

## **Problems Christians face Dealing with a Potiphar's wife situation Genesis 39:7-12**

*[Please note : New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

My family's favourite films to watch at Christmas time are the Home Alone movies. My children get a concerning amount of pleasure watching Kevin, the young boy who has been left home alone, lay all kinds of traps for the baddies. I think they see it as a fact-finding mission to then plot clever ways to play tricks on us. It's interesting that sometimes Kevin overhears the bad guys plotting and so is prepared and able to plan all sorts of obstacles to defend his house and trap the crooks. Other times Kevin bumps into them in the middle of a street. On those occasions Kevin has no time for planning and just has to run as fast as he can!

It occurred to me that often the Christian life is not so different to this. We know we're not supposed to sin. Sometimes we can see dangers ahead. Situations where we know we'll be tempted to do wrong and give in to various temptations. In those situations, we can sometimes take action to avoid those temptations in the first place. We can turn the TV off, we can avoid particular places, or put safeguards in place of one sort or another. But other times, we find ourselves in situations which were totally unplanned and not asked for, and temptation seems to hit us in the face, completely by surprise. In those situations, there's no time for plans or safeguards. Perhaps the only option is to run fast.

Today's message on Truth for Today finds Joseph in one of those unplanned situations. Joseph had had a strange life. He'd been the favoured child growing up, but his brothers resented him for it. Their resentment was so strong that they sold him to slave traders and afterwards told their father he was dead, mauled by some wild animal. Joseph ended up as a slave in Egypt, working for Potiphar, who was one of the officers of Pharaoh, and the captain of the guard. Although a slave, things started to look better for Joseph as Potiphar's house prospered under Joseph's oversight. Maybe everything wasn't so bad for Joseph after all. The road had been bumpy, often even awful, but things weren't so bad any more. That is, until Potiphar's wife developed an interest in Joseph.

At this point, Joseph's life is going to take another turn because he finds himself in a situation where there's a temptation to sin. How will Joseph respond? Today, we'll ask three questions related to this event in Joseph's life:

- How should we respond when tempted to sin?
- Why should we flee from sin?
- What if we've already failed?

But first, let's read the account in the book of Genesis, chapter 39 and verses 7 to 12:

"And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, my master does not know what is with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand. There is no one greater in

this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" So it was, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her. But it happened about this time, when Joseph went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house was inside, that she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside."

There was a lot about this situation that Joseph couldn't control. The Genesis account describes Joseph as "handsome in form and appearance." Nothing he could do about that. That was the way God made him. No wonder Potiphar's wife started to take an interest in him. No doubt the way Potiphar's house prospered under Joseph also increased his attraction. Here was a man who had character and integrity, who worked hard, and was wise. What's not to like about that? There were other things about this situation that Joseph couldn't control. He knew Potiphar's wife was interested in him, but he couldn't exactly hand in his notice and look for other employment. He was a slave, despite the freedoms he seemed to have earned in Potiphar's house. At the moment of temptation in the account we read, we found that "Joseph went into the house to do his work." He was doing what he was supposed to do. It couldn't easily be avoided.

So, through circumstances outside his control, Joseph finds himself alone in the house with Potiphar's wife. She isn't exactly subtle in communicating what she wanted and pleads with Joseph to "Lie with me." Evidently, this wasn't the first time this had happened. Joseph had turned down Potiphar's wife's advances before. But there seems to be something about this situation that was different and more intense. Perhaps the opportunity was there more than before. An empty house – no one would know. What was Joseph to do?

Joseph "fled and ran outside." He was so urgent in fleeing the situation that he "left his garment in her hand." You might say it was better to lose his cloak than his character. We won't focus on it too much today, since it will be picked up again in next week's talk, but this was a costly choice for Joseph. He ended up in prison again because of it. With hindsight, because we know the end of the Joseph story, we can see that this was all part of God's providential planning; and that, as Joseph would later say to his brothers, "God meant it for good." But at this stage, the consequences for Joseph of fleeing from the advances of Potiphar's wife were serious and hard.

What can we learn then from this story of Joseph in the Old Testament of the Bible? How does God want to use these verses to help us when we find ourselves in unplanned situations where we are tempted to sin? We may or may not find ourselves in the exact same situations Joseph found himself in. But I suspect all of us will find ourselves in some situation this week, which we hadn't planned, where we find ourselves tempted to sin. Some listeners may even somehow find themselves in a situation, where they are tempted to sleep with someone to whom they aren't married! Others might find themselves tempted to quietly go along with some unrighteous plan at work. For other's the temptations might seem to be much smaller, a lie, or dishonest action here or there. A temptation to fill our minds with ungodly thoughts through something we have watched or read? But all can be damaging to our walk with the Lord. What are we to do?

