

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Lessons on the Life of Joseph: Joseph in Potiphar's House

Joseph is a familiar Bible character. We all remember how his father Jacob gave him a coat of many colours and how his older brothers envied and hated him, eventually selling him as a slave to passing traders. We may remember, too, that he ended up as virtually the ruler of Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh. Even if we are a bit shaky on the details, we've probably all heard of *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat*, a musical based on Joseph's life.

Well, we're not going to indulge in imagining a story loosely based on the Bible; we're going to look at what the Bible itself says about this important character in Israel's history. Joseph was the second youngest son of Jacob, a grandson of Isaac and a great grandson of Abraham. Abraham was the man who started the nation of Israel when God called him out of a city called Ur of the Chaldees in what is now Iraq. God promised Abraham that He would make him a great nation and that in Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed. Joseph was a vital part of how God made that come about, one reason why his story is so important, not just to Jews but to all of us; without Joseph, history might have been very different. There is another reason why Joseph is important and that is that he is what the Bible calls a type of the Lord Jesus and certain aspects of Joseph's life are foreshadows of the character and life of the Lord Jesus. But more of that on another occasion.

The point we have reached in Joseph's history for the purposes of this talk is where the Midianite traders who had bought him from his brothers go to Egypt and sell him in turn to an Egyptian called Potiphar. He was an important man because he was the captain of Pharaoh's guard and owned what must have been a substantial property.

It is here that we begin to see the qualities that marked out Joseph.

- First, the LORD was with him.
- Second, the LORD made all that Joseph did to prosper.
- Third, we read that Potiphar saw these things.
- Fourth, Joseph could be trusted with considerable responsibilities; Potiphar virtually gave over to him the management of his house and everything in it, and the estate as well.

The Bible underlines the real reason for Joseph's success - the LORD was with him but, of course, Joseph was an excellent manager and administrator: in Potiphar's house, later in the prison and, later still, as governor of Egypt.

The result was that, in Joseph's hands, everything in Potiphar's establishment went really well, not just because of Joseph's capabilities but because "the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had in the house and in the field," as we read in Genesis 39 which is where in the Bible we find this part of Joseph's story. The result of this was that Potiphar felt he could leave all his domestic responsibilities to Joseph and he did not know any more than the food which he ate. We don't know whether Potiphar was lazy or whether Joseph's superb management meant Potiphar could devote more time to his military responsibilities. The way it is described in the Bible makes it sound like laziness. Whatever it was, it didn't mean he spent more time at home, which perhaps he should have done.

Normally, it is very unwise to leave employees to their own devices without supervision. It is a sure way of making an enterprise fail. If people are not watched in one way or another, standards and performance start to slide. We see it in public life, and in business life many a company has gone downhill because the owner took it easy.

But it was different with Joseph; he really could be left without supervision. There is a lesson here for us. Are we so conscientious that a superior does not need to check how well we are working? Of course, it doesn't matter how conscientious we are, we may not be capable enough at our work to manage without, at the very least, the boss giving us a steer. As Christians, whatever our capabilities, we should be known for doing our best and for being utterly trustworthy. And even if there is no one we are responsible to, if we are self-employed, for example, we still need to remember that we have a Master in heaven to whom we shall one day have to give an account of the things done in the body.

But we need to be as trustworthy in spiritual things as well. We must serve the God whom we can't see as conscientiously as we serve the boss, client or customer whom we can see. After all, God sees our actions and understands our motives far better than any employer. Joseph is an excellent example of what the Lord Jesus says in Luke 16:10, "He who is faithful in little is also faithful in much."

A lesser man than Joseph may well have been tempted to take advantage of Potiphar's trust and to feather his own nest. Unfaithful stewards are mentioned in some of the Lord's parables and, in fact, it seems to be a constant factor in human society. Whilst many people are conscientious and honest, there are always some people who cannot be trusted, from pilfering, through inflated travel claims and overtime that hasn't been done, all the way to cheating on a grand scale. It goes on all the way up society even to corrupt rulers in some countries. But not Joseph. As we shall see, not only was he very loyal to Potiphar but he was very much aware of his responsibilities to the LORD.

So life at Potiphar's continued smoothly except for a major fly in the ointment - Potiphar's wife. She kept saying to him, "Lie with me." To some extent, the Bible is written like a film - it mostly tells us in the narrative parts only what we would have seen and heard if we had been present, and hardly anything in comparison about what the characters thought or what their motives were.

