscar Wilde said, “I can resist anything but temptation.”

Well, you'd better learn how to face temptation, or you will be at the mercy of three enemies throughout your entire life - the world, the flesh, and the Devil. These are the three enemies you acquire once you give your life wholly and completely to Jesus Christ.

- The World - your External Foe
- The Flesh - your Internal Foe
- The Devil - your Infernal Foe

Are relentless in their attempt to squelch your witness for Christ. The primary tool is temptation.

Temptation is when the WORLD and the DEVIL present you with an opportunity to sin that resonates with our FLESH.

James reminds us in 1:13–15 (ESV)

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived

gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Genesis 39 may be the most helpful chapter in the Bible for dealing with Temptation. Joseph is about to face what I call the **Perfect Storm of Temptation** - all of the things that can lower one's resolve to resist temptation will suddenly and dramatically fall upon this one man.

Disappointment, Competency, Rank, Strength, Opportunity, Tiredness, and Privacy will converge in that young man's life. But still, he will remain strong and faithful to God.
There is much for us to learn.

Most of us will not encounter all of these categories at one time, but when we succumb to temptation, we will likely be encountering one or two of these.

CONTEXT: With that in mind, consider Joseph. At an early age, God had given him great dreams of being raised up into authority, but then, the last time we were together, we saw Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers at the age of 17. We don't know exactly how much time passed between chapters 38 and 39. We know Joseph was 30 when he stood before Pharaoh. Therefore, most scholars place the events before us today when Joseph was in his early to mid 20's.

He was unmarried at this point, far from home, with zero accountability structure. There was no father, no family, no faith community around him. He was completely isolated.

God has a marvelous plan for Joseph, but it must have been difficult to discern at this point. Later in the narrative, Joseph will marry **Asenath**, and she will bear Joseph two sons, **Ephraim** and **Manasseh**. But all of that is far off in the future for this young man.

Today, he is a slave in Egypt, dealing with the trauma of being placed there by the people who should have loved him most.

TEXT: Genesis 39:1–23 (ESV)

¹ 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.

Joseph caught the eye of **Potiphar**, the "*captain of the guard*" (ESV) — in Hebrew, *sar hattab-bachim*, which literally means "chief of the executioners." This was a high-ranking military and political official, likely connected to Pharaoh's personal security. Potiphar purchased Joseph from the Ishmaelites and placed him on the staff of his household servants.

² **The Lord was with Joseph**, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master.

Now, that is one of the first keys to Joseph's success against temptation. Even though

he had experienced significant trauma at the hands of his family, he didn't allow it to skew his relationship with God. He trusted God, and God was with him.

1. Don't Let Your Disappointments Justify Your Disobedience

Solomon tells us in Proverbs 13:12 (ESV)

¹² Hope deferred makes the heart sick...

A sick heart is more susceptible to temptation. So the enemy loves to keep you disappointed, frustrated, and down. When we experience disappointment, so often, like our ancient ancestors in Eden, we hide from God, we fall out of church, we stop practicing spiritual disciplines. Joseph did the opposite; he leaned on God harder.

ILLUSTRATION: A landmark study published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (Baumeister et al., 1998) introduced the concept of "**ego depletion**." Researchers found that emotional distress, disappointment, and sustained hardship deplete the same internal resources we use to resist temptation. In other words, when you are emotionally spent from pain and loss, your ability to say no to sin is measurably weakened.

Here's how it works spiritually. Disappointment whispers a theology of entitlement into your ear: "God let you down, so you deserve this." "You've suffered enough — you've earned a little pleasure."

If anyone felt this, it would have been Joseph. *But he didn't allow his disappointment to justify his disobedience...*

What would Joseph have considered as he was trying to make sense of the fact that God gave him these incredible dreams, but now he was a slave? He had a family legacy of God's faithfulness amidst challenge:

- *Great Grandfather Abraham - Genesis 15:5* — "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them... So shall your offspring be." But Joseph also knew the rest of the story. Abraham waited *twenty-five years* for that promise to begin to be fulfilled.
- Joseph knew that his *great-grandmother Sarah* had been barren for decades. He knew that she had laughed at God's promise because it seemed biologically impossible. But God came through for her.
- Maybe he thought about his *dad, Jacob*, as he tried to do the right thing with Laban but got swindled time and again - but how God remained faithful to his promise.

Whatever it was, Joseph remembered that God is faithful even when life is disappointing.

2. Don't Let Your Competency Justify Your Compromise

³ His master saw that the Lord was with him and that ***the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands.*** ⁴ 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.

Disappointment can cause one to be tempted, but so can success. This is one of the most consistent patterns in all of Scripture. It is rarely the wilderness that destroys God's people — it's the Land where milk and honey are flowing.

