

The Joseph Principle

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 39:6b-20

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A Bible printed in 1562 contained the typo, “Blessed are the place-makers for they shall be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). Place-maker sounds like something out of Martha Stewart. The word is peacemaker. “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

Speaking of printing errors, a printer back in 1914 left the negative out of the 6th command so it read, “Thou shall kill.” Maybe that’s the Bible people are reading today.

The worst typo of all occurred in 1631. Two English printers, Robert Barker and Martin Lucas, left the negative out of the 7th commandment, so it appeared as “Thou shalt commit adultery.” A thousand copies were printed before the error was found. King Charles summoned the frightened printers to his chambers, revoked their printing license and fined them big time. He ordered their Bibles destroyed, although eleven survive to this day. One sold recently to a collector for \$90,000.

Thou shalt commit adultery isn’t only a typo. All too often it’s a sad reality in contemporary American culture. Hackers recently exposed the 37 million users of the Ashley Madison website. It’s a website that caters to married people with the tagline, “Life is short; have an affair.” We live in a sex-saturated, sexually-exploitative age.

We’re only two Sundays into Joseph’s story and already it’s a mess. Father Jacob plays favorites with his 12 sons. Joseph has allowed his favored-son status to go to his head. And his 11 jealous brothers are consumed with hatred for their brother.

Today’s story is mostly about sex. I’m not surprised. Sooner or later, I knew this messy story was going to involve sex somehow.

Why, you ask, does the Bible spill so much ink on sex and violence? It’s for the same reason that our 21st American culture is so preoccupied with sex and violence. Sex and violence are endemic to a fallen world.

Joseph’s jealous brothers sell him to Potiphar, the captain of the guard in Egypt. It would equate to chief of police in our day. Joseph prospers as a servant in Potiphar’s household—so much so that he is put in charge of Potiphar’s domestic affairs.



She caught him by the cloak, saying, “Sleep with me.” Gen. 37.12

Our narrator tells us that Joseph is well-built and handsome. Potiphar’s wife notices also. Potiphar’s wife is never identified by name in our story. So, let’s just call her Mrs. Potiphar. She propositions Joseph with the words, “Come lie with me.” Joseph

flatly refuses on two accounts. He will not violate his trust established with Mr. Potiphar. He also considers it a sin against God (39:9).

Mrs. Potiphar is not accustomed to taking no for an answer. She pressures Joseph at every turn. “Come lie next to me,” she says. Joseph recognizes the trap that is being set for him. No way, ma’am!

One day, when no one is around, Mrs. Potiphar grabs Joseph’s tunic. “Sleep with me,” she orders. Joseph flees the house, leaving his coat behind.

What is the line from a 1697 play? “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” Mrs. Potiphar concocts the story that Joseph has tried to rape her. She offers his robe as tangible proof.

She tells Mr. Potiphar, “That Hebrew slave whom you brought into the house tried to seduce me, but I screamed so he fled” (Genesis 39:17).

“Hebrew slave” is a put down, definitely anti-Semitic. Mrs. Potiphar also throws in a little dig aimed at her husband. I suspect all is not well between Mr. and Mrs. Potiphar. Isn’t this why couples get into trouble?

A black rectangular box containing white text that reads: "That Hebrew slave (slight on Joseph) you brought me (dig on Potiphar) came to seduce me. Gen. 37.16"

Potiphar throws Joseph into prison for violating his trust. If ever you have been falsely accused, you can identify with this story. But the Lord is with Joseph even in prison. Joseph prospers—so much so that the warden of the jail puts him in charge of prison operations.

This story offers real insight into temptation’s appeal. Temptation begins as desire. Temptation is fueled by desire in our story. The writer of James recognizes how much temptation is ignited by desire. “Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desires. After desire has been conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death” (1:14-15). Note the progression here. Desire gives birth to sin and sin gives way to death. Sin always leads to death—death of the self, death of relationship, death to everything important to us.

Temptation is so subtle. We’re not tempted to jump from A to Z in a single leap, especially if step Z represents a total breach of trust. But if the devil can get us to move off A to B and B to C, then this downward slide gains momentum. Before long, we find ourselves at step Y only to discover that step Z isn’t very far behind.

