

Message #6
Joseph

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RESPONDING TO REJECTION:
JOSEPH AND POTIPHAR'S HOUSEHOLD
GENESIS 39

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Lee came from a broken family background. His mother was married three times. She was a domineering woman. Her second husband divorced her because she beat him up regularly. Lee's dad was the third husband. He died a few months before Lee was born.

As a result of the death of Lee's father his mom had to go to work when Lee was a little tike.. She worked long hours to make ends meet. She gave little love and attention to her son. She even told him to never call her at work. He had no friends. When Lee was 13, a school psychologist commented that he probably did not know the meaning of the word "love."

Despite having a high IQ, Lee failed academically and dropped out of high school. He joined the Marines but found no acceptance there either. He rebelled against authority. He was court-martialed and thrown out of the Corps with a dishonorable discharge. In his early twenties he found himself alone and without any marketable skills. He was short and skinny and balding. He still had no friends. He had an adolescent squeak in his voice. He did not even have a driver's license.

Lee decided to try life overseas. He met and fell in love with a gal in Europe who was herself an illegitimate child and had significant self-esteem problems of her own. He brought her back to the States and had two children with her, but he never enjoyed the status and respect that a father should have. His marriage began to fall apart. His wife demanded more and more things that he could not provide. She bullied Lee and finally forced him to leave the house.

After days of wandering around, he returned home and begged her to take him back. She did for a while, but the bullying and the ridicule from her continued. He was a rejected man. His ego was destroyed.

There was perhaps only one thing that Lee was very good at. He decided to use that skill to make a statement, a cry, a scream to the world which had rejected him. On November 22, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald (PROJECTOR ON--- LEE HARVEY OSWALD) took his rifle and shot and killed the President of the United States.

All of us have experienced rejection of one sort or another. The more significant experiences of rejection can have more significant effects, as was the case with Lee Harvey Oswald. How we respond to these major rejections can determine the future course of our lives. (PROJECTOR OFF) Some of us are totally wiped out by rejection. We are never the same afterward. Others of us go on with life but we have a gnawing

ache or a burning anger that never leaves. Then there are some who manage to overcome rejection and rise above it.

Joseph in the Old Testament is one such individual who fits into the last category. He experienced the most intense rejections which life has to offer. But Joseph not only managed to recover from them. He matured and became a better person as a result of experiencing them. Eventually he became the number two government official in the most powerful nation in the world. What was the secret of his success? Hopefully we will figure that out today as we study Geneses #39.

I.

First, we are going to look at v. 1 as we consider the subject of THE PAIN OF FAMILY REJECTION. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE PAIN OF FAMILY REJECTION) According to v. 1, **“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.”**

Decades earlier God had chosen Abraham and had graciously given him several unconditional promises. The Lord promised to make a great nation of Abraham’s descendants, and He promised to bless all of the nations of the world through him. The fulfillment of these promises seemed in doubt until Abraham had a son through his wife, Sarah, in his old age. This was Isaac. It was his son Jacob who carried on the line of promise. In the nineteenth century BC Jacob had twelve sons, including the hero of our story, Joseph.

Despite being in the line of promise, Joseph had a difficult family background. He was the eleventh of twelve boys. His parents and his brothers operated on the basis of the philosophy that the end justifies the means. In tough situations they were prone to use deceit and trickery to get what they wanted.

A couple of weeks ago we saw that Joseph’s father Jacob favored Joseph over his other sons. When Joseph told about a dream in which he envisioned himself as ruling over his entire family, his brothers got even more upset with him. When Joseph was seventeen years old, his brothers took Joseph and sold him as a slave to passing traders who were going down to Egypt. The brothers convinced their father Jacob that Joseph had been eaten by a wild beast. That is where our story picks up here in v. 1 of #39. We see the results of his family rejection.

