

## God's with you (for others)

### Genesis 39

Some say, 'If God's there, then He's against me. Because... I lost my job... I lost my home... My mum died too young... I lost my family... I was betrayed by people I loved... I got a job, but it sucks compared to the one I used to have... I got forced out and had to leave... I'm stuck in this place where nobody knows me and everything's new and strange... I was falsely accused... It never rains but it pours; bad things keep happening to me...'

In the light of things like that and more, people say, 'God's not there,' or, 'God's against me.' And they live in the bitterness and fear of that. But not everybody who goes through these things says that. Some people - some of you in our church family - have gone through things like this, and said, 'God *is* there. God is *with* me. I found that out when these things happened.'

And you're in good company. Because every one of those circumstances I listed are things that happened to Joseph between Genesis chapters 37 and 39. And it's here in Genesis 39 that Joseph becomes aware, and we as readers of his story, that *God is with him*.

In v.1, we pick up the story of Joseph. The eagle-eyed amongst you will have spotted that we've skipped over chapter 38. That's Judah's story. It's like a spin-off from the major movie franchise, a story that tells you more about one of the minor characters. It's worth a read to fill out the story of Judah developing as a man. But we're going to keep following Joseph's story.

And it picks up here at v.1, where we're reminded that 'previously, on Joseph...' he was sold as a slave by his own brothers to some traders who had carted him off to a different nation. Here in Egypt, Joseph started a new life as a slave to an official named Potiphar.

It's here in this chapter, where Joseph hits new lows as a slave and finally as a prisoner, that we read this: 'The Lord was with Joseph.' Actually, we read it time and again. It's like the dawning realisation breaking in to the darkness of all that has happened, and all that is happening now, that God *is* there, and that more than that, He is *with* Joseph.

At the start of the story, in vv.2-5, 'The Lord' is mentioned five times. God's presence is recognised here, where things are hard but looking like they are taking a turn for the better.

Then, when life throws another curveball and decidedly turns for the worse again, and Joseph gets thrown in prison by the end of the chapter for something he didn't do, we read again twice more in vv.21-23, 'The Lord was with Joseph.'

'The Lord' is the personal name of God. 'Yahweh' is the Hebrew. In the Old Testament, when you read 'The Lord,' this is not God as a concept. This is not God as a being that lots of people have different ideas about and who knows who's right, really. This is God as He has revealed Himself personally to the people that He is adopting.

And that personal, intimate, holy name of God comes up *here* in Joseph's story. Actually, it *only* comes up in this chapter. God wasn't mentioned by name at all in all the events of chapter 37. It's like it has taken all of these difficult, terrible things in Joseph's life before he came to the realisation, 'God is with me here.' And that realisation came at his lowest point.

'The Lord was with Joseph' is pretty much a summary sentence of the teaching of Genesis 37-50. It declares that though Joseph's life had its ups and a lot of very serious downs, God was with Him, purposing things, using it all. It declares that God was not absent, but present, and *in control*. It declares that God's exercise of His control and His good purposes in it, happened *in and through His presence in Joseph's life*.

And it tells us that there's *more* to 'God being with you' than 'He helps me to get through the things that suck.' Have a look at vv.2-6, and also at vv.21-23. God is bringing blessing not just *to* Joseph, but *through* Joseph. Both Potiphar, and later on the prison warden, are getting blessed by God because of Joseph being where he is.

This is a little, local example of something happening that had always been part of God's plan for the world: Because God is with His people, He will bless other people through them.

Back in Genesis 12:1-3, when God set up and announced His rescue mission for the world, He called Joseph's great-grandfather Abraham to leave behind the life he knew... come and follow God wherever He would lead... be blessed by belonging to God... and *be the means through which God would bless all the families of the world*.

God's people are not just to discover that they are blessed because it's really true that God is with them. They will also enable blessing to come to those

that God places them amongst, in whatever wonderful or horrible circumstances He places them.

Look closely at vv.2-5. It's not *Joseph* who blesses Potiphar. It's *God* who blesses Potiphar and all that is his, *through* Joseph's presence, v.5 says. And in v.3, even Potiphar, this guy who has had no connection with the God of the Bible in his life, can see that it's *this God* - 'The Lord' - who is with Joseph and blessing Joseph.

God hasn't placed you where you are so that you can work jolly hard to be nice to people and make their lives a little bit better even though yours is a bit difficult. He has placed you where you are so that *He* can bless people *through* your being present with them. So let's expect that, and pray for that, and watch for that. That seeing others prosper through our presence will reinforce our worshipping sense of how God is in control.

This isn't a totally 'let God and let God' message, though. For those of you who love a good take home point from a sermon, let's scratch your itch. Whilst there's no report of specific actions on Joseph's part that were a blessing, what is accredited to Joseph in this is his *trustworthiness*.

As Joseph's new employer saw that God was with Joseph, he invested a lot of trust in the lad. And Joseph worked in such a fully trustworthy way that Potiphar could see the presence of God in his life, and blessing came to Potiphar and all that was his.

