

Genesis 39

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[0 : 00] We've met a few women on our journey through Genesis, Eve and Sarah and Hagar, Lot's wife and Rebecca and Leah and Rachel and Dinah, and then last Sunday evening we were thinking about Tamar, and many of these women were wronged in different ways and to different degrees.

Eve, if you remember that far back, though bearing great personal responsibility for her actions, was unprotected by her husband.

Hagar was ill-treated by Sarah and by Abraham. Leah and Rachel were pawns used by their father Laban to secure his own selfish interests.

Dinah, perhaps the most horrifying account that we've considered, was cruelly raped by Shechem and then bartered by her brothers. And then last week we saw Tamar, who suffered all manner of tragedy and injustice and yet heroically survived.

And perhaps if there was one of these characters that I was most taken by, I suppose most impressed by how they responded to adversity and to violence and to tragedy, then perhaps it would be the woman we thought about last Sunday evening, Tamar, a heroic survivor, a victim yes, but a survivor also.

[1 : 42] And today we meet the final woman who figures with some prominence in the Genesis account, Potiphar's wife. And with Potiphar's wife, the narrative or the dynamics change.

The woman for once is not the victim or the wrong one, but the victimizer and the oppressor. And I suppose that just serves to remind us that sin is no respecter of gender.

We are all sinners, men and women alike. It's just that power grants greater opportunity to commit certain sins.

And power often lies in the hands of men. And so, for that reason, principally, it is often men who are guilty of that particular sin of abusing positions of power.

But when we find a woman in a position of power, as we do in this account, well, we find that she too falls into the trap of abusing that power.

[2 : 44] And I think this account, the account of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, can be viewed through that lens, I suppose, of power. The power to abuse and the power to resist.

It's often an account that we look at exclusively in the matter of Joseph resisting temptation. And of course, that is an entirely legitimate way to consider the account.

Joseph does resist temptation. But it's not just about temptation. It's about power. It's about power being abused by the one who holds power, in this case, Potiphar's wife.

And it's about that abuse of power being resisted by Joseph, employing power of his own, or power that is granted to him.

And that's the way we want to consider the account this evening. Now, as we've made our way through Genesis and met these different women, we've tried to give particular attention and prominence to them.

[3 : 48] After all, the series is called Women in Genesis. And maybe on this occasion, we can draw a little more that is useful and helpful to us from considering how Joseph resists that abusive power.

And so perhaps we'll spend a little bit more time thinking about Joseph than we will think about Potiphar's wife. We'll see how it pans out. Well, let's think about Potiphar's wife first of all.

And think of her from this perspective of a woman who has power and who seeks to abuse that power. And as we explore her in that light, we do so with two purposes in mind.

First of all, that we would identify the kind of behavior that those who wield power often fall into. And that's true across time.

So the kind of things we'll see that Potiphar's wife does are the kind of things that men and women in power today also do. And it's good for us to be aware of that, to identify that, to be warned, I

suppose, of that reality.

[4 : 53] But also, perhaps more personally, to acknowledge that we can be guilty of these things. You know, all of us have different circumstances. Some of you might say, well, I don't have any power at all.

But all of us, in one way or another, in certain relationships or in certain circumstances, exercise power over others. And we, too, can be tempted to abuse of that power in the way that we'll find Potiphar's wife doing.

So let's think about her from that perspective. Well, first of all, let's just notice the position of power that she enjoys. And really, that summarizes what is said about her, the status that she enjoys, as we are told of that in the second half of verse 6 and into verse 7.

We read, now, Joseph was well-built and handsome. And after a while, his master's wife took notice of Joseph. His master's wife. This was clearly a very powerful household, a very wealthy household.

Potiphar enjoyed a position of significant power within the Egyptian administration. And as a result, his wife was also a woman who wielded great power as the wife of this very powerful man.

[6 : 10] And having that power, as we'll see now, she makes use of it to her advantage, or at least in a manner that she considers to be to her advantage.

So let's just think about her abuse of power. And let's notice different aspects of this abuse. First of all, the most prominent thing, perhaps, that we see is the power to demand.

Notice there in verse 7 what is said of her. After a while, his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, Come to bed with me.

Now, this is a command. The language is the language of command. It's not really an invitation. It is a command. She has power. Joseph is powerless, at least in this relationship.