The Bible just says literally (according to the note in the margin of my Bible), "his master's wife lifted up her eyes toward Joseph." Joseph not only had the qualities we've noted but he was attractive with it; "handsome in form and appearance" the Bible says. He may also have been attractive because of his spiritual qualities. Being a person for whom God is of overriding importance should not make us unattractive. So it is not surprising that Potiphar's wife noticed him but, of course, her reaction was completely unwise, disloyal, mischievous and just downright sinful. Had she been caught, she would have been in real, deep trouble. She may have realised that - if someone else had been doing what she was. What can be obviously wrong in our eyes when someone else is doing it can be quite acceptable when it's us. The Bible makes it clear that sin is not only wrong but it is foolish. Our sinful nature can make us appallingly blind to the obvious. Potiphar's wife saw, was attracted, wanted and then all common sense, or what was proper for a married woman, went out of the window.

This basic reaction to what we see is so common we scarcely notice it. We see, we want and then we assume we have a right to it. History and, indeed, ordinary life, is full of this. It causes wars and colonialism - the desire for another nation's territory and resources - the desire to be top (in fact, what else is politics but trying to get someone else's position and then keeping hold of it?) - the lust for money and possessions - and, of course, the lust for a person to whom we have no right. For many people, this is what life is all about and, if we are not actively pursuing such a path ourselves, we are reading about it in those newspapers and magazines which are full of the doings of celebrities, we are entertained by it on the television, and it's what people gossip about.

We can't say that it is only other people and not us. We all have a sinful nature and we can all react wrongly to what we see. No doubt we have at one time or another. What comes into our minds through our eyes usually has a more powerful effect on us than what enters by any other means. It may well be that we were one of those people for whom anyone of the opposite sex, even other people's husbands or wives, was fair game before we became a Christian. And, even if we would never have dared take any actual action, the seeds of it are within many hearts. The moral climate of the age we live in fosters and encourages the wrong attitude towards the other sex. The papers are full of it, and also of the tragedies which such behaviour brings, and all without any sense of shame. People do not even have the decency to try and cover up their misdeeds in this area of life. They no longer see that what they do is so dreadfully wrong, shameful and harmful.

Even if we avoid this flood of salacious material by being careful what we watch, what we read and what we listen to, there is no escaping the adverts in public places, the emphasis in the news on immoral behaviour and its results and just the generally unhealthy atmosphere of our society. As Christians, we have to seek the Lord's protection of our hearts. We also have our part to play by avoiding things which will have a bad effect on us, looking ahead, if possible, for moral hazards just as a car driver should be looking ahead down the road so as to avoid traffic hazards.

We read in Romans 8:13, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." In Ephesians 4:17 to 24 we read, "This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness." And, if you will permit another quotation from the Bible, we read in Galatians 5:16 to 18, "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not

under the law." The writer of this Epistle, the Apostle Paul, then lists the works of the flesh - the horrid things we have been speaking of and more besides and says that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Paul follows this with the contrast of the fruit of the Spirit - "love, joy peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

Now you'll have heard for yourselves how much better the Bible puts these things than I can. And this leads on to the next point - it is the Bible, God's Word itself, which informs us and strengthens us spiritually. It fosters that new life, the eternal life, which every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ has from the moment of their conversion. We need the renewed mind and so, every day, and as much as possible, we should be putting God's Word into our minds. This helps to create the right, the godly way, of thinking. It helps defend us against the attacks of Satan on us.

Of course, the Bible does not teach us that sex is bad; far from it. The Song of Solomon, for example, shows quite the opposite. And in 1 Corinthians 7, it is obvious that Paul expects his married readers to have normal physical relations. In fact, he says in 1 Corinthians 7:5, "Do not deprive one another." Elsewhere, in 1 Timothy 4:1-3, Paul writes "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." Here the apostle, inspired by God's Spirit, lists bad things which will characterise the last days. One of them is forbidding the natural relationship between man and woman which God has created, as He has also created the physical expression of that relationship.

But it has to be within marriage as God ordained it - one man, one woman for life. Whenever we read in the Bible of where that principle was disobeyed, as it was in the lives of Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon, then there was always trouble in the family, no matter how long that trouble was delayed. Those who live differently from God's way can often make a lot of trouble for themselves and always a lot of trouble for those people they are involved with; much real misery and heartbreak with broken marriages and relationships, as well the other problems which we are so aware of.