Joseph now finds himself in a strange country with a strange language and strange customs and a strange religion. Joseph is alone. He is a foreigner. He is a slave. The situation appears to be the result of his brothers’ jealousy and hatred. He has been rejected by his own family. How are those for conditions which are likely to produce a great man? Too often such rejection produces despair and anger and hatred and a desire for revenge. They produce someone like Lee Harvey Oswald.

Rejection by family takes various forms today. Some children are still being sold into slavery in our day, and even in our country. According to a Homeland Security Inspector General's report released a month ago there are 320,000 migrant children who have crossed our southern border whom the government does not know where they are. A federal whistle blower says that she fears that many of them are being used in sex trafficking and child labor. They are under the control of criminal gangs. (*New York Post*, 8/21/2024) They are slaves of a sort.

Children often perceive the divorce of their parents as a kind of parental rejection. In the 1960s and 1970s the popular notion was that children bounce back quickly from divorce. We know now that this is not generally true. A clinical psychologist by the name of Judith Wallerstein began a study in 1971 of children whose middle class parents were divorced in California in the late 60's and early 70's. That study lasted for 25 years. She and her fellow researchers were shocked to discover that the children from those divorced homes continued to suffer significant negative effects from those divorces well into their adult years.

I knew a young man years ago in Massachusetts whose name was Dave. Dave was in his 20's when I came to know him. As a small child his father had deserted the family. Dave could count on one hand the number of times that his father had visited him since then. Dave perceived that behavior by his father to be rejection, and he continued to suffer the effects of that as a young adult. He struggled with a low self-esteem, though he was a very capable and intelligent guy. He was often depressed. Occasionally he was suicidal. Dave got good grades in school. He earned an engineering degree. He had a pleasant personality and had excellent practical abilities. He was a Christian. But that sense of family rejection was a problem that plagued him well into his adult years.

Family rejection may take the form of desertion by a mate. It may take the form of desertion by kids or grand kids or siblings. Family rejection, whatever form it takes, can be devastating. But it need not be fatal. It is even possible for good things to come out of it.

II.

Certainly rejection was not fatal for Joseph. Thus in vv. 2-6 we encounter **THE BLESSING OF JOB SUCCESS**. (II. THE BLESSING OF JOB SUCCESS) It appears that Potiphar was a very wealthy man and that he had a large household which included many workers and servants. Joseph probably started at the bottom. He was a foreigner, and he probably did not know the language or the customs of the Egyptians. But in v.2 we are told, **"The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master."**

One evidence of Joseph's success was the fact that he came to live in his master's house. Most slaves probably lived in separate servant quarters. But Joseph's success was not just ordinary success. Verse 3 says that his master saw that the Lord was with him. Potiphar does not describe Joseph's God in generic terms. He uses the specific name for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--- YHWH.

Joseph had obviously made his religious faith known in a visible way. His work was also of such a quality that his master attributed it to more than just his natural abilities. This Egyptian official of a different religious faith attributed it to the blessing of Joseph's God.

So Joseph became Potiphar's right hand man and chief of staff. He became responsible for managing the other workers and servants, for handling money, and probably for controlling business and agricultural interests that Potiphar had. The household flourished with Joseph at the helm. In v. 6 we are told that **"...because of him he [Potiphar] had no concern about anything but the food he ate."**

Joseph worked hard, but the key to Joseph's success was that the Lord was with him. In spite of the terrible rejection he had experienced, Joseph was confident that God was with him. Because he chose to act in accordance with that belief, which was rooted in reality, that presence in his life was evident not only to Joseph but also to his Egyptian master. The work and the responsibilities which Joseph exercised flourished in an extraordinary way.

Bob Vernon (BOB VERNON) was the deputy police chief in Los Angeles until 1992. When Darryl Gates retired as police chief, Bob Vernon was next in line for the position. But his strong Christian convictions had produced political enemies in the city, and he was passed over for the job. Eventually Vernon resigned and is now president of an outfit in California called the Pointman Leadership Institute.

