

THROUGH IT ALL: TEMPTATION (GENESIS 39:1-20)

When we left off, Joseph was disappearing over the horizon in a caravan – sold into slavery and headed to a strange new country.

Then Moses (the writer of Genesis) hits “pause” on the story of Joseph and uses chapter 38 to give some details about Judah – one of Joseph’s brothers. Then, here in chapter 39, he returns to the story of Joseph.

As when we pick back up, Joseph is about to face an extremely *tempting* situation. You see, there’s not a person who has walked on the face of the earth (including Jesus), who hasn’t faced temptation. And there’s not a single person (except Jesus), who has not given into temptation at one time or another. Temptation is simply a part of our fallen world. You cannot escape it.

1. The forms of temptation.

Temptation wears many faces...

- **Material Temptation** – the lust for things. It might be as big as a house or as small as a diamond, but who hasn’t felt the lust for things? And who hasn’t given into it at some point? Old saying, “There’s nothing wrong with you having things unless the things have *you*.”
- **Personal Temptation** – the lust for fame, authority, power, or control. It might be for a title like “CEO” or “influencer” or “president” or “doctor” or “professor,” etc. Again, nothing wrong with those positions unless the lust says, “You *deserve* this because it will define you and be your identity.”
- **Sensual Temptation** – the lust for another person or for their body. And of course, we’ve all experienced this temptation in some way.

Joseph has already battled with the second (personal) temptation when he had the dreams about his future greatness. He *wanted* it, and he *bragged* about it. But now he's about to battle with sensual temptation...

Genesis 39:1 "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."

So, Joseph is now in a country and culture he doesn't know – surrounded by a language he doesn't understand. And notice: there's no mention of time in verse 1. We have no idea how much time has passed since Joseph arrived in Egypt. He could have been there two months or two years at this point.

But he's purchased by a man named Potiphar, "the captain of" Pharaoh's "guards."¹ So, this man is the head and leader of Pharaoh's bodyguards, which would have been some of the most elite soldiers in all of Egypt. And you don't become the team *leader* of an elite group like this without a reputation for being someone that you DON'T fool around with.

And Joseph has not only *adjusted* to working for Potiphar, he's actually *THRIVING* for one major reason...

Genesis 39:2–5 "The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. 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. 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."

When it felt like God had forgotten or abandoned Joseph, God was actually *intimately* involved in his everyday life. In fact, God had

¹ Bethancourt, P. (2024). *Exalting Jesus in Genesis* (D. Platt, D. L. Akin, & T. Merida, Eds.; p. 232). Holman Reference.

placed Joseph exactly *where* and *with whom* He wanted him.

And God blessed Joseph and made him successful. The cool thing is – not only did Joseph realize this, but everyone recognized where Joseph's success came from. **Verse 3** says, "His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed."

In fact, Potiphar was so impressed with Joseph's leadership, organization, and administrative skills, **verse 4** says, "He made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had."

And it paid off big time! **Verse 5** goes on to say, "From the time that he made [Joseph] overseer in his house, 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."

- **Fields** – crops are booming and selling.
- **Animals** – herds are healthy, multiplying, and selling.
- **Finances** – Potiphar's wealth is steadily growing under Joseph's leadership.

So, Joseph had gone from being a common slave (probably one among dozens in Potiphar's home) to running the entire estate of the top military man in Egypt. And this leads us to our next point about temptation...

2. The times of temptation.

Luke 4:13 tells us that the devil looks for "an opportune time" to bring temptation into your path. He strategically tempts you at various times. For example...

- **When you're tired.** It's easy to fall prey to temptation when you're physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. This is often when we mindlessly doomscroll, right? And all forms of temptation can pop up. Be careful!
- **When you're alone.** The devil loves to put temptation in your path when you're all alone. That's why, as we'll see in a

moment, Joseph is very careful *not* to be alone in a tempting situation. So, keep your guard up when you're alone!

- **When you're successful.** Times of success often lead to greater times of unguarded vulnerability. So, don't assume that temptation will hit you hardest when life is difficult. Sometimes, you're even *more* vulnerable when life is going great. *That's* when you need to be especially careful and alert!

Now, notice the next detail we're given about Joseph...

Genesis 39:6 "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. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance."

After telling us how successful Joseph has become, it gives us an unexpected detail – *Joseph's appearance*.

- NIV says, "Joseph was well-built and handsome."
- NLT says, "Joseph was a very handsome and well-built young man."

And this is where the devil chose to exploit Joseph – with his success and good looks...

Genesis 39:7 "And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me."

When everything was finally going well in Joseph's life, the devil saw the opportune time to strike. He uses Potiphar's wife to do it, and she is shamelessly aggressive! But Joseph responds with equal boldness...

Genesis 39:8–9 "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?"

His response shows us how to better fight temptation in our own lives. You see, her attention is on short-term pleasure, but his focus is on the long-term:

- **Joseph remembers what God has called him to do.** He's in a position of leadership and responsibility. He says, "Everything your husband owns is under my authority." Joseph understands that saying yes to temptation jeopardizes God's call on his life.
- **Joseph remembers who God has called him to be.** He reminds her (and himself) of who he is: "No one in this house is greater than I am." In other words, "Why would I do anything to ruin my reputation as a trustworthy leader?"
- **Joseph remembers how God has provided for him.** He is fully aware that ALL of his success is the result of God's favor. And he dare not touch another man's wife because she is off limits in *Potiphar's* eyes and in *God's* eyes.
- **Joseph remembers how God views sin.** He says, "How could I do this *great wickedness* and sin against God?" He's reminding her (and himself) how God views sex, not their personal or cultural opinions.