Joseph was quite the opposite. He could have been very resentful. His older brothers had intended killing him but instead had thrown him into a pit and then sold him to Ishmaelite traders. He had been sold on to Potiphar as a slave. Because of his natural ability and the fact that God was with him, he had risen rapidly up through the other slaves to being Potiphar's right hand man. This had given him a lot of privileges and a degree of power within Potiphar's establishment. But he was still a slave, a bit of property, a piece of household furniture, which could be disposed of whenever his owner decided he had no more use for him. We don't know whether he could exercise any meaningful kind of freedom at all. Everything had gone wrong for the one who had been his father's favourite son. Wouldn't you be resentful if you were in that sort of situation? We can feel pretty hard done by in conditions far better than Joseph's. Quite often though, we are in situations which are very unpleasant and which we are desperate to escape from but, as with Joseph, there may be no way out. Our lives may be tragic or there may be just long term disappointment and difficulty - poverty, relationships gone wrong, loneliness, ill-health, things at work never working out quite right; you've probably got your own list. Whatever it is, we're unhappy. We may even blame God for our predicament. But there is no indication that Joseph was ever resentful. He never seems to have held things against other people.

Next and more importantly, he resisted a temptation that he encountered daily. He was continually pestered. He could well have complied with Potiphar's wife's suggestion so as to get one over Potiphar - stolen fruits are sweetest. He could have been attracted to her. He could have calculated that, if he didn't respond, she could have told lies to get him into trouble, which is, of course exactly what did happen. He could have thought that he was very unlikely to be caught, although it seems to me that it was bound to get out among the other slaves and then sooner or later to Potiphar himself. Or Joseph could have given in just to relieve the pressure.

He did not think in any of these ways at all. Instead, he was very loyal to his master; he was aware of his responsibilities to his master and where the boundaries lay; he was aware that what was suggested was a great wickedness; he was aware of his responsibilities to God. We don't know whether he was exactly aware that God was with him but God was real enough to have a definite effect on his behaviour. How could he sin against Him? And that is what kept him from succumbing to the temptation.

What keeps us from temptation? Do we consider the harm that is likely to occur to others and ourselves? Do we realise how serious sin is? Do we ask what God would prefer us to do? Do we remember that God's eye is upon us at all times? True, it is an eye of love but it is still a holy eye. Do we remember that God's Word tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it"? Do we flee youthful lusts, as Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:22, Paul's second epistle to him?

And what happened next? Potiphar's wife tried it on once again when no one was around. This time, she caught hold of his garment and he fled - the best thing to have done. But then she cried out and once she'd got an audience, she said, "See, he has brought in a Hebrew to mock us. He came in to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. And it happened, when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me, and fled and went outside." She managed, not only to accuse Joseph of what he had done his best to avoid, but she managed to put the blame for his presence on Potiphar.

When Potiphar came home, she repeated the false accusation to him. What else could he do but get rid of Joseph? So it was off to prison for Joseph, a place even lower than he had been in before. More unfairness. He had done the right thing and where had it got him? We may have felt the same on occasions. In fact the unfairness of life, the way the wicked seem to get away with it and the righteous suffer is an important theme in the Bible. Many psalms, for example, implore God to do something about the wicked. The Bible does not promise God's people a trouble-free existence by any means. Those who say that Christians should be healthy and wealthy all the time perhaps should read the Bible a little more closely.

And this brings us to our final point. Joseph is a type of the Lord Jesus Himself. Was Joseph unfairly treated, even by his own family - our Lord was even more so. Did Joseph avoid temptation and sin? Our Lord was perfectly sinless and triumphed over Satan's temptations in the wilderness. Did Joseph's sufferings actually result in blessing not only for his family but also for the whole of Egypt? Our Lord's crucifixion has resulted in eternal salvation for millions across the world and down the centuries to the glory of God.

In summary, we have learnt from the story of Joseph in Potiphar's house that we should copy his absolute honesty, his horror at the thought of sinning, his awareness of God, and his lack of resentment. In addition, there was his being a type of the Lord Jesus. We have also seen the bad example in Potiphar's wife of wanting what we have no right to, the dangers of sex outside marriage, and the wickedness of lying. The name of Potiphar's wife has been completely forgotten but Joseph's name has come down the centuries to us.

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