And she is exercising that power to demand what she wants. Come to bed with me. I want sex, and you're going to give me sex.

[7 : 07] And I can demand that because I have power, and you don't. So you'll just do what you're told. She has this power to demand. I don't know if this was true of you, but as children, some of us were told, I want doesn't get.

Well, that's how it should be. But actually, often in life, I want does get. When the person who wants holds the power. In this broken, sin-sick world, the reality is that those who have power do get what they want.

And this is Potiphar's wife. She has power. She wants. And so she imagines that she can get whatever she wants. She has this power to demand.

Women and men, people with power, and it's the same today, demand of the powerless and expect to get what they demand.

Potiphar's wife doesn't, it seems to me as I read the account, and this is where it's difficult to read an account without the kind of preconceptions that we already have, but it doesn't seem to me that Potiphar's wife seduces Joseph or even tries to seduce Joseph.

[8 : 20] She simply demands sex. You know, when you read the accounts about it, you speak, you know, the presentation of Potiphar's wife is of this sultry woman trying to seduce Joseph, and you read of the smooth words that she employs, but there's no smooth words.

There's no smooth words being employed. She just says, come to bed with me. Do what I want you to do. And what she's doing isn't seducing him or attempting to seduce him, seems to me.

She's simply demanding that she gets what she wants, and that's a classic feature of abusing of power.

But then we can see other aspects of this abuse of power, and many of them are kind of intertwined, but we also see the power to assault with impunity. As Joseph refuses time and time again, there comes a point when the indignity of Potiphar's wife, in the face of this refusal of not getting what she wants, leads her to practically assault.

Joseph, we read in verse 12, she caught him by the cloak and said, come to bed with me. So there is a physical assault. Now, we kind of think, well, that sounds a bit odd, and probably the reason we think it sounds odd, because of the gender.

[9 : 34] We think, well, this is a woman approaching a man, and we don't think of it in terms of assault. Now, I'm not suggesting it was a very violent assault, but it was a physical assault on the part of Potiphar's wife towards Joseph.

And she was very confident that there would be no consequences for her of that. She could attack this powerless man, as she saw it, with impunity. And, of course, that is another ugly feature of the abuse of power, the idea that you can do harm to somebody else, you can attack somebody else, you can oppress somebody else, and you can do so with impunity.

And we see that all around the world, in this sin-sick world in which we live, where people with power attack and abuse with impunity, at least in this life, though a day of reckoning is coming for all of that, we can be sure.

There's another aspect of Potiphar's wife's power and her abuse of power, and that is the power that she has to control the narrative. Now, what do I mean by that?

Well, after Joseph refuses for a final time and flees from the household, and it's clear to Potiphar's wife that she's not going to get what she wants, and so now she changes tack and decides that her best option is to seek revenge on the insubordination, really, of this slave.

[11:04] What does she do? Well, she controls the narrative. She makes up the story of what happened, and she has the power to do that. She has a voice that will be heard, and so she can make up the story.

It doesn't need to correspond to the truth. That doesn't matter. She has the power. If she says that this is what happened, then this is what happened, and that is precisely what she does in verses 13 to 18. We read in verse 13, Now, I don't know, and, you know, I'm entering a little bit into the realm of speculation, but I wonder how many of these servants knew full well that that's not what had happened.

But it didn't matter. She had the power to decide what the story was. She could say what had happened. It didn't matter if it was true or not. Her power allowed her to make up the story, to control the narrative, and that is what she does.

This isn't just about lying. It is about lying. She is lying, but it's more than lying. It's about power and its abuse. And Joseph, of course, is silent in the face of every accusation.

Why? Because he has no right to speak. He has no right to defend himself. He has no right to give his side of the story. His side of the story is irrelevant.

[12:36] The only story that counts is the story of the one who holds the reins of power. So, she controls the narrative, but as we just develop that a little bit, notice some of the elements of this, let's call it, poisoned narrative that she constructs.

First of all, there's this feigned victimhood. Notice when she gathers the servants. And we read there in verse 14, She called her household servants, Look, she said to them, This Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us.

She's the victim. She's the one who has been ill-treated. She turns it around completely. She's no longer the oppressor, but the oppressed. She's the victim. And notice how she devulously brings in the other servants on board as fellow victims.

She says, This man has been brought in to make sport of us. It's interesting, we'll see in a moment how she changes the story a little bit when she relates the story to her husband. But here she says, To make sport of us.

