

## Beginnings in Genesis – Genesis 39

### Success

Genesis 39 <sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup> His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" <sup>10</sup> And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. <sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house." <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> 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.**

## Introduction

The story of Joseph must rate as one of the most compelling and attractive narratives in all of Scripture, if not in all literature.

Callously betrayed, deserted, and sold like a piece of merchandise by his own brothers, he arrived in Egypt at the age of seventeen without friends and with no visible means of support.

**Genesis 39:1** <sup>1</sup> 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.

Lesser men would have sunk into despair and defeat in such circumstances but not Joseph!

**Genesis 39:2-3** <sup>2</sup> The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup> His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands.

The expression which catches the eye is 'became a successful man'.

Few things are of greater interest to modern people than success which can be recognized and verified.

'Success' however can mean 'a favourable outcome or result' – an achievement – or more often it can mean 'the gaining of wealth, fame, and rank.' The Hebrew word used to describe Joseph's experience conveys the former idea. The emphasis is not on his rank, fame, or wealth [although he was not short in any of these departments] but rather on the favourable outcome and achievement of all that he was intended to do.

So in looking at the story of Joseph in this chapter, let's consider some issues attached to 'success'.

## 1. NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE SUCCESS`

At a very early age, Joseph had been given a sense of what he was to achieve, and when he shared it with his family, he got into trouble.

But he did not forget his dreams about the sheaves and the heavenly bodies which had indicated that he would arrive at a position of prominence which even his own wretched brothers would one day acknowledge.

The underlying sense of objective, coupled with a consciousness of his close relationship to the Lord, must have been significant factors in the development of his ability to press on regardless of the circumstances. The emphasis on 'the Lord' cannot be overlooked in this account of Joseph's success. 'The Lord was with Joseph', 'his master saw that the Lord was with him,' 'the Lord made all he did to prosper [be successful] in his hand,' 'the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had in the house and in the field' [vv. 2-5]

Success requires not only an objective but also suitable criteria of evaluation.

One man's success is another man's failure. Jesus hanging on a cross is to most men a loser, but at the moment of His death He cried triumphantly, 'Finished!' In His own eyes and in the eyes of His Father He was a winner. He had achieved!

Joseph's achievements were measurable in material terms.

Potiphar was not slow to note that as soon as he put the young man in charge everything in his house and his business took off.

He was so impressed with Joseph's abilities that he handed over to him the complete running of his household.

But it is important to note that the Egyptian interpreted this material achievement in spiritual terms. He was ready to acknowledge that the secret of Joseph's achievement was his relationship to the Lord.

It would be a mistake to assume that God's blessing can always be measured in material terms. The Lord Jesus was wonderfully successful but had little to show for it materially; the apostle Paul rates highly in everybody's voting for 'Most Valuable Apostle' but he died in a prison with little material comfort besides a cloak and some good reading material.

The key must have been in Joseph's exemplary lifestyle which he related to his spiritual convictions, and the clear articulation of his sense of God-given destiny.

In much the same way that John the Baptist was determined not to take credit for his own success, but to point always and only to His Lord, so Joseph managed to convey, even to an Egyptian, that his hope and his trust were in the Lord and it was He who gave him success.

Joseph had come a long way from the empty cistern and the future looked bright for the young man who 'was handsome in form and appearance' [v. 6]. Everything was coming up roses for Joseph, but ...

## 2. NOTHING SEDUCES LIKE SUCCESS

The handsome young man was highly visible and therefore was highly vulnerable. The wife of Potiphar could not fail to be aware of him. She "cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, 'Lie with me'". [v. 7]

Physical attractiveness can provoke lust and desire. It is not necessary for the attractive person to do anything to promote or provoke the desire. In fact that person is often totally unaware of what is going on.

This was no doubt the case with Joseph. Other people are drawn to those who have achieved positions of prominence and power. To them physical beauty is not as compelling as the feel and sense of authority and the heady visions it conjures up in the minds of the susceptible and the careless. Joseph was also eminently successful and some people cannot resist getting as close to the successful as possible. Joseph was wide open on all these points. He was a sitting duck.

Men who, like Joseph, have conquered their worlds and tasted conquest find that they have created an appetite for more excitement.

The thrill of the chase and the exhilaration of one more victory become the stuff of life for them. This is easily translated into sexual liaisons. If Joseph had succumbed to this seduction he would have simply joined the ranks of thousands of other men in similar circumstances. Moreover, the remarkable freedom which his master had given him could have bred in a lesser man an insatiable appetite for indulgence.

Joseph could also have rationalized that if he did not accede to the proposal, he might well jeopardize his standing in the household. He may not have been old enough to have learned that 'Hell hath no fury like a woman spurned' but he might have suspected it!

His response to the seductive invitation was simple and to the point. "He refused and said to his master's wife, 'How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?'" [ vv. 8-9]

It should be noted that this was no isolated event because ‘she spoke to Joseph day by day’ [v. 10].

The factors which enabled Joseph to take such a stand need to be noted. He was clearly convinced that sexual activity with another man’s wife was not only ‘great wickedness’ but also a ‘sin against God.’ At the base of his action was his commitment to solid principle. The person who lack similar principles is much more likely to succumb to temptation.

Second, he clearly stated his position. There was no doubt in Potiphar’s wife’s mind as to where he stood on the issue, but evidently she thought she could erode his defenses. She failed and there is no doubt that his clear stand made her task much more difficult.

Third, he flatly rejected the proposition. His reply allowed no room for debate or discussion. That would have been too dangerous. When passions are high, discussions are better postponed. He wisely headed for the exit.

Fourth, he did all that he could to avoid being in a compromising position. He not only refused to ‘lie with her’ but also ‘to be with her’ [v. 10]

His duties made it impossible for him to totally isolate himself from her and on one occasion he was trapped by her, with no one else around. She tire dot hold him by his clothes and when he tried to get away ‘he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside.’ [v. 12]

When he could not avoid being with her he abandoned all thought of dignity and got out of there as quickly as he could.

That is the fifth principle – in situations like that discretion is the better part of valour. Paul told Timothy to ‘Flee also youthful

lusts' [2 Tim 2:22] and his advice is well-taken, and not just for youths!

But Joseph's troubles were far from over. The scorned woman screamed for 'help,' lied to the servants about what had happened, and when her husband returned she said, 'The Hebrew servant whom you brought to us came in to me to mock me; so it happened, as I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me and fled outside.' [39:17].

It is possible to learn something of the woman's attitude, not only from her illegitimate desire and her lying, but also her insulting use of 'Hebrew' and her disparaging way of talking about her husband to her servants. It is unfortunate that a young man of Joseph's calibre should have been at the mercy of such an unscrupulous and unprincipled person. But it has always been so and it will continue to be so, because God has not excused His people from living in a sinful world. But neither has He deserted them in their struggles, as Joseph soon discovered.

### 3. NOTHING SUSTAINS LIKE SUCCESS

Joseph was promptly imprisoned. 'But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison' [v. 21]

His relatively brief but full experience of the Lord had taught him that while he could not expect to be exempted from life's harshness and injustice he could expect the Lord to be merciful and gracious to him in the invidious situation.

He could look back on his meteoric rise from minor shepherd to major-domo and recognize the hand of the Lord.

True he had been put back in a bad scene through no fault of his own, and true he could have questioned whether or not there

was a God of justice, but he chose rather to put his roots down deeper in the things to which he was committed.

As a result it was not long before he made his mark in the prison, although it would be many years before he would understand the remarkable ways in which the Lord had been leading him.

Sustained by what he knew had been done, he was strengthened to go on to discover what new wonders God would work in him and through him.

This is the secret of true success.