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## The Family of Abraham: Part 29—Joseph in Potiphar's House

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Today, I discuss Genesis 39, the story of Joseph in Potiphar's house and Joseph's resistance of Potiphar's wife.

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### Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 29th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're looking at chapter 39 of the book of Genesis, which concerns Joseph in Potiphar's house. In my previous discussion, I stressed the importance of reading these chapters alongside each other, both in terms of their continuing themes and then also in terms of their juxtaposed characters.

So we've had in chapter 37 the garment being removed, the garment presented as evidence, someone thrown into a pit, the use of goats as a means of disguise, these sorts of things. They're themes we've seen already within the book of Genesis, but they

recur. And then in chapter 38, they appear again in a different form, a different configuration.

And here we have a third rendition, as it were, a third iteration of some of these themes in a way that juxtaposes the story of Joseph with the story of Judah, and which also continues some of the themes by which their stories are entangled. It repeats the experience of Joseph himself a second time. Once again, you'll have a story of things entrusted into his hands, this favoured, disfavoured lad, and then the favoured lad being given a special privileges, a garment, that being stripped from him in part by jealous brothers, and then he's thrown into a pit, and then the way that God works in that situation.

And it contrasts with the story of Judah. Judah is tempted by a woman and tempted to lie with her, and he just goes straight ahead, whereas in the story here, we have a different situation. Joseph resists.

And there's a contrast, but also similarities. The contrast is seen in the fact that one resists, one does not. The similarities that in both cases, there are personal items taken and later produced as evidence against them.

In chapter 39, then, we need to see this chapter in terms of the wider themes of this cycle, and then the book of Genesis as a whole. And we'll see this as we go through, just how deeply embedded it is within the broader narrative of the book. The story is bookmarked by two statements that are very closely paralleled with each other.

At the very start of the chapter, we read of Joseph being brought down to Egypt, and then his rising up within the house of Potiphar. Now, Joseph had been taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, brought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there. The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man, and he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all he did to prosper in his hand. And Joseph found a favour in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put in his hand.

So it was from the time that he had made him overseer of his house, and all that he had, that the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake, and the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had in the house and in the field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's hand, and he did not know what he had except for the bread which he ate. And Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

At the end of the chapter, a very similar statement, then Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in the prison. But the Lord was with Joseph, and showed him favour, and he gave

him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison, whatever they did there it was his doing.

The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's hand, because the Lord was with him, and whatever he did the Lord made him prosper. So there are very close parallels between these statements. Joseph is taken down to Egypt, he's put in jail.

God is with Joseph, and then God is with Joseph at the end again. He's in the house, he's in the jail, he finds favour in the sight of Potiphar, he finds favour in the sight of the jailer. All things are placed into his hands, all prisoners are placed into his hands.

Potiphar does not concern himself with any of his property, and the jailer in charge of the prison does not supervise anything under Joseph's hand. God causes everything that he does to prosper, and God causes everything that he does to prosper at the end. There is a very close parallel as you go through this, and we're seeing even in this dramatic change in Joseph's condition that occurs in the course of this chapter.

There is a deep continuity in the way that God is favouring and blessing him, and we see this continuity in the way that both Potiphar and then later the jailer are favouring and recognising that God is with this particular lad, that this one is trustworthy, that this man is one that God is blessing, even in that situation. This story is also one that might recall the story of Jacob in Laban's house. All of Laban's property, Laban prospers as Jacob serves him, and as he's served, as he serves Laban, he is blessed.

God causes everything that he does to prosper, and so we have similar things happening in the case of Jacob's son Joseph. The two experiences are paralleled. Jacob is reduced to a sort of servitude in the house of Laban, but yet even in that state of servitude and increasing servitude, God blesses whatever he does, and in a similar manner his son is blessed.

His son is raised up, his son is blessed by God and made to prosper even in this condition of servitude. There is, however, a problem, and there is this woman in the house of Potiphar, Potiphar's wife, who sees that Joseph is an attractive man and she wants to have sexual relations with him, and there are two temptation scenes. She first comes to him and she casts longing eyes or lifts up her eyes upon Joseph and says, lie with me, and he refuses and he gives three reasons.

His trust, the trust that his master has placed in him and his trustworthiness in response to that, the fact that he has not kept back anything from him except for this one thing, his wife, and then finally that he cannot do this wickedness and sin against God. Now there may be some parallels with the story of the forbidden fruit being played out here. We've seen that played out in the story of Esau and Jacob and the red stew.