As if to say, It's not just me that's the victim. You're victims as well. Look how we're all suffering as a result of this Hebrew. And so there's this feigned victimhood that she uses to poison this narrative, this story that she's constructing.

[13:54] No doubt playing on some of the servants' jealousy and resentment. You can just imagine the scene. Human nature hasn't changed. Thousands of years may have passed, but human nature remains the same. You can just imagine the scene.

This young Hebrew comes in, and he's so successful. And he's given so much responsibility. And so the prestige and the honor that goes with it. And some of them may be the more long-standing Egyptian servants are saying, Well, what about me?

What about us? And so when Potiphar's wife comes and says, Look, we're all victims of this man. Well, jealousy and resentment is the fuel that allows the servants who hear this account, even if some of them doubted its veracity to get on board as fellow victims.

There's also in the language of Potiphar's wife a very ugly strain of racism. What does she say? How does she identify Joseph there in verse 14?

Look, she said to them, This Hebrew has been brought to us. Now, she isn't simply identifying where he comes from. She is using this description of him in a brutal and vicious, racist way.

[15:07] She's saying, and the subtext is clear, We are Egyptians. We belong here. We are the locals. And this foreigner, this outsider, this Hebrew, He's come in and look at the place that now he enjoys.

And so she exploits racism, the racism, no doubt, that was a feature of the servants that she was addressing, most of whom perhaps, we don't know for sure, but many of whom perhaps would have been Egyptians.

Though no doubt there were others, I guess, like Joseph from other places. But she employs this racist language as she constructs this poisoned narrative.

Now, in terms of how we can be careful about this, when we witness those who employ power or who enjoy power, this is one thing we need to be wary of. Be careful when you hear those who wield power pointing the finger at the outsider.

It's not an uncommon strategy to point the finger of blame at the outsider, whether it's this Hebrew or you can put the nationality that you wish, depending on the circumstances.

[16:16] Of course, this narrative that she constructs is also characterized by shameless lying. You know, we have the advantage of being told what happened, and then we can compare it with what Potiphar's wife said that happened.

And, of course, we see that at so many points, all she is doing is shamelessly lying about what happened. And, of course, that, again, is something that the powerful can do.

They can simply lie. When the powerless are silenced, when they know that the truth will not come out, when those who know the truth have no voice, well, then they have the power to simply construct a story that is riddled with lies.

There's also in this poisonous narrative that she constructs a sense in which she's playing the audience, or the audiences. I noticed, or I commented a moment ago that we pick up on this, as we notice the different way that she reports the events, first of all to the slaves and to her husband.

They're largely the same, but there are one or two subtle differences that are clearly deliberate on the part of the woman and the purposes that she's pursuing. One thing, even in the manner in which the servants are described, in verse 14 we read, she called her household servants.

[17:38] Now, here we're simply having described what she did. We're not told that she used that language, but it is interesting that there those who are gathered to hear her report are described as household servants.

But then when she's speaking to her husband, and she's speaking about Joseph, she doesn't say that Hebrew servant. She actually uses a different word, translated in English as slave.

Now, really they were all slaves, but one word is much more respectable, and the other is much more harsh. And so really what she's doing is, to those who she's wanting to get on her side, she describes them as servants.

You know me, you know how I care for you, how I value your loyalty and your service, you're practically part of the family. And look how we're being abused by this Hebrew slave.

You're a servant, he's a slave. And so she uses language deviously. There's also a subtle difference in how she speaks to the servants and says how this Hebrew has come to make sport of us.

[18:40] And then when she speaks to her husband, she says, this Hebrew has come to make sport of me. Of course, she's speaking to her husband, and there she wants the husband to burn with anger that Joseph would have abused of his wife, that Joseph would have sought to attack and rape his wife.

He has come to make sport of me. And so we have Potiphar's wife abusing power. But then we have Joseph, and we have Joseph, and we want to think about Joseph from the perspective of the power to resist.

Now, a few years ago, a previous incumbent of the White House, and those of you, if you're very young, I don't know how we define very young, you may not remember this, but most of you will remember this, a previous incumbent of the White House famously and falsely declared, I did not have sexual relations with that woman.

