

## Prayer

Lord God, You surprise us by the wonder and the privilege of Your presence. You are the Creator of the world and You hold the mystery of the Universe within Your grasp; and yet, You have also created everyone with care and with passion. Defeat the evil which blinds people to Your presence, and reveal Yourself in glory, we pray. We praise You, Lord God: AMEN.

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Music

*Music is a powerful influence on people's lives, sometimes for good, and sometimes for ill. Pray that the good gift God has given us will be used by His people for good.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who are still suffering the effects of world recession*
- *Pray for children, and those who teach them about the environment*
- *Give thanks for the rule of law and the security it gives people*

## Meditation

When is it the right time to stop, and seek advice,  
Or press on despite hardship to complete a task?  
The Lord knows when.

When is it right to open up and speak to a friend,  
Or guard yourself by keeping your own counsel?  
The Lord knows when.

When is it right to challenge a friend about a wrong,  
Or let it pass, accepting a fault for friendship's sake?  
The Lord knows when.

When is it right to leave a relationship if things go bad,  
Or persist in trust that love will one day conquer all?  
The Lord knows when.

But one thing is clear for all people who own His name;  
We must know how to listen and recognise His voice,  
If we are to know what He would have us do.

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## Bible Study - Genesis 39:7-23

<sup>7</sup> After some time passed, Potiphar's wife began to look lustfully at Joseph and said, 'Lie down with me.'<sup>8</sup> But he refused and said to her, 'Now listen, my master is not concerned about anything in the house with me in charge, and he has entrusted everything he has to me. <sup>9</sup> No-one has greater authority in this house than I, and he has not withheld anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such evil, and sin against God?' <sup>10</sup> Although she tried to entice Joseph day after day, he would not agree to lie beside her or to give in to her.

<sup>11</sup> One day, when no-one else was in the house, he went to the house to do his work. <sup>12</sup> She caught hold of his tunic and said, 'Lie with me!' But he fled and ran outside, leaving his tunic in her hand. <sup>13</sup> When she saw that he had fled, leaving his tunic in her hand, <sup>14</sup> she shouted out to the other servants and said to them, 'Look, my husband has brought this Hebrew among us to insult us! He attempted to come and lie with me, so I screamed as loud as I could; <sup>15</sup> and when he heard me cry out for help, he fled and left his tunic beside me.'<sup>16</sup> Then she kept his tunic with her until his master came home, <sup>17</sup> when she repeated the same story, 'The Hebrew servant you brought among us, came in to insult me; <sup>18</sup> but as soon as I screamed and shouted, he fled outside and left his tunic beside me.'

<sup>19</sup> When his master heard what his wife had to say to him about how his servant had treated her, he became furious. <sup>20</sup> Joseph's master took him and threw him into the prison where the king's prisoners were held, and he was left there in the prison. <sup>21</sup> But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him faithful love, and He made the chief jailer treat him with favour. <sup>22</sup> The jailer placed all the prisoners who were in the prison under Joseph's supervision, and whatever was done there, he arranged it. <sup>23</sup> The chief jailer had nothing to worry about if it was in Joseph's care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD gave him success.

## Review

At the very end of yesterday's passage, Joseph was described as 'handsome and good looking' (39:6); a pair of superlatives used nowhere else in the Bible and exceeding the later descriptions even of Saul and David, who were both described as handsome (1 Sam 9:2 and 1 Sam 16:12). Clearly, the young Joseph had inherited the beauty of his mother Rachel who was praised for her figure and beauty (29:17), and he was sexually attractive to the wife of his master Potiphar! The story we have read today sounds very modern, and it could be part of any number of tales we come across almost nightly on television, and even in ancient times, there were numerous myths and legends about righteous men escaping the clutches of a wanton female seductress!

Firstly, however, it is worth saying that in Genesis as a whole, Scripture is remarkably even handed towards men and women in sexual, marital and other relationship issues. This is not the place to do a detailed study of this, but this fact alone is remarkable for such an ancient document as this, and it says something about the nature of the God who is revealed in its pages. As far as our story is concerned, there is no 'anti-female' traits to our story; it is about the unjust suffering of Joseph who, after rising to prominence by a combination of God's blessing and his own merit, is suddenly thrown into jail. For the second time in his life, he was in a hopeless situation and apparently at the mercy of others. However, the hand of God was on his life.

The details of the story of what happened appear straightforward. Potiphar's wife had little to do with her time except to occupy herself with the seduction of the handsome rising star of the household, in which she persisted for some time (39:10). Matters came to a head when she took hold of Joseph's clothing. Common male wear in those days would have been simple; a lower garment (something like loose fitting shorts), and a loose upper garment or tunic (probably like a loose 'T-shirt'). Potiphar's wife grabbed Joseph's tunic in her attempt to get him to sit 'beside' her (39:12), and Joseph ran out, leaving the clothing behind. It was a justifiable but unfortunate move, because Potiphar's wife, with Joseph's tunic in her hand, was firstly able to undermine Joseph's authority with the other servants (39:14-15) and then secondly, with subtle changes to her story, to obtain the desired response from her husband (39:16-18). She raised her husband's fury to the point that Joseph was immediately expelled from the household, and in one brief instance all the good that Joseph had done over a long period of time was undone.

