

Genesis 39 Living for God in a secular world

Introduction

On the grapevine in Egypt it would have been reported that the most prominent servant in the household of the Chief of Pharaoh's security staff had been imprisoned for propositioning the wife of his master. How many people do you think hearing this story in whatever form it was told assumed that the slave in question was guilty as charged? I suspect universal agreement that he was 'lucky' only to be imprisoned when he could have been executed on the spot. Yet their assumptions and interpretation of what happened that day could not have been further from the truth.

Fast forward to the present time - We hear all kinds of information about other people. Inevitably we pass judgements about the statements or allegations made with respect to the character or conduct (or both) of that individual or group of people. How often are our first impressions correct? If we are honest with ourselves we know that sometimes we get it right and on other occasions we get it wrong. For some people to have wrong judgements made about them can be life changing in the most negative of ways. I remember when Gerard Crispin, the Director of Daylight Prison Ministries, formerly a Crown Prosecution Services barrister in the south of England, told us a little of the story of a man who will spend the rest of his life in prison, having already spent a long time there, for a murder Gerard was convinced he never committed. Had the man 'admitted the crime' he would have been released years ago, but by maintaining his innocence of the crime he is condemned to remain behind bars. The man in question is a Christian and refuses to tell lies to get out of prison. He will know how Joseph felt in those first years in prison.

Yet this story is far from unique. On 10 August 2013 in an article in *The New York Times* popular novelist John Grisham told the story of Algerian Nabil Hadjarab. This thirty-four year old man has been detained for eleven years in Guantanamo Bay prison by the American authorities. He has been on hunger strike since February of this year and is only alive today because of compulsory force-feeding of prisoners by the authorities there. How did he end up there? On 11 September 2001 Nabil had been staying in an Algerian Guesthouse in Kabul at the time of the American invasion of that country. As a result of many Arab terrorists supporting the Taliban the Americans offered a financial reward to their allies the Northern Alliance militia for any Arabs they could capture in the country. Nabil tried to exit the country through Pakistan but was captured, taken to the Bagram Air Base prison prior to being flown to Cuba on 15 February 2002. Twice he has been cleared of links to terrorism by reviews ordered by Presidents George W. Bush in 2007 and Barack Obama in 2009 –but a further four years on nothing has changed for the better. What chance has that innocent man of justice? [John Grisham, *New York Times* 10 August 2013] What chance had Joseph in prison in Egypt? What chance for you and me when our integrity is likewise called into question? The account recorded in Genesis 39 is disturbingly relevant to twenty-first century society.

1. The importance of self-discipline (Genesis 39:1-6)

(a) **Joseph pleased God** (Genesis 39:1-2) *Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.* ² **The Lord was with Joseph** so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. It is when we are away from family and friends and close colleagues that the true test of our character is seen. How do we behave when we are out of sight of people close to us? How many sailors, for example, over the years have had a proverbial 'wife in every port'? How many businessmen who spend a fair bit of time away

from home arrange additional female companions on their travels without their wife having a clue about what is going on? How many people have used vocabulary in their speech in the workplace that they wouldn't think of using in church on a Sunday? The list of possibilities that could be suggested here is a long one, but the point is obvious to anyone who gives a moment's thought to the issue before us. Whom am I most concerned to please in my speech and my conduct? Is it my own desires and aspirations that top the list of priorities? Is it some other human being –maybe someone in our family? Or is it supremely seeking to be the man or woman that God wants me to be in the various situations in life where He has allowed me to live week by week? The answer that we truthfully give to the question will determine our priorities when the pressure is on. Sometimes we have to admit that we have never faced a particular temptation and could not say what response we might give if we had been standing in someone else's shoes. There are humorous challenges to our integrity. One I saw on TV years ago was run by a film production company in London who set up cameras in a telephone booth and then proceeded to place five pound notes –one at a time- in a visible place and watched to see the response from passers by. It was good viewing for a few moments and a fair study in human nature, but often much bigger, life-changing temptations may cross our pathway –it is these rare scenarios in our experience that can impact our lives for years to come.

