

## Genesis 39 Who Really Has It All?

It's not uncommon today for people to say that they are 'spiritual' people – they aren't offended by the idea of a god or gods, they're glad he, she, it, or they are there, it's comforting to know. Kind of like seeing a life guard on their chair at the pool – you think it's good that they're there, a very valuable, perhaps even necessary thing, and you know if you ever get in trouble they'll be there to help you.

But you never really talk to the lifeguard, you don't know their name, you don't go out to lunch with them or spend time with them...unless you're trying to hit on them. And the same is true with most people and their idea of God – they're glad He's there; glad He's watching over us, so long as He doesn't blow His whistle and interfere with their good time.

Let's just be very clear – that is not the Christian concept of God. The God we worship wants to be up close and personally involved in your life. Our relationship with Him is not supposed to be ethereal or 'spiritual' it is supposed to have an effect on us in the here and now. It has to work itself out in our daily lives, minute by minute, choice by choice, reaction by reaction.

That's what we're going to see this morning - God's presence manifested in Joseph's *real* life, His presence making a difference in the choices Joseph makes and the way he responds to situations. And that's important, because from the outside, Joseph's life seems to have a lot of ups and downs; the only constant is God's presence.

But, as we'll see, he wouldn't trade that presence for anything.

1 Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there. 2 **The LORD was with Joseph**, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. 3 And his master saw that the LORD *was* with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand. 4 So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all *that* he had he put under his authority. 5 So it was, from the time *that* he had made him overseer of his house and all that he had, that the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had in the house and in the field. 6 Thus he left all that he had in Joseph's hand, and he did not know what he had except for the bread which he ate.

If we were asked how Joseph is doing, we'd have to say, "not bad," right? Yes, he was sold into slavery by his brothers, who also faked his death, and yes, he is a slave, but overall things seem to be going fairly well. It's not a perfect existence, but it ain't bad either. And why is that? Well, vs 2 says, "The LORD was with Joseph" causing everything he did to prosper.

So, his external circumstances leave a little bit to be desired, but his internal condition can't be improved on at all. And that is all the more remarkable in light of his external circumstances.

So let me ask you, if you could only have one or the other, which would it be? Would you rather have all the outward trappings of success and liberty or is it more important to have peace with God?

Think about that, *not in some abstract, philosophical way*, but right here, right now. Because chances are, most of you don't have all the external trappings you want, but I can promise you that **this morning**, you can have the complete and total satisfaction of your soul through fellowship with God.

And that kind of satisfaction can remain with you even when everything else is stripped away.

We see it here in Joseph's life, but this isn't just a one-time event found in the oldest sections of our Scripture, it has been repeated throughout the pages of history right up to the present day. Time and again men and women have proved that is better to have next to nothing and intimacy with God than to have all that your heart desires and be far from Him.

One of the songs we sing in worship is based on this idea, the song "Better is one day in Your courts, better is one day in Your house, better is one day in Your courts, than thousands elsewhere." It's taken from Ps 84:10-11

[10](#) For a day in Your courts *is* better than a thousand.  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.  
[11](#) For the LORD God *is* a sun and shield;  
The LORD will give grace and glory;  
No good *thing* will He withhold  
From those who walk uprightly.

The Psalmist is saying he would rather spend a single day as a doorkeeper in God's temple than spend a thousand days anywhere else under any circumstance.

The apostle Paul understood the same thing, turn with me to Philippians 4, as Paul reflects on a gift the church in Philippi had just sent to him:

[10](#) But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. [11](#) Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: [12](#) I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. [13](#) I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

This verse is constantly taken out of context as people use it to say, I can do *anything* through Christ, almost like it's a superhero verse. But in its context Paul is clearly saying, it doesn't matter what my external circumstance is, whether life is easy or life is hard, I know I can handle it all **because** Christ is with me. He is the frame that supports my life when everything else falls away.

And that wasn't just poetry or boasting on Paul's part – he experienced some *rough* seasons in his life, but he knew, he REALLY knew, that God was with Him and **that knowledge** enabled him to weather every storm.