The last part of our story today is just as interesting, because a man of Potiphar's position might have been expected to dispense summary justice and have his accused slave killed on the spot. This would have been quite normal in the Egyptian kingdom of that period. However, Potiphar placed him in jail together with other prisoners of Pharaoh (39:22). This suggests that although he was furious about what had happened, he either retained some degree of sympathy for the gifted man he had trusted so completely, or he feared the God who he had clearly seen at work in Joseph (39:2,5).

We are nevertheless reassured that God was indeed with Joseph, even though he found himself in prison. Our story is far from over however, and God was guiding Joseph's life in ways he could not possibly understand. Following true personal form, he rose above others in the prison to find favour with the jailer (39:32). God's hand and the blessing of His covenant love mean that 'the Lord was with Joseph and showed him faithful love' (39:21), and strangely, the story ends today with Joseph in a similar position to that which he attained in Potiphar's house; except it was in prison!

It is not always easy to understand how God's plans work, but we all need to show patience. It is hard to read a story like this and not be inspired to have faith that God will indeed bless us in the midst of our trials, if we follow Him closely and keep to the ways He has planted in our hearts.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Joseph and Potiphar's wife
- The unjust imprisonment of Joseph
- The story of Joseph and its meaning in the book of Genesis

## Going Deeper

As with the rest of the story of Joseph, within the detail of the story there are many fascinating insights and additions to what we know of the basic story. There is a clear comparison drawn between the devious nature of Potiphar's wife, and the innocence of Joseph's actions, protected by the Covenant love of God, for example. Moreover, the whole story keeps us 'on the edge of our seats', because there is always an anticipation of something more. The story never ceases to hint that God is manoeuvring things for a far bigger plan than we can see.

### ***The story of Joseph and its meaning in the book of Genesis***

It has often been pointed out that the whole book of Genesis is framed by two stories; the first, which is about the creation of the world and first people who lived in it, and the last (the story of Joseph), which is about the creation of God's people as a family unit in Egypt. Each of these two stories takes about 11 or 12 chapters (at the beginning and end of Genesis accordingly), and each contains an important story about temptation. In the first, Eve is tempted by Satan and succumbs, condemning herself, her husband and consequently the whole world, to mortality, sin and death (Genesis 3). In the second story at the end of Genesis, temptation is again the theme, as Joseph resists the sexual temptations of Potiphar's (anonymous) wife and is eventually used by God for the salvation of His people and the blessing of the whole nation of Egypt. Genesis begins with creation and a description of the problem of sin in the world, but ends with a prophetic story about salvation!

### ***Joseph and Potiphar's wife.***

The actions of Potiphar's wife are typical of seduction. The mindset which 'must have' will eventually create a crisis which forces the issue, and out of that crisis, what happens may seem to be unpredictable; but this story shows us that God is in control. Joseph sustained his hard won role as senior master of the house with appropriate decorum, responding initially to the advances made to him with the proper speech of a man in service (39:8-9), ending with one of the few 'theological' statements made by Joseph in his whole story; 'how could I do such evil, and sin against God?' (39:10). However, whereas her husband recognised the power of the Lord at work in Joseph, his wife only saw the potential for sex.

The devious nature of how Potiphar's wife dealt with the situation is revealing. Initially, it is clear that she grabbed the 'tunic' from Joseph. It was probably a tunic which bore the insignia of his household office, and it was the second time that Joseph had his tunic taken from him (the first being when his brothers ripped off his tunic when throwing him in the pit – 37:23). Now, when Potiphar's wife subsequently decided to create a story of attempted rape out of what happened, she was careful to identify the tunic as 'left behind' by him (39:15,18), implying that the item of clothing had been removed by Joseph in his attempt to sexually molest her. She also spoke about the incident in one way to the servants in the house, and in another way to her husband, and the differences are significant. Firstly, she said to the servants 'my husband has brought this Hebrew slave among us to insult us'; implying blame on Potiphar for purchasing Joseph in the first place, and also using racism (calling Joseph 'this Hebrew', and his presence as an 'insult' to everyone) in order to cast doubt on Joseph's suitability for office (39:14-15). Secondly, although verse 17 says 'she repeated the same story' to her husband when he came home, what was told was indeed different. She certainly modified what she said about Potiphar's bringing Joseph into the household, leaving out the racist charge and speaking only of her charge that Joseph had 'insulted her' (instead of 'us' – v14), emphasising the screaming and shouting (39:18) which was itself an exaggeration of what had taken place.