Many of you will remember the occasion and the precedent that I'm speaking on. Now, I don't think Joseph even had the opportunity to make that statement. But if he had, it would have been true. Joseph could have said in the face of his accusers, I did not have sexual relations with that woman, because he didn't. But he didn't even have the opportunity to make that statement, to make that

defense.

[20 : 10] How then did he enjoy and exercise the power to resist? To resist abuse and to resist temptation. And the two are kind of intertwined.

I think the first thing we need to stress, and it's very important to stress, is that the power that he exercised was power that was given to him by God. A theme that runs out throughout the chapter is this reality that the Lord was with Joseph.

At the very beginning of the chapter, we read in verse 2, the Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered. And that is repeated, I think, on at least four occasions. The Lord was with Joseph. The Lord was the source of Joseph's power to resist. And as Joseph needed of God's presence and of God's power and of God's grace, so we too need of God's presence and power and grace. If we are to resist abuse, if we are to fight and win battles against temptation. So let's be very clear that that's the foundation. This reality that the Lord was just with Joseph is also illustrated, and this is almost in the passing, but it's an intriguing detail of the account of how the Lord's presence with Joseph is manifested in not only Joseph being blessed, but the household that he was within being blessed.

[21 : 38] And it states very explicitly that the reason why Potiphar's household was blessed was because of Joseph. We see that in verse 5. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field.

And it's actually the first part of the verse. From the time he put him in charge of his household and all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. Now why do I draw attention to that?

It's because actually what you're seeing there is the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham. Remember the covenant promise given to Abraham that in you will be blessed the nations of the world.

You will be blessed and you will be of blessing. And here we see it in the real world, in real life, gritty situations where Joseph is one of God's covenant people, not only is blessed by Yahweh, by the Lord, by his covenant God, but is of blessing to the nations, in this case to Egyptians.

And so we see how God is fulfilling his promise to his people and his promises to the world through his people. Well, that's just in the passing. Joseph's power to resist is grounded in God's presence with him.

[22 : 50] But let's also notice how that power was exercised by Joseph. What were the tools in his armory that enabled Joseph to exercise God's power to resist the abuse and the temptation?

There's a couple of just preliminary answers that are relevant but really fall short of explaining Joseph's power to resist. But let's just mention them. First of all, Joseph knew the value of trust and so he was loyal to Potiphar.

That's really the first reason he gives when he is refusing to accept or to submit to the demands of Potiphar's wife.

In verse 8 we read, but he refused. With me in charge, he told her, my father, or rather my master, does not concern himself with anything in the house. Everything he owns he has entrusted to my care.

And just focusing on that word, he has entrusted to my care. Joseph knew that there was a relationship of trust between him and Potiphar. And that trust was valuable. It was precious. It was not something that could be lightly dismissed or just cast aside.

[23 : 52] No, trust he knew to be important. And so he could not do what Potiphar's wife demanded of him because, and there's more as we'll see, but partly because of the value that he places on trust.

But let's move on and really see what I think is the heart of the matter. And the heart of the matter that explains Joseph's ability to resist abuse and temptation, the heart of the matter is in the words of Joseph in the second half of verse 9 where he continues to explain his reasons to Potiphar's wife in this way.

No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you because you're his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?

How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God? And I think here there are two elements. There's knowledge of God and there's loyalty to God. How did Joseph know that to sleep with this woman would have been such a wicked thing?

He knows the moral quality of that act. He knows that it is or would be a wicked thing. And it may seem a silly question or an odd question to ask but how does he know?

[25 : 09] How does he know that that would be a wicked thing? Who decides what a wicked thing is? That's a big question in our mixed up world today. Who decides what's right and wrong?

Who decides what's good and what's wicked? Well Joseph is very clear on this point. God decides. He knows that it's a wicked thing because he knows that God has determined that it was or would be a wicked thing.

He is a child of the covenant and his covenant God decides what is right and wrong. God had established from the very beginning his perfect plan for sex.

One man, one woman, lifelong and exclusive. To breach that God established order would indeed have been a wicked thing. Didn't matter what Potiphar's wife thought.

Didn't matter what his fellow slaves thought. In a sense it didn't even matter what he thought or felt. God had decided that to do this would be a wicked thing and he knew that it would be a wicked thing and so his knowledge of God and of God's purposes and of God's decrees serves as a weapon to defend himself against this abuse and against this temptation.

