

# Book of Genesis – Part XVII - Genesis 39-41

## “Joseph, Prime Minister of Egypt”

When we last left Joseph, he had barely escaped death at the hands of his treacherous brothers and was sold into slavery to Potiphar, a captain of Pharaoh’s guard. The critical thing we are told is that, “the Lord was with Joseph and he became a successful man (39:2).” This hardly happens overnight. Joseph first has to fend off the seductive advances of Potiphar’s wife and be sent into prison. Yet, astoundingly, God, in ways we could never imagine, not only delivers Joseph but places him in the highest rank of Egypt’s society. This only sets the stage for many amazing things to follow.

- I. Joseph in Potiphar’s House – chapter 39
  - a. Potiphar, as an Egyptian, is able to recognize God’s presence with Joseph (39:3). The only thing that Potiphar would know about Joseph’s God is what he observed in Joseph’s life. The same applies to us today. People know less and less about the God of the Bible. If they don’t see God in our lives they may not see him at all.
  - b. Potiphar, understandably, is impressed with Joseph. In response to his good work, Potiphar makes Joseph the overseer of his whole house. The promise that God made to Jacob, that he would be with him and keep him wherever he went (28:15), is now being applied to his son, Joseph. This is all the more remarkable since Joseph’s older brothers were doing everything they could think of to harm him. In spite of their efforts, Joseph continues to receive God’s favors.
  - c. However, God’s favor does not come without Satan’s counter attack (1 Peter 5:8). Yet everything still is in God’s hands (Isaiah. 45:7). Potiphar’s wife sees how attractive young Joseph is and propositions him in very direct terms (39:6b-8). Genesis makes abundantly clear that one of the most vivid consequences of the fall is the breakdown of sexual relations. We have already seen Judah and Tamar, Reuben and his father’s concubine, Bilhah (also the mother of two of his brothers), the rape of Dinah, Lot and his daughters, the sons of god and the daughters of men, not to mention Abraham and Isaac asking their wives to pose as their “sisters.” In addition, we now have Potiphar’s wife. She pursues Joseph “day after day” (39:10).
  - d. Joseph responds in a twofold way. He resists Potiphar’s wife, pointing out how good Potiphar has been to him (39:9). The response to this could be the standard, “He’ll never know.” Joseph however adds that he cannot sin against God. God, of course, would always know.
  - e. Finally, Potiphar’s wife finds Joseph alone in the house. (The fact that she is not named is already a judgment on her on the part of the writer. She doesn’t deserve to have her name mentioned.). She again tries to seduce him, even grabbing hold of his garment. Joseph, wisely, does not try to confront her. He does not stand his ground. He runs outside. Sometimes the best thing to do with temptation is to run away from it. There are

temptations that we simply cannot resist. Rather than try to face the temptation, we do better simply to run away (I Corinthians 10:13).

