



WHERE IS GOD IN TIMES OF BETRAYAL?

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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One of the greatest difficulties in the Christian life is bridging the gap between the promises of God and the circumstances that we encounter in everyday life. One of the most powerful truths that believers celebrate is the fact that the Lord is "with us." Throughout the ages, this bedrock truth has become a popular form of liturgical blessing: "The Lord be with you," followed by, "and with thy spirit." Just before I left for Scotland, a brother sent me off with this blessing, "The Lord be with you." I felt his love as he commended me to God's protection and care on my journey. This is how we pray for our children when they leave home on a date, a weekend trip, when they go to college or depart overseas. But what happens when we pray for God to be with our children and a tragedy occurs? What happens when we pray for God to be with us at work and we are laid off? What happens when we pray for God to be with us in our marriage and, although we were faithful, we end up divorced? What happens when we pray for God to be with us when we are undergoing treatment for cancer and it is unsuccessful? What then?

When reality seems to go against the promise, we are forced to reexamine the question of whether God really is "with us." And if he is with us, to what end? Finally, what should be our expectations in life if he is indeed "with us"? This is the theology that is developed in our text from Genesis today. Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, has been sold into slavery and taken to Egypt. Decades will pass before Jacob sees his son again. But even then, the narrator does not blush as he boldly asserts, "the Lord was with Joseph" (39:2). After he states this presupposition, the narrator puts the theology to the extreme test to see if it can hold up under the tragic tale of betrayal. In the end, he leaves us with a very profound theology, as he redefines what the words "the Lord with us" actually mean.

Literary Outline

Carl Temme

A God blesses Joseph in Potiphar's house	39:1-6
B Potiphar's wife seduces Joseph	39:7-10
X Potiphar's wife "grabs" Joseph's coat	39:11
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A' God blesses Joseph in prison	39:21-23

I. Joseph Exalted in Potiphar's House (39:1-6)

A. Joseph sold as a slave in Egypt (39:1)

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there. (Gen 39:1, NASB)

Jacob's favorite son is turned into an article of trade. After his brothers sell him into the hands of the Ishmaelite traders, they take him to Egypt, where again he is sold as a commodity, bringing profit to others. Think of the tension for Joseph. The one who dreamt of prominence now finds himself transported hundreds of miles away from home, to be sold as a

slave. What happened to the promises of God? Did Joseph question God's power to act? Or did he doubt God's love that seemed to turn a blind eye to evil and withhold his saving power? The narrator doesn't keep us guessing long.

B. The Lord was with Joseph (39:2-6)

The LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. Now his master saw that the LORD was with him and how the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge. It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; thus the LORD's blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field. So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate. (39:2-6)

It is a rare moment in biblical narrative when a narrator uses such an abundance of rich theological expression. More often than not, the writer plays his cards close to the chest, and we must carefully deduce theological meaning from more sophisticated and covert methods of expression. But this time he lays all his cards on the table, in full view of the reader. So we must "seize the day" and grasp the implications of what he is saying. His opening statement, "The LORD was with Joseph," summarizes all that follows, so that there will be no mistaking the source of Joseph's success. Joseph would thrive in Egypt like a fertile tree whose fruit is prolific (Ps 1:3; Jer 17:8), and the reason for such "success" was none other than God's presence: "The LORD was with Joseph."

In his research on the promise "I am with you," Donald Gowen suggests that it was originally given to Israel's chosen leaders in advance of an almost impossible undertaking, and that it "is not a blessing in general, not simply reassurance that all is well, but is a promise of help in times of great danger, or when setting out on an undertaking that seems very likely to fail."¹ Thus when God promised to be with Jacob until he returned to Bethel, it heightened the fact that Jacob's journey would be fraught with peril, and that God would not only overcome the obstacles, he would make him fruitful in the process.

And in like manner, God is with Joseph in a very dangerous situation, with the odds of his success being slim, at best. But despite the odds, God's hand prevails, as is evident in what Waltke describes as "the five steps of Joseph's elevation through God's blessing: sold as a slave to an aristocrat; serving in the house, not in the field; winning the master's esteem; becoming the master's personal attendant; heading the entire household."² Joseph's success is so evident that even Potiphar, an unbeliever, recognizes the hand of God on him. Thus he gives Joseph more and more responsibility for his affairs. Then, after elevating him to be his "personal attendant" ("this function conforms to that frequently encountered in Egyptian

texts as *mer-per*, or comptroller”³, there was such a comprehensive blessing (“in the house and in the field”) to all with whom Joseph came into contact, that Potiphar abandoned all his concerns into Joseph’s care (except for the food he ate, which probably is a reference to his private affairs, including his wife). Joseph became the most trusted individual in Egypt, caring for Potiphar’s entire estate.⁴