- *Success can erode dependence on God.* When you were struggling, you prayed. When the bills couldn't be paid, you cried out to God. When the marriage was falling apart, you were on your knees. But when everything is going well, prayer feels optional.
- *Success generates a sense of entitlement.* This is the most insidious effect. You start to believe that because you've worked hard, because you've sacrificed, because you've achieved — you've earned the right to certain indulgences. The rules are for ordinary people. You're the exception.
- *Success provides access and opportunity.* Simply put, successful people have more opportunities to sin. They have more money, more travel, more unsupervised time, more people willing to accommodate their desires. Joseph's position in Potiphar's house gave him access to every room, every resource — and to Potiphar's wife, alone, with no one watching.

ILLUSTRATION: A Harvard Business Review analysis (2019) of executive leadership failures found that the most common period for CEO ethical violations is not during company downturns but during periods of sustained growth and success. When revenue is climbing, stock price is rising, and public praise is flowing, executives are statistically more likely to engage in fraud, harassment, or abuse of power.

The researchers attributed it to what they called the "**hubris syndrome**" — the gradual erosion of self-awareness that accompanies sustained praise and authority.

It was said of **Steve Jobs** that his tremendous success often created a **Reality Distortion Field**, causing him to fail to see life as it actually was.

- Think of King David - he didn't fall to temptation while he was running in the wilderness from Saul. He fell when the Kingdom was going strong, and he had time on his hands.

3. Don't Let Your Rank Justify Your Recklessness

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

Joseph ran everything. He managed the finances, the servants, the estate, the fields. He was a slave in title but a ruler in function. He had power — real, daily, unchecked power — over virtually every person and resource in that household. And that kind of authority does something to the human brain that most people never recognize until it's too late.

Lord Acton famously observed: *"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."*

ILLUSTRATION: Dr. Dacher Keltner's twenty-year research program at UC Berkeley, published in *The Power Paradox* (2016), found that subjects given authority in controlled experiments began to exhibit measurable behavioral changes within minutes. They interrupted others more frequently, spoke with less regard for others' feelings, ate more than their share of communal food, and — critically — became more likely to act on sexual impulses. Keltner described the effect as **"acquired sociopathy."**

Power, over time, tends to produce the same behavioral profile as a brain injury to the orbitofrontal cortex — the region responsible for impulse control and social awareness.

Think about what that means for Joseph. He had operated in a position of nearly unlimited household authority for what may have been years by the time Potiphar's wife approached him.

4. Don't Let Your Strength Justify Your Self-Importance

6b. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

The Hebrew is a comprehensive description covering both his physique and his face. This wasn't a man who was merely pleasant-looking. The language describes someone who was strikingly, noticeably attractive.

What makes this detail significant is how rare it is. The Bible does not often comment on a man's physical appearance, and when it does, it's almost always connected to a coming crisis.

- *He didn't have to seek attention — attention sought him.* Most people have to pursue temptation to some degree. They have to put themselves in the wrong place or send the wrong signal. Joseph didn't have to do anything. The text says Potiphar's wife "cast her eyes on Joseph" — he was simply existing, doing his job, and his appearance alone was enough to draw her obsessive attention. For an attractive person, temptation is not something you go looking for. It finds you. It follows you. It's in the gaze of the person across the room who won't stop staring.
- *His appearance gave him social currency he never asked for.* Modern psychology has documented what researchers call the **"halo effect"** — The halo effect means that physically attractive people are automatically perceived as more trustworthy, more competent, more intelligent, and more likable.

For Joseph, this meant that his rise in Potiphar's house was likely accelerated by his appearance. People wanted to be around him. People trusted him faster.

But that same quality that opened doors professionally also opened a door to temptation.

5. Don't Let Your Opportunity Justify Your Obliteration

⁷ And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me."⁸ 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.⁹ 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?"

Potiphar's wife skipped every step. She didn't flirt. She didn't hint. She didn't create a romantic atmosphere and let things "just happen." She looked at him and issued a two-word sexual command. And that changes the nature of the temptation entirely.

When temptation is subtle, you can pretend you don't see it. You can tell yourself, "She's just being friendly." You can maintain the illusion of innocence while slowly moving toward the line. Subtlety gives you the comfort of self-deception — the ability to say, "I'm not really doing anything wrong."

Potiphar's wife removed that option completely. There was nothing to misinterpret. There was no gray area. There was no way for Joseph to pretend he didn't understand what was happening. Her bluntness forced an immediate, binary decision: yes or no. Right now. No time to gradually rationalize. No slow slide. Just a door flung wide open and a demand to walk through it.

Research suggests that direct solicitation can be harder to refuse than gradual seduction.

