

SOVEREIGN GRACE PRODUCES NEW DESIRES THAT LEAD TO NEW BEHAVIORS

Genesis 39:1-23

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Think about the last time you were angry (irritated, upset, frustrated). Why were you irritated? What was the cause of your irritation?

How do you usually describe the cause of your emotional state, whatever it might be? When someone asks you why you acted in a certain way, how do you respond? Think about this and try to be as honest as you can be.

Most of us say things like this when describing why we feel as we do: "What you did made me angry." "I'm crabby because I had a bad day at work." "I ate the package of Oreo's because I lost my job." "I'm feeling really sad because of how my husband treated me today." In other words, if you pay attention to how we talk about our emotional condition and our behaviors, we often ascribe their cause to something that happened to us. The story of Joseph in chapter 39 is proof that we do not do what we do because of what happens to us. We are able to live by faith, above the circumstances of our lives.

STUDY

1. Make a list of all the "negative" things that Joseph has experienced in Genesis 30-37.

He was raised in a home that is as dysfunctional as you could possibly imagine. He lived in the mother of all blended families. He had 10 half brothers and one half sister and three stepmothers. He grew up in a violent, perverted environment. He witnessed his brothers' violent murder of the Shechemites. He knew of his oldest brother's rape of one of his stepmothers. He witnessed his father and grandfather's hostility and greed. He was with his family as they anticipated the arrival of his murderous uncle. His mother died when he was a young teenager. He

had a doting father and hostile siblings. Not only did he grow up in this dysfunctional family but he was betrayed, beaten and sold into slavery by his brothers. He spent a month or two traveling as a slave in a caravan of Ishmaelites. He was sold into slavery into Egypt.

2. If emotions and behaviors are caused by what happens to us, how might we expect Joseph to be feeling and acting?

We would not be shocked to discover that Joseph is bitter, depressed, hopeless, angry at God and living a dysfunctional life. If anyone ever had reasons for being angry, depressed, passive-aggressive, addicted to wine or sex it would be Joseph. If how a person feels and behaves is determined by the things that happen to him rather than by what we choose, then he should have been a basket case.

3. What might be some reasons that Moses included the story of Judah in chapter 38 immediately before recording the story of Joseph as contained in chapter 39?

The story of Joseph is meant to be set in contrast to the story of Judah to show that while these men grew up in the same home and were both exposed to the same promises and examples of godliness, Joseph flourishes because he trusts promises whereas Judah flounders in sin due to his unwillingness to believe the same promises.

4. If you were among the first recipients of this story, the nation Israel after their delivery from slavery in Egypt, how might you feel after reading v. 1?

They would feel Joseph's pain, as it had recently been their own pain. Joseph has fallen into the hands of their worst enemies. Joseph is living out their worst nightmares. He is the slave of a cruel Egyptian who is one of the most powerful men in that inhumane empire. How their hearts would have quailed and their souls shuddered in their empathy for Joseph's condition. You cannot imagine a worse situation to be in than to be under the absolute control of your worst enemy.

5. Describe, from vv. 2-7a, what happens as Joseph serves as a slave in Potiphar's house.

Joseph serves his enemy in such a way that his enemy prospers. Joseph works so hard and so effectively for Potiphar that Potiphar's wealth is increased and his life is less troublesome. This benefit that he enjoys from the labor of Joseph causes Potiphar to acknowledge that the Lord is with Joseph and that Joseph's effective work is the result of the fact that Joseph belongs to Yahweh, the creator of the heavens and the earth. This effective and fruitful labor of Joseph causes Potiphar to place him in charge of all his affairs. Joseph is made the manager of all of Potiphar's businesses. He engages all his God given talents and abilities in the labor of benefiting his master, his enemy. Potiphar grows wealthy at the hands of Joseph, whom he has cruelly enslaved.

6. According to vv. 2-7a, what is the ultimate cause of Joseph's hard and effective labor?

"The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered." Joseph is a slave of his enemies and the Lord is with Joseph causing him to prosper. It is the Lord who is blessing and enabling Joseph to work so well and so effectively that Potiphar, his enemy, grows rich and enjoys a life free from worry.

7. Does that seem strange to you at all? Does it seem strange that Joseph is a slave and works so well that all that belongs to Potiphar flourishes because the Lord blesses Joseph? Why or why not?

The end of verse five is the shocking statement, "The Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph." Joseph isn't blessed because of his faith. Potiphar is blessed through Joseph, because of Joseph's faith. Joseph is still a slave and God makes the life of the enemy more prosperous through the diligent labor of Joseph. This is not how we think of God's "blessing" on our lives.