Bob Vernon's rise to a high position in the LA police force was due to God's blessing on his life. According to his own testimony there were many incidents in his career where it was clear that God was causing him to experience success. One example that he tells about came when he was a police sergeant, and he was on patrol alone. As he approached a corner gas station, he saw a man frantically waving and pointing down a cross street. Bob Vernon swung his police cruiser down that street. A couple of blocks down that street he spotted another man standing on a corner and frantically waving and pointing down another street. He turned down there. A bit further on he saw a man in a gas station uniform chasing a guy who had a wad of money in one hand.

Vernon pulled up alongside, got out of the car, and collared the suspect who, by now, was dead tired from a long run. The suspect had a gun in his belt. Vernon disarmed him, handcuffed him, and brought him back to his car. As he got back into his vehicle, his radio blurted out a call for him to investigate a possible holdup at the gas station he had just passed. Vernon went on the radio and reported that the suspect was now in custody. The dispatcher responded, **"No, you don't understand. We just had a report of a robbery in progress. You need to check it out."** Finally he got the dispatcher to understand that he already had the thief in custody.

It was many incidents of this nature that made it clear to Bob Vernon, and to at least some in the police department, that God's blessing and care were upon this guy and his work. Perhaps some of you have also experienced this sense that God has prospered

you in whatever success which you have had in your work. God has been with you. God often blesses us with success on the job when we keep our trust in Him.

III.

Despite this blessing upon his work Joseph was about to experience another rejection. Thus in vv. 7-12 we come to THE DANGER OF JOB SUCCESS. (III. THE DANGER OF JOB SUCCESS) The ability and skill and success of young Joseph became obvious to all who were in the household of Potiphar. Potiphar's wife was one who began to take notice of this Hebrew in her house. The last part of v. 6 also informs us that "**Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.**" He was a hunk. Mrs. Potiphar decided that she wanted him.

Egyptian women, especially those in the upper class, were more liberated than other women in the Ancient Near East. Some were known to be philanderers. Potiphar himself may have had other women. So young Joseph became a target for Mrs. Potiphar. She boldly propositioned him, saying, "**Lie with me.**"

This woman was married to one of the most powerful men in Egypt. Probably she was attractive and well-educated. She was older than Joseph. Joseph did not have a wife. He was perhaps only in his early to mid-twenties. She wanted him.

Last week we were reminded again that the sexual standards in Joseph's family were not especially high. His father had four wives. His brother Judah, according to #38, had been involved with a woman whom he thought was a prostitute. He did not seem to have any guilt about that relationship. One might think that the circumstances facing Joseph were weighted heavily against the idea that he would be able to resist the advances of this powerful woman.

But Joseph did resist. He refused to consent to her wishes. He gave her two reasons for this. First, he said that to go along with her wishes would be a violation of her husband's trust. Joseph felt a sense of responsibility to Potiphar. It was Potiphar to whom Joseph was subject, and it was Potiphar who had allowed Joseph to advance to a position of responsibility in the household.

Second, to go to bed with Mrs. Potiphar would be a violation of God's trust. Joseph felt accountable to Him. He recognized that it was the Lord who had been with him and who had blessed his work.

Some people in positions of power are persistent when they don't get what they want. Such was the case with this woman. Joseph, however, continued to resist her advances. He wisely avoided being alone with her. But one day she managed to get Joseph alone and made another bold attempt. Verse 12 says that she grabbed his garment.

The Apostle Paul in the New Testament told the Corinthian Christians to simply “**Flee immorality!**” (1 Corinthians 6:18) That is just what Joseph did here. But he left his outer garment behind.

Job success made Joseph a target. Some of us have experienced some measure of job success. The dangers that come with that can include pride, misuse of power, and manipulation of others. People around us can become jealous. Sometimes powerful men can abuse women. Here we have a situation of false accusation by a woman.

IV.

In vv. 13-20 we encounter THE PAIN OF JOB REJECTION. (IV. THE PAIN OF JOB REJECTION) Mrs. Potiphar was faced with a decision. There was the possibility that another servant saw Joseph flee without his clothes. There was the danger that someone could find her with Joseph’s robe. Then there was also the fact that the object of her desire had scorned her advances. She decided to mount a preemptive strike. According to v. 14 she called out to other men of the household who were around, and she lied about what had happened.

