

Genesis 39 — What should I do when life doesn't go according to plan?

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Has someone ever told you, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life”? I grew up hearing that phrase. The problem is life doesn't always feel like God has a wonderful plan. As Christians, instead of a life filled with ease and comfort, we struggle. We struggle to pay the bills. A loved one comes down with cancer. A spouse is unfaithful to you. A relationship with someone we love falls apart. Some of us may lose our jobs, and our dreams for the future are shattered. If you are like me, there are times when you find yourself saying, “God, where is your wonderful plan?”

This morning we are going to learn what to do when life doesn't go according to plan as we study the life of Joseph.

We first met Joseph two weeks ago in Genesis 37. He was a gifted young man at the age of 17. He was son number 11 of what would become a family of a dozen. Only his brother Benjamin was younger. When Joseph was a teenager, Ben was just a baby. As a teenager, Joseph was a prideful, spoiled-rotten brat that tattled on his older brothers. He lied and schemed to get out of work. He flaunted the favoritism his father had toward him in front of his brothers. He was one of those spoiled, rich kids that you want to humiliate to teach a lesson.

No matter what he did, his brothers had no right to do what they did. They hated him so much that when he came to see them in the field that was more than 60 miles away from home, they planned his murder. Thankfully, at the last

minute, they decided to sell him into slavery to make money off his skin rather than killing his skin. That ended our story two weeks ago.

Last week, the Bible took a break from Joseph's story to tell us what happened to his brother Judah while Joseph was in Egypt. Judah was also a complete mess. For most of his life, he was very evil man. He married a pagan wife and slept with a woman he thought was a prostitute just a little more than a week after his wife died. Last week, we saw most of Judah's life from the time he helped sell Joseph into slavery was a downward spiral. At one of the lowest moments in his life, he had his come-to-Jesus moment and God changed his heart. The reason he was saved was purely by God's grace. While he spent over a decade pursuing sexual sin before his conversion, this morning we see Joseph is someone that resisted sexual sin tooth and nail. To make matters worse, every time Joseph responded the right way, he was treated as if he sinned. Let's jump into the text.

Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. Genesis 39:1–5 (ESV)

Joseph was 17 when he was sold into slavery. Next week, in chapter 40, he will be 30 years old. There were 13 years between his brothers selling him into slavery and what unfolds next week in prison. Joseph served in Potiphar's house approximately 11 years, then he spent at least two years in prison. When

we read these chapters, it is easy to compress them and think they happened in a few weeks. They cover more than a decade of his life. God's plans unfolded slowly. In a similar way, God's plans for our lives usually takes a long time to unfold.

The man Potiphar, was called the Captain of the Guard. Today that would be the rough equivalent of the head of the Secret Service. He had a high-stress job. He was in charge of security and executions, plus, he ran a prison. This will become an important detail later in our story.

I want you to put yourself in Joseph's shoes. A few weeks before he was a slave in Potiphar's house he was wearing a fancy jacket and was the favorite son of a wealthy man. Then he found himself auctioned off on a slave block. Joseph didn't even speak the language of his new home. He spoke Hebrew, not Egyptian. He didn't know anything about the culture. He didn't know anything about the people or their customs. This was an opportunity for some serious depression. There was nothing encouraging him to follow the God of his father.

If you have ever spent time in a foreign country, or found yourself lost in a foreign city where you didn't speak the language, you know what it was like for Joseph. Yet in spite of all these obstacles, Joseph prospered. How could anyone become a success in that mess? Joseph made a decision to make the best of a bad situation. We don't see him sulking. We don't see him homesick and lost in depression. Of course he faced homesickness and depression but he made a choice to not live in them. He made the best of the tough situation he found himself in when he woke up every morning. That is something each of us can

apply this morning. When life doesn't go the way we planned, just like Joseph, we need to choose to make the best of a tough situation.

There is another important thing we learn in this chapter. That is the phrase, "The Lord was with Joseph." That phrase or a similar rendition of it, is repeated seven times in this chapter. Whenever a biblical writer repeats something, especially seven times, that means we should notice it. That is an important point he was trying to communicate. Here is his point.

Just because life isn't turning out the way I hoped, that doesn't mean God is against me or he isn't with me.

When Moses wrote this, he wanted us to know that even when it seems like the world is falling apart, God is silent and things are spinning out of control, they aren't. God is with us, just like he was with Joseph. He has a good plan in those tough times. The great temptation in our lives when we lose a job, when we are diagnosed with cancer, or when a spouse leaves is to think God left us. God has a good purpose in tough times and we are not alone even when it feels like it. Maybe God's desire is for you to share Christ with a doctor while you are in the hospital. Maybe God has a friend or neighbor watching how you suffer and how you rely on Jesus when life falls apart. Maybe you lost your job so God can teach you to depend more on him as he brings you through the long process of finding a new job.