Well, the lesson from Joseph is that sometimes it's necessary to run away rather than to stay in a situation where we are tempted to sin. Fleeing isn't a sign of weakness, but rather a recognition of the tendency all of us have to fail; and a desire to please God by living holy lives. Although we're thinking today about the story of Joseph, which happened near the beginning of the Bible, running away from sin is something that the New Testament writers insist upon as well. The apostle Paul tells the Corinthian Christians to, "Flee sexual immorality" in 1 Corinthians 6:18, and to, "flee from idolatry" in chapter 10:14. Paul would later write to Timothy, who in a sense was his apprentice or protégé in the faith and say in 2 Timothy 2:22:

"Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:8 and 9 that we are to resist the devil, who “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” I don’t know about you but if I saw a roaring lion who was looking for something to eat, I’d not try to rely on my own will power to avoid it. I’d run! And sometimes that’s the best thing to do with temptations to sin. So, let’s keep that in mind from now on. When we do find ourselves tempted to sin, let’s at least consider the possibility that the best thing to do might be to run. That might be physically to run, or it might be to turn off the TV, or to put down the book. Or it might be to walk away from some situation that you see turning in the wrong direction. Why not start praying today that when those kinds of ‘unavoidable’ situations arise, the Lord would help you to follow Joseph’s example and run.

It’s worth pausing at this point to consider that the title of today’s talk is “Dealing with a Potiphar’s wife situation.” It’s not “avoiding a Potiphar’s wife situation.” I mentioned earlier that Joseph didn’t go looking for this difficult situation. He didn’t ask for it, and neither could he do much about the fact that he had to be in the house doing his work. But I did hint at the beginning that not all situations in which we’re tempted to sin are like this. Some are more avoidable. Sometimes we find ourselves tempted to sin because we’ve allowed a lot of small events to happen in the run up that we could have avoided. The example of David and Bathsheba in the Bible is a bit like that. David should have been out at battle with his armies rather than resting on the rooftop when he first saw Bathsheba bathing. Even then, he could have gone inside and done something else. Even then, he could have not called her to come over. Even then he could have stopped things before they got out of hand. But he didn’t and so much went wrong. We’ll come back to David and this sad incident a bit later, but it’s worth pointing out at this point that we can put sensible precautions in place to reduce the threat of some of these temptations to sin.

The famous evangelist Billy Graham apparently had a rule that he would never be alone with a woman other than his wife, in any situation. This was probably a sensible move for him, since even unsubstantiated rumours of wrongdoing based on misinterpretations of perfectly innocent situations would have ruined his ministry. That’s not a command of the Bible, so I’m not suggesting everyone should adopt Billy Graham’s rule. I’m holding it up as an example of a Christian putting sensible precautions in place. Sometimes there are things we can do to avoid finding ourselves in situations where we are tempted to sin. So, if you struggle with pornography for example, don’t put the TV on late at night, when you’re alone. Don’t go on websites you know will cause you problems. If you struggle with getting drunk, perhaps stop going to the pub, or buying beers at the supermarket. If attraction to an office colleague is threatening to ruin your marriage, are there ways you could reduce contact, specially just the two of you? Today’s talk is focussing on what to do when we find ourselves in unavoidable situations where we are tempted to sin. Like Joseph we should flee. But I just wanted to emphasise that in many cases there are things we can do at much earlier stages to avoid difficult circumstances like that developing.

We’ve spent a bit of time now considering what we should do when tempted to sin. We should flee. But why should we flee? Why would it have been so wrong for Joseph to give in on this occasion, especially if no one knew about it. What was the harm?

Joseph highlighted a few reasons in verses 8 and 9 of the section we read in Genesis 39. Joseph would have been betraying his master. He says, “My master... has committed all that he has to my hand... nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife.” Joseph knew that adultery was wrong because it wronged Potiphar. Potiphar had entrusted a lot to Joseph. Joseph would not betray that trust. We live in a society today that takes a pretty liberal view on sexual misconduct and tolerates a lot. But the Bible is clear, and I think experience often bears out, that adultery is damaging. It hurts spouses. It hurts children. It can be a reason for breakup of marriages and homes. Sadly, the consequences even run to the breakup of friendship groups and churches.

Joseph gave another reason why it would be wrong to sleep with Potiphar’s wife. It would be a “great wickedness and sin against God.” This is a reminder that sin is primarily against God. It does hurt others – Potiphar in this case - but it is also a sin against God. We must avoid adultery because it is a sin against God. And all sin deserves God’s judgement. All our sin made it

necessary for the Lord Jesus to come to our world and die on the cross for us. If God takes sin that seriously, we should certainly avoid something God calls sin!

