Genesis 39 – The Blessing of Chastity

As we get back to the story of Joseph, we find him now in Egypt, a slave in the house of Potiphar. A couple weeks ago we found Joseph on top, moving to the head of his family, the beloved son, given princely robes, and dreams that tell of his prominence. And then he was betrayed by his brothers, and thrown into the pit, only to be sold into slavery.

In this beginning we find strong correlations to Jesus' life. Like Joseph Jesus is the beloved son, like Joseph Jesus is rejected by Israel, like Joseph Jesus sold for a bag of silver, and like Joseph Jesus is thrown into the pit of death. It is then not improper to see Jesus as a fulfilment of what God was pointing us to in the life of Joseph. It is not simply that 'history repeats itself', but that God was both preparing our imaginations, and allowing us to see how he is the same throughout history. He is truly a great God, whose loving-faithfulness guides all things.

So, if Jesus fulfills the life of Joseph, and just previously we see him descending into the pit of death, what we find now is something of a resurrection. Now, this isn't exactly like Jesus' resurrection of course, Joseph still has many trials, but there are many correlations. The biggest correlation is seen in how Joseph is blessing the nations. With this in mind, let's read Genesis 39, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife.

Genesis 39:

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. 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 favor 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.

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!"

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. 9 No 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?”
10 And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

11 One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. 12 She 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.

13 When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, 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.

But while Joseph was there in the prison, 21 the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. 22 So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. 23 The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph’s care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

This is the Word of the Lord.

In the scheme of Joseph’s life, this story feels a bit like history repeating itself. One step forward, two steps back. He starts off in Palestine, the favourite child with a princely robe, with grand prophetic dreams of his prominence. And he ends up stripped of his robe, in a pit, and sold to slavery. In our chapter, he rises to prominence once again, against all odds things are going pretty good while being a slave in Egypt, only to find himself once again stripped of his robe and thrown into a pit. This time not only a slave, but now a prisoner. One step forward, two steps back.

Moses, in writing Genesis, is careful to show how history is rhyming with itself. Joseph, in this story, might be thinking, “not again!”, but we know that this rhyming is showing how God is ordering history. Repeated at the beginning and the end, God is with Joseph, ordering his life. The repetition itself is teaching us something, that God will use a story like

this to bring his salvation once and for all. These are his fingerprints, as I said last time, this type of story lets us see how God works in history. Got lifts up the lower, God puts through adversity to show faithfulness. All this pointing to their fulfillment in Christ two thousand years later.

As we come down from the 10,000' view, we can get more clarity about what God is teaching us in this particular story. As I said in the introduction, if Joseph is prefiguring Jesus in going down to the pit is like his going down to death, then his coming up from the pit is like his resurrection. We can ask, what exactly about what Joseph is doing here is bringing new life? How is Joseph's interaction with Potiphar's wife bringing new life into God's broken and sinful world? Let's keep that question in mind as we look more closely at this story.

The story begins with Joseph finding himself starting at the bottom of the slave pool in a rich and powerful household, the house of Potiphar, the captain of the Egyptian guard. Because the Lord was with Joseph, he has "success in everything he did," and so "finds favour in [Potiphar's] eyes," and he works up the ranks until he was Potiphar's right-hand man.

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Somehow, Potiphar is able to see God's blessing on what Joseph did. Maybe this meant that Joseph had some kind of supernatural fruitfulness, like when his father Jacob was breeding speckled goats under Laban, but more likely we simply see here an example of the practical effects of godly virtue. That is, Joseph was a diligent worker, in control of himself and living as God intended him to, as the story goes on to show. Even though Joseph is now a slave, he does not wallow in self-pity but shows determination and that is rewarded by his fair-minded owner. He might be a slave externally, but he is free internally because he lives according to how God created him to live. That is true liberty, no matter what external circumstance we might find ourselves in.

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Potiphar is blessed by God when he begins blessing Joseph. Moses says, "[Potiphar] 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." This blessing is what God promised Abraham in Gen. 12:3, God promises Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." The blessing of Israel is not only for Israel herself, but for all people. This is clear in Gen.39:2 when it says, "the Lord was with

Joseph…" This is despite being far from Palestine, and seemingly from the far reaches of God's plan for Abraham.

Remember, God is showing us how he will save his people. First by setting apart a group to know him, praise him, and understand his ways. And then later for them to go out and bless the nations. After Jesus' resurrection, we come to Pentecost, where the nations are blessed with the Spirit, paving the way for all of us to come and worship the only true God. Here, Joseph is blessing the nation of Egypt in a small way by living as God called us to live, and so undoing some of the mess that our sin creates.

