

“THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE”

The Story of Joseph - 2

Genesis 39:1-23

Those of you who were here last week (not very many!), will remember that we left our story of Joseph at the point where he was disappearing over the sandy horizon with a bunch of Ishmaelite traders, having been sold to them as a slave by his brothers. They had become sick of the sight of the spoilt brat and had decided something had to be done. The first suggestion was that he should be killed. Then, after the intervention of Reuben, the oldest brother, they threw him down a well. And eventually, after a moving speech by Judah about how he was their flesh and blood after all, they decided to make a bit of money out of the affair by selling him.

Well, the traders made their way down to Egypt and managed to sell him to someone called Potiphar, who was the “*captain of the guard*”. The word translated “*guard*” can mean either “executioner” or “butcher”, so Potiphar was either in charge of the criminal justice system or the head cook at the palace. We are told in the story that Joseph had a pretty meteoric rise within the household of Potiphar and he was soon running his master’s household, with very little supervision. Potiphar clearly trusted him and once again it seems that Joseph has landed on his feet. He’s still an irritating goody-goody, it seems.

But in that situation, Joseph soon learns that a responsible job has its drawbacks. No doubt, with the responsibility came pressure and stress. Although he was top dog in the household, there was very little job security – as he was soon to find out. And he had to deal with a very clear case of sexual harassment, which meant that his life took another very unexpected twist.

The narrator of the story emphasises that he was a good-looking boy (*v6b*) and it wasn’t long before Potiphar’s wife took a fancy to him. It may well have been the story of the wife of the government official, living out in the suburbs with very little to do, and wanting someone to share her siesta with. Whatever her motive, she was determined to get Joseph as her lover. And she tried a number of strategies. Firstly, she tried to flatter him. We are told that she “*took notice of Joseph*” and propositioned him there and then. As someone in her position was probably used to getting her way pretty well most of the time, she must have been mortified when he refused. What was wrong with her? What was wrong with *him*? It wouldn’t have done any harm, surely? And it might have done him a bit of good in the short term, in getting him not only into her bed but into her good books.

But no, she finds her advances rebuffed. So she tried the second tack – wearing him down. “*She spoke to him day after day*”. The pressure was applied, again and again and again. Every time Joseph saw her,

she would make some advance towards him. But he kept his head down and wouldn't have any thing to do with her. So she plays her final card. One afternoon, while there is no-one about in the house, she decides to take the direct approach (not that saying, "*Come to bed with me!*" was particularly subtle!). She ambushes him. She grabs him by the cloak and tries to drag him off to her room, but Joseph slips out of the coat and runs off, leaving her once again unsatisfied. This time, though, she is determined to cause trouble. Screaming for her personal servants, who must have been out in the grounds, she claims that Joseph, the Hebrew slave whom her husband has brought into the home to mess things up, has tried to seduce her and *she* has managed to escape *him*, holding up his cloak as proof that something has gone on.

Potiphar comes home from a hard day executing either people or animals (depending on the translation you prefer) and hears the same sorry story all over again. He has no choice but to punish Joseph, but instead of having him executed – which would have been the usual punishment in such circumstances – has him incarcerated in the maximum security jail. Once again, it seems as if Joseph's life is just a roller-coaster of emotion and excitement – up one minute and down the next. But even in prison, this man wins folk over to his way and the warder effectively puts him in charge. Plenty of responsibility, but no freedom. The closing credits roll on this week's episode over a picture of Joseph choosing the menus of the prison canteen (or some such similar activity).

There's some very instructive stuff in this story, though, about handling temptation. There can be no doubt, I don't think, that Joseph would have been tempted to give in to Mrs Potiphar's advances. We don't know how attractive she was or whether Joseph did have any weakness for her, but she was certainly persistent, and it would have been much easier for him to have given in than to resist. When she first suggests an afternoon in the bedroom, he actually reasons with her and, as one commentator points out, the reasons he gives for not going along with her plan are exactly the reasons many other people might have used as an excuse for accepting. In vv8,9 he says that he is in sole charge; his master has given him free rein within the household; he is the main man there. The only thing Potiphar has not allowed him to get involved with is Mrs Potiphar. Many people would have said, "So let's get on and get the full set!" He could certainly have used his influence in the household to hush up any unwelcome gossip. But Joseph did not. The fact that he has been put in charge of so much is seen as an affirmation of Potiphar's trust in him and he does not want to break that trust.

