

SERIES: Joseph: From Pit to Prominence

SERMON: **When Temptation Comes in Like a Flood**

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 39

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

DATE: June 17, 2007

I read recently of a wife who went to lunch with eleven other women, all taking a French course together since their children were in school. One rather bold type asked, "How many of you have been faithful throughout your marriage?" Only one of the dozen women raised her hand. That evening the woman related the incident to her husband and admitted she was not the one who had raised her hand. Her husband was devastated. "But I *have* been faithful to you," she quickly assured him. "Then why didn't you raise your hand?," he asked. She responded, "I was embarrassed."

Friends, that's a true story. It demonstrates how absolutely screwed up our society has become when someone feels embarrassed because she has not been promiscuous. I will not spend the time this morning citing statistics to prove how far our culture has fallen into immorality, because any thinking Christian knows that the cesspool has overflowed. From daytime soaps to the nighttime interviews, from prime time sitcoms to Emmy-award winning dramas, somebody is invariably getting in or out of bed with someone other than their spouse. What was once labeled adultery and carried a stigma of guilt is now generally referred to as "an affair"—a nice-sounding, almost inviting word wrapped in mystery, fascination, and excitement. It's a relationship, not sin. Some prominent psychologists are actually calling adultery "healthy."

It's of little value, however, for us to moan and groan about the awful moral deterioration in the secular culture while ignoring the slide in moral standards in the church. The Apostle Peter wrote, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" If you think immorality isn't a problem in the church today, you're hiding your head in the sand. In the years I have served as a pastor, I have done more counseling in regard to sexual sin than for heresy, grief, conflict, and depression combined.

The first thing I want to make clear is that this sermon is for all of us. It's obviously relevant for those who have sinned in this manner or those who are undergoing severe temptation right now. It's relevant for the elderly. Statistics indicate that sex outside of marriage is growing at a faster rate among those over 65, particularly among the widowed, than in any other segment of society, in part because of attempts to beat the social security system. It's terribly relevant for career singles and teens, who find themselves in a far more sex-saturated atmosphere than many of us experienced growing up.

Our topic today is even relevant for those who have *not* sinned sexually and are self-righteous enough to think it couldn't happen to them. First Corinthians 10:12 says, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." So don't tune me out, even though this is not the most pleasant topic for a Sunday morning worship service. If by addressing this subject today I can prevent one person from going down the tubes or one marriage from going on the rocks, it will have been worthwhile.

We know what the Scriptures say, don't we? The Seventh Commandment says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Hebrews 13:4 adds, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge." And 1 Cor. 6:18-20

extends the prohibition against sexual sin to those not yet married, as it says,

“Flee from sexual immorality (fornication). All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”

But the primary Scripture text I want us to focus on this morning comes from the life of Joseph in Genesis 39. I think sometimes we learn more from the real-life examples of Scripture than we do from heavily doctrinal treatises, because the truth is clothed in flesh and blood.

We began studying the life of Joseph last Sunday. He was the eleventh son of Jacob and lived in the 19th century B.C., nearly 4000 years ago. At the age of 17 he was sold into slavery by his own brothers and became a household slave of a high government official in Egypt. Again we will read the entire chapter.

By the way, we are skipping chapter 38 because it has nothing directly to do with the life of Joseph. It contains a sorry story about one of his brothers, Judah, and his blatantly immoral and hypocritical behavior. We could benefit in studying it because of the stark contrast with Joseph’s behavior here in chapter 39, but its principal contribution is that it supplies information about the royal genealogy. I encourage you to read it on your own. Now let’s turn our attention to Genesis 39.

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.

The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So he 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, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

But 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. No 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?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She 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.

When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

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

When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. Joseph'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, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did. This is the Word of the Lord.

Joseph experiences success and prosperity explainable only by divine providence. (1-6)

What an incredible story we find here at the beginning of chapter 39! In a relatively short time Joseph is promoted from slave to personal attendant to trustee in charge of Potiphar's household to caretaker of everything he owned. We are inclined to speculate that he must have had tremendous skill, energy, ambition, integrity, etc., but the text focuses on only one factor in explaining Joseph's prosperity: The Lord was with him. That is mentioned in verse 2, in verse 3, in verse 5, and again in verses 21 and 23 when Joseph ends up in prison.

I'm not suggesting that he lacked skill or energy or ambition or integrity; in fact, I'm sure he possessed all those things. But none of those things, nor all of them put together, can explain Joseph's meteoric rise to success; only God's blessings can explain it.

With a measure of success often comes an even greater measure of temptation. Thus we shouldn't be surprised to read that . . .