8. What is it in Joseph that enables him to work so well, with such blessing on Potiphar? (Clues: See Gen. 37: 5-7, 9 & Luke 6:35, Eph. 6: 5-8, 1 Peter 2: 18-23 & 3: 9)

Joseph shows by his joyful and effective service that he believes the promises of God. The pleasure of God is what matters to him, not living as a free man. He works for the reward of God and so he is the agent of Potiphar's blessed life. If you believe that obeying Christ, being

rewarded by Christ, being sons and daughters of the Most High God is the best thing that could happen to you, then you will gladly, diligently and effectively serve your enemy so that he prospers. When you do this, it is obvious that the Lord Jesus is a greater treasure than being treated well by others. However, if obeying Christ, being rewarded by Christ, being sons and daughters of the Most High God does not make you happy, then you will not serve your enemy, you will make him pay for what he has done to you.

God's grace always produces men and women of faith who work for the good of others, even his or her enemies.

9. While Joseph is faithfully serving Potiphar and God is blessing Potiphar because of Joseph, what happens (vv. 7, 10 & 11-12)?

Potiphar's wife "fixes her eyes" upon handsome Joseph and seeks to get him to have sex with her. Every day she seeks to seduce him. Finally, one morning she empties the house of all the servants and when Joseph shows up for work she throws herself upon him and begins to take off his clothes. Joseph flees from her grasp out of the house.

10. Read Proverbs 7 and 9:13-18. How is the seduction of Potiphar's wife a picture of the "seduction" of all sin (See also Genesis 3: 1-6)?

Like the adulterous wife who seeks to entrap the young man, so sin allures us with promises of pleasure and joy. All sin appeals to our desire to be happy. When we sin, we simply believe the promises of sin more than we believe the promises of God.

11. Brainstorm a list of reasons Joseph might have been able to use for giving into the wife's provocations?

First, consider that he is around 22 years old and everyone knows that the sexual desire of 22-year-old men is virtually uncontrollable. Isn't what this woman is doing the stuff of every adolescent boys' dreams? Second, he is a slave. While the wife is not the master, she has more authority than he does and who is he to disobey an order of one who has more authority than he? It wasn't his idea to have sex, it was her idea and she's the boss or almost the boss. In addition, by refusing her advances he is exposing himself to harm because she is the wife of his

master. He has no power and so why should he expose himself to further harm by refusing one who has power when he has none? Third, he is a slave. Why should he protect the man who has enslaved him? He has been treated cruelly, why not pay some of these arrogant people back by using this woman for his own gratification? Fourth, he is a slave in a foreign land, far from home, lonely, craving human attention. Why would it be wrong to enjoy such warmth when he is in such a pitiless place? God wouldn't want him to suffer like this! Fifth, he is a slave in a pagan land and culture that is obsessed with sex. There are not many who would criticize him for giving in. I mean, everybody's doing it, right? Finally, when she accosts him while no one else is around, who would know? There are an overwhelming number of reasons why it would seem reasonable for Joseph to give in to this woman's entreaties. Who could blame Joseph for having sex with her?

12. According to vv. 8-9 why did Joseph not give in? How did he keep from succumbing to the temptation? What were the reasons he gave for not having sex with her?

The first reason that Joseph gives in verse 8 is that to have sex with her would be an abuse of the trust placed in him. His master has entrusted everything in the entire house into his care, how could he use that trust to benefit himself? Joseph sees that when you are put in charge of other people's property, you are obligated to act only in their best interest. The authority he has been given is for the purpose of benefiting Potiphar. Having sex with his wife does not benefit him, but instead uses the trust of Potiphar to steal from him.

The second reason he gives in verse 9 is that it would be an offense against his master and against her. He sees that Potiphar and his wife belong to each other and he, as a single man, has a duty to protect that relationship. He holds marriage in honor and he holds Potiphar and his wife in honor. He desires good for them and not evil. He wants them to be happy in their marriage. He does not want to harm either of them and even though she is the one initiating this, he is trying to protect her from herself. He is seeking to love Potiphar as he loves himself. He knows that he would not want someone to have sex with his wife and so he is unwilling to treat someone else in a manner that he would not want to be treated. Joseph realizes that how he conducts himself has an impact on those around him. There is no such thing as a

sin that only affects you and Joseph knows this. Every violation of God's laws violates the stability and security of the community that I live in. There are no private sins, even when you are not caught.

But the third and greatest reason for why he cannot do this is because it would be a great sin against God. Joseph fears God's displeasure more than he fears living a life without sex, more than he fears what Potiphar's wife might do to him. He loves pleasing God more than he loves the pleasures of sex, more than he loves the idea of alleviating some of the pain of his imprisonment through this liaison.