C.S. Lewis wrote about this subtle slide into temptation: “The safest road to hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”

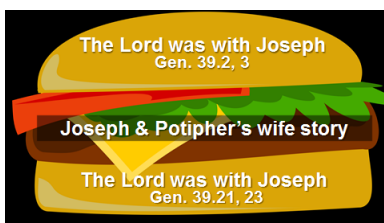
I remember people telling me as a child, “If you play with fire, you’re going to get burned.” I came to realize later this proverb originates in Scripture. Can you build a fire in your lap and not burn your pants? Can you walk barefoot on hot coals and not get blisters? It’s the same when you have sex with your neighbor’s wife” (Proverbs 6:27-29).

Temptation likes to sneak up on us. Temptation begins with an idle thought or a passing glance. How do most of us succumb to temptation? A little at a time! Would any of us be tempted if we realized how monstrous evil really is?

One of the best ways to resist temptation is to limit access to it. Avoid situations where you know you will struggle with self-control.

I’ve titled this sermon “the Joseph Principle.” When Joseph is tempted, notice what he does. He runs! When temptation comes knocking, sometimes the best strategy is to run. Run as fast as your little legs can carry you.

Paul advises us in Corinthians to flee temptation. He advises people in this sexually permissive city of Corinth to “Flee sexual immorality” (1 Corinthians 6:18). Play with fire and you are going to get burned.



What is Joseph’s secret to resisting temptation? It’s found in the oft-repeated phrase, “The Lord was with Joseph.” It’s found twice at the outset of the chapter when Joseph is a servant in Potiphar’s house and twice at the end when Joseph languishes in prison. “The Lord was with Joseph” wraps like sandwich bread around our story. The Lord was with Joseph both in Potiphar’s household and Potiphar’s prison.

Resisting temptation isn’t a matter of sheer will power. The Lord fights our battles with us.

Every last one of us is battling temptation in some arena of life. For some of you, this story hits close to home. Sexual temptation is a real struggle in your life.

We support a young woman who works with a campus ministry in Virginia. In a forum, someone asked her about the challenges of student

ministry. Her first response caught me by surprise. She talked about the problem of pornography on her campus. Pornography is a problem nobody wants to talk about in church and in culture.

Maybe you are tempted in another direction. You may be tempted to gossip or hold a grudge or nurse anger. All of us are tempted; each in our own way. There is a spiritual resource available to us. The Lord who was with Joseph is available to us also.

Emmanuel is a title given to Jesus in Matthew's gospel (1:23). Matthew references Isaiah's prophecy, "The virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son and they will name him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). The Hebrew word Immanuel is literally translated I (with) manu (us) el (God) or alternatively the "With-us God." Jesus is God with us.

We have a spiritual resource available to us. The Lord who was with Joseph is with us also.

Resisting temptation isn't easy. Fighting temptation is hard, really hard. Again from C.S. Lewis, "Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of an army by fighting it, not by giving in. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would look like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of an evil impulse until we try to fight it."



Let me bring this sermon all the way down to where we live. I have three suggestions for your consideration.

First, if you are new to faith, start at the beginning and become one of Christ's followers. Invite Jesus Christ to become your Savior. Resolve from this day forward to follow him as Lord of your life.

Second, do something to strengthen your connection to Jesus this week. Sign up on our website at the address on the screen to receive our daily devotionals. Learn about how to grow and serve through Worship+2. Come to today's new member class or next Saturday's coffee house or Sunday's meeting about small groups. Join a virtual study we are launching or attend the Getty concert. What can you do to strengthen your connection to Jesus Christ right here and right now?

Third, identify a friend to help you resist temptation and live for things that matter. We talk often about the value of spiritual friends. Men are particularly reticent about making spiritual friends. We don't want to appear weak and lacking self-control. Get over it, guys! The devil would like nothing better than to be alone with us. He can tempt us at our weakest point without interference. Then, after we capitulate, he neutralizes us with shame. We establish friends to both encourage us and hold us accountable. We can be better Christians together than we can ever be alone.



1. **Start at the beginning**
2. **Strengthen your connection with Jesus**
3. **Identify spiritual friend(s)**