[26 : 23] Of course this is crucial for us. Make no mistake it is God who decides what is right and what is wrong. Not the government not the majority not your flatmates or boyfriend not what everybody is doing even when that everybody includes fellow Christians.

They're not who decide God decides and Joseph knew the mind of God on this matter. But knowledge alone though necessary was not enough.

Joseph was also loyal to God. He knew that if he were to fall his sin would be against God. You know when you read what Joseph says there you almost if we weren't so familiar with the passage we would almost expect that sentence to finish differently.

How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against Potiphar? That's what you kind of expect. He's already just said you know Potiphar has entrusted me all this and you know and you're his wife how then could I do this wicked thing against Potiphar?

That would make sense. But no he doesn't say that. Of course it would have been a sin against Potiphar but Joseph hones in on the core matter. How then could I do this wicked thing against God?

[27 : 38] The God who was with him the God who had prospered him the God who had been loyal to him the God who had kept his promises to him. God had honored him and he must honor God.

He respected God. He feared God. He was fiercely loyal to God. What kept Joseph out of that bed was not a fear of Potiphar not a fear of getting Potiphar's wife pregnant not a fear of getting caught it was fear of God.

What can keep you from engaging in forbidden sex? Well let's define what forbidden sex is. Any sex outside of marriage.

It's not complicated. We may not like it. You may disagree with it but it's perfectly clear in God's word. Any sex outside of marriage is forbidden sex.

Now what will keep you and me from engaging in forbidden sex? Will we be kept from forbidden sex because we're afraid of being caught, of being found out?

[28 : 41] Is it because we might be afraid of letting family down? Is it what will keep us from forbidden sex? Fear of SDIs? Of getting pregnant?

Now many of these things might in some measure hold us back but I doubt if any of these things will hold us back when it feels so right that it can't be wrong.

What will hold you back is loyalty to God, is respect for God, is the fear of God. Indeed I would say only that will hold you back.

This was a defining moment for Joseph. How would the story have ended had he failed at this point? Well we don't know. Thankfully we don't know because he didn't. The power of God that he was given was employed by Joseph and he resisted the abuse that was being perpetrated against him and the temptation that he was facing.

Well let's draw things to a close with a final question. Does God really honor those who honor him? What happened to Joseph? He was thrown into prison.

[29 : 52] He did the right thing. He did the right thing and yet he was thrown into prison with no opportunity to defend himself, no opportunity to give his side of the story.

The abuse of the powerful just continues. And let's be honest, that's what usually happens when righteous men or women stand up to powerful abusers.

The outcome usually is that they continue to be abused. They are seldom vindicated, rather they are often further abused. But of course that's not the whole story, nor is it the end of the story.

in verse 21, immediately following this news that we're given that he's cast into prison, we are confronted with the same truth with which the account began. The Lord was with him.

He was with him when he prospered, and he was with him when he was thrown into prison. And then, of course, as we take the long view, and of course we know the long view because we're given the long view in the biblical account.

[30 : 59] We know how the story continues to unfold, and how Joseph is honored, and how his faithfulness to God served to protect from starvation and death the people of God, his family, and the godly line that we've been tracing throughout Genesis, the godly line from whence would come Messiah Jesus.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the realism with which it describes the world in which we live, a world where those who enjoy power often, not always, but often abuse of that power for their own ends, for those who can attack with impunity, for those who can lie with seemingly no consequences, unconcerned as to all who suffer as a result. We know that that is the world we live in. We acknowledge that we too can be guilty of abusing whatever measure of power that we might enjoy and forgive us for that.

We thank you also for what we discover of Joseph. We thank you for that wonderful truth that you were with him, and you were the one who helped him. You were the one who accompanied him and enabled him and empowered him to resist that abuse, to resist that temptation, to flee from it, even though the consequences for him were grave and dangerous.

We thank you for that example that we are given. Help us to have a knowledge of you and of your truth and of your laws, and help us to have that loyalty to you that would make it for us a matter of the utmost priority, to keep those laws that you have given us, to acknowledge that all sin is ultimately a sin against you.

[32 : 53] We thank you that you are the God who orders all things. We thank you for the wonderful way in which you ordered these sad and tragic events, for the good of Joseph ultimately, but perhaps even more importantly, of your people and the fulfilling of your purposes and the protection of your family, the family from whence would come, Messiah Jesus.

And we pray these things in his name. Amen.