The passage tells us here that *The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered* (Genesis 39:2). Joseph had no choice in who purchased him at the slave market in Egypt, but somehow in His mysterious providence God did. Potiphar was a senior courtier of the Pharaoh. His title was literally: 'Chief of the butchers'. This title must not be mis-understood. He was not providing the Sunday roast for Pharaoh's lunch; instead he was responsible for executing the people who had fallen out of favour with the Pharaoh. By definition, this man was brutal and tough. There is not a chance that he was naturally gentle and sensitive. Yet it turned out that he was the ideal man to oversee these early years of Joseph in Egypt. First impressions are not always reliable. Joseph's heart must have sunk on day one wondering what lay in store for him on this estate. Yet what matters most was that: *The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered* (Genesis 39:2). In your life and mine in the workplace, the neighbourhood or in some other context, there are unpromising relationships which cause real concerns for us. How can I keep going as a Christian in this place? How can I maintain my integrity when the pressure to be dishonest, immoral or whatever is so strong? It is impossible to go through a working career of any length without at least some temptations to behave inappropriately. Joseph had been stripped of his coat, but not of his character! Removed from his situation but not his standards; Paul in Ephesians 6:5-9 wrote these words for enslaved people and their masters: *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. ⁷Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, ⁸because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.⁹ And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with Him.* Joseph lived and died approximately two thousand years before these words were written, but his life as a slave of Potiphar was lived in a manner consistent with the teaching of these verses. He could not change his enslavement, but he could control how he responded to it. He would not allow the injustice of how he had been treated to be transferred through him to be thrown at another person. This could be the most natural response in the world, but Joseph would not go down that road. What was the secret of his success? How can we be as successful in our day as he was in his? The key verse is Genesis 39:2: *The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered.* God's blessing may not be what we had prayed for or in a form we had expected, but when we honour Him there is a clear promise

that in some way we will gain a blessing of some kind beyond that which we could have expected. This must be the case, because the text before us is explicit in making this statement.

How might Joseph have been blessed in Potiphar's house? First of all, Joseph must have begun with the most menial and difficult of outdoor tasks when he first arrived on the estate. Undoubtedly there would have been discipline issues with other slaves who declined to do any more than they could get away with. After all who could blame them for that? However, the problem with it is that their situation certainly would not get any better and might even get worse. That is what happened to the Israelite slaves four centuries later following Moses' first appearance on their behalf before Pharaoh. His appeal for recognition of their faith and identity caused their working conditions to be made much worse, almost impossible. Exodus 5:19-23 states: *The Israelite overseers realised they were in trouble when they were told, 'You are not to reduce the number of bricks required of you for each day.'* ²⁰*When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them,* ²¹*and they said, 'May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.'* ²²*Moses returned to the Lord and said, 'Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me?'* ²³*Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and You have not rescued Your people at all.'* Joseph didn't choose that path. Instead he did his best with the chores entrusted to him and as a result made a remarkable rise through the ranks, until within a short space of time he was appointed the overseer of the whole estate. Who knows whether there were a handful of slaves or hundreds employed by Potiphar? What is important is that God was providing an ideal work placement for Joseph for the future career He had prepared for him in Egypt. Only years later as he looked back would Joseph grasp what was going on. We cannot expect to find things any different in our lifetimes. There will be some things that take place in our lives that years later we will grasp why God allowed them to happen. We must honestly admit that there will also be things we will never understand in this life as well. Yet if we are genuinely doing our best to live for the Lord in our family circle, in our workplace, in the work of our church then these words stated with respect to Joseph can equally be true for us as well. ***The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered*** (Genesis 39:2). Be encouraged to know that in time we too will see the hand of God's providence at work in our lives. Yet the only way this happens is that we consciously and carefully endeavour to the best of our ability to honour the Lord each day of our lives. Yet this was not the only person whom Joseph pleased:

(b) **Joseph pleased Potiphar** (Genesis 39:3-6a) ³*When his master saw that **the Lord was with him** and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did..* ⁴*Joseph found favour in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.* ⁵*From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field.* ⁶*So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.* How did this tough worldly-wise man give this young man so many promotions in his business? Genesis 39:3 declares: ³*When his master saw that **the Lord was with him** and that **the Lord gave him success** in everything he did.* When I read these words I naturally want to ask the question –how did he know this? Potiphar was not a follower of the God of Israel and in any case would have viewed the gods of Egypt as superior. I suspect that this man might have had a hard time putting it into words, but deep down there was something about Joseph that attracted this man to favour him and reward his diligent service. If Joseph is a type of Jesus in any way then this stage of his life was one in which words spoken of the younger Jesus in Luke 2:52 are applicable. *And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.* It was the quiet steady witness of character that has a much bigger impact than we could ever imagine. How long did this process of recognition by Potiphar take to go from a menial slave

aged seventeen to being put in charge of his household affairs? Genesis 41:46a tells us: *Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt.* Earlier in Genesis 41:1 it is stated that it was at least two years from the release of the chief cup-bearer to Pharaoh from prison before he told his employer about the man who had interpreted his dream. Therefore it is simple maths to work out that it may have been up to ten years, a whole decade as a slave before Joseph landed this ideal role running the household affairs of Potiphar. What a C.V. Joseph was building up here. Later unknown to him I can imagine Pharaoh asking Potiphar about the character of the man who had spent so long in his household. A man who can be trusted to do menial tasks as a teenage slave against his will, was a man who later could be entrusted with the heavy responsibilities of being Vizier, Prime Minister, of Egypt. In the Parable of the Talents Jesus spoke about the importance of faithfulness in service. Matthew 25:23 declares: *'His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"*' Here is a clear principle for those of us who are younger –a relative term I know!- of faithfulness in the work before us just now because we never know how that good stewardship in the present will open doors of opportunity for greater service in the future. Joseph over this ten year period modelled such an example for us here.

2. **The importance of personal integrity** (Genesis 39:6b-20)

(a) **Temptation is natural** (Genesis 39:6b-7) *Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, 'Come to bed with me!'* Joseph had overcome the trial of slavery. He had been faithful to God at a time when all seemed hopeless. The question now was how would he cope with success and prosperity? There are those who can cope admirably with all kinds of adversity but struggle desperately with advantageous circumstances. Joseph had gone from a life of privilege to a place of humiliation but in it all he had been faithful to God and maintained his principles. How often the biggest failures follow our greatest successes. Elijah after his monumental victory on Mount Carmel, against all the odds humanly-speaking, yet falls to pieces emotionally after receiving a threatening message a few days later (I Kings 19:1-3); Noah who honoured God over a century by building the biggest boat he and his contemporaries had ever seen, in the face of howls of derision from unbelieving people, yet after the great flood had subsided he humiliated his family under the influence of excessive alcohol (Genesis 9:20-24); King David, the greatest King in Israel's history, known as a man after God's own heart. The author of many of the Psalms sung to this day in Jewish and Christian worship services, yet his infatuation with Bathsheba led not only to adultery but to the deaths of a number of his finest soldiers in the army, including her husband Uriah (II Samuel 11); no one alive on this planet will go through their life without serious temptation to say or do something wrong. It is how we respond to temptation that is crucial. The temptation itself is not sin. James gave this warning in his letter to Christian Churches: *Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. ¹³ When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death* (James 1:12-15). Notice the intensity of Joseph's pressure. He has no choice but to be in the same house as this woman. He possibly had times when he was unavoidably alone with her. He could not quit his job and look for something else as a slave. There were plenty of reasons why he might have given in. It was the easiest thing to do. He was not in a position to be other than single as a slave and it is very possible

that he thought the chance of marriage and a family was close to non-existent. There have been numerous cases of younger women in particular pressured by unscrupulous employers to give in to sexual advances. I would hope with the strong legal framework in the United Kingdom against harassment in the workplace that such problems are less common at the present time than in the past, but in some other countries problems in this area are very serious. India and Pakistan, for example, have both received criticism for failing to take this problem seriously.