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The text says that "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."

The charge that Joseph is given, to rule over everything except Potiphar's food, is very reminiscent of what God says to Adam in the garden. Joseph, as the concluding story to Genesis, shows how in part God will fix the problems that we see coming out of the sin of Adam. In fact, Potiphar's 'food' might even be a euphemism for his wife, which is the main temptation for Joseph. See Joseph's response to Potiphar's wife, everything in the house but you. Here, Jospeh, like Adam, is tempted in a place where he is in control of everything but forbidden the fruit of Potiphar. Joseph, unlike Adam, is able to resist this fruit, even when it is freely offered by the wife. In this comparison, Moses is showing how God will undo the sin of Adam, beginning with Joseph's faithfulness.[1]

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In this story, one of the blessings that God promised Abraham he would bless the nations with, one of the things that shows new life out of the pit of death, is a godly chastity. We might not think of chastity, of being in control of your urges, as a blessing (the word itself seems a bit old fashioned), but anyone who has been under the slavery of their own lust will know the true freedom it is to be in control of them. Chastity is a virtue, and a virtue that is essential to any thriving society. This should cause us to be very concerned, as it is widely derided in our own.

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Joseph shows wisdom in how he responds to Potiphar's wife. Moses says that when he was continually propositioned by Potiphar's wife he responds saying, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my

[1] Samuel Emadi, *From Prisoner to Prince: The Joseph Story in Biblical Theology*, 94.

care…" Joseph recognizes that trust is the basis of any good relationship, whether in business or in a household. Because he is trustworthy, he is in control. Order can only be maintained in a household, or a society, when we are able to trust one another. Chastity is a common good, for social order.

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More than this, Joseph recognizes that if he were to follow his lust as Potiphar's wife encourages him to, it would not only betray his trust, but it would be "a wicked thing and sin against God." Notice, Joseph does not yet have the Law of Moses, and yet he knows that this is sinful intuitively. Any wise person can see the chaos that infidelity produces, and peace that comes with chaste marriages. Have you ever heard of a story where infidelity brought greater peace? Off the top of my head I can think of many instances of broken families, and even one acquaintance who is in jail for murder because of infidelity.

This is because marriage is an institution built into God's creation. It is how we were created to live. Right at the beginning, God says, "a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." This institution is not only for the well-being of individuals, for the well-being of human society. When a man and a woman come together in marriage, they are not only given a partner for life, but when things are working like they should, they are given children, not only children are created, but aunts and uncles, grandparents, nieces, nephews, cousins, second cousins, eventually towns, cities, and even nations. This is God's blessing, and all these things create all kinds of wonderful beauty out of the simple marriage bed, even for those who do not get married themselves.

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This is why the enemy attacks this institution so strongly, because when the marriage bed is destroyed, all society crumbles after it. Notice, the curses of sin that come after the fall, pain comes with the fruit of marriage, children, and there will be strife between husband and wife (Gen.3:16).

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This curse is seen clearly up to the story of Joseph in Genesis. There are many instances of God's institution of marriage being degraded. The story of Noah begins by saying that "the sons of God" married the beautiful "daughters of men," we don't have time to get into what that might mean, but that it is an aberration of marriage that eventually results in the flood. The patriarchs are constantly getting into messes with concubines and polygamy. The height of God's institution of marriage being degraded is seen in Sodom and Gomorrah, where he eventually wipes them off the map because of their sin.

All these stories point to the way that God has created us to live in this creation is in lifelong monogamous relationships. When these relationships are disturbed with the sin of infidelity, whatever the sort, chaos ensues. This chaos is then partly undone with the ordered faithfulness, as we see in the life of Joseph. Even though Potiphar's wife promotes the chaos of infidelity, Joseph resists temptation, and brings blessing to Potiphar, and eventually all of Egypt. This faithfulness is a blessing, even if it should be the norm for this creation.

As an aside, this norm is changed in the new covenant. As Jesus says, in the age-to-come, there is no marriage (Mt.22:30). And so, in the church we should not prize marriage as they did in the old covenant, but, like Paul, look at celibacy as a higher calling, and greater good (1Cor.7:7-8). This does not mean that we can ignore God's institution of marriage, or degrade it as our society has done with no-fault divorce and homosexual marriage, but that we must recognize that marriage is an institution for the good of this age, and not the age to come. Marriage will not ultimately fulfill us as only our heavenly marriage to our Lord can.