- f. Potiphar's wife, however, is determined to save face. She holds up his garment as "proof" that Joseph tried to rape her (39:13-16). Potiphar comes home and, upon hearing her story, becomes enraged. The narrator tactfully does not say which person is the object of Potiphar's rage.
  - g. Under normal circumstances, a slave attempting to rape his mistress would immediately be put to death. Potiphar instead places Joseph in prison. This suggests that Potiphar does not completely believe his wife. This is probably not the first time she has engaged in this kind of behavior. Yet he too must keep up appearances, so Joseph is sent to prison.
  - h. God continues to be with Joseph. God shows him his steadfast love (39:21). Joseph could well wonder what was the benefit of this steadfast love since he has had nothing but negative experiences up to this point. We need to remember that God's love is not a guarantee of success in this world, though eventually this will be the case for Joseph. This is not the case with other Biblical characters such as Job, Jeremiah and Paul, for example.
  - i. Right away, again we read that Joseph finds favor in adverse circumstances. The Lord makes him prosper even in prison (39:23).
- II. Two Dreams – chapter 40
- a. In prison, Joseph encounters two former officers of Pharaoh. One was the chief cupbearer and the other the chief baker (40:2). Joseph, because of his favored status in the prison, is given charge over them (40:4).
  - b. Both servants have dreams. They believe the dreams have significance but they cannot understand them. Therefore, they are troubled (40:6). Joseph asks that the two men tell him their dreams, stating that interpretations belong to God (40:8). The cupbearer tells of a dream with three branches of a vine. He dreams that he presses the grapes of the three branches into a cup and serves it to Pharaoh. Joseph interprets the dream to mean that in three days Pharaoh will lift up the cupbearer's head and restore him to his office (40:9-13). Joseph then pleads with the cupbearer to tell Pharaoh of his plight in prison and of his innocence (40:14-15).
  - c. The narrator now engages in some very black humor. The chief baker, hearing of the good fortune of the cupbearer, is anxious to tell of his dream. He dreamed he had three cake baskets on his head and birds were eating out of them. Joseph uses the exact same phrase that he had for the cupbearer. Pharaoh will "lift up" the baker's head but in this case it means literally that he will have his head cut off! (40:16-19). Both interpretations come true. The phrase, the baker was hanged, probably refers to his body being hung up for the birds after he was decapitated (40:22).
  - d. The cupbearer is restored, but, having been set free, he forgets all about Joseph (40:23). This is an all too human trait. We conveniently forget to be grateful (Luke 17:11-19).

### III. Foretelling the Future – chapt. 41

- a. Two years go by. They would have gone by very slowly for Joseph. Pharaoh has a dream. He is convinced there is an important message in the dream. He dreams of seven fat cows followed by seven lean and ugly ones. The dream is repeated with seven ears of good grain followed by seven withered ears. He calls together all the magicians of Egypt but no one is able to interpret his dream (41:1-8).
- b. It is at this point that the cupbearer finally remembers Joseph. He tells Pharaoh about how Joseph interpreted his dream and the baker's dream correctly.
- c. Pharaoh of course sends for Joseph who naturally has to be cleaned up before he can approach Pharaoh (41:14). Joseph interprets the dream to mean that there will be seven years of abundant crops followed by seven years of famine. Joseph points out that the famine will be "very grievous." The fact that Pharaoh had two dreams means that God will shortly bring this about (41:25-32).
- d. Joseph then adds that Pharaoh is to select a man who is "discerning and wise" to oversee the project of conserving food from the seven years of plenty for the seven years of famine (41:33-36). Joseph must know that he is setting himself up as the prime candidate.
- e. Pharaoh not surprisingly chooses Joseph to oversee all of this. What is more amazing is that Pharaoh recognizes the spirit of God on Joseph. Joseph's God would not have matched any of the gods of Egypt (40:37-39).
- f. Joseph is made second in command in Egypt. Interestingly enough, Joseph is given the daughter of a priest of the sun god "Re" whose temple was in On, as a wife (41:37-45). Joseph cannot be swayed by the gods of Egypt. He has seen too much of the steadfast love of the true God (41:37-45).
- g. It has been thirteen years since Joseph was sold into slavery. He is now prime minister of Egypt. To call this astounding is to put it mildly. Joseph carries out the plans for the famine (Famine was a terrifying prospect for the ancient world and helps explain the fertility cults whose worship was believed to promote continually growing crops).
- h. After the seven years of plenty (Joseph is now thirty-seven), the famine begins. All the world comes to buy grain in Egypt. The scene is now set for an incredible reunion (41:46-57).

## Questions for Us –

1. Our concept of God's steadfast love does not usually accord with the kind of treatment which Joseph suffers. How do we understand God's continuing love when we often find ourselves to be treated unfairly and even abused?
2. Why do you think that we see so many examples of sexual brokenness in Genesis? What does this tell us about sin in general?
3. What do you think it was like for Joseph to spend two years in prison after having asked the cupbearer to tell his story to Pharaoh? What does this say about how we should endure adversity?
4. What can we learn from Joseph's model of faithful service to God in a land of unbelievers?

Next study – Genesis 42-44 – “The Fateful Reunion”