

Gen 39:6 [Potiphar] left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

⁸But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. ⁹No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" ¹⁰And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

¹¹One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. ¹²She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.

¹⁶She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. ¹⁸But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁹When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. ²⁰Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.

But while Joseph was there in the prison, ²¹the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. ²²So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. ²³The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

TAKING UP THE CROSS

Dear Friends in Christ,

On Thursday, an amazing thing happened. We were leaving church and going home, so we had to take a left on 31W there. Well, we rolled up to the stoplight, but it was green! And then, going south on 31W, we got to Vine Street, and my least favorite light in town turned green far enough ahead of us that we didn't even need to slow down. And all the rest of the way home the lights were green. Now when was the last time you went from this parking lot down 31W to Joe Prather without a red light? Well, I said, "We must be livin' right."

I spoke in jest, of course. We Christians know that's not how things work. And yet, there is this little feeling in us that tells us, "When things go well, we must be livin' right!"

Today's event from Joseph's life challenges so many thoughts and feelings people have about being a Christian. It mostly challenges our thoughts about what happens when we do good things.

- If you ever want proof that bad things do not always happen because of the bad things we have done, here it is.
- If you ever want proof that doing good and godly things does not always bring you success and happiness in this life, here it is.
- If you ever want proof that saying "No" to temptation might not make temptation go away but might actually even make temptation worse, here it is.
- If you ever want proof that choosing to do things God's way might actually make your life

difficult, here it is.

and here's one more, and the best one:

- If you ever want proof that God is with you in the darkest moments of a Christian's life, here it is.

I. Taking Up the Cross Means Battling Sin

When things go badly for you, how do you react?

There was a day when people were stout of heart and grim in resolve. Back in the 1940s, there was the well-known phrase in Britain, "Keep Calm and Carry On." That phrase started in WWII when the people of London were expecting enemy bombs to be falling out of the sky on their homes. Enemy bombers? Take to the shelters for an hour or two, and when they are gone, "Keep calm and carry on."

Not these days. We have been taught to bring our sufferings and pains out into the open. It can be very helpful to confront past and present traumas. This stands in sharp distinction with a past time when people were expected to "suck it up" and get on with life. The downside of our modern way of dealing with difficulties is that it can lead to a feeling of victimization – manhandled by forces beyond our control, that we are defined and imprisoned by the bad things that happen to us.

Joseph didn't act like a victim, but he was a victim. Victimization defined him. His brothers so hated him that one time when they were far from home, out of sight of their father, they sold Joseph to slave traders. To cover it up, the brothers planted evidence to make it look like Joseph had died in an accident. Joseph was the victim of his brothers' hatred and an human trafficking network. Now he was as a slave.

Might you feel just a teensy-weensy little bit sorry for yourself? Or would you lash out or complain? Or might you say, "God, I've had it!"

Bad things happened to Joseph, but he continued to trust in God. Even in the worst of times—and Joseph really did have the worst of it—his trust remained in God. Joseph the slave never let his victimization define him because he knew his merciful, forgiving God, the LORD, the God of Abraham. And so even though he was enslaved at age 17, he served his slave master impeccably. So well, that within a fairly short time his master, Potiphar, put him in charge of his entire estate. The Lord blessed everything Joseph did. So much so that Potiphar, coming home after doing whatever captains of the guard did in ancient Egypt, Potiphar did not even ask how the estate was running. At the end of every day Potiphar surely thought, "All is well with Joseph here. It's great to have Joseph around the place."

Which is kind of what Potiphar's wife was thinking too. "Sure is nice to have Joseph around here." She took notice of Joseph. She not only thought about, but tried to cheat on her husband with Joseph. And though Joseph refused her advances, she continued to pester him "*day after day.*"

What a relevant passage for our day! In the day of pervasive media, where it is difficult to avoid Potiphar's-wife-like images on billboards, screens and handheld devices. If not actually acting out the immorality that Potiphar's wife proposed, then the suggestive images are at least trying to break down our barriers constructed against ungodly behavior. We are neck deep in temptation inducing material—now I am generalizing here—whether the male tendency toward sensuality or the female tendency toward a more meaningful outside relationship.

Joseph's response teaches us how to deal with, not just immorality temptations, but all temptation. It is not easy. It is, as Jesus called it, taking up a cross, a big, heavy, splintery cross. This is how we must deal with temptation.