Joseph experiences temptation that is powerful, persistent, and sudden. (6-15)

Think with me for a moment about the seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife. What makes it such a powerful temptation? I think it is that Joseph has nearly every worldly rationalization at his disposal. Let me mention a few possible excuses that might have crossed his mind:

1. God allowed him to be sold into slavery. What does he owe God?
2. He has been separated from his family and friends for years. Who would know? Character, you know, is best revealed, not in how we act in public or at church, but rather how we act when we're alone.
3. He has been forced to adapt to a new culture which is thoroughly pagan. The slogan,

"Everybody's doing it," was probably close to reality in Egypt.

4. Joseph could well have thought, "I didn't go looking for trouble. It came to me." That is true, but God holds us responsible, not only for the sin we seek out, but also for that which we fall into.

5. Joseph has natural good looks. He is the son of the beautiful Rachel. He could have said, "God, you made me irresistible." There are some for whom beauty can actually be a curse, especially if Christ is not been made Lord of that area of life.

6. Potiphar's wife apparently isn't finding fulfillment in her marriage. The first verse says that Potiphar is one of Pharaoh "officials." The Hebrew word literally means "eunuch," which shouldn't surprise us since many of the palace employees were required to be eunuchs in order to protect the king's harem. If that is the case with Potiphar, his wife undoubtedly has some unfulfilled personal needs. Joseph could rationalize that he is only trying to "minister" to her.

7. He is safe. Verse 11 says there is no one else in the house. Potiphar's wife surely won't tell. Who would find out?

You think this isn't a real and powerful temptation? Don't kid yourself. But I want us to notice that this temptation is also both persistent and sudden. Look at v. 10: "She spoke to Joseph day after day." That's persistent temptation. But in v. 11 it says, "One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She 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.'" That's sudden temptation. Some people, especially those who are impulsive, find sudden temptation to be particularly difficult. Others are more vulnerable to persistent temptation. They can resist the sudden overwhelming temptation but tend to get worn down when it comes at them like a dripping faucet. Joseph faced both.

But he refuses to yield. How do you explain such resistance? It is impossible to explain as merely the exercise of a strong will. He is no embalmed mummy, no plaster-of-Paris saint lacking red blood cells in his veins. I think the key has to be found in four facts: Joseph has a proper view of sin, a proper view of God, a proper view of others, and a proper view of himself.

Joseph is able to resist temptation due to four godly perspectives: (9-12)

1. First, he has a proper view of sin. (9) In v. 9 he asks Potiphar's wife, "How could I do *such a wicked thing*?" He calls it what it is. Sin is still sin, even when it's dressed up in all its finery. People are selling rat poison today and calling it food, and we're too dumb to see it.

This week the man whom President Bush has nominated to be the new Surgeon General, Dr. James Holsinger, ran into major opposition, particularly from leading Democratic presidential candidates, who often seem to take their marching instructions from the gay and lesbian lobby. Sixteen years ago this eminent physician testified that homosexual sex is "unnatural." Not even "immoral," mind you, just "unnatural." And for that major failure in political correctness, he is

being tarred and feathered as a “homophobe,” and thus incompetent to be the country’s Surgeon General.

It’s amazing to me how some are not satisfied just to have homosexuality declared legal; they want it declared “natural” even though God’s Word clearly declares it “unnatural.” Speaking of pagan Greeks and Romans, Paul says,

“God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.”

(Romans 1:26-7)

The notion that it is sinful to do what your body urges you to do is lost on this generation.

The sin in focus in our text today, and the one that is the greater temptation for most of us, is heterosexual promiscuity. But whether we’re dealing homosexual sin or heterosexual sin, the prophet Isaiah speaks loudly to our culture as well as his own when he says,

*“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,
who put darkness for light and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.”* (Isaiah 5:20)

Frankly, I think we’re seeing a lot of that today. It’s one thing to do evil and then try to find rationalizations and excuses for it. It’s another thing to do evil and call it good. Joseph has a proper view of sin.

2. He has a proper view of God. (9) Joseph says to Potiphar’s wife in verse 9, "How could I do such a wicked thing, and sin against God?" Here I am reminded of King David, who came clean regarding his sin with Bathsheba in Psalm 51 by admitting to God, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” On the surface it seems ludicrous for David to say he has sinned only against God. He certainly sinned against Uriah—he had him murdered. He sinned against Bathsheba, he sinned against the child that was born, who died because of David’s sin, and he sinned against the nation. But clearly what he means is that ultimately sin is against God, and that aspect of guilt is greater than any other.

