

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 6, 2009**

## **REFUSING SIN**

### **Genesis 39:1-12**

Last Sunday's message was an introduction to and overview of the life of Joseph, who, despite his common name, was an uncommon man of dreams and destiny. Joseph was treated with special favor by his father Jacob, but deeply resented, even hated by his ten older brothers who, when the opportunity presented itself, decided to get rid of Joseph (they thought) by selling him to traveling Midianite traders who were on their way to Egypt. He was taken to Egypt, where he was sold as a slave to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's royal guard.

Today's message is part 2 of an 8-part series on the life of Joseph. Our Scripture focus today is Genesis 39:1-12 (page 30). Genesis 39 tells the story of Joseph in the house of Potiphar and what happened to him there. If you're not familiar with it, let me warn you that it is one of the racier passages you will find in the Bible. It provides powerful evidence that the Bible does not gloss over or attempt to cover up either human nature or human behavior.

Let's look together at part of the story as we read verses 1-12. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Word.

Near the end of his New Testament Letter to the Romans, Paul said something that seems particularly relevant for us today as we think about the life and legacy of Joseph. In Romans 15:4, Paul wrote: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Even though it was written long ago, it was written for us. It was written to encourage us, to give us hope and to inspire us to persevere when *we* go through trials and temptations and troubles in life. There are at least two important things I think God wants to teach us through the experience of Joseph in Genesis 39.

#### **1. THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD**

First, God wants us to see His sovereign goodness and faithfulness in the life of Joseph. Joseph's life, in the good times and the hard times, was governed by God's providential care. Joseph had been mistreated, rejected and sold like a piece of pottery by his own brothers, and taken to a foreign land where he knew absolutely no one. But, the Bible tells us in verse 2, "the LORD was with him and he prospered." The next verse says that even Potiphar, his master, recognized that "the LORD was with (Joseph) and... gave him success in everything he did."

Even though he was in a foreign land, far from home, and only 17 (maybe 18 by this time), God blessed Joseph. In fact, the blessings of God in Joseph's life spilled over into the life of Potiphar and his household as well. Look at verse 5: "From the moment Potiphar put Joseph in charge of his household and of all that he owned" – what happened? – "the LORD blessed

the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had.”

Mary Sue and I had a professor in college (Dr. L. John Van Til) who had a simple formula for explaining the history of redemption and, ultimately, the whole of history. It goes like this:

1. GOD
2. GOD plus a PLAN
3. EXECUTION of the PLAN

It all begins with God. That is the place where we have to start. It doesn't begin with us.

God has a plan. He has a plan for the world. He has a plan for everyone who has ever lived and for everyone who will ever live. He has a plan for all the famous Joes and all the not-so-famous Joes who have ever lived. He had a plan for Joseph in Egypt. He has a plan for your life and mine. He has a plan for the salvation of a world of lost sinners who have no hope apart from Him.

And God is executing His plan. He is carrying out His plan for the world. He sent His Son into the world and to the cross to accomplish our salvation. It was God's will that took Joseph to Egypt. It was God's providential care that sustained him there. It was God's plan to bless him and, like the Lord's promise to his great-grandfather Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3), to make him (Joseph) a blessing to many.

God had a plan. In His sovereign goodness and power He carried out His plan in Joseph's life. Even in Egypt. Even when Joseph was a slave in Potiphar's house. The Lord was with him and blessed him.

Which should serve as a reminder to us that, wherever we find ourselves in our pilgrimage through life, God is with us. He is with us in the hard places as well as the good places. In fact, sometimes the hard places turn out to be the good places (We see that only in hindsight.) He is with us in the land of suffering. He is with us in the place of abundance. He is with us in the place of want. God was with Joseph. And He is with you. He has a plan for your life, a carefully crafted plan to bless you and make you a blessing. But this doesn't mean He will spare us from temptations or trouble.

In all the places of life, God is faithful. Sovereignly faithful. Just as He proved in Joseph's life.

## **2. TEMPTATION AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT**

Second, notice what happened to Joseph in Potiphar's house. He was doing his job, minding his own business, taking care of his master's interests, faithfully executing all his responsibilities when – BAM! – out of the blue comes an invitation to sin by committing adultery with Potiphar's wife. The Scripture says that Joseph was “well-built and handsome” (39:6). He was “a strikingly handsome man” (*The Message*). He was a hunk. And his boss'

wife liked what she saw. She became infatuated with Joseph and tried to get him to come to bed with her.

There was nothing subtle or coy about her approach. She was aggressive and direct. She knew what she wanted, and she went after it – after Joseph – relentlessly. When at first she didn't succeed, what did she do? She tried and tried again.

Chuck Swindoll says that temptation has many faces. For example, there is *material* temptation, which is the lust for things – whether it is a bigger house, a luxury car, expensive jewelry, or whatever our neighbors have. I'm sure none of us has ever struggled with this! There is *personal* temptation, which is the lust for fame, for authority or power or control over others. Of course, no one in Washington experiences this kind of temptation. Then there is *sensual* temptation, which is the lust for another person (or the pleasure of sexual intimacy with that person). Joseph found himself face-to-face with this kind of temptation.

Let's be clear about this: The Bible teaches that sex is a good gift from our loving Creator. But it is meant to be expressed and experienced within certain boundaries. There is a right place for sex – and that right place is in the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. Potiphar's wife, obviously, was a married woman. And Joseph knew it would be wrong to go to bed with her.

How did Joseph respond to her invitation to sin? Check out verse 8. It says: "He refused." Joseph refused. I appreciate Swindoll's comments on this. He writes: "If you're sitting there thinking that Joseph was some kind of spiritual giant, put it out of your mind. If you're thinking that some kind of supernatural cloud of protection held him in check, forget it. Just look at the evidence. Here was an Egyptian woman offering her body and a young Jewish servant being tempted by her bold advances. And so? 'He refused.' He said NO! He resisted her alluring words; he stared her down, determined not to yield" (C. Swindoll, *Joseph*, p. 27).

