

Main Idea: When the Lord is real in our lives, it will show. He will show. His presence will make a difference in tangible ways. We see this in Joseph’s life as he responds to three tests in Genesis 39.

Review: Four scenes in Genesis 37...

- A. The Plot (12-20)
- B. The Pit (21-24)
- C. The Plea-Bargain (25-30)
- D. The Pain (31-36)
 - 1. A Broken Father (31-35)
 - 2. A Betrayed Brother (36)

- I. When the Lord is real, it shows in our response to rejection (1-6).
- II. When the Lord is real, it shows in our response to temptation (7-10).
 - A. Joseph resisted on ethical grounds (8-9a).
 - B. Joseph resisted on spiritual grounds (9b-10).
 - 1. Joseph recognized temptation.
 - 2. Joseph avoided temptation.
- III. When the Lord is real, it shows in our response to misrepresentation (11-23).
 - A. First he lost his freedom.
 - B. Then he lost his reputation—unjustly so.
 - C. When Joseph was at his lowest, God was still real in his life!

Make It Personal: Practical lessons from Genesis 39

- 1. Practice the presence of God in your life.
- 2. When the Lord is real in your life, others will see it.
 - a) Potiphar saw it (3).
 - b) The warden saw it (23).
- 3. When it doesn’t seem like the Lord is real, know that He is.

Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 6:11-21

Is it possible to live a pure and godly life in this immoral and ungodly world? It’s hard, isn’t it? If you are a young person or older, you are bombarded by temptation right and left. Can we withstand the onslaught? Yes, but there’s only one way.

The Lord must be *real* in our lives.

Is He in your life? The truth is, we can’t fully answer that question sitting in a pew on Sunday, or standing behind a pulpit.

How can we tell if the God who made us is real in our lives? The answer is, when the Lord is real in our lives, it will show. He will show. His presence will make a difference in tangible and obvious ways.

That’s precisely what we see in Joseph’s life as he responds to three tests in Genesis 39. The Lord was indeed *real* to Joseph. And Genesis 39 shows us, as well as how the same can be true in our lives.

You know the story. It’s a great story about Joseph. But it’s an even greater story about God. Indeed, God is the main character in the story of Joseph. I challenged you last week to look for God in every episode of Joseph’s story, which is really Jacob’s story (according to Genesis 37:2), which is really a vital link in the story of the Bible, the story of how God is rescuing a people for His glory.

God is there, behind the scenes, over the scenes, controlling the scenes. And the God of Joseph is the God who is in control of the details of our lives.

Joseph knew that. The Lord was real to him, not just one day a week, but when things were going well on Tuesday and messy on Thursday.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ This message is adapted from two series at WBC in 1992 and 2002.

As we ponder Genesis 39 today, we're going to see that when the Lord is real, it shows, by His grace, in our response to three tests.

- I. It shows in our response to **rejection** (1-6).
- II. It shows in our response to **temptation** (7-10).
- III. It shows in our response to **misrepresentation** (11-23).

The Setting:

Last week, we looked at the first episode of Joseph's life in Genesis 37. What a great tragedy gripped us in the four scenes. We saw the plot, the pit, the plea-bargain, and the pain as Joseph was betrayed by his own brothers.

When we turn the page, something unusual happens in the narrative. An unexpected break occurs in Genesis 38 (see 37:36 and 39:1), as Moses inserts a shameful story from the life of Judah, Joseph's brother.

And what a story it is! Judah married a Canaanite woman who bore him three sons. Judah ends up sleeping with his daughter in law, Tamar, who pretended to be a prostitute, who became pregnant with his twin boys.

What does that have to do with the Joseph story? Most commentators have very little to say about the interruption in chapter 38, other than to say it's a historical parenthesis.

But this is God's Word, and the Spirit of God always has purpose for what He includes and the way He includes it. So if He's telling us the Joseph story, and interrupts it with something from Judah's life, He wants us to see something.

This apparent "interruption" is linked to three factors...

1. *Judah is the rightful heir of Jacob, and the ancestor of the Messiah.*

Remember, the purpose of chapters 37-50 according to 37:2 is to give us "the account of Jacob." And the account of Jacob is part of God's gracious plan to provide the world with the Messiah, who will come from Judah's line.

2. *Genesis 38 reveals the result of sin.* This of course is why every descendant of Adam needs this Messiah, to save us from our sins. And this includes even those in the Messiah's lineage, starting with Judah.

Judah and nine of his brothers sinned against Joseph in horrendous ways in chapter 37. And now the seeds of his sinful living begin to produce a harvest in his own life. You can't read Genesis 38 without thinking, "Man, what a messed up man and family!"