Joseph’s vindication and rapid rise to power fills us with exhilarating joy, and confirms the earlier promise of God, “I am with you.” But, just as the narrator fills us with a confident expectation of Joseph’s destiny, he adds a rather unsettling note that breaks the “the perfect harmony of Joseph’s divinely favored stewardship.”⁵

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. (39:6b)

These terms are an exact description of his mother Rachel (29:17). We recall that every time that that beauty of a matriarch was mentioned in the patriarchal narratives, it opened the door for her life either being threatened (Sarah and Rebekah), or damaged (Rachel). Now the roles are reversed; it is the male whose beauty will become the object of lust and danger. On that ominous note the narrative moves from blessing to betrayal. What follows will bring into question the very fabric of what it means that “God is with Joseph.”

II. Joseph Betrayed in Potiphar’s House (39:7-19)

A. Blatant seduction (39:7-12)

It came about after these events that his master’s wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, “Lie with me.” (39:7)

When we compare this scene with the previous one, we find the gender roles totally reversed. In the earlier story it was Judah’s lustful eyes that fell upon one whom he deemed a prostitute. With brash speech, Judah asked her to lie with him. In this scene it is Potiphar’s wife who is filled with lust, and her speech is even more direct than Judah’s. At least Judah said “please” (38:16), but so strong are this woman’s sexual appetites she can only manage a mere two words in Hebrew, “Lie with me!” By contrast, as Alter points out, “Joseph will issue a breathless response that runs to thirty-five words in the Hebrew.”⁶ The contrast between the two characters could not be more pronounced.

But he refused and said to his master’s wife, “Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?” (39:8-9)

Joseph doesn’t even entertain the temptation. Immediately he puts his stake in the ground, where it belongs. His refusal is as bold as her invitation. As Waltke states, “He concedes nothing to imperial power.”⁷ Then Joseph attempts to reason with her, using language that makes the crime not only morally indefensible but absolutely horrific against his master. Hearing Joseph’s words we can sense how thankful to God he had become for his deliverance and exaltation. He viewed his service as a rare privilege that he would never think of using for his own advantage.

As the capstone, Joseph is not afraid to raise the stakes and place the whole matter before God, who is the supreme judge of all. Sarna comments that, “His moral excellence can be appreciated all the more if one remembers that he is a slave and that sexual promiscuity was a perennial feature of all slave so-

cieties.”⁸

Notice that as Joseph unfolds his inner logic to Potiphar’s wife he not only defends himself against her advances, he condemns her behavior on every count, since she is violating a covenant of trust. Such clear boundaries not only protected him, they should have backed her into a corner of repentance. But no such repentance comes. Just like the devil, she tries to wear him down with repeated solicitation (Judg 14:17; 16:16-17; Luke 4:1-13).

As she spoke to Joseph day after day, that he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her. Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside. She caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me!” And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside. (39:10-12)

She is so lacking in morality that Joseph’s words make no impact on her. With renewed determination she repeats her invitation day after day, but now she softens her tone to more “innocent” behavior (“lie beside her”). But Joseph responds by creating even stronger boundaries, wisely choosing never to be alone with her.

Undeterred, she uses all the powers at her disposal to satisfy her sexual longings. She removes all the other slaves in the home, secretly hoping that by banning all witnesses, Joseph will let down his guard and give in to illicit sex. The stage is set. Joseph enters the house, as was his practice every day, to do his tasks. On this occasion, with no one else present, she grabs hold of him. The verb “caught” (*taphash*), a violent term, is often used in contexts of war to refer to wielding a weapon (Ezek 30:21), and is further indicative of their role reversal in this text. Waltke comments, “Normally, a man rapes a woman by force with little dialogue and a woman violates a man with seductive speech (cf. Prov 5:7). Her masculine attack is unique in Scripture.”⁹

But Joseph will not be taken in. Since this woman will not take no for an answer, he does the only wise thing left to him: he runs. Joseph is one of the best examples of sexual purity in the Bible. He serves as a model for men who travel into the anonymity of foreign cultures. It’s not enough to resist your own inner temptations; sexual immorality will come looking for you. If you do not predetermine your ethics, you will be easy prey. Paul memorializes Joseph’s actions as exemplary in his instructions to the Corinthians, “Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body” (1 Cor 6:18). What a wonderful example Joseph is in the midst of a depraved family and society! This demonstrates that the sins of one generation do not have to be visited on the next. Like Joseph, we too can choose to take the high road and rise above family flaws.