In spite of being a slave, even Potiphar noticed how Joseph made the best of his circumstances like Paul told slaves to in Ephesians 6:5-8

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ... Ephesians 6:5 (ESV)

As Joseph worked hard, God kept blessing whatever he did. Whatever Joseph touched turned to gold. Over the course of 11 years, Potiphar elevated Joseph higher and higher in Potiphar's house. That reminds us of Matthew 25:21 when it says those who are faithful in little things will be put over bigger things. As Joseph was serving Potiphar from his heart and doing his best even when Potiphar wasn't looking Potiphar noticed his work ethic and God's blessing so he promoted Joseph up the corporate ladder. We pick up the story somewhere in year 11.

So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house." Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house." Genesis 39:6–18 (ESV)

Joseph ran everything in the house. The only thing Joseph was not in charge of was what they served for dinner. Potiphar reserved that choice for himself. Sometimes he wanted steak. Sometimes he wanted ribs. He wanted the ability to make the final call. Everything else, Joseph ran.

At this time, he was a 27- or 28-year-old man. The Bible says he was well-built and handsome. That means he spent time in the gym. The dude was huge. He was shredded. Every muscle looked like it was chiseled into his rock-hard, darkly-tanned body. He looked like he could model for a men's clothing catalog. Not only did he have a stunning physique, but he was handsome. He looked like Tom Cruise. Women couldn't keep their eyes off him. He was one of those sharp dressed good-looking guys, and Mrs. Potiphar couldn't help but notice.

Where did these good looks come from? Remember Joseph's mother, Rachel? We learned she was a hottie. Rebekah, his grandmother on his father's side, was also a looker. Sarah, his great-grandmother, was also stunning. The gene for genetic perfection came from both sides of his family so it ended up doubly manifested in his life.

Potiphar spent most of his days at the office with his high-stress job. Joseph was around the house with Mrs. Potiphar all day long as he managed Potiphar's busy life. Mrs. Potiphar started to find her heart captivated by the good-looking young man managing her house. After a while she so attracted to him she put her thoughts into words and said, "Lie with me." Last week, I told you translators sometimes tame things down in the Bible. This is another example of the English toning down the original. In Hebrew it is just one word said in the emphatic. She says, "Sex! Now!" If that isn't bold, I don't know what is.

I kept wondering what made this lady such a desperate housewife, even before the television show? Here is where it gets interesting. In the beginning of the chapter, it said Potiphar was an officer of Pharaoh. The word *officer* in

Hebrew also means eunuch. At this time in history officers closely associated with the Egyptian Pharaoh were castrated to ensure their full-hearted devotion to their duties and to minimize the possibility of a coup. Potiphar probably consented to this operation after he was married. That left him with a very frustrated wife, which explain why she was filled with raw lust when she had a 27-year-old good-looking, single man with an amazing physique working around the house every day. This is why she became so desperate to have him and demanded intimacy from him.

We need to see this temptation for what it was. Potiphar's wife was in charge of the house. She gave Joseph orders every day, and he carried them out. At this time, women whose husband's were eunuchs customarily had affairs with slaves in the house. It was almost expected. Everybody was doing it. For Joseph to be a slave that served Potiphar and his wife with scrupulous attention to detail for 11 years, then start refusing her requests, was something she didn't expect. She wasn't used to anybody saying "No" to her. She always had her way.

To beat this temptation Joseph armed himself both mentally and practically. Let's look at how he mentally guarded himself.

1. It would be a betrayal of the trust his boss placed in him (Genesis 39:89).

If you are at work and an inappropriate relationship begins to develop, it is not a private matter. It may be betraying the trust of your employer. Potiphar trusted Joseph with everything. To use that trust to take advantage of his wife would have been betrayal.

2. It would have ruined her. Joseph didn't want to violate the marriage covenant (Genesis 39:9). Joseph understood marriage is an institution created by God. Anyone entering into a romantic relationship with someone that is already married is a violation of that covenant. It is not just innocent fun on the side but it will tear apart of the fabric of marriage itself. Many of you will agree with me that marital infidelity is wrong but you think about this differently when it comes to intimacy before marriage. Most of the people in our culture think there is nothing wrong with intimacy before marriage while you are dating. Here is the problem. You are dating somebody else's future wife. You are dating somebody else's future husband. You treat the girl you are dating like you want another man treating your future wife if he was to take her on a date. Almost every single person will eventually become someone's wife or husband. When you get involved with someone you are dating before marriage, you are committing premarital adultery with someone's future spouse. Joseph refused to tear apart the fabric of her marriage even if he didn't know any better.