So as God's people, be fully trustworthy on the frontlines where God has placed you. Be a fully trustworthy employee. Be the person that the boss can place confidence in. Be a fully trustworthy manager or leader. Be the one that those you are responsible for can be confident about having their interests at heart. A fully trustworthy friend. Let there be no gossip or flakiness in you. A fully trustworthy sister, brother, husband, wife, father, mother.

And be these things, not so that you can earn points, improve the CV, get a promotion, or out of any self interest at all. Be these things because you desire to see these people around you invest enough trust in you that God would pour blessing out to them *through* you.

*How have people around you been blessed by God through your circumstances?*

We read vv.6-12 after the children went out. Because this is the part of the story with the sex in it. Or at least, that was the hope of Potiphar's wife. Long before 'The Graduate,' long before every Hollywood movie and every TV show where the plot puts the temptation of adultery on the menu with a predictable inevitability that people always cave, comes this story.

The story of a seventeen year old boy who said no to sex when it was put on a plate for him. See - it *is* possible! This is the context for a masterclass in resisting temptation. I suppose a message about resisting temptation sounds a lot like what people think churches and ministers are for. 'Be good... don't be naughty... say no...'

Well, as much as there's a whole, whole lot more to the good news from God than this, there is this good news to share: You *can* resist temptation! To some people, this will be news, and to others, it'll be news that this is *good*. But these verses teach us both the *possibility* of resisting temptation, and some *practical* ways to make that happen.

The context here is sexual temptation, and in particular, adultery. But what we have to learn here can apply to any one of the many temptations we face and fall to in our daily journey through life. All of us will find that we've been prone to sexual temptation, so let's take it as read that this is an area for all of us to have in mind here. But there may be others for you too.

So, whether it's extra-marital sex, materialistic consumption, making an idol of something (that is, making something bigger in your life than God is), addictions to anything from drink and drugs and porn and gambling to exercise and clothes and food and Facebook, let's learn from Joseph.

*Firstly, when temptation arises, Joseph says 'no' clearly.* When temptation is placed in our path, here's what we often do. We either jump on it straight away before even thinking about it. Or, we don't address it. We just let it... sit there. We let the possibility linger. We tell ourselves, 'I haven't done anything with it yet!' But we let the temptation flirt with us, because we don't do what Joseph did here.

He addressed the temptation, and the one doing the tempting, and clearly said 'no.' Mentally, even verbally out loud, that decisive action makes a big difference. You commit yourself to reject the thing rather than let it walk alongside you.

*Secondly, Joseph says out loud why it would be wrong to say 'yes.'* He articulates to Potiphar's wife - and really, to himself as well - the *consequences* of accepting this temptation. In vv.8-10, Joseph talks through how accepting this invitation to come to bed would breach the trust of the master who trusts him. And he says that to do this thing would be to sin against God.

Joseph gets it clear in his mind that there are two people he'd sin against if he fell to this - Potiphar, and God. To commit adultery would be to offend both; incur the wrath of both; break the relationship with both. He helps himself by saying this out loud. That always helps the penny drop. And he helps himself by taking longer over the reasons *not* to do it than the three words (two in the Hebrew) that Potiphar's wife offers him - 'sleep with me.'

Resisting temptation is made much easier when you take a second to think through the consequences of falling to it - and when you deliberately spend more time on 'why not to do this' than 'why to do this.' You might write off 'thinking about it' as an unrealistic prospect when temptation's right in front of you. But don't. Because if a seventeen year old lad on a promise can do it, so can you.

The good news is, you'll get better at this the more you grow as a Christian. A Christian is someone who has the Holy Spirit in their lives - God Himself enabling, equipping, leading, prompting and strengthening you. He'll keep growing you in character and faith throughout your life. And the more that you grow in your love for God and your gratitude for what Jesus has done for you on the cross to pay for your sin, the less you'll want to succumb to the temptation in front of you.

*Thirdly, when the temptation persists, Joseph takes action to be away from it.* v.10 tells us that Potiphar's wife kept inviting Joseph day after day. In the soaps, they always cave in the end. It usually takes about three or four episodes, tops. But in v.10, Joseph takes steps to be consistent about resisting the temptation. He avoids being in its presence.

That might be what it takes for you. How on earth do two Christian young people avoid sleeping with each other until they've committed their lives, body and soul, to one another in marriage? I think you'll find many of us saying, 'Yeah... this one we struggled with...' But here's one simple help - don't be alone in a bedroom together.

How do you avoid adultery with the person you've become more emotionally connected with than your husband or wife? One simple help - don't be alone with them. How do you avoid getting drunk and dishonouring God in your unwise actions? If that's your area of temptation - don't go to the pub. Or if you do, be accountable to a fellow Christian about drinking no more than your limit.

How do you avoid idolising Facebook? X-Box? Set a time at which you won't touch them. After 10pm, 11pm, whatever... the phone or the console won't be in the same room as me. Whatever your temptation is, do like Joseph does here - deliberately set a clear boundary that will help you to be *able* to keep saying no to it.