Now, if you're thinking, "Wow, Joseph must have been a spiritual giant who isn't affected by temptation like I am," you're wrong. He's just a man, but he *is* a focused man who guards his heart.

Clearly, Joseph had thought these things through BEFORE the temptation ever presented itself. If you don't develop biblical convictions about your sexuality *before* temptation arises, you won't be able to stand when it happens.

So, at this point, you're probably thinking, "OK, Joseph passed the test and when it happens to me, I can respond the same way and overcome temptation forever." If that was only true! And that leads us to...

3. The nature of temptation.

Genesis 39:10 *“And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.”*

Potiphar’s wife refuses to be ignored or take “no” for an answer. She’s relentless in her pursuit of Joseph! And this shows us some things about the nature of temptation...

- **Temptation is tireless.** If you think you can resist temptation a few times and be done with it, you’re wrong. In fact, if that’s how you think then you’ll become an even greater target for the devil. Remember: temptation will *never* stop this side of heaven!
- **The tempter wants the respected person.** Often times, the adulterer (man or woman) is attracted to someone who is happily married, faithful, and well-respected.

This is why Proverbs says the adulteress “hunts down a precious life” (6:26). You see, the more Joseph proved to be a godly man, the more she wanted him!

But, think about it: if Joseph sleeps with her, then the very thing that attracted her to him (his character) would be gone. Then she would lose interest and move on – leaving his life in shambles.

Thankfully, Joseph doesn’t fall for it. In fact, he not only refused to listen to her; he refused to even go near her. **Verse 10** says, *“As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her or be with her.”* You see, Joseph didn’t trust her (or himself) enough to be alone with her. Smart man!

But she’s not done. She makes plans for one final attempt...

Genesis 39:11–12 *“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."

That day, when Joseph arrived at the house to do his work, the place was unusually quiet. No one was around. It was just the two of them and she made her move. But this time she was determined to do more than just verbally offer herself – she wanted Joseph to *feel* her touch. So, she came up and grabbed hold of him and hugged him. But when he jerked away, his outer robe was left in her hands as he ran out of the house.

A lot of guys will laugh at Joseph. But he did *exactly* what the Bible says to do when you're faced with sensual temptation: *"Flee!" RUN from it!* (1 Cor 6:18; 2 Tim 2:22). The Bible doesn't tell you to reason with it, or stand your ground, or even claim verses against it. No, God says RUN FROM IT as fast as you can!

So, when Joseph flat-out refuses and pulls away from her, she is furious!

4. The extremes of temptation.

Genesis 39:13–14 "And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, ¹⁴ she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, [my husband] 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."

Notice the extremes: she went from being consumed with *lust* for Joseph to suddenly being consumed with *hatred* for him. And this teaches us something important.

- **Temptation pushes you to irrational thoughts and actions.** When you get fixated on some *thing* or some *one* that you MUST HAVE, temptation will cause you act in ways that are completely unreasonable.

And, that's what she does. She thinks, "If I can't *have* you then I'll *ruin* you." So, she builds a case against Joseph using the evidence right there in her hands...

Genesis 39:15–20 *“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.”*¹⁶ *Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home,*¹⁷ *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.”*¹⁸ *But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.”*¹⁹ *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.*²⁰ *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.”*

Think about it – If this happened today and she called the cops; her story makes sense:

“This slave tried to rape me. When he grabbed me, I tried my best to fight him off and I screamed as loud as I could. He panicked and ran away so quickly that he left the evidence right here – his robe. Apparently, he had watched me every day, obsessing over me. And when he was finally overcome with lust, he made his move and forced himself on me when no one was around. It was the most horrifying moment of my life.”

This is an open-and-shut case, right? But we know better. Joseph knows better. God knows better. *She* knows better. But her husband believed her.

~~Or did he... really? There’s evidence to support the idea that Potiphar didn’t *totally* believe his wife. After all, if the top bodyguard and chief executioner of Pharaoh really believed a common slave tried to rape his wife, do you really think he would have put him in prison? Most likely, he would have killed Joseph on the spot. Ancient Egypt wasn’t exactly easy on crime. Seems more likely that Potiphar was angry for losing his best servant due to a wife he knew to be unfaithful.~~²

By the way, this is twice that Joseph’s robe has been torn off because of jealousy, deception, and lies. His brothers tore off his

² Charles Swindall, “Joseph: A Man of Integrity & Forgiveness”

robe of many colors, lied about him, and wanted him dead.

And now, Potiphar's wife has torn off his robe because of jealousy, deception, and lies – and she wants him dead as well. No doubt, she fully expected her husband (the mighty war hero) to kill him on the spot.

Can you imagine what's going through Joseph's mind at this point? He's not only innocent but he resisted blatant temptation over and over again. So, once again, he was trying to do the right thing and honor God, but now he's suffering for it.

And, he goes to sleep that night in a prison cell – wondering what God was doing in all this. But by this point in his life, Joseph realizes that God hasn't abandoned him. He somehow senses that God has a hand in all this. And, as we'll see next time, he's right!

Small Groups