(b) **Temptation contains pressure** (Genesis 39:8-10) ⁸ *But he refused. 'With me in charge,' he told her, 'my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. ⁹No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?' ¹⁰And though **she spoke to Joseph day after day**, he refused to go to bed with her or even to be with her.* The pressure was on day after day. No-one could have blamed him had he not been willing to put his life on the line –which was the risk as a slave. In our social and economic context refusing improper advances in the workplace can cost a promotion, a job or at worst a career. This can be devastating in the latter case and might result in serious financial difficulties- which for some people might put their home at risk of repossession if they were unable to pay their mortgage. Joseph might have been expected to enjoy his promoted post, but I'm not sure how much pleasure he would have got facing that kind of problem on a daily basis. We must remember that temptations do not lessen because we are faithfully serving God. They might actually become stronger and more intense. Jesus' most intensive time of tempting came immediately after the blessing of the Father at His baptism (Matthew 4:1-11). One verse so helpful to memorise and claim is I Corinthians 10:13: *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* Praise the Lord for such a promise.

(c) **Temptation demands a decision** (Genesis 39:11-13)¹¹ *One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. ¹²She caught him by his cloak and said, 'Come to bed with me!' But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. ¹³When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house...* D. Day came unexpectedly for Joseph when on one occasion he entered an unexpectedly quiet house. The bustling sounds of the household servants were conspicuous by its absence. It did not take long to find out what was going on. No more attempts at flattery and seduction. Now Mrs Potiphah reminds Joseph he is a slave who has no say over his body any more than over the use of his time. It is an aggressive grabbing at his clothing with a view to forcing off his clothes. Joseph, however, being physically stronger forces her off his person but has no choice but to flee outside the house, presumably to draw attention of other people to the situation. Paul in I Corinthians 6:18-20 gave this advice to Christians in sexually compromising situations: *Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. ¹⁹Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.* Joseph literally fled but to where? It must have been the lowest point of his life emotionally, closely followed by some of the time when he was in prison over the next two to three years. He had done the right thing against all the odds, but the consequences were serious. Yet God saw that he had maintained his integrity and that was what counted. We do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, not because it makes life easier. On the contrary, as for Joseph life can become significantly harder by honouring God's standards and principles in our personal lives.

(d) **Temptation produces consequences** (Genesis 39:14-20) ¹⁴ *she called her household servants. 'Look,' she said to them, 'this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came*

*in here to sleep with me, but I screamed.*¹⁵ *When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.*¹⁶ *She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home.*¹⁷ *Then she told him this story: 'That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me.'*¹⁸ *But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.*¹⁹ *When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, 'This is how your slave treated me,' he burned with anger.*²⁰ *Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.* Here was the very serious but false allegation of attempted rape, or at least a sexually motivated assault. Joseph did the right thing but it was he not her who was undoubtedly concerned about the possible ramifications. Just over a decade ago senior civil servant in the European Union administration Bernard Connolly, a Roman Catholic Christian drew attention to the financial corruption taking place within that organisation. Was he rewarded for his honesty and saving European taxpayers a lot of money? No! the honest man was sacked and he lost a promising career. What message did that send out to European citizens? When you and I do the right thing at the human level we may not only not be rewarded, but may suffer for telling the truth or upholding high standards of integrity in our personal conduct. Yet we follow in the footsteps of one who supremely did the right thing and ended his three-year earthly ministry on a cross. Isaiah wrote concerning Jesus: *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth.*⁸ *By oppression and judgment He was taken away. Yet who of His generation protested? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people He was punished.*⁹ *He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in His death, though He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.*¹⁰ ***Yet it was the Lord's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer ...*** (Isaiah 53:7-10a). Was it back to square one with Joseph after a decade in Egypt? It looked that way, but on the contrary it would be less than three years before Joseph lived in a palace and led the country as its Prime Minister through some of the toughest times in its recent history. In our service for God in a secular world –remember this, God is still on the throne. He will honour you as you honour Him. May He help us to do just that, for Jesus' sake, Amen.