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Even though Joseph was wise in his dealings with Potiphar's wife in spurning her propositions, he still finds himself at one point alone with her in the house. It isn't entirely clear as to whether Joseph was acting in a totally upright manner in this story. There is a lot of Rabbinic tradition that implies that Joseph had eventually succumbed to temptation, or at the very least was putting himself unwisely in the zone of danger. We remember, he is the head of Potiphar's house at this point, he had repeatedly repelled this woman's advances, but now, knowing there was nobody in the house finds himself alone with her, not only this, but in a way that she is able to get a hold of his tunic. The story does invite some raised eyebrows.

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This part of the story should at the very least give us a warning to not put ourselves in compromising situations. As Proverbs 5:8 says, "Keep to a path far from [the adulterous woman], do not go near the door of her house." Or as Paul tells Timothy (2Tim.2:22), "Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness." Especially when it comes to matters of sexuality, putting up appropriate boundaries is a must. This is all the more essential in today's technological age, where we have a Potiphar's wife beckoning us from every angle, from our phones, to our TV's, to the billboards on the side of the road!

As we face these temptations, we should remember what kind of chaos ensues from adultery. And adultery is not just the act itself, but the lust in our hearts. As Jesus says, "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his

heart" (Mt.5:28). We might be able to admire Joseph's ability to resist Potiphar's wife, but I doubt very much that he was able to meet Jesus' high standard.

Joseph, like the rest of us, still rely on God's grace for our sin in this area. All of us in some way have felt the effects of the sin of adultery in our lives. Some perpetuating it to some capacity, and others feeling the effects of this sin from someone they love. It is only by God's grace that we can flip this on its head, turn away from temptation, and hold on to the freedom that comes with living according to God's plan for his world.

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If anyone feels the effects of someone else's lustful sin, it is Joseph. Even though he is chaste, he feels the effects of sin in the world. As Potiphar's wife spins her story, notice how she emphasizes that Joseph is an outsider, so as to maximize sympathy with her side of the story. To the other slaves in the house she says, "this Hebrew has been brought in to make sport of us!" Notice how she first goes to all the other servants in the house to rile them up against Joseph. They, like Joseph's brothers, would have been jealous of his rise to prominence, and eager to see him taken down a few notches.

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Again, she says to Potiphar her husband, "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to make sport of me." She is emphasizing this as a play on his more xenophobic base mindset, but, in continually pointing this out, she ends up emphasizing how God will bless the whole nation through the Hebrew people.

Potiphar does not seem to totally trust his wife's account of the story. The text says that Potiphar is fuming with anger, but it doesn't say that he is angry with Joseph. Presumably, Joseph, though still "that Hebrew slave," had risen to the right had of Potiphar because of a certain character he showed, and presumably, his wife's poor character had been seen elsewhere, as is typical in these situations. We know this because, had Joseph been guilty, he would have most assuredly been given the death penalty. Instead, Joseph was put in the prison with the King's prisoners, where Potiphar, the captain of the guard, would have been able to keep a close watch on his favourite admin. It seems Potiphar had his hands tied, as the accusation of a free person over a slave would be damning in this society.

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Joseph, in this outcome, is like many women today who come forward with stories of abuse in the workplace, only to find that they lose their job and their credibility out of it. Joseph, as a slave, is in a position of lower power and authority than Potiphar's wife. And even though her character might have been evident to Potiphar, he would have no other option than to

take some recourse on Joseph at her accusation. It is a great good out of the “Me Too” movement that some of the stigma of reporting abuse like this is taken away, as Christians we should always oppose abuse, and promote the truth, especially supporting those who feel the effects of reporting abuse. Stories like this show the need to protect the vulnerable.

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As this part of the story ends, it says that the Lord was still with Joseph, and his favour is seen in the way that God puts him in charge of the life of the prison. For Joseph, this prison is a much better place to have been than if he had succumbed to the temptation of Potiphar’s wife. Yes, he may have stayed out of a physical prison, and enjoyed the company of someone else’s wife for a time, but in the end he would have created a prison of his own shame and guilt in his sin before God. When we turn away from how God created us to live, we do not find greater freedom, but deeper slavery. That is a prison that only God can free us from.

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Instead, God calls us, like Joseph, to live in the world as salt and light. As salt, preserving his good creation by maintaining the way he has created us to live in his world. Light, in shining God’s Word for others to see, pointing to the one who is a light in the darkness, even the darkness of the pit of prison that Joseph is in. We too are to follow this pattern of rising and falling, depending on what God has in store for us. As 1 Pet.5:6 says, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.”