Notice that she made three accusations in her initial complaint. First, she criticized her husband for having Joseph around the house. Second, she charged Joseph with attempted rape. Third, she appealed to racist prejudices by saying that Joseph the Hebrew had come “**to laugh at us.**” Not “me,” but “us.” The “us” could refer to the women of the household. But I suspect that she was claiming that Joseph the foreigner had treated all Egyptians with contempt by his attempted assault on Mrs. Potiphar. She was using the race card.

When Potiphar got home, she gave a similar story. Ironically Joseph was more faithful and honest with Potiphar than his own wife was. According to v. 19, “**...his anger was kindled.**” It is significant, I think, that the specific object of Potiphar’s anger is not identified. I suspect that his anger was directed toward the whole situation. I suspect that he had some doubts about his wife’s story. Potiphar had a history with both his wife and Joseph. He was aware that the prosperity of his household had been largely due to Joseph’s work and his God’s blessing. But there was a big political and family downside to not going along with his wife’s wishes. Now he was going to lose Joseph. Potiphar was angry about the whole situation.

So Joseph was sent to the slammer. Then, as now, some sexual harassment charges are legitimate, and some are not. But the legal situation was stacked against Joseph. His accuser was married to the Egyptian attorney general. But there was no separate judicial branch to which Potiphar had to answer. He was responsible only to the king. Joseph was a slave and a foreigner.

I suspect that Potiphar could have executed Joseph without suffering any political repercussions. But I think that Potiphar didn’t trust his wife and actually believed the story of Joseph. But for political and family reasons it was more expedient to have Joseph put in prison.

How do you suppose that Joseph felt at this moment in his life? He had experienced rejection by his family a few years earlier. His own brothers had sold him into slavery. Joseph had overcome that horrible experience. Now he had worked hard and had done a great job for his employer. But he was being shafted by his boss's wife and sent to prison.

This prison had little resemblance to the modern prisons that we know about. There was no running water. There was no TV. There was no air conditioning to provide protection from the searing Egyptian heat. The food was really lousy. There was no ACLU around to protect his rights. Furthermore Joseph was a foreigner among Egyptians. I suspect that he got no special consideration from his fellow prisoners for being of a different race. Maybe there was a Canaanite gang that tried to connect with him. I suspect that Joseph had to experience some emotions of anger and depression and desire for revenge for how a powerful woman had mistreated him.

There was a woman like that whom I once encountered. In my first pastorate forty years ago I was in a church composed largely of young families. The head elder and his wife were a couple in their fifties. They exerted considerable influence and leadership in the church. This woman was the pianist, the Sunday School superintendent, children's program leader, and the leader of a women's Bible study. She had been a college professor.

During my two years in the church I heard complaints from at least a dozen people about this woman's habit of embarrassing and making fun of people in public situations. I encouraged these complainers to talk to the woman in private. They were afraid to do so. Finally after one weekend where I witnessed this woman ream out somebody in front of people who were not even from the church, and when I saw her embarrass another woman in a public meeting, I decided that I needed to talk to her in private.

So in what I thought was a gentle way I expressed appreciation for her contributions to the church, and then brought up these two incidents which I had witnessed during the past weekend. I explained how this was upsetting to people in the church. She said very little, thanked me, and left. She decided that I was a problem and that I had to go. She convinced her husband to have a secret meeting with the elders and convinced a majority of them that I was a problem and had to go. So after the Sunday morning service I was handed a letter demanding my resignation.

My son Bart was a year old. A year earlier we had bought a small house. We were given one month's pay. See ya later. Such can be the pain of job rejection. Ever experience that kind of rejection?

V.