We see Paul and his travelling buddy Silas in Philippi in the book of Acts, they have been beaten and thrown into a foreign jail because of what they were saying and doing about Jesus. Their external situation looks pretty bad, but what are they doing in jail? They begin singing worship songs and praising God and wind up leading their jailor to the Lord because they *know* Immanuel, God is with us.

Peter and John had a similar experience a few years prior in Jerusalem, they were beaten and released and went on their way rejoicing “because they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus.” They had bruises on their body, but joy in their soul.

And then again, Peter by himself was arrested a different time and locked up in prison between guards who were waiting to execute him the next day and he was sleeping like a baby. His external situation didn't seem too great, but he knew that God was with him.

The pattern continues up to the present day. I have done a lot of reading and studying up on American POWs and missionaries who have been held captive in cross-cultural settings and almost without fail, they have the same thing to say – they knew, or came to know, the presence of God in a very real way when externally their situation was absolutely bleak and dismal. When they had nowhere and no one else to turn to, they found that God was always there and could never be taken away from them.

Some of them learned it quickly, like Air Force pilot Scott O'Grady whose F-16 was shot down over Bosnia in 1995. During his descent in his ejection seat he said he became aware of the presence of God and he continued to rely on him while he evaded capture until he was eventually recovered by US Marines eight days later.

Others didn't learn as quickly. Lt Nick Rowe was a Special Forces officer held in South Vietnam for five years before he escaped. It took two years (you have to love the persistence of our spec ops guys) before he realized he couldn't do this on his own any more and turned to God, but when he did he found that God was right there, and had been all along. For the next three years he said he used the Code of Conduct to determine what was the right thing to do as a POW, and depended on God to give him the strength to do it.

Listen to this from Admiral James Stockdale, the highest-ranking naval POW of the war, who also held for one of the longest periods of time:

“In sorting out the story after our release, we found that most of us had come to combat constant mental and physical pressure in much the same way. We discovered that when a person is alone in a cell and sees the door open only once or twice a day for a bowl of soup, he realizes after a period of weeks in isolation and darkness that he has to build some sort of ritual into his life if he wants to avoid becoming an animal...For almost all of, this ritual was built around prayer,

exercise and clandestine communication. The prayers I said during those days were prayers of quality with ideas of substance.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s a strange thing, but pain and suffering seem to teach us more about the nature of God and draw us closer to Him than anything else we experience. Now, we would have to be fools to go chasing after pain and sorrow on our own just so we can know more about God. There are people who do that, monks and others have taken vows of silence, of poverty, have fasted for extreme periods, all to try to induce their own suffering so they can know more of Christ. That’s foolishness. Life on this broken planet, surrounded by sinful human beings will bring enough heartache and loss your way. But the point is, when those things come, if you are grounded in your walk with God, you can survive and even thrive even though your external circumstances seem dismal.

And all of this should affect the choices we make today – are we choosing to strengthen our internal condition and deepen our walk with God, are we striving to know more of Him and let Him have more of His way in us, or are we using our lives to try to secure our external circumstances, to build up those things that Jesus said could rot, rust, or be taken from us?

Let’s compare Joseph’s life with that of his boss’s wife, who seemed to have it all but lacked the presence of God.

(vs 6 cont.) Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

**7** And it came to pass after these things that his master’s wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, “Lie with me.”

**8** But he refused and said to his master’s wife, “Look, my master does not know what *is* with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand. **9** *There is* no one greater in this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you *are* his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?”

**10** So it was, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her *or* to be with her.

Their situations couldn’t be more opposite – Joseph has all of God, but little freedom, she has complete freedom but none of God – and yet, who would you rather trade places with? Who seems to be most content?

And notice, that it is *because* Joseph fears God, because of what is going on inside him, that he is able to turn down his boss’s wife. He realizes that if he says yes, more than just betraying his boss, he will be sinning against the God who is watching over and blessing him.

That’s a hugely important realization – we need to understand that when we give in to temptation, we aren’t just doing it alone, or among other people on earth, ALL of our sin is ALWAYS against God.

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<sup>1</sup> James Bond Stockdale, “The World of Epictetus: Reflections on Survival and Leadership,” in *War Morality, and the Military Profession*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Malham M Wakin ed. (Westview Press: Boulder, CO), 1986, 17.

It is possible for me to sin against God and not sin against you, but it is impossible for me to sin against you and not sin against God. Think about that.