ILLUSTRATION: A study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (Santos, Leve, and Pratkanis, 1994) indicated that when people are caught off guard by an unexpected or bold request, their normal cognitive resistance is temporarily disrupted, making them significantly more compliant in the moments immediately following. The boldness of the request itself creates a window of vulnerability.

Biblical scholars have noted that the Hebrew text uses ***no euphemism*** here. Throughout the Old Testament, sexual encounters are frequently described with softened language — "he knew his wife" (Genesis 4:1), "he went in to her" (Genesis 38:2), or other indirect constructions. But Potiphar's wife doesn't use softened language. *Shikbah immi* — "lie with me" — is direct, physical, and unmistakable.

ILLUSTRATION: I've told you before about the concept of Limerence introduced by Dr. Dorothy Tenov - that indicates when mutual attraction is confirmed, all of the "feel good"

chemicals in our body begin to dramatically increase. Noradrenaline, Serotonin, Dopamine.

How Did Joseph Sober Himself?

a. He remembered his responsibility. “My master has no concern about anything in the house.”

b. He recognized the boundaries. “He has kept back nothing from me except you, because you are his wife.”

c. He feared his God. “How then can I do this great wickedness and **sin against God?**” This is the key. Joseph didn’t say, “How can I sin against Potiphar?” He didn’t say, “How can I sin against my future wife?” He said, “How can I sin against **God?**”

6. Don’t Let Your Tiredness Justify Your Trespass

¹⁰ And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

That is not a single battle. That is a war of attrition. That is waking up every morning knowing that today, again, you will have to fight the same fight you fought yesterday. And the day before. And the day before that. With no end in sight. No promise that tomorrow she'll stop. No relief on the horizon. Just the grinding, relentless, soul-exhausting repetition of saying no to something your flesh wants to say yes to.

And eventually — not because you've changed your theology, not because you've abandoned your convictions, not because you've decided sin is acceptable — but simply because you are *tired* — you begin to wonder if it's even worth fighting anymore.

ILLUSTRATION: What Potiphar's wife was practicing has a name in military strategy: **attrition warfare**. It's the strategy of winning not through a single decisive battle but by gradually exhausting the enemy's resources until they can no longer sustain the fight. You don't have to outfight them. You just have to outlast them.

Satan uses the same strategy against us every day. He doesn't need you to abandon your faith in a single dramatic moment. He just needs you to get tired. He needs Monday's to be a little harder than Sunday's. He needs Friday's resistance to be a little thinner than Monday's. He needs you to wake up one morning and think, "I just don't have the energy to fight this anymore."

7. Don’t Let Your Privacy Justify Your Permissiveness

¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.

Not just that Joseph was alone, but that none of the men of the house were there. The text is emphatic. The house was empty. The witnesses were gone. The stage was set with surgical precision for the most dangerous moment of Joseph's life.

Privacy is not merely a circumstance of temptation — it is the *catalyst* of temptation. Every other factor we've discussed — disappointment, success, authority, appearance, the boldness of her words — all of those were present on the other days too. She had propositioned him "day after day" according to verse 10. So what was different about *this* day? One thing: nobody else was in the house. Privacy didn't create the temptation. Privacy *unleashed* it.

The Bible's message is relentless: there is no such thing as private sin. Every act committed in the dark will be dragged into the light.

Hebrews 4:13 (ESV) — "And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

Luke 12:2–3 (ESV) — "Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops."

Numbers 32:23 (ESV) — "Be sure your sin will find you out."

Not *might* find you out. *Will* find you out. You see **Privacy is an Illusion**.

Joseph knew, and you should know, that the most important observer sees everything.

LISTEN: When it comes to sexual temptation in particular, but any temptation when you find your reserves are depleted, like Joseph, the advice of Mark Twain rings true. **Mark Twain once wrote**, "There are several good protections against temptation, but the surest is cowardice."

2 Timothy 2:22 (ESV) — *"So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart."*

1 Corinthians 6:18 (ESV) — *"Flee from sexual immorality."*

1 Corinthians 10:13 (ESV) — *"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide a way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."*

CONCLUSION/INVITATION: When I was about 11 years old, I rode my bike down the street to my cousin's home. Turns out my cousin's older brother had just bought a huge pit bull dog named Cisco. He was the meanest dog I have ever encountered. He came at me on my bike. I jumped off; nothing stood between me and Cisco but a Huffy bike. Eventually, after I screamed a few times, my uncle came out and called the dog. As soon as the dog looked the other way, I bolted. I ran as if my life depended on it. I ran

into my grandmother's house and slammed the door behind me.

Looking back on that moment, I realize something: I didn't stop to negotiate with that dog. I didn't try to reason with it. I didn't stand my ground and hope for the best. I ran. And that instinct—that God-given impulse to flee from danger—is exactly what the Bible calls us to do when we face temptation.