3. Adultery is a sin against God. (Genesis 39:9). The reason to avoid sexual sin is because it is a sin against God. God sees all and he knows all. God promises he will discipline those who dishonor the marriage covenant.

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. Hebrews 13:4 (ESV)

When we think nobody knows about our sin, God knows about our sin.
The most important person to please in life is him.

The first way Joseph guarded himself from falling into Mrs. Potiphar's temptation was he girded his mind by reminding himself adultery would be a sin

against God, that God would judge. It would also have ruined her marriage and ruined his boss' trust.

Coupled with his mental armor, he adopted some practical strategies that we can apply to our lives when tempted towards sin.

1. **He avoided being with her.** When we faced with temptation, the wisest thing to do is to avoid the temptation. Don't spend time negotiating with the temptation. Don't spend time around the temptation. If you struggle with alcohol, avoid the liquor locker at Hy-Vee. Get all booze out of your house. Don't go into Casey's when you pay for gas. Use a credit card at the pump. Some former drug addicts tell me they are fine away from drugs but don't put the drugs in front of them or they feel like they can't help themselves. To beat temptation they need to avoid the presence of temptation.

When we find ourselves tempted, the best thing to do is to avoid tempting situations. If the computer is tempting, don't turn it on. If a girl at the office is tempting, don't spend time with her. If you need to get another job, get one. If you are dating somebody and you find yourself struggling with limits, avoid spending time at the apartment together after dinner. Call on the cell phone. You have unlimited minutes! Avoiding temptation worked for a while, but it didn't work forever. Joseph was eventually faced with a tempting situation he couldn't avoid.

Finally, Mrs. Potiphar cornered Joseph when they were alone in the house. She grabbed him and would not let him go. Some commentators point out that she was most likely skimpily dress, if dressed at all. She was going to do anything she could to seduce him by touching him. We often miss this but she

literally tore his clothes off his body. For some guys, that would be your dream temptation. In that day, they wore a long T-shirt that went below the waist. She literally tore his tunic off, and he ran out of the house missing the equivalent of his pants and shirt. This was an incredible level of temptation and he beat it! How did he do it?

2. He ran from the situation. Notice he did not try to stop and negotiate with her in that moment. He didn't look at her and tell her how adultery would not be good for her marriage. He didn't tell himself they would just spend time together but the temptation wouldn't go any farther. This wasn't time for talk. It wasn't time for negotiation. It was time to run! That is the second principle of beating temptation: Run from it. Don't stick around telling yourself you can resist it. Run from temptation. That is a consistent biblical command.

So flee youthful passions... 2 Timothy 2:22 (ESV)

Flee from sexual immorality... 1 Corinthians 6:18 (ESV)

If you find yourself facing a temptation that you cannot avoid, run from it. Turn off the television. Get out of the house. Go for a walk. Call a friend in the middle of the night and ask for prayer. Don't stand there trying to resist it. Get away from it.

In the Bible, there are some times we are told not to run. There are times we are to resist. The Bible says we are to endure and face trials. We are not to try and escape them but endure them. We are to stand strong during our trials. In temptations, we don't resist them because we will rationalize ourselves into sin. When faced with a temptation, that is where we run. If you notice, we usually do the exact opposite. When we find ourselves tempted, we tell ourselves we won't

fall into the trap while we slowly talk ourselves into sin. The Bible says that is the wrong plan.

Usually, when we face trials, we try to run from them and escape them. The Bible tells us the opposite. We are to bear up under our trials as it says in James 1. That way our trials will make us mature and complete. If we run from our trials, we will not grow strong from our trials.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2–4 (ESV)

Here is the difference. Temptations, which we must run from, come from inside of us. They come from the natural sinful inclination of our hearts. That is why we run from them. James described it like a fish looking a lure. Do you know how to put a fish on a hook? You can't. All you can do is tempt a fish into putting himself on a hook by tempting his appetite. The longer a fish looks at a lure, the more likely he will talk himself into biting the lure. It is the same with each of us.

As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, "This is the way your servant treated me," his anger was kindled. And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed. Genesis 39:19–23 (ESV)

When Mrs. Potiphar couldn't have Joseph, she determined to destroy him. She screamed and accused him of attempted rape. What I find interesting is that rape was a capital offense. Joseph should have been killed, but he was imprisoned. When Potiphar came home, it says his anger was kindled. It doesn't

say who his anger was kindled against. It could have been against Joseph for attempted rape of his wife or it could have been against his wife for accusing Joseph of rape and forcing him to lose Joseph's services. Maybe Joseph's character and godliness were so great that Potiphar actually believed Joseph's story of innocence but he imprisoned Joseph to appease his wife.