13. What do you learn from Joseph's response to the adulterous wife that can help you in your fight against sin?

Every temptation to sin contains a reason for why you should give in to it. Even when it does not seem that there is any thought in the process, when sinning just seems automatic to you, even then there are reasons why you sin. We are not told all the reasons that Potiphar's wife gave to Joseph as to why he ought to have sex with her, but you know that a woman as brazen as this was giving him reasons. Joseph knows that the way you fight sin is to have better reasons for not sinning. The way you stop sinning is by believing that holiness has greater promises than sin. It is to love the reasons for not sinning more than you love the reasons for sinning. It is to hope in the pleasures of purity more than you hope in the pleasures of impurity. You will successfully resist sin when you are amazed that God loves you and has made promises to you and is going to receive you into his eternal kingdom. When this amazes you, thrills you, then the power of sin will be broken in your life. When what God promises to you is better to you than what sin promises then you will successfully resist. The reason you do not resist is because you believe that the pleasures of sin are greater than the pleasure of being known and loved by God. When the pressure to sin becomes too great you must flee from the place of temptation to a place of safety.

God's grace always produces men and women of faith who resist sin out of love for God and for others.

14. How does Potiphar's wife respond to Joseph's final rejection? Note how she talks with the two different "audiences", the servants and her husband. What does she appeal to in each one?

In order to protect herself and to punish him for not gratifying her lusts, she immediately begins to scream for the servants she sent out of the house. When she describes Joseph's attempted rape to the servants, she appeals to their racism by using a racial slur, calling Joseph a Hebrew. She identifies with them by saying that the Hebrew slave was "brought to us to make sport of us." How do you think the other slaves felt about the 22-year-old Joseph, the new kid on the block, the Hebrew, being in charge of all Potiphar's household? Do you think they might have some resentment towards him and towards Potiphar who put him in charge? "Potiphar brought this despised Hebrew to us to take away your jobs and to assault me." After prejudicing the servants against Joseph she waits all day with Joseph's shirt beside her. She doesn't want to disturb the crime scene but prepares her case like a good prosecuting attorney. Notice how she changes her language. She isn't as blatant in saying that Potiphar brought Joseph to make sport of her but she does play on his guilt enough to cloud his judgment. "The despicable Hebrew slave that you brought into our home tried to rape me. What are you going to do about it?"

15. What "reward" does Joseph get for working hard and effectively for his slave master and for resisting sin? What does this tell you about those who say that if you obey God, good things will always happen to you?

The wife is treated as a victim and he, the victim, is treated like a criminal. His good name and his reputation are smeared. False accusations are made against him and believed. He is sent to prison. He is thrown in a dark, dank, smelly, hole with violent men. People who teach that doing the right thing always leads to a life of blessing on planet earth are liars.

16. What happens when he gets to prison?

Joseph doesn't blame God or people for his situation. He believes God's promises. He believes that God loves him and that he has a great and glorious future awaiting him and so he lives in hope. He believes that the purpose of his life is to love God and to love people and so it doesn't matter what is happening to him. No matter what the circumstances are, he can joyfully do the will of God. He works so hard

and so effectively that the cruel hearted warden notices and so puts him in charge of all the prisoners. Again, Joseph's hard work and faithfulness to God leads to his oppressor, his enemy being blessed.

17. According to vv. 21-23, why is Joseph so successful at being a prisoner? Why is the warden given such an easy life?

The Lord is with him. The Lord is kind to him. The Lord gives him favor in the eyes of the warden. The Lord gave him success in whatever he did.

18. Do verses 21-23 surprise you in any way? Why or why not?

If there ever was a person who had a right to be angry with God, to doubt God, Joseph is that person. If being treated poorly is the cause of bitterness, depression, anger, inability to obey God, then Joseph should have been bitter, angry, focused upon himself, unable to serve God or others. The language of vv. 22-23 is almost unintelligible to most people. How can God be with a person and be kind to a person and that person be falsely imprisoned in a dungeon? How can the evidence of God's presence with a person be that person is working so hard and so well that those who imprisoned him enjoy a better life? Where is the justice of God? Where is the love of God?

19. How do you respond when people treat you wrong? How do you respond when you are falsely accused, when you are taken advantage of? How do you respond when you resist sin and suffer for it? What will it take for you to live like Joseph?

If the goal of your life is to live a pain free, pleasure filled life on planet earth, then when you experience pain or when you don't get the pleasures you yearned for and hoped in, you will become angry and depressed. You will not love God or people. But if you are living for another world, if your hope lies in the promises of God, then you are able to live above your circumstances by continuing to love God and people.

God's grace always produces men and women of faith who do not blame God or others when suffering but continue to live by faith.