But Potiphar’s wife is not done. With Joseph’s cloak in hand she devises her next strategy. For the second time, Joseph will be betrayed by his cloak.

B. Accusation and betrayal (39:13-20)

When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, she called to the men of her household, and said to them, “See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed. When he heard that I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled, and went outside.” (39:13-15)

Now that Joseph has fled the scene, Potiphar’s wife will make good use of the cloak he has left behind. She quickly gathers all the men and, in an attempt to align them with her

cause, speaks in derogatory tones, not just of Joseph, but also her husband, whose name she will not even utter. It is their master whom she blames for dragging this “Hebrew” (read as a racial slur) to mock them (literally “to make sport of”—a derivative of Isaac’s name “to laugh,” a thematic word in Genesis). With extreme craft she plays all the cards in her hand: she plays on their jealousy of Joseph, their resentment toward their master, her innocence (“I screamed”), and finally, the damning evidence. It’s an open and shut case. Finally, before Potiphar gets home, she tampers with the evidence to make her case all the more convincing.

So she left his garment beside her until his master came home. Then she spoke to him with these words, “The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me; and as I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside.” (39:16-18)

After the workers return to their tasks she takes the garment that she had violently ripped off Joseph’s body and lays it beside her on the bed, awaiting Potiphar’s return. She greets him with a verbal tirade, blaming him for what had happened, and publicly denouncing him as the one who had violated her by allowing this “Hebrew” (a racial slur) to mock “us” (this now includes all Potiphar’s house). Again she proclaims that she did the proper thing by screaming. No one heard her scream, of course, but it did scare Joseph, and he ran away. Then she seals her case with the physical evidence. It’s obvious that she does not have a healthy marriage. It’s probably not the first time she made an advance to one of her slaves. But no slave had ever reached this kind of prominence. So her attack is a direct accusation against her husband, whom she hates. How will he respond?

Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, “This is what your slave did to me,” his anger burned. So Joseph’s master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail. (39:19-20)

At first glance we might think that Potiphar is furious with Joseph, but a more careful reading suggests that his fury is directed against his wife, whom he knew all too well. Sarna explains, “The motif of a married woman making improper proposals to one who rejects her, and then protecting herself by accusing the man of having attempted her dishonor, is not uncommon in world literature.”¹⁰ The narrator says that his anger burned upon hearing the words, “This is what *your* slave did to me.” With public opinion on her side, and the hard evidence lying on her bed, she holds all the cards. So Potiphar is forced to take action against Joseph. That he was reluctant to do so is confirmed by the fact that Joseph is not given the death penalty (the usual punishment for adulterers), but is placed in a comfortable prison, under the king’s care. This is the best that the king can do when his wife has tied his hands. It looks as if Joseph’s integrity has secured him no lasting reward, and that once again the favoritism he enjoyed is being used against him. For a second time he finds himself in a pit, betrayed by a cloak. But, just as quickly as our hopes are dashed, the narrator turns the light as clear as day on God’s providence. With God, no man (or woman) will have the last word.

III. God Has the Last Word (39:21-23)

But the LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness (*loyal-love*) to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph’s charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. The chief jailer

did not supervise anything under Joseph’s charge because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made to prosper. (39:21-23)

The scene is capped with the same theological statement it opened with, “The LORD was with Joseph.” But added to it now is the term “loyal-love.” God extends loyal-love to Joseph in prison. While no one else remains faithful to covenant in Joseph’s life, God does, and “His loyalty has the capacity to transform situations.”¹¹ God remembers his oath to be with Joseph and acts on it, showing him kindness in a very dark place. Brueggemann sums it up well, “The narrator offers an understanding of reality that is an alternative to every imperial presupposition of control...(Israel) observed and understood not only that there is an *abiding order* to life which no imperial ingenuity can ignore, but also that there is an *inscrutable power* for life at work in spite of everything human cleverness devises. The text witnesses to the hidden life-giving power of God at work in the midst of imperial death.”¹²

It doesn’t take long for the chief jailer to recognize what a find he has in Joseph. He imitates exactly Potiphar’s actions at the beginning of the chapter. Though his influence is drastically reduced, Joseph again rises to the top of the heap, bringing a richness and vitality to whomever and whatever he touches. He so thrives in prison that the chief jailer gives him complete responsibility, with such abandon that the man feels no need to concern himself with anything under his care. There were no employee reviews or monthly reports, just pure trust. If we are slow to miss the point that the Lord was with Joseph, the narrator repeats it for a third time—a rare occurrence in Biblical narrative. Perhaps this threefold reminder is meant to prepare us for even more danger to be faced by Jacob’s favorite son.