But what's even more important is that he sees this as a sin against God. Yes, it might upset Potiphar (and it's clear from the way things develop that it certainly would have upset him), but Joseph sees this first and foremost as wickedness against God. The circumstances and the set-up could have provided him with a situation in which no-one was really hurt – she fancied him, he would have enjoyed it, the other servants were all out of the way, and Potiphar would not have known. It was almost too good to be true.

But it went against God's moral absolutes and Joseph was not prepared to do that. How often do we weigh up whether to give in to temptation according the criteria of pragmatism? Will I get caught? Will anyone find out? Will this hurt anyone or is it some kind of "victimless" crime? God has put us in a world he has made and told us that if we want to get the best out of it we need to follow his laws, his moral absolutes. There is right and wrong, and we have clear choices to make.

So not only does Joseph resist temptation according to the absolutes of God, but, even more practically, he takes steps to limit the effect of the temptation. He tries to keep out of her way. At the end of *v10* there's a little phrase which says "*he refused to go to bed with her or even to be with her*". He tries to ensure that he would not even be in the way of temptation. Very often, when we find that we are regularly being tempted in a particular area of our lives, usually at a point where we're actually quite vulnerable, there are actually ways in which we can try to limit the effect of that temptation. In *Proverbs 5:8*, the wise writer gives some advice about how to avoid (once again) the seductress – "*Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house.*" In other words, do all that you can to ensure that you're not even in a position to be tempted.

When I've talked about this before, I've usually given a concrete example, but despite using three different and very unusual examples (involving, amongst other things, a Ford Escort XR3i cabriolet and speaking Klingon – don't ask!), people have come up to me at the end of the service and asked how I knew what their particular weaknesses were. So this is an example plucked from the air and does not imply that I am privy to any of your own personal temptations. (Oh, alright, it's my own story!) If your one vice is that you cannot stop buying CDs, and you find yourself giving in to the sin of covetousness in that area with alarming regularity, then it makes sense to cross over the road away from halls that have large "CD Fair Today" banners hanging outside, and not to keep wandering into Tudor Tunes every time you come up the Tudor passageway. That way the temptation doesn't have a chance to get a grip on you (me).

Now that may seem a trivial example, but it's the same with that person at work whom you do feel attracted to, or that pull which Ladbrokes seems to have on you, or the strange compulsion you have to fill your supermarket basket with chocolate. Don't even go there. Keep away from the woman, the betting shop, the chocolate aisle. Take steps (literally) to walk around the places where you know you'll be tempted. Ask someone to help you. Make sure you're not left alone in situations where the temptation might be too great to bear on your own. And keep praying the line from the Lord's Prayer, "*Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil*". After all, God has told us in his word (*1 Corinthians 10:13*) that he "*will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.*" If you give in, in other words, don't blame God. Try, with the help of the Holy Spirit to keep out of temptation's way.

Joseph certainly had God's help in all this. As this story progresses, you find a little refrain creeps in – *"The LORD was with Joseph"*. In all these different adventures, God is there helping and strengthening his servant. And as he makes his presence real in Joseph's situation he enables him to be successful in every way. You may well feel that being thrown into prison for something you didn't do isn't exactly the height of success, but even in that situation, God is able to *"show him kindness and grant him favour in the eyes of the prison warder."*

It's not too clear in all of this whether Joseph himself knows that God is at work in this way. Is he aware that God is behind all his success? Whether he is or not, Joseph still acts in accordance with what he believes is God's will, as we've already seen in his response to Mrs Potiphar. But even if Joseph didn't quite realise what was going on, other people did. Joseph tried his hardest to stick to what he believed was God's way, and other people took note. Potiphar certainly noticed (v3), and so did the prison warder (vv22,23). They noticed his integrity and trustworthiness, the ways in which he dealt with the responsibility he'd been given. It's actually explicit in the comment about Potiphar that he could see the hand of God in all this. As another commentator has written, *"This is not a story of the success of Joseph, rather it is a story of God's faithfulness to his promises."* Of course, it's important that Joseph does nothing to obscure or negate the activity of God in his life and allows the Lord's light to shine through him.

I suppose that is the challenge that comes to us out of this story this week. It's a challenge that is quite simply expressed but is very difficult to meet – can other people see that the Lord is with you? Do you live your life in such a way that his light shines through you? Do you deal with temptations in such a way that it's obvious that God is at work in you? Today, perhaps more than ever before, there is a desperate need for the women and men of God to live lives of integrity and holiness as a means of witnessing to other people about the transforming power of God. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, *"let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father who is in heaven."* The character of Joseph is gradually changing from the annoying spoilt brat of chapter 37, to the shining example of a man set apart and used by God here in chapter 39. Maybe we could try to get to the point of displaying God's holiness and faithfulness without having to go through the irritating phase first!