A. First of all, when temptation comes, fight it.

Potiphar's wife tempted, but Joseph did not toy with temptation in the least. He didn't share in a bit of off-color humor; no footsie, no flirting. He knew a dangerous enemy was near, not only Potiphar's

wife but even the great Tempter. He flat out refused: ***“With me in charge my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care... My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?”*** He refuses on every level. “I can’t do this. It would be traitorous to my master.” He tries to prick her conscience: “You are his wife.” Finally he appeals to the highest authority: “Whatever you may think about this, it is a sin before God.” Joseph fights temptation and he is safe—for the moment.

B. Joseph shows us a second point about dealing with temptation: avoid temptation.

Many of you Christians, whether it be with Sixth Commandment sins or other sins, are exactly where Joseph was. You may have confronted and refused temptation, but you still battle it.

“She spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to... even be with her.” When temptation persists, we need to avoid tempting situations. The book of Psalms begins with these words, *“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers”* (1:1). Keep your distance, not just from sin, but even from temptation. Avoid the people, the places, the programs that create temptation. Like a snake left to slither around your house will sooner or later bite you, sooner or later living with temptation will lead to sin.

C. But Joseph, the chief steward of the house, couldn’t avoid Potiphar’s wife forever. How long this went on, we don’t know: months, perhaps years. ***“One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. [Probably her doing.] She caught him by his cloak and [propositioned him]. But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.”*** This is the third thing we must do with temptation: When temptation has you at a disadvantage, run.

What do you do in a situation with your peers, when they are engaging in ungodly behavior? What do you do when the eyes are on you, and you know everyone’s expectation is that you join them? Run like Joseph did. Run. Leave behind your jacket, your phone, your car, your wallet. And while at the moment of running out it will feel like you have lost everything, eventually you will realize that, by God’s grace, you may have saved everything: your conscience, your soul, blessings in this world and the next.

There is no dishonor in running away from temptation. Just like there is no dishonor in running away from a 16 foot king cobra snake. Second Timothy 2:22 says, *“Flee the evil desires of youth.”*

Joseph exemplified three steps of fighting temptation: 1) When temptation comes, fight it. 2) When it persists, avoid it. 3) When temptation has you at a disadvantage, run from it.

II. Sometimes, the Results of Our Godly Choices Are the Cross

Joseph was living right—wasn’t he? Then how do you explain what happened next. Potiphar got home. His wife completely changed the story around and said that Joseph made advances on her. When Potiphar, ***“heard the story his wife told him... he burned with anger. Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison.”***

When I went through all those green lights on Thursday I said, “Must be livin’ right.” Do I somehow imagine that something as trivial as the stoplights is divine approval on how I live?! What about Joseph? He did what was right. He did what was right even though he was in slavery. He did what was right in the face of a very enticing sin. He fought this sin dozens of times and he had taken preventative measures. Joseph literally ran from it. And he doesn’t just get a couple extra red lights thrown at him, he gets thrown into prison. And let me tell you, there weren’t any TVs in 2nd millennium BC Egyptian prisons.

This is where we get to taking up a cross. Joseph suffered greatly, not *in spite of* being a godly man, but specifically *because he was* a godly man. That is taking up a cross. It is not the sicknesses

and sadnesses all people share because they are human. Taking up the cross is much narrower than that. That cross is when we suffer specifically because we are Christ's children. Are you willing to do that?

I was reading an on-line article about whistle-blowers, you know, the people who see corrupt practices at work and report them. Looking at the comments section below the article, the most common comment was, "Just keep your mouth shut." Several people explained Joseph-like situations. They did what was right. They suffered for it. None of them seemed to think that doing the right thing was worth the problems it brought them.

Dear Christians, we can be tempted to think that way. We can look at a situation where we know that doing the godly thing will bring us problems, and we can want to avoid any problems. Remember whose approval you have and want to continue in. In Jesus, you always have God's approval. He is the one who has paid for and covered up all the sins of life. He is the one who has assured you of heaven. His approval is what counts.

And Joseph knew that. I am not going to pretend that Joseph took his prison sentence with a smile on his face. But he knew. He knew whose approval he had. He had taken up his cross. He was willing to suffer disgrace so that the name and will of God would be glorified.

Finally, there is one last challenge to our assumptions in this Bible reading. Even in the worst challenges of life, the LORD is with his people. It is the resounding note of hope in our reading. It is the chorus line of Genesis 39. "***The LORD was with Joseph.***" It sounds out right after Joseph is sold into slavery (2), and right after he was put in prison (21). It is a reminder of that profound truth that, God uses all things for the good of those who love him, even when he asks us to take up a cross to follow Jesus. Amen.