While we don't know what Potiphar was thinking, we do know what Joseph was thinking when he went from running Potiphar's house to languishing in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Life wasn't going according to plan once again. Psalm 105 speaks about Joseph and tells us what life was like in prison.

His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron... Psalm 105:18 (ESV)

Here is what is the important point for us to remember. In all of these circumstances, where God seemed far away, God was with him. Even though he was suffering, God was watching. God is with us even when life doesn't go according to plan.

While the clear message of this text is to remember that when our lives don't go according to plan, just like life didn't for Joseph, as God's children we need to remember that God is still with us, even when we feel incredibly alone.

There are also practical choices Joseph made to make it through those tough times. Before we wrap up this chapter, let's look at four of the important choices he made when life didn't go according to plan that we can learn from when our lives don't go according to plan.

1. Refuse to become bitter. Bitterness is a choice. We can choose to have it or not have it when life doesn't go the way we expect. Bitterness isn't depression,

confusion or crying. Those are normal emotions. Bitterness is choosing to hold on to the pain. Bitterness is taking the embers of past hurts and fanning them into flames. Bitterness is letting the pain of your past become your new identity in the present and refusing to move beyond it.

Bitterness It is like eating a jalapeño pepper. I like hot food, but a direct jalapeño is too hot for me. Some people take one bite and they cry in pain. After they eat it, they want another bite. They keep going back to hot peppers and hurting themselves. They can't say enough is enough, put it down and move on. When life doesn't go as planned, refuse to become a bitter person that keeps reliving the pain of your past and living in the past.

Bitterness will shut down the work of the Holy Spirit in your life.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:30–32 (ESV)

If you allow yourself to keep reliving the pain of the past, don't expect the Holy Spirit to be pleased. If you know a bitter person, how much fruit of the Holy Spirit does he or she manifest in his or her life? Are bitter people kind and compassionate? Those two things don't go together. Bitter people aren't kind, compassionate and forgiving.

2. Make the best of a tough situation. This is a decision. Whenever life doesn't go according to plan, we get to pick what we are going to do about it. We can whine. We can yell. We can treat people we love like trash. We don't have to do any of those things. We choose how to respond in a tough situation. For example, some of you are single wishing you were married. Is that a tough

situation? Yes. Most of you wish you were in a great marriage. It is not the situation you are in right now. Nobody can change it for you. If you are single, make the best of the situation you find yourself in this morning. Use your singleness to do things for Christ you couldn't do if you were married, such as starting a single's meeting at church. Make the best of your situation. If you can improve things, certainly do it. If you can't change improve things, embrace them and make the best of it. Some of you are in a tough marriage. I can't change that. Do the best to honor your spouse and love him or her. You can do that. I can't guarantee how he or she will respond but we can choose to be loving and kind. All you can control is what you do. Think of Joseph in Potiphar's house; he couldn't even speak the language. Think of Joseph in jail; he was helping the jailer not moping in the corner.

3. Commit to doing more than asked and better than expected. It seems no matter where he went, Joseph was given a promotion. Why do you think he was promoted? Whatever he did, he made sure he did it better than other people. One of the reasons he was promoted was God's blessing on his life, but God's blessing on his life was seen in his work ethic. If you are in management, you know what I mean. You never promote anybody because he or she is lazy. You never promote anybody because he or she clocks out early. Everybody you promote is somebody that did more than he or she was asked or better than you expected. As Christians, we should do that all the time because we aren't just representing ourselves, we are representing Jesus. The way we stand out to people at work is that we are model employees. We do our work with excellence.

Joseph was even given promotions in jail. Don't forget Joseph was not working for Christians. He was working for hard-core pagans.

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:17 (ESV)

Let me give you some practical advice on how to get yourself a promotion. Do whatever you do incredibly well. Many people think when they are in a more important job they will start working hard. The truth is if you don't work hard now, you won't work hard then. If you want to be paid more for what you do, do more than you are paid for and that will happen.

4. Continue to do the right thing even if it produces the wrong results. One of the most discouraging situations in this world is what Joseph faced when he said no to sin and he ended up in chains for years. In our lives, when we do the right things and are treated as if we did the wrong thing, many times the truth and time go hand-in-hand. God usually comes to our vindication and rescue, just like he did for Joseph. The truth is there is no guarantee God will save us in this life. Here is what we need to remember: This world is not the end. One day we will stand in front of Jesus. He knows the truth. He knows the real score. We will be rewarded according to the truth he knows. If you think this life is all there is, you will be sorely disappointed. You won't keep doing the right things if you have to suffer for them like Joseph, if you think this world is the end.

Conclusion

How do we respond when life doesn't go as planned? Remember God is with us, even when we don't see him and even when he hasn't come to our

rescue. Just because life is hard doesn't mean God is against us or he isn't with us.



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