As I was thinking about this talk, I came across an interesting passage in Proverbs 7. In many ways I think there are a lot of parallels between the story told in Proverbs 7 and the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife we've been considering today. Listen to the story from verses 6 to 25 :

“For at the window of my house I looked through my lattice, and saw among the simple, I perceived among the youths, a young man devoid of understanding, passing along the street near her corner; and he took the path to her house in the twilight, in the evening, in the black and dark night. And there a woman met him, with the attire of a harlot, and a crafty heart. She was loud and rebellious; her feet would not stay at home. At times she was outside, at times in the open square, lurking at every corner. So, she caught him and kissed him; with an impudent face she said to him: “I have peace offerings with me; Today I have paid my vows. So, I came out to meet you, diligently to seek your face, and I have found you. I have spread my bed with tapestry, coloured coverings of Egyptian linen. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love until morning; let us delight ourselves with love. For my husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey; he has taken a bag of money with him and will come home on the appointed day.” With her enticing speech she caused him to yield, with her flattering lips she seduced him. Immediately he went after her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks, till an arrow struck his liver. As a bird hastens to the snare, he did not know it would cost his life. Now therefore, listen to me, my children; pay attention to the words of my mouth: do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, do not stray into her paths.”

The Proverbs 7 man finds a similarly enticing situation to Joseph. A husband not home, an empty luxurious house. Promises of “our fill of love until morning” and delighting in love. The seductress makes it all sound so appealing. But unlike Joseph, the Proverbs 7 man succumbs to this temptation and goes into the woman's house. He is described as a fool. There were consequences to this action. An arrow struck his liver – perhaps the action of a jealous husband. This seduced man “did not know it would cost his life.” If ever there was an example, the Proverbs 7 man shows the dangers of choosing the passing pleasures of sin over righteous living. The Proverbs 7 account is a warning. A picture story told in a book of wisdom to encourage the reader to not let their heart be turned by seduction, but to follow the Lord's paths. Don't be like the Proverbs 7 man, be like Joseph and flee from sexual immorality.

If you are listening today and you find yourself in a situation where you are considering sleeping with someone other than your husband or wife, please don't do it. You might respond “But you don't know my circumstances. You don't know how miserable I am in this marriage. You don't know how good this other person makes me feel.” And you're right. I don't know your circumstances. I don't know what you're going through. But I do know that God says not to commit adultery, and that it's always better to follow God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin. So please, if you're listening today and feeling a bit like I've just described and are tempted to sleep with someone other than your spouse, take you circumstances to God. Tell Him how you're feeling. And ask him for help. But don't look for satisfaction and pleasure in the bed of someone else.

Well, we're nearly done for today. We've spent some time thinking about what we should do in situations where we're tempted to sin. And we've spent some time thinking about why fleeing is sometimes the best option. But I guess the reality is that for some listening today, this talk comes too late, and you have already given in to temptation of one form or another. Maybe some have been more like the Proverbs 7 man than like Joseph. Perhaps it's not a sexual sin, but something

financial, or you've got too deeply into idolatrously following of some person or thing. And although you've made it to the end of today's talk, it's all been a bit hard to stomach. If that's you, I want to end by speaking to you in particular. Don't give up hope. Don't think that your life is ruined and wasted. The Bible has examples of people who failed spectacularly and yet were still useful in God's service. We've already mentioned David and Bathsheba today. When God used the prophet Nathan to call David out on his sin, it led to David repenting and praying the great prayer of repentance in Psalm 51, "Create in me a clean heart O God." So, it might be that there are past, or even recent, failures in your own life. You've been more like David than Joseph. But you can still respond like David and repent and cry out to God for forgiveness. If you do, you'll find a loving God waiting to forgive and restore, whatever the wrong. Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers in 1 Corinthians 6 listing a load of serious moral failures in verses 9 and 10. Most strikingly he goes on to say: "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." The glorious news of the gospel is that through the Lord Jesus and His death on the cross, sin has been judged. Therefore, God can clean and use us. David was described as "a man after God's own heart" and even after the Bathsheba incident was used mightily by God. Don't give up if you've failed before. Perhaps today is an opportunity for you to speak to God about past sins. Perhaps today is a day to start making amends with those you've wronged. And perhaps today is a day to determine to be more like Joseph from now on and to flee from sinful situations.

May the Lord give us all help as we try to steer clear from sin, and live holy lives, which are pleasing to God.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on "Dealing with a Potiphar's wife situation", talk T1211.

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