*Fourthly, when temptation has Joseph in its grasp - he runs!* In vv.11-12, the house is quiet. Now's her chance... she approaches Joseph. She manages to get close enough to touch him. Surely this is it now... they're touching. Their eyes are locked. There's nobody around, just her and him, and...

Now his cloak is in her hand. The second time that a cloak has been taken from Joseph, and everything turns sour. The Hebrew doesn't say what garment it was, actually. I don't suppose that Potiphar would have minded much if Joseph had forgotten a coat. It may be more likely that his wife got as far as opening up Joseph's shirt.

Joseph is in a seriously testing moment. It feels like the temptation has swarmed around him now, and claimed the inevitability of its triumph. Maybe he's even beginning to break a little now; he's let the shirt come off... but here it is - he realises the situation, and he *runs*. Without stopping to make sure everything is in order, he just gets out of there whilst he still can.

You may find there are moments where this is what it takes. Where you've ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time, and it feels like you're just going to get enveloped in the moment. What's on the screen in front of you all. The dare that's been put out there. The way the conversation about that person is going at work. The person in front of you, and the eyes they're making.

**RUN!** Decide you'll have no part in this, and run! It might feel awkward. It might feel like there will be pieces to come back and pick up afterwards. But for now - just get out of there.

Before we move on from this, a word about forgiveness. Because if, like me, you hear all of this and can only think about how you've failed to say no, then we need to hear the *very* good news that Jesus brings us.

We *are* responsible for our actions. With the presence of God the Holy Spirit in our lives, we *can* resist temptation. So it is genuinely wrong and sinful when we don't. We're fond of telling ourselves, 'I couldn't help it.' Like we're slaves to our feelings or our circumstances. But we're not. We *are* guilty when we let temptation become genuine sin.

But there's genuine forgiveness for genuine sin. At least, if you'll accept both your need for it, and your welcome to it, that are all shown to you in Jesus' death on the cross. Every one of the things that you are guilty of before God is forgiven because of that death. So if you'll trust that, there is no more wrath of God for your sin; there is no more broken relationship with God.

Instead, there is wholeness, forgiveness, and enabling to live in a new way from this day forward. Don't let this day go by without remembering that *every* sin you were once guilty of has been dealt with by that, and is not to define you any more. And don't let this day go by without confessing to God the genuine sin that you haven't dared admit yet. So that you can be free and forgiven of that, too.

### *Silent reflection*

What does Joseph get for his remarkable faithfulness to God here? He gets falsely accused of attempted rape, and thrown into prison. That's what we read in vv.13-20. It's a kick in the teeth, isn't it? How often have you said, 'God, I tried it your way. I was faithful to you there. And what do you do with it? You make things worse for me!' Well, again, you're in good company. Think how it was for Joseph here.

Why is this happening to Joseph? Well, at a human level, it's happening because Joseph's faithfulness angered, hurt and embarrassed Potiphar's wife, so she set about hurting him. People of integrity often get treated that way. And it happened because she would rather Joseph get into trouble than she did. Better to point the finger at the innocent before she got found to be guilty.

That's the way the world works, we see that. Okay... but why is *God* letting this happen to Joseph? Why would God reward Joseph's faithfulness with suffering? Why would God allow this incredible injustice to befall Joseph's

life? I hope by now, after all we've looked at this week and last, you know something of what the answer is going to be here...

God is not absent, and He has not lost control. In the verses that follow, vv. 21-23, we're told once again, 'The Lord was with Joseph.' Once again, we haven't seen the whole story unfold yet. The story of how God used this to position Joseph to bless others. First of all in a prison. Then in a palace. Then to save the lives of tens of thousands.

God used all these things to *bless other people through Joseph's presence*. That much we looked at earlier on. It's just that here, we're beginning to come to terms with the scale of the surrender that God is calling for from you.

Are you ready to say to God, 'Lord, I surrender my life to your control completely and absolutely. I surrender to you responding to my most faithful moments by giving me suffering, if that's what you want to bring about your purposes for other people through me. I surrender to you delivering injustices to me that shatter my reputation and lower my life, if that's how you want to position me to bring blessing to other people through me'?

Some of you said yes to that a long time ago. And we look at your lives and marvel at the presence and blessing of God to you and through you. Some of you want to say yes, and you're on the verge of it, and you get how big a deal surrendering like this is. Well, I'm with you. I think, you and me, we've got to bow lower. There's nothing else for it.

Some of you are saying, 'No, of course not. What a stupid thing to surrender to. What a high price to pay, and what a lot to lose.' Well, before you're too quick to do that, remember that Jesus told you that to be His disciple, you would need to take up your cross daily and follow Him. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, 'Jesus said: "Come and die."' And think too what you're going to miss out on.

You see, when you surrender to God like this, you will find freedom. Because when your faithfulness results in nothing but suffering, and when injustices befall your life, everyone is bound by something. Those who have not surrendered to God like this will be bound by anger, bitterness and confusion. But those who *have* surrendered to God like this will be bound by the peace that comes from trust. Trust that God is with you - for the blessing of those around you.