A dramatist has told the story of Joseph's temptation, and in one particularly profound scene he shows Potiphar's wife preparing her bedroom and herself for the seduction. In the process she places a robe over the head of her Egyptian god and says to Joseph, "He will not see." "But," says Joseph, "My God always sees." She wouldn't think of committing this act in front of her husband, but she has no fear of her gods (so long as their heads are covered). But Joseph fears God (see 42:18). I can't help but think of something Jesus says in Luke 8:17: “For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open.” Joseph believed that. Third,

3. Joseph has a proper view of others. (8-9) Look at verses 8 & 9. Joseph goes on to protest to Potiphar's wife, "With me in charge, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife." Joseph knows

the meaning of loyalty. Someone has said that adultery is of the devil, if for no other reason, because it is the betrayal of an oath and the breach of a trust. But, of course, it is heinous for many other reasons as well. Joseph is struck by the terrible act of treachery that yielding would involve.

4. Joseph has a proper view of himself. (12) He knows his limitations, for verse 12 says that when she catches him by the garment saying, "Lie with me!" he leaves his garment in her hand and flees. His choice to flee rather than fight is validated several times in the NT. We've already read 1 Cor. 6 where the command is given to "Flee from sexual immorality." Paul sends the same message to his young protege Timothy, "Flee the evil desires of youth." Joseph no doubt knows the possible consequences of leaving his coat behind (he could be framed, and was), but he also knows the dangers of going back to get it. He values a good coat less than a good conscience. He values *everything* less than a good conscience.

Steve Zeisler writes perceptively,

"We sometimes hear that temptation to sexual sin is too powerful to say 'no' to, but that is not true. If we cannot say 'no,' it is because we have said 'yes' too many times earlier in the process. We must therefore choose to say 'no at the beginning, before it is too late to say 'no'."

I wish I could tell you that Joseph's stand enables him to live happily ever after. But it doesn't quite work out that way. You've heard it said that "Heav'n has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned!" This passage is a case in point.

Joseph pays a heavy price for refusing to yield, but God remembers him. (13-23)

Potiphar's wife turns on him and falsely accuses him. Her husband believes her, or pretends to, and Joseph is remanded to the place where the king's prisoners are kept. That doesn't mean a country-club prison fit for a king; more than likely it means a dungeon where those whom the king wishes to teach a lesson suffer in a manner fit for a king's enemy.

Prison of any kind is an awful price to pay for purity. But not too high. The Psalmist writes, "I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the House of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness." And Heb. 11:24-26, speaking of a later man of God, says,

"By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward."

Thankfully God doesn't leave Joseph there to rot in prison. Test him? Yes. Abandon him? No. In the last three verses of the chapter we read,

But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made

responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

Did Joseph know in advance that God would reward him this way, and later even rescue him from prison? No, I'm sure he did not. But did He know God was trustworthy? Yes, he knew that. John Wesley, perhaps the greatest preacher of 18th century England, once prayed, "God, give me 100 men who hate nothing but sin and fear no one but God, and I will take England for the Gospel." Joseph reminds me of the kind of man Wesley prayed for. He hated nothing but sin and feared no one but God. May his tribe increase.

We have talked today about the problem of sexual sin, which is attacking the Christian home with unprecedented force today. In these closing moments I want to turn our attention away from the story of Joseph and toward ourselves by asking three important application questions.

Three application questions:

1. What should you do if you have been guilty of sexual sin? First, recognize that sins of immorality are sins which God can and does forgive. While these sins often have much more severe consequences than other sins, they are not necessarily any more sinful. As with any sin, the thing to do is to confess it, forsake it, and accept God's forgiveness.

Then repent and purpose in your heart never to do it again. Repentance is a mental and spiritual state which acknowledges an act, accepts the seriousness of it, experiences sorrow over it, rejects all excuses, and purposes to stop. I don't say that a person has failed to repent if he ever does it again, but I believe there must be a desire and intention to stop.

I think especially in the case of sexual sin we must recognize the danger of repeated failure. I've talked to individuals who have said, "Well, I'm already an adulterer. I can't be any worse, so what does it matter if I do it again?" Well, I believe sexual sin has a cumulative effect. It's kind of like carbon monoxide poisoning. Eventually even a non-lethal dose can kill you because the poison accumulates in your system. The only way to deal with these kinds of sin is immediately, radically, and permanently.