We've seen it also in the story of Abraham and Sarai and Hagar, and this forbidden fruit story I think may be playing out here as well. There is trust placed in the one that's placed over all of the house. He's an Adam-type figure, and Potiphar is in this situation, like God, who gives everything, commits everything into the hand of the servant who has given rule over all the house except for one thing, one thing he's not allowed to touch, and he does not.

So Joseph is faithful in the house of Potiphar in a way that parallels the experience of Adam but contrasts with Adam's unfaithfulness in that situation. So the one thing that's held back from him, and his final reason is because how could he do this wickedness and sin against God? And so he sees the importance of being trustworthy in response to the trust of his master, and also he sees himself as belonging to a greater master, God himself. As we look at the story of Joseph, this theme of loyalty is a very prominent one.

The question of to whom is he loyal? We've seen that in chapter 37. The questions that Jacob might have, his first, the son that he's giving all these firstborn privileges to, entrusting all these things to, is he really loyal to him or is he loyal to something else? Is he loyal to his own advancement? Here Joseph receives a test of loyalty. Is he going to be truly trustworthy or is he just going to go for the appearance of trustworthiness? Now he could have the appearance of trustworthiness by sleeping with his master's wife.

His master would be none the wiser, but he, and there would be less chance of him being attacked by the wife and reduced in his status, he could play both sides of the situation. He could have the benefit of sleeping with his master's wife, betraying him, while also having the benefit of seeming to be this trustworthy servant, and everyone in the house being pleased with him, having influence with both the master and the mistress of the house. But he resists and he stands and he does what he's supposed to do and he is expelled as a result of it.

He's cast out of the garden. He loses his garment. Rather than having a garment placed upon him, as he's put out, he has that garment removed from him.

Now this might seem to be a very strange sort of Eden story, but these themes help us to read it, I think. There is a test concerning the forbidden fruit and there's faithfulness in a situation where it is not in the advantage of Joseph to be faithful, in his immediate advantage. It would not seem to be that way.

It would seem that he could maybe get by better if he actually betrayed his master. And then he resists on this occasion and then it says day by day she speaks to Joseph and he does not heed her to lie with her or to be with her. And then it happens around that time.

Joseph went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house were inside. She caught him by his garment saying lie with me, but he left his garment in her hand and fled and ran outside. So she keeps the garment beside her and then calls to the men

of the house and speaks to the men of the house, see he has brought into us a Hebrew to mock us.

He came into me to lie with me and I cried out with a loud voice and it happened when he heard that I lifted my voice and cried out that he left his garment with me and fled and went outside. So she kept his garment with her until his master came home. Pay attention to what we're reading here.

Where have we heard this sort of thing before? We've heard it in the previous two chapters ago where Joseph has a garment taken from him and that garment is taken from him and then later produced as evidence. But going back even further there's something else. Read the story of Abraham and Abraham and Sarai and Hagar and then later on that second part of the story in chapter 21.

There are great similarities. The mistress of the house mistreating the servant and in that first case it's the Egyptian in the house of the Hebrews. In this case it's a Hebrew in the house of the Egyptians.

There are deep similarities. This one who's cast out and why is he cast out? Because he has been brought in a Hebrew to mark us and that term to mark or to laugh it's the same term as we see used as that which leads to Ishmael and Hagar being sent out. Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian whom she had borne to Abraham scoffing or literally Isaicing.

Therefore she said to Abraham cast out this bondwoman and her son for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son namely with Isaac and the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son. And then in the previous chapter and previous reference to and the story of Sarai and Hagar. Hagar is cast out.

Sarai says to Abraham my wrong be upon you I gave my maid into your embrace and when she saw that she had conceived I became despised in her eyes the Lord judged between you and me and Sarah deals harshly with her and she flees from her presence. So here again we have a servant who's mistreated that flees. The servant flees from his mistress just as Hagar fled from her mistress and then later we have the dealings between the mistress and the master of the house and the mistress actually perpetrating an injustice against the servant.

The first case is Hagar in the house of Abraham and then this case is the story of Joseph in Potiphar's house and the instigating event or the event that really provoked the casting out of the bondwoman was the fact that Ishmael was Isaicing, was laughing, mocking, scoffing, whatever it is in some way or other he was laughing in a way that threatened Isaac's status and here we have twice it is mentioned that the Hebrew Joseph is brought in to mock, to laugh and so once again Joseph is an Ishmael character. In the previous chapter 37 I've remarked upon the way in which the Ishmael story was playing

out again. The story of the child expelled from the house, the story of the child that's cast out of the family and the Ishmaelites, the fact that they are the ones that sell him to Potiphar, the fact that he is cast down, that the pit is empty of water, that there is the wandering around in the wilderness meeting with all these sorts of events one after another and the reference to Shechem and the shoulder.