So Joseph says, “no, that might be OK with you, but it’s not OK with your husband and it’s sure not OK with God.” And that is kind of the essence of temptation, it suggests to you that you have an opportunity to take for yourself something that God, or life, has not or will not provide to you. But if God hasn’t provided it for you, is it really something you should have?

You have to ask yourself that question when you struggle with temptation – will this chance to vent, or to grab, or to indulge, really give me something that God can’t or won’t give to me in a much better way if I just trust in Him? Is this opportunity really the BEST option?

Let’s look a little more at this temptation and see what we can understand about it.

1. Temptation came on the heels of success – God was granting Joseph success and blessing everything he set his hand to, and now, at the peak of it all, here comes the chance to fall. This is a very common thing, in our moments of greatest accomplishment we need to be most vigilant. The athlete who has worked hard all season needs to be vigilant in the championship not to round a corner, the engaged couple who have maintained sexual purity in their dating relationship need to be vigilant not to stumble the month before their wedding.
2. This temptation was predatory, it came looking for him. You don’t always have to go looking for a chance to sin, sometimes it serves itself up to you on a silver platter.
3. It was flagrant, sometimes temptation is subtle, but it can just as easily be bold and brash.
4. It was repetitive, saying no once wasn’t enough, Joseph had to hold his ground and keep resisting over and over again. For most temptations, the Bible says we are supposed to stand – this is the purpose of the whole “armor of God” that you know about from Ephesians 6. Verse 11 says “Put on the whole armor of God, **that** you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”

However, sexual temptation is in a different category. 1 Corinthians chapter 6 says, “[18](#) Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. [19](#) Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? [20](#) For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”

Sexual temptation is not something you play around with; you just get away from it, and get away quickly. And that’s what Joseph does.

[11](#) But it happened about this time, when Joseph went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house *was* inside, [12](#) that she caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me.” But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. [13](#) And so it was, when she saw

that he had left his garment in her hand and fled outside, [14](#) that she called to the men of her house and spoke to them, saying, “See, he has brought in to us a Hebrew to mock us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. [15](#) And it happened, when he heard that I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me, and fled and went outside.” [16](#) So she kept his garment with her until his master came home. [17](#) Then she spoke to him with words like these, saying, “The Hebrew servant whom you brought to us came in to me to mock me; [18](#) so it happened, as I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me and fled outside.”

It is interesting to me to note that she tries to shift the blame for all of this to her husband – twice she says, “it was you who bought him” this is all your fault. When we sin we find all sorts of excuses for why we acted the way we did.

Potipher responds to the charges, but his response is pretty interesting itself.

[19](#) So it was, when his master heard the words which his wife spoke to him, saying, “Your servant did to me after this manner,” that his anger was aroused. [20](#) Then Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king’s prisoners *were* confined. And he was there in the prison.

Why is it that Joseph was thrown into a political prison, one which Potipher was in charge of, instead of just being immediately put to death? Perhaps Potipher had a suspicion that his wife wasn’t exactly as trustworthy as his servant Joseph had been.

[21](#) **But the LORD was with Joseph** and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. [22](#) And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph’s hand all the prisoners who *were* in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. [23](#) The keeper of the prison did not look into anything *that was* under *Joseph’s* authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made *it* prosper.

We’ll come back to this again next time, but we find ourselves almost right back where we started - Joseph’s external circumstances have changed, but his internal peace hasn’t been altered at all. He continues to rest in God and God continues to bless through him.

Someone once explained to me that the difference between joy and happiness is that happiness is dependent upon your external circumstances, but joy transcends everything that is going on because it springs up from your soul instead of seeping in from the outside. Did you know the word “happy” appears only six times in the New Testament, but “joy” appears 63 times?

You can have joy this morning, joy that can never be taken away from you, if you, like Joseph, find it in God. You can’t control your external circumstances as much as you would like – Joseph was wrongfully betrayed and sold into slavery, he was wrongfully accused of attempted rape, his external circumstances stink, but he’s bobbing along like a buoy in the storm because he is being held up by God. And God offers to do the same thing for you, if you will just value your relationship with Him above everything else, if you will resist temptation and receive the Lord.