In vv. 21-23 we encounter THE REWARD OF FAITHFULNESS IN GOD'S BLESSING. (V. THE REWARD OF FAITHFULNESS...) In v. 21 we are reminded, "**But the Lord was with Joseph...**" Even in that stinking, rotten prison the Lord was with Joseph.

Nothing had happened to him outside of the sovereign plan of God. Joseph once again found himself at the bottom, but he was actually right in the center of God's will for his life.

Life is sometimes like that. Sometimes we find ourselves at the bottom in terms of our job situation or our family situation. Sometimes it may seem like we are starting all over again. But if we are following the revealed will of God, we can be confident that He is with us and that there is a purpose for it.

Joseph had that conviction, even in that lousy prison. He acted on the basis of the conviction that God was with him, despite outward evidence to the contrary. He set out to do his best and was rewarded for it. Just as he had come to supervise everything under Potiphar's authority, we are told in v. 23 that Joseph came to supervise everything under the jailer's authority. It became evident that God was working in and through him.

After being dumped by this church in the Midwest we moved back to the East Coast to live with my wife's relatives. Things were difficult, but I was confident that God was with us. Within 24 hours of arriving in the east, I got a call from a fellow with whom I had once been involved in discipling. He had a lower level managerial position in a computer company, and he offered me a job. Unlike Joseph I did not rise to become the second in command of the company, but I did have a job. Later I got a pastoral position in Connecticut, and eventually I came here.

Our passage does not show it, but we learned in an earlier chapter that Joseph not only had a sense of the presence of God, he also had a promise from God. In a dream in #37 God had revealed to him that one day his family would bow down to him. Joseph clung to that promise. He believed that God had a plan for his life. And indeed the Lord did.

Last week we saw in #38 that Joseph's family was being corrupted by the Canaanite culture in which they lived. God had told Abraham and his descendants that His plan for them was that they were to become a distinct nation which would eventually be a blessing to the other nations of the world. Now the fulfillment of that promise was threatened. The Lord had to get His people out of Canaan. Joseph was the key link in His divine plan. He was going to be the one who would have the key role in getting this family of shepherds to a nation which regarded shepherds as unclean. It would be there in Egypt that Israel could grow to become a nation without the danger of being absorbed by the surrounding culture.

We Christians also have a promise from God. In Hebrews #13 v. 5 (HEBREWS 13:5) God tells His people, **"I will never leave you nor forsake you."** That is a promise to us of God's presence. Before He departed from this earth Jesus Himself (MATTHEW 28:20) promised His followers, **"...I am--- not 'I will be,' but--- I am with you always, to the end of the age."** Do you believe that?

This Jesus also knows the meaning of rejection. The Bible says that He was God who became man. He was born as a Jew, and He came as the fulfiller of the Old Testament qualifications for the promised Messiah. He performed miracles. He healed the sick and cured the blind. (PROJECTOR OFF) Yet His own family for a time rejected Him, at least they rejected His claims to be the Messiah. The religious leaders, who should have been the first to recognize His fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, rejected Him. The Bible tells us that, as with Joseph's brothers, they were jealous of Him. But they did not just ignore Him or run Him out of town. They killed Him.

Nevertheless, the Bible says that this was also according to the sovereign plan of God. For in order for man to be reconciled to a holy God, payment had to be made for man's sin. **"The wages of sin is death,"** the Bible says. It was only One who was both man and God who could qualify to provide that payment. Jesus did that by virtue of His death on the cross.

This same Jesus has promised to be with us. There is one catch in all of this. The promise has been made only to those who have identified themselves as followers of Christ. The Bible says that we have to be part of His family before the promise applies. The way that we become part of this family is simply by trusting in Jesus and His death for us. There is nothing for us to earn or join or do or buy. What is required is that we accept the gift of salvation that God offers us by placing our trust in Jesus.

Some of us have already experienced painful rejections in life. Some of us have painful rejections that yet await us. How much easier it will be to face them knowing that God is with us. We can know that He is, and will be, with us if we have accepted this Jesus, who Himself has known the real meaning of rejection.