What can we to learn from this text of the Joseph story? Is “the Lord with us”? If so, to what end is he “with us”? And what expectations should this promise grant to our journey?

III. God is “with us”

A. The promise expanded to the church

We saw that the original context of the promise “I will be with you” was highly specific. It was given to Israel’s leaders when they faced extreme danger and overwhelming odds in serving God’s purposes. Gowen observes that “68 out of 104 passages...associate the promise with leaders.”¹³ When a leader faced a crisis in Israel, he could hear no more encouraging words than these, “Fear not, for I am with you!” It was then that the people of God knew for certain that their leader would be equipped with God’s presence to carry out his task, against all odds. Thus it proved true for Moses, Joshua, Caleb, Samuel, David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Jeremiah. God was with each one, accomplishing his purposes in precarious situations, against overwhelming odds. As the capstone of the promise, the prophet Isaiah promised that one day a s(S)on would be born, whose name, *Immanuel*, would embody this promise for his people (Isa 7:14; 8:8). At the birth of Jesus, the angel announced to Joseph that Jesus was Immanuel (Matt 1:21-23). After the resurrection of Jesus, the promise was then confirmed not just to the leaders of the church, but expanded to include every follower, when Jesus said, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). So we can say for certain that just as the Lord was with Joseph, he will be “with us.” We, like Joseph, will be guaranteed success.

But then we must ask, to what end is God “with us”? What is the task to which he has called us that we can utterly count on his presence to accomplish? The resoundingly clear answer comes from the same text in Matthew 28.

B. The task redefined

“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’” (Matt 28:18-20)

The task for which God has guaranteed his presence is that we make disciples of all nations. Everything else is secondary. Therefore we cannot count on God to fulfill our agendas, no matter how “righteous” they may appear. But we can be certain that if we follow him and give ourselves to this task, we will be as successful in our age as Joseph was in Potiphar’s house. So everything in our lives must be subservient to this one grand agenda. From politics to planting churches, from software to hardware, from the post office to the hospital, it is all about training the next generation to be followers of Christ. So much disappointment in life comes from giving ourselves to the wrong purpose. And, as we have learned from the recent series from the book of Ephesians, all of us have been equipped with spiritual gifts to this end.

Finally then, what should be our expectations as we devote ourselves to God’s purpose?

C. Our expectations refined

What does Joseph’s story teach us about life’s expectations? In chapter 38, Judah, who does everything morally wrong, repents and lives in freedom. In chapter 39, Joseph, who does everything right, is betrayed and ends up in prison. The fact that the Lord is with Joseph doesn’t spare him from peril, but it causes him to thrive in those settings.

Therefore, since God has pledged his presence to us to make disciples of all nations, we too, like Israel’s leaders, must understand that the task is fraught with danger. At times it may even appear impossible against the prevailing imperial powers. But we are guaranteed success in this venture until the work is complete (“end” of the age would be better translated “fulfillment” of the age, Matt 28:20). Like Joseph, we may find ourselves betrayed or placed in prisons of despair, where we feel limited and forgotten for decades. But no matter the environment or the circumstance, God guaran-

tees that despite the prevailing odds, more disciples will be made as a result. If the book of Acts is any indicator, the more the church suffers, the more effective is its witness and the more plentiful its disciples. When the church’s most effective leader was in prison, falsely accused, he thrived there because the Lord was with him. That prison became the womb for much of the New Testament. As the apostle Paul wrote,

Just as it is written,

“For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long;
We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. (Rom 8:36-37)

The Lord be with all you. Amen.

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1. Donald Gowen devotes a whole chapter to this significant theological theme, “I will be with you,” in his commentary on Exodus, *Theology in Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 54-75.
2. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 518.
3. Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 215.
4. “Joseph’s position as a house slave conforms to documented Egyptian practices. An Egyptian papyrus from 1833-1742 B.C. details the names and occupations of nearly eighty slaves in an Egyptian household. In that list, Asian slaves were given superior status and skilled jobs over the Egyptian slaves, who were usually assigned strenuous field labor.” Waltke, *Genesis*, 519.
5. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 224.
6. Alter, *Genesis*, 225.
7. Waltke, *Genesis*, 520.
8. Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 273.
9. Waltke, *Genesis*, 521.
10. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 215.
11. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 319.
12. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 317.
13. Gowen, *Theology in Exodus*, 57.