

**The Joseph Story:
Where is God in Times of Betrayal?
Genesis 39:1-23**

One of the greatest difficulties in the Christian life is bridging the gap between the promises of God and our everyday life. One of the foundational promises we celebrate is that *“the Lord is with us.”* This bedrock truth has been a popular form of liturgical blessing throughout the ages—*“The Lord be with you,”* followed by *“and with thy spirit.”* Parents pray this over for their children as they launch them off on a weekend trip, to college, or to a foreign land. But what happens when you pray for God to be with your children and a tragedy occurs? Or to be *“with you”* at work, and you are laid off? Or to be *“with you”* in your marriage and you end up divorced? Or to be *“with you”* in your cancer treatments and they are not successful? What then?

When reality hits we are forced to reexamine whether God **really** is *“with us.”* And if he is, to what end? What can we expect if he is indeed *“with us”*? This is the theme our text addresses as we find Jacob’s favorite son, Joseph, sold into slavery and taken to Egypt. Although it will be decades before the father sees the son again, the narrator boldly asserts that *“the Lord was with Joseph.”* Then he puts the theology to the extreme test to see if it can hold up under a tragic tale of betrayal. In the end he leaves us with a solid theology of how the Lord is **indeed** with us.

I. Joseph Exalted in Potiphar’s house (39:1-6a)

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

1 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. (39:1 ESV)

After Joseph’s brothers sold him to Ishmaelite traders, he was taken to Egypt where again he was sold to a high ranking Egyptian official. Think of the tension in the young man, who had dreams of prominence but now finds himself transported hundreds of miles away from home then sold as a slave. Had Joseph lost confidence in the dreams that he had treasured in his heart, or begun to doubt God’s love that seemed to turn a blind eye to evil and withhold his saving power?

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

2 The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 His master saw that the LORD

was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. (39:2-3)

It is rare in biblical narrative that a theological statement frames the story (vv. 2, 3, 21, 23). More often than not, the narrator plays his cards close to the vest, and we must carefully deduce theological meaning from more sophisticated and covert methods of expression. But here the narrator lays all his cards on the table, repeating the thesis four times; therefore, we must not miss its implications. The opening phrase, **“the Lord was with Joseph,”** summarizes all that follows so that there will be no mistaking the source of Joseph’s success. Joseph will thrive in Egypt like a fertile tree whose fruit is prolific (Ps 1:3; Ezek 17:9) for no other reason than the Lord’s unrestrained presence.

In his research on the promise *“I am with you,”* Donald Gowen observes that it was originally given to Israel’s leaders before 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 was going to be fraught with peril and danger, but that God would not only overcome the obstacles, he would make Jacob very fruitful in the process. In like manner, God will be with Joseph in a very dangerous situation with the odds of his success slim at best. But despite the odds, God’s hand will prevail.

4 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. 5 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. 6 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. (39:4-6a)

After elevating Joseph to be his “personal attendant,” there was such a comprehensive blessing to all that Joseph came into contact with, that Potiphar abandoned all his concerns into Joseph’s care (except for the food he ate, which is probably a reference to his private affairs, including his wife). Joseph became the most trusted individual in Egypt, as he cared for Potiphar’s entire estate. It’s a wonderful

thing when the stellar character of believers is acknowledged and promoted by unbelievers.

But just as the narrator fills us with an effusive joy for Joseph's rise to power and influence, he adds a rather unsettling note that breaks the "the perfect harmony of Joseph's divinely favored stewardship."²

II. Joseph Betrayed in Potiphar's House (39:6b-19)

A. Blatant seduction (39:6b-7)

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." (39:6b-7)

The description of Joseph is identical to that of his mother, Rachel (29:17). Each time the 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 and it is the male whose beauty will become the object of lust and danger. In the previous scene it was Judah's lustful eyes that fell upon what he deemed to be a prostitute (*zonah*). In this scene it is Potiphar's wife who lifts up her eyes with desire and her lusts are so strong she can only manage "a mere two words in Hebrew (*"lie with/me"*) an expression never used of marriage."³ In response "Joseph will issue a breathless response that runs to thirty-five words in the Hebrew."⁴ The contrast between the two characters could not be more apparent.

B. Resisting temptation (39:8-9)

8 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. 9 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?" (39:8-9)

Joseph doesn't even entertain the temptation, but immediately places his stake in the ground where it belongs. His refusal is as bold as her invitation. As Bruce Waltke affirms, "He concedes nothing to imperial power."⁵ He attempts to reason with her in language that makes the crime not only morally indefensible, but a heinous betrayal of his master. At the conclusion, he boldly raises the stakes and places 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 perennial feature of all slave societies.”⁶

Hearing his words, we can sense how thankful to God he has become for his deliverance and exaltation, which has given him a new lens to reinterpret the fulfillment of his dreams. He sees Potiphar’s magnanimous generosity as God’s sovereign hand providing for him just as he did for Adam and Eve, giving them “every tree in the garden of Eden” to eat except one (Gen 2:16-17). It was unthinkable that he would ever use his service to Potiphar for his own advantage. Joseph illustrates that the cure for lust is a love that transcends sensual desire.