How could Joseph refuse Potiphar's wife? Nobody does that these days. At least, that is the way it seems on TV and in the movies. How could Joseph resist her invitation? There were two reasons. First, there was his sense of loyalty and commitment to Potiphar, his boss. To give in to the advances of Potiphar's wife would be a betrayal of Potiphar's trust in Joseph. And Joseph wouldn't do it. Second, there was his loyalty and commitment to God. He said: "How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (39:9).

Joseph's moral compass was pointed in the right direction. He knew his life was an open book before God, and the supreme desire of Joseph's life was to please God, not himself.

He refused the invitation to sin with Potiphar's wife. But I'm sure you noticed that she didn't take NO for an answer. She kept pursuing him. She was persistent. She was relentless. Day after day she kept trying to seduce him. She thought she could wear him down – which is exactly what the devil does with us where he thinks we are vulnerable to his seductions and enticements to sin. He tries to wear us down. But Joseph stood his ground. Notice verse 10:

“Though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.”

Joseph said NO to Potiphar’s wife. But that is not all he did. He did his best to avoid her, too. He stayed away from her. As much as possible, he kept his distance from her. He made the conscious choice not to put himself unnecessarily in a position where she could entice him with her beauty, her availability and her desire for him. Joseph saw sin – in this case, the sin of adultery, the sin of sexual intimacy outside of marriage – for what it was: an offense against his master and an offense against God. So he did his best to avoid being with her.

That is a good strategy for us, too, as we deal with temptations of different kinds in our lives. Make the decision ahead of time to say NO to temptation, so that even if you are surprised by temptation, even if it seems to come out of the blue at a moment when you least expect it, you will have already determined to say NO. And, if possible, if the devil seems to barrage your soul with an unrelenting invitation to sin, do your best to avoid that person or situation which holds temptation for you.

That is what Joseph did. He could have easily given in to Potiphar’s wife. But faithfulness to God and his own integrity meant more to him than a few moments of pleasure. Even if it would be their secret, even if no one else would know except Joseph and the wife of Potiphar, Joseph *would* know. And so would God.

Don’t ever forget that: Even if no one else knows, God does.

Joseph said NO to the invitation to sin with his master’s wife. He did his best to avoid being with her. And there is one more thing Joseph did. When all else failed, he ran. He fled. One day he found himself all alone in the house with Potiphar’s wife. Something tells me she arranged that. Something tells me she set it up so that no one else would be there. This time she wouldn’t take NO for an answer. But when she grabbed his robe and tried to pull him to her bed, what did Joseph do? He fled. He ran for his life. Which is exactly what you and I must do when there is no other escape from temptation.

Listen to what Charles Spurgeon writes about this: “This day I may be exposed to great peril, let me have the serpent’s wisdom to keep out of it and avoid it. The wings of a dove may be of more use to me today than the jaws of a lion. It is true that I may be an apparent loser by declining evil company, but I had better leave my cloak than lose my character. It is not absolutely necessary for me to be rich, but it is imperative for me to be pure. No ties of friendship, no chains of beauty, no flashings of talent, no shafts of ridicule must turn me from the wise resolve to flee from sin. I only need to resist the devil and *he* will flee from me. But the lusts of the flesh, *I* must flee, or they will surely overcome me” (Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, July 25 Morning).

Sometimes, when sin knocks at our door, we must simply flee. It is better to leave your cloak behind than to lose your character. Sometimes that is the only way to deal with particular temptations.

If you read the rest of this story in Genesis 39, you will see that, in spite of his obedience to God and his refusal to give in to the wife of Potiphar, more trouble came Joseph's way. When he spurned her advances, her lust turned to rage, and she used both her position as Potiphar's wife and Joseph's robe against him. She falsely accused him of attempting to violate her, and Joseph landed in prison. Like Daniel hundreds of years later, Joseph paid a price for doing what was right. That happens sometimes, doesn't it? But both Joseph and Daniel believed that faithfulness to God was worth it. And, while it may seem surprising to those who don't know the story, Genesis 39 ends on the same note with which it began. It says, beginning in verse 20: "While Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him. He showed Joseph kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in that prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there." Even in prison, "the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did" (39:20-23).

## **CONCLUSION**

I said at the beginning that this Scripture, this account of Joseph's experience in the house of Potiphar, was given to teach us. To encourage us. To give us hope in our own lives as we deal with temptations of different kinds and intensity. To inspire us to persevere in faithfulness and wholehearted reliance on God.

It was *not* given to make you feel guilty or spiritually inferior if you think you could never live up to the example of Joseph. If you feel that way, you're probably not alone. But it is not about trying harder or doing your best to measure up to Joseph. It was not given to drive you to despair if you have been tested by some temptation, sexual or otherwise, and you failed the test. With God there is forgiveness, for all who come to Him in true repentance and trusting faith. All of us have fallen short in one way or another. That is why Jesus came to die for us. And you have come today to a place of grace. Our hope is not in our goodness or obedience. Our hope is in the grace of God.

This Scripture was given to remind us of the presence and faithfulness and providential care of God in our lives, regardless of where we find ourselves today, regardless of our circumstances, regardless of the temptation(s) we are facing. The Lord is with us. He is faithful forever. And He is in charge.

It was given to teach us, too, that in the Lord our God, we have the power to resist temptation and refuse the enticing invitations to sin which are an inevitable part of daily life in this world. Just as Joseph did in the house of Potiphar. And God always provides a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13).

May we exercise that same power in reliance upon Christ our Savior. Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.