2. What should you do if you are a victim of sexual sin? You must be willing to forgive. "But you don't understand, Pastor. That decision by my spouse was a breach of faith so traumatic I will never be able to forgive. Besides, I have read that Christ allowed divorce for immorality." On July 15 I plan to preach a message entitled, "Forgiving the Hard to Forgive." It's about Joseph's decision to forgive the brothers who sold him into slavery. I suspect everyone of us has someone in our life who is exceptionally hard to forgive, and if you have been the victim of adultery, you are certainly in that category.

I don't ask you to forgive that person because he or she deserves it. Forgiveness is never based on deserts. I don't ask you forgive for that person's sake at all. I ask you to forgive

because that's the only way you're going to find freedom. I ask you to forgive because God asks you to forgive.

Here's a question you must wrestle with: "How much has God forgiven you? Was this sin any worse than all the sins you have ever committed put together? And has God forgiven you of all those sins?" Jesus said, "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." (Matt. 6:14, 15).

Yes, I believe Jesus allowed for divorce when there is persistent, unrepentant immorality, but He didn't encourage it even then. He is glorified most when there is repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

3. What should you do if right now you are facing severe sexual temptation? I think it is not only likely, but almost certain, that some in this audience are there. Friend, don't dally with it. The person who plays with temptation will inevitably get burned. Did you notice the word which appeared in both Gen. 39 and I Cor. 6? I'm thinking of the word "Flee." Not a very courageous response to temptation, is it? But smart!

Would you rather be a hero or be holy? I fear that many Christians today, if caught in Potiphar's home with Potiphar's wife and the identical set of circumstances would have a far different reaction than Joseph. With no intention to go all the way with her, many would have seen this as a good opportunity to flirt around a little, check out the scenery, store up a few fantasies for future use. And that's the very reason Joseph escaped unscathed while many today are watching their families crumble right before their eyes.

Of course, not every case of immorality begins in such a sinister fashion as Joseph's. Charles Mylander describes a fairly typical beginning for a modern affair:

An unwary Christian often becomes vulnerable because the tender talk with his or her spouse is missing. . . It may start with a sexual problem they no longer talk about. The finances pose trouble, and the only communication is a fight. . . Then, one of them begins confiding in an employee or neighbor of the opposite sex. This person, perhaps divorced or hurting in his or her own marriage, listens intently and seems to care.

Nothing in the conversation seems to hint of any immoral activity. Each feels it's innocent, harmless, and even helpful to the other. Tender talk about real feelings, and often about marriage problems, is going on outside of marriage rather than within it. The light turns amber. Before long, "innocent" touching begins taking place. If she is his secretary, he puts a hand on her shoulder while giving instructions. If she is a friend, there's a social embrace, a warm pat, a friendly nudge.

Both would insist nothing is wrong with the limited physical contact between them because it's not related to sex. They are good friends and no more, or so they tell themselves. Each, however, is aware of the other's genuine admiration and acceptance. The light is changing

from amber to red.

During this stage, the couple begins spending more time together. At first, they just happen to work on the same projects or they end up at the same events. It feels good to be together. But before long, the two are making excuses to spend more time with each other. Lunch or dinner, special gifts, and private times with each other soon become the norm. By now both know they have much more than a casual friendship. But they rationalize that it's not adultery because, after all, they are not sleeping together. A solid red light is glowing.

Once emotional delight with the opposite sex is coming from outside the marriage, the danger is intense. The man suddenly realizes he is in love with this other woman, although he tells himself he also cares for his wife. The woman knows she is in love with this other man and often feels she's made a mistake about the man she did marry. No more warning lights—it's too late to flee.

If you think this is a far-fetched tale found only in romance novels, you definitely aren't in tune with reality. It's all around us and we must be wary.

Conclusion. May I take you back to the fact that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, a Holy of Holies, a sanctuary. Let me ask you to compare your treatment of the sanctuary which is your body with your treatment of this sanctuary in which we are worshiping. Most of us have a certain respect for the sanctuary in a church building. We talk a little more quietly in here; we wouldn't run down the aisles; I don't know anyone who would smoke or swear in this room. And yet the Scriptures nowhere state that there's anything sacred about the room where a church meets. In fact, Acts 17:24 says that the Lord "dwells not in temples made with hands."

But the Scriptures do say that the physical body of the believer is sacred, and yet we find it relatively easy to desecrate these temples and leave them in ruins. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God which is your spiritual service of worship."

Some of us need to improve the maintenance on our temples. If we will keep them pure and holy, the Holy Spirit can continue to dwell in them with power and glory.

i. Steve Zeisler, "*That Which You Do in Secret*," <http://www.pbc.org/dp/zeisler/4044.html>, 6.