C. Fleeing seduction (39:10-12)

10 And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. 11 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, 12 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. (39:10-12)

Sadly, Joseph’s words make no impact on her and, just like the devil, she tries to wear him down with repeated solicitation (Judg 14:17; 16:16-17; Luke 4:1-13), only now softening her tone to more “innocent” behavior (“*lie beside her*”). Joseph counters by creating a stronger boundary and wisely chooses to never be alone in her presence.

Undeterred, Potiphar’s wife removes all the slaves in the home, secretly hoping that, with no witnesses present, Joseph will let down his guard and give in. Once the stage is set, Joseph enters what is now an empty house to do his work and she grabs him. The Hebrew verb “*caught*” (*taphash*) is a violent term often used in contexts of war when wielding a weapon (Ezek 30:21) and further indicates their role reversal. But Joseph will not be taken in. Since this woman will not take “**no**” for an answer, he does the only wise thing he can do. **He runs**. Paul memorializes Joseph’s actions as exemplary:

Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Cor 6:18-20)

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. (1 Cor 10:13-14)

Joseph demonstrates that the sins of one generation do not have to be visited on the next. What a wonderful example Joseph is in the midst of a depraved family and promiscuous society. His example sets the bar for all who are in Christ and it becomes a non-negotiable pre-requisite for leaders in the church.

Sadly, our euphoria doesn't last long. Potiphar's wife, humiliated by Joseph's refusals, retaliates by fabricating witnesses and accusing Joseph of assault.

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

13 And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, 14 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. 15 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." (39:13-15)

Now that Joseph has fled the scene, Potiphar's wife will make good use of the cloak he left behind. She quickly gathers all the servants and, attempting to align them with her cause, she speaks in derogatory tones, not just about Joseph, but also her husband, whose name she will not even pronounce. It is their master whom she blames as bringing this Hebrew in to *mock* them ("*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 (the scream that was not heard) and finally, the damning evidence. It's an open and shut case. Then, before Potiphar gets home, she rearranges the evidence to make her case appear all the more convincing. For a second time Joseph will be betrayed by his cloak.

16 Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, 17 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. 18 But as

soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.” (39:16-18)

After the workers leave, she takes the garment that she had ripped off Joseph’s body and carefully lays it beside her on the bed. When Potiphar arrives at home, she lashes at him with a verbal tirade, blaming him for bringing this Hebrew into their home to “mock her.” She claims that she did the proper thing by screaming and, although no one heard it, it scared Joseph and he ran. Finally, she presents the condemning evidence. It doesn’t take us long to figure out that this is not a healthy marriage, and this is probably not the first time she made advances on one of her slaves. But no slave had ever reached this kind of prominence, and so her attack is a direct accusation against her husband, for whom it seems she has little respect.

19 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. 20 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. (39:19-20)**

At first glance we might think Potiphar was furious with Joseph, but a more careful reading suggests his anger was directed at his wife, a wife he knew all too well. With public opinion on her side and the hard evidence lying on her bed, he has no choice but 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 normal punishment for adulterers) and is placed in the most comfortable prison under the king’s care. This is the best he can do given that his hands are tied. For Joseph it looks as if his integrity has secured him no lasting reward and that once again the favoritism he once enjoyed has been used against him. For a second time Joseph finds himself in a pit. But just as quickly as our hopes are dashed, the narrator turns the light on God’s providence as clear as day. For God, not man (or woman) will have the last word.

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

21 But the **LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. 22 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. 23 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. (39:21-23)

The final scene reiterates the theological truth it opened with, that "*the Lord was with Joseph,*" with the added emphasis of the Lord's "steadfast love" (*chesed* = covenantal love and faithfulness). Though Joseph is betrayed a second time, God remains faithful to his oath to be with him, causing him to flourish in a very dark place. It didn't take long for the chief jailor to recognize what a find he had in Joseph and he imitates Potiphar's actions at the beginning of the chapter. Though the breadth of his influence is drastically reduced, Joseph once again rises to the top of the heap and brings a richness and vitality to whomever and whatever he touches. The chief jailor even felt no need to concern himself with anything he had placed under his care. God indeed has the last word, causing Joseph to flourish despite his circumstances.