All of these events recall the earlier story of Ishmael being sent out and now once again Joseph, the one who's bearing the legacy of Abraham's house, is suffering an Ishmael-like experience himself. What once was done by his forefather and his foremother to a servant in their house, he's now in the house of the Egyptians and suffering a similar fate. There are great parallels there that help us to understand then the story of Joseph as an Ishmael-type character.

He's brought in to mock us and notice again Sarah or Sarai brought this judgment against Abraham in that situation. It was Abraham's fault and in the same way here Potiphar's wife blames Potiphar. Again there are forbidden fruit themes here that Potiphar's wife is in some sense Joseph is the one who resists the temptation but Potiphar's wife is like someone who, like Adam, and she tries to shift the blame.

Or maybe she's like Eve saying that the serpent that deceived me and I ate. But I think she plays a role more similar to Adam here that she's the one who blames or she's the one who blames some other party. She blames the woman whom you gave.

In the same way the serpent who you gave is the one who deceived me, is the one who tried to take me. And as we read this I think reading it against the background of that first story of the forbidden fruit and then the second this other story of the forbidden fruit with Hagar and Ishmael and Abraham and Sarah I think it helps to understand the events that are occurring here. So the garment is taken from Joseph and then later on presented as evidence.

But first of all she does something else. She gets the men of her house and she speaks to them first. See he has brought into us a Hebrew to mock us and he came in to me to lie with me and I'll crowd out with a loud voice.

Now why is she speaking with the men of her house? Why would she do that? Well they're the servants alongside Joseph. They're his brothers as it were. And once again the brothers of Joseph are jealous of him because he's risen in status and so they want to cast him out.

She's also trying to get leverage in dealing with her husband. Presumably she does not believe that her husband will just take her word for it. Her husband knows her character better than that and he's not going to trust her.

And so what she's trying to do is get leverage rather than just speak the truth of the

situation and allow that to carry the day because she knows that the truth is that Joseph did not in fact lie with her. Rather what she's doing is exploiting her position within her position of power within the house to cast out this bondman. And as the bondman is cast out then she can get away and she's getting the other men of the house to join with her in that because they are jealous brothers of Joseph.

She speaks to Potiphar and Potiphar's response is one of anger. His response of anger. Who is... to whom is the anger directed at? Is it directed at Joseph? I don't think it is.

I think it's primarily directed at his wife. He knows the situation and he sees also that she's using the leverage of her power and her position within the house to get this... to resolve the situation. She's not actually dealing with this as a matter of justice.

She's doing it to exploit her power. She's doing it as a means of getting her way because she has not got her way and he knows there's something up I think and so his anger is not primarily directed at Joseph. And as we read the story further I think there are details that bear that out.

He puts Joseph in the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were confined. Now why would he put Joseph in the place of the king's prisoners? That's a strange place to put him. Why not just put Joseph... I mean Joseph's a servant.

Why not just put him with the common prisoners in the regular jail? He doesn't do that. He puts him with the king's prisoners. I think there are a couple of reasons for this.

First of all the king's prisoners would be treated better than the common prisoners but then also he was the one who was the captain of the Pharaoh's guard and so he is the one who keeps the prison. Later on in chapter 40 we see he's put in the custody of the house of the captain of the guard or the butler and the baker are put in the custody of the house of the captain of the guard in the prison, the place where Joseph was confined. Now who is the captain of the guard in chapter 39? It's Potiphar and so he's putting him in his own personal prison that he oversees and that is a very insignificant thing to do.

He's suggesting, I think, by that action he still wants Joseph as part of his extended house, no longer his domestic house but now the house of the prison that he is ruling over for Pharaoh but he recognises that Joseph is a good man, he's an innocent man and that his wife is not to be trusted and so he does not take his wife's word for it. He puts Joseph in the prison that he looks after and he allows him to rise to great stature within that prison in a way that parallels the rise to stature that he has at the beginning of the story. So we have again patterns playing out.