Potiphar's wife had her way, and Potiphar, whatever he may have thought of Joseph or his wife, removed Joseph. Even if he liked Joseph (and the evidence is that he did) it would have been difficult for him to retain the trust of the household again after such an incident.

### ***Joseph and his unjust imprisonment***

For the second time in his life, Joseph was thrown down into what might appear to be an impossible position. The pit he earlier occupied was a place in which he could have died (37:19 etc.), but the brothers decided, more humanely, to sell him into slavery. The trouble with being thrown into the king's prison (39:20) was that people were held there at the sole discretion of Pharaoh. It may have been that Potiphar, like Reuben in the earlier story (37:21f.), intended to 'rescue' Joseph at a later date, but we hear no more of him. Joseph had to make the most of the situation in which he found himself, which as far as he was concerned, had no end.

'But the Lord was with Joseph' (39:21), and this is the heart of the story. It is a phrase repeated from earlier on in the chapter (see 39:2) to tell us that God was in control and had his hand on all that happened; moreover, the phrase 'faithful love' (39:21) is one which is specifically linked with God's Covenant, so we are reminded that Joseph's experience in jail would be of far greater importance than he may have seen or appreciated. What did happen was that Joseph found himself at the bottom of the pile again, but because of God's presence and his own natural ability, he continued to rise, even in Pharaoh's jail. Then, just as with his

previous position in the wealthy house of Potiphar, Joseph attained the post of a trusted servant, and in whatever he did, the Lord gave him success.'

## Application

Who knows what happens in a marriage? Were Potiphar and his wife very close? Did Potiphar recognise the corrupt nature of what his wife told him and was he used to this? Did he send Joseph to jail because he had to be seen to please his wife, but refrained from executing Joseph out of a sense of justice? None of us can know the answers to these questions because like all marriages, what was really going on between Potiphar and his wife was and is a mystery. From our point of view, the story of Potiphar's wife, of her sexual appetites, her scheming, lies and xenophobia, is all very unsavoury. It forced Joseph, now best described as a man of God, into a position which was fatally compromised by actions outside of his control.

Too often, people today can look at what is happening in their lives and bemoan the circumstances in which they find themselves because they cannot see how God could possibly 'allow such things to happen'. I, and maybe you, have heard this said many times by other Christians. In this part of Genesis, we are not told about Joseph's feelings, but he was surely entitled to feel the same. However, Joseph had the ability to rise and not be defeated by the circumstances of life; and suffering was for him the seedbed for further action and for proving himself. From slavery he rose to become master of a household; and from being a prisoner, he rose to become a responsible trustee. There was not a great deal more that Joseph could do in his circumstances, but he made the most of them all, and rose through the suffering associated with each circumstance to the point of success. The reason for this was because God had a plan for Joseph which was far beyond what he could see at that time in his life.

Would that all God's people had the confidence to hold firm to their calling and their faith through even the hardest of times and most difficult suffering, because we are firmly told in Scripture that these trials of life are something we cannot avoid. Joseph was one of the earliest examples of someone who was a 'saviour' for God's people, and he came to that position through repeated suffering. When Jesus walked the path of salvation and accepted the way of the Cross, He knew that the way to Resurrection was through suffering, and He won for us a complete salvation only hinted at by the story of Joseph. Nevertheless, we can still learn from Joseph something about how to accept suffering, and defeat it in the name of the Lord.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. How prevalent is sexual temptation in today's society, and what does it do, particularly to God's people?
2. How easy is it to tell a story differently according to the people to whom you tell it? Is there anything wrong in this?
3. Is suffering always tolerable? Is there any suffering we should not accept as something that God can use for His greater purposes?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*I know that I am like everyone else, and from time to time, it is very easy to lose our perspective on things and be drawn into thinking that the Lord has abandoned us or that He withholds his hand for a time. We can respond by getting on with things as best we can, but faith always looks beyond what we experience and knows that God is working out His plan of Salvation in us, through good and ill, however strange it may seem.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Do you feel that you have a grasp on the wider picture of what God is doing in your life, and are you able to make sense of the ups and downs of life in the light of His greater plans for you? Reflect on these things and seek the Lord's will concerning what happens in your immediate future.*
- *Pray for any you know who find themselves in a difficult place in life without any apparent hope for the future. Whatever condition this may be, and it may well be beyond our immediate understanding, pray for deliverance and the blessing of God.*

## Final Prayer

Keep us closely within Your purposes for us, Lord Jesus. We may not understand them, we may not see them clearly, we may not get things right, and at times we may not want to follow them; but lead us along Your path, Lord Jesus. You know us through and through; keep us within Your will, we pray; AMEN

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