IV. The Lord Is With You!

A. It implies a reciprocal relationship

In stark contrast to Judah in chapter 38, Joseph demonstrates his commitment to the Lord by overcoming his sexual desire amid fierce and relentless temptation. His passion for purity was fueled by his dreams and the elation he felt as God was beginning to fulfill them. In response to Joseph's unwavering commitment the Lord demonstrated his covenantal love to be "**with Joseph,**" granting him success in every circumstance. The two go hand in hand in a reciprocal relationship, you can't have one without the other. Psalm 1 displays the dynamics of the divine-human relationship. (I've translated the first verse literally to highlight the threefold repetition of "**not.**"

Blessed is the man

who does not walk not in the counsel of the wicked,

and in the way of sinners he does not stand,

and in in the seat of scoffers he does not sit;

but his delight is in the law of the Lord,

and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water

that yields its fruit in its season,

and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers. (Ps 1:1-3)

The poet's strong aversion to evil is the result of his affections (*"delight"*) that are transformed by consistently feeding on God's word "day and night." Therefore *he prospers* (the same word used to describe Joseph's "success" in v. 23) in all that he does because the **Lord is with him**. The Lord's presence is a reciprocal relationship in which our participation is vital.

B. The promise conveyed to all in Christ

We saw that the original context of the promise *"I will be with you"* was a promise given to Israel's leaders when facing extreme danger and overwhelming odds when called to serve God's purposes. In a national crisis, no more encouraging words could be given than *"Fear not, for I am with you!"* It was then 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. God was faithful in upholding his promise for Moses, Joshua, Caleb, Samuel, David, Solomon, Hezekiah and all the prophets.

As the capstone of the promise, Isaiah promised that a Son would be born whose name, Immanuel (*"God with us"*), 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 his resurrection Jesus conveyed the promise to his disciples when he said,

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and [make disciples](#) of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, [I am with you always](#), to the end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20)

The task for which God will be "with us" is to make disciples; everything else is secondary. If you are a follower of Christ, you have been equipped with spiritual gifts to contribute to the process of introducing people to Jesus and nurturing their growth to maturity. We can be certain that if we follow him and give ourselves to this task we will be just as successful in our age just as Joseph was in Potiphar's house. Everything in our lives must be subservient to this one grand agenda. From parenting to planting churches, from software to hardware, from the post office to hospital, it is all about training the next generation to be followers of Christ.

Finally then, what can we expect as we devote ourselves to God's purpose?

C. Our expectations refined

In chapter 38 Judah does everything morally wrong, repents and lives in freedom. In chapter 39 Joseph does everything right and is subject to betrayal and ends up in prison. So the fact that the Lord is with Joseph doesn't spare him from danger and peril, but it causes him to thrive in those settings. As Waltke observes,

The pattern of exaltation, humiliation, and exaltation experienced by Joseph will be worked out in the Israelites' life in Egypt... Above all, the movement from exaltation to humiliation to exaltation foreshadows the career of the Son of God. Believers have an exemplar by which to interpret their experiences. They are assured that ultimately God controls history.⁷

We must understand that our task of disciple making is fraught with danger and at times may appear impossible against the prevailing imperial or secular powers. Like Joseph, we may find ourselves betrayed or placed in confinement by a pandemic where we feel limited or forgotten. But no matter what the environment or circumstance, our Lord will be with make us fruitful in the divine task. If the book of Acts is any indicator, the more the church suffered the more effective was its witness and the more plentiful its disciples. And when her most effective leader was confined to prison under false accusation, he flourished because the Lord was with him, transforming his prison cell into a scriptorium for much of the New Testament.

To bring our theme closer to home, I asked a dear friend in our congregation to share how the Lord has been with her during the pandemic amid difficult health issues.

Testimony

For many years, health issues have made attending Sunday services and church events a challenge for me, so it was disheartening when the pandemic hit and my doctor urged me to remain at home for the duration, except for walks. While I envisioned months of bleak seclusion, **God was with me** and transformed this year of isolation in ways that I never could have imagined.

For the past thirteen months, it has been a joy to participate in a weekly online Bible study with Compass, a wonderfully quirky group of creative young techies, whose off-the-wall humor matches my own. Although we are a generation apart, our time of fellowship is the high point of my week and is always filled with laughter.

Recently, I was quite ill and confined to bed for several weeks. Despite that, I continued with our online discussions, except for one session when I was simply too weak to listen in. While recuperating, I began instant messaging a few members individually which allowed us to go deeper, one-on-one, and strengthen our bonds of friendship. Instead of becoming mired in a pit of despair this year, God graciously opened my eyes to the many ways in which I might reach out and connect with others, even with the constraints of pandemic isolation.

Along with Compass and livestreaming Sunday services, I've been "Zooming" with a weekly prayer group, an evening women's Bible study, and a Sunday afternoon fellowship that has been deeply meaningful. This is the most connected I've been with our church Body in years. These online opportunities have really kicked open the door for shut-ins, older folks who are driving less, friends on the mission field, and former PBCCers, who have retired and moved out of the area. Amid this heartbreaking pandemic, I rejoice to see that the **God who is with us** continues to reveal His countless blessings through His palpable presence and provision.

May the Lord be with you all. Amen.

¹ Donald E. Gowen, *Theology in Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 54-75.

² Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 224.

³ Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 519.

⁴ Alter, *Genesis*, 225.

⁵ Waltke, *Genesis*, 520.

⁶ Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 273.

⁷ Waltke, *Genesis*, 523.