First of all we have Joseph rising to power and being envied by brothers, having a garment removed from him, having that garment presented as evidence against him to a father figure to whom he has been loyal and that was in chapter 37 and it's in chapter

39. The father figure in that story is Potiphar. The brothers are the other servants and Potiphar's wife is the one that produces the evidence against him, this garment that has been stolen from him that's presented as false evidence.

But there is a difference. In the first case that garment is taken from him and he's a victim with little power of his own. He proves his loyalty to his father in going to Chekhem and then later to Dothan but in this case he has even more agency.

There's a position of trust that he's placed in that he could have seemed to be trustworthy while not actually being trustworthy. He could have rejected the word of his master or he could have rejected the trust of his master and slept with his wife while still appearing trustworthy and he doesn't do that. In the first story we saw the way that appearing to be trustworthy actually played in Joseph's favour and the way in which that raised questions about is he really doing this for the sake of loyalty to his father or is he doing it for the means of his own advancement.

Here we see that Joseph is indeed a trustworthy man. He's a man who will be trustworthy even when it is not in his favour to be, even when it will lead to a situation when he appears not to be. And so the second time he's placed into the pit there is an amplification of the moral development of the character of Joseph.

The first time he's thrown into the pit more as a victim. Now he has been faithful to his father, he's proved his loyalty in a difficult dangerous mission to his brothers but he's treated more as a victim in that story. In this story he has more agency.

He leaves the garment in the hands of his mistress. It's not as if it's just taken from him by force. He flees and he has some agency in the situation and he shows loyalty and through that he gets thrown into prison.

So there's a playing out of the same story but a playing out in a way that advances the themes. He's loyal to a deeper degree in this story and then this story plays out again in the prison. We again have two dreams within that and then he's in a pit and will he be, will God raise him up from this second pit? And so looking through these stories we'll see that they are all connected in subtle ways.

They are ways that help us to read what's taking place, to understand what's truly occurring, to understand the contrast between Judah and Joseph, to understand the way in which Joseph's character is being developed. His loyalty is being tested on a deeper level at each point and his loyalty at this point is revealed not merely, it's not just about doing it for his own advantage nor is it just doing it to be trustworthy to his master. It's a step even further.

He's loyal to God. How can I do this wickedness in God's sight? And it's faithfulness in a forbidden fruit situation where others have failed, where Esau, the Esau character, Esau



originally failed concerning the and despised his birthright and took some of the red stew and Judah failed and slept with Tamar. Again that's a despising the birthright type story.

Now Joseph is someone who succeeds in that situation even though it has difficult consequences for him in the short term he is faithful. What else can we say about this story? First of all we can see pairs. There are pairings between characters like Judah and Joseph but there are more, there's more than that going on.

There are ways in which we'll see doubles within the story of Joseph and Judah. Judah has two sons that die. He has two sons through Tamar.

There are two temptation themes with Potiphar's wife. There are two dreams, the baker and the cupbearer and there's two characters, the baker and the cupbearer. There's two dreams of Pharaoh.

There's two sets of seven years. There's two sons of Joseph. There's two visits of the brothers.

There's two times the Egyptians begged Joseph for food and in all of and there are two dreams that Joseph has earlier on in the story. As we read this then we can see that it's playing upon repetition. It's playing upon certain ways in which things are juxtaposed, certain ways in which themes are developed as they're repeated a second time over and so being thrown into the pit again and then raised up.

It's playing out the original story but with a variation. It helps us to see that Joseph is growing. There's something that is played out once and then played out with an amplification.

The story of Judah and then the story of Joseph. The story of Joseph's first dream, then the second dream. The story of the first dream concerning the set of seven years and then the second dream and in each case there's some progression that takes place that helps us to understand again what God is doing through all of this.

All of those pairings is something that James Jordan has highlighted and so I'm taking that from his notes. If you want to read more about that look at his series on the life of Joseph. He's put down into the pit again and God will raise him up.

We've seen the parallels between Ishmael and Joseph and once again we have an Ishmael type character thrown out, brought into the wilderness and goes down to Egypt and again we have the Ishmael type character who's cast out by his mistress who's falsely accused where the mistress uses leverage of her position in the house against the bond servant. And so the experience of Joseph's ancestors are playing out in his story. The consequences of what they have done, the sins they have committed, they get played out in the next generation and so we're seeing contrasts, we're seeing continuation of themes and we're seeing recurrence of themes that have seemingly

been forgotten.

Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow with some thoughts on the baker and the cupbearer and the two dreams. If you have any questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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