All because of one thing. Sin.

Yet in His grace God worked with and through this sinful family to bring into the world the solution for sin, in the person of His own Son, the God-man, who would die and conquer death to pay sin's penalty and break sin's power.

3. *There is a stark contrast between Jacob and Joseph in Genesis 38 & 39.*

Genesis 38 records the immoral acts of Jacob. You can hardly wait to end the story, it's so ugly. But then Genesis 39 highlights the moral purity of Joseph. It says that we can live holy lives when the Lord is real to us.

So let's look at the three tests.

I. When the Lord is real, it shows in our response to rejection (1-6).

Verse 1 "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."

As this chapter begins, Joseph is a rejected seventeen year old. He has lost his freedom. His brothers sold him. The Ishmaelites transported him to Egypt and resold

him to an Egyptian named Potiphar. There Joseph was, a slave, far away from his beloved father, rejected by the world.

Humanly speaking, you'd have to say things were bleak. Joseph didn't have a thing going for him, or did he? I want you to take special note of the next five word phrase, for it is the key to the fortitude of Joseph's life.

Verse 2 "The LORD was with Joseph."

The Bible need say something only one time for it to be important. If it repeats it twice, you know it's vital. If three times, we'd better pay special attention! Notice:

v 3 "the LORD was with him"

v 21 "the LORD was with him"

v 23 " the LORD was with Joseph"

"You mean to tell me," someone objects, "that God was with Joseph when his wicked brothers threw him in the pit and sold him into slavery?"

Yes.

"That God was with Joseph when he was placed on the auction block, and controlled the bidding so that a leading official named Potiphar purchased this young Hebrew?"

Yes.

You say, "I don't understand. Why would God allow something so terrible to happen to one of His own?"

One of the great Christians of the past century was a Dutch woman named Corrie TenBoom. In her book, *The Hiding Place*, she tells the horrid, yet true story of her persecution by the Nazis. She herself was not a Jew. But because she aided the Jews, she was driven to a death camp in Germany. She saw people die. She watched her sister die there in Ravensbrook. She felt the sting of a whip. Yet while enduring a hell on earth, she radiated hope. Not a fake hope, but a real hope. The hope generated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. She knew that Jesus Christ had defeated man's greatest enemy, death, and offers life to all who will trust in Him.

It's that hope that strengthens us in the trials of life. I like the way Corrie put it, "However deep the pit, God's love is deeper still."

The Lord was real to Corrie TenBoom and she chose to focus on what she knew to be true, the gospel, rather than on what she did not know.

We see Joseph doing the same. He knew God was with him. Watch what happened.

Verses 2-6 "The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. ³ When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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."

Who was Potiphar? We're told he was a royal official in Egypt. The Pharaoh he served was probably Sesostris II, who ruled from 1897-1879 BC. Potiphar not only knew Pharaoh, but worked for him as captain of the guard.

And into that household God placed Joseph.

You have to admire Joseph. To use the well known cliché, life handed him a lemon, so he made lemonade! He could have moped, but he didn't. He could have had a pity party. But again he didn't.

Had he been wronged? Without question. He'd been violated by his brothers and sold into slavery. Yet he purposed to be the best slave he could be.

And God blessed him for it.

Joseph gained favor with his master. Potiphar promoted Joseph up the ladder. First he was made his master's personal attendant. Then he was placed in charge of the entire household. Finally he was promoted to being in charge of all of Potiphar's possessions. Potiphar delegated everything to Joseph except the food he ate (says verse 6).

What did God do for Potiphar's estate because of Joseph? Verse 5 says (KJV), "The Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake."

Why did God put Joseph in Potiphar's house? What purpose could there have been in allowing Joseph to administrate this domestic operation?

Let's answer that question with another question. What would Joseph be doing in a few years? Oh, he certainly didn't know it yet, but he would be administrating the affairs of the entire country of Egypt. There in Potiphar's house, God was preparing Joseph and giving him the managerial skills he would need later.

There's a lesson here. Be faithful where you are.

You say, "I don't like the job I've got. I deserve better."

Nothing necessarily wrong with considering a job change, but did God give you the job you have? Did He put you where you are? Then be faithful. God rewards faithfulness (Luke 19:17). Jesus said in Luke 16:10, "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much."

Of this we can be sure. The Lord is real. He is sovereign. And when He is real in our lives it shows, as it did in Joseph's life, when we're facing rejection.

II. When the Lord is real, it shows in our response to temptation (7-10).

The last phrase of verse 6 sort of baits the hook for the drama that follows. "Now Joseph was well-built and handsome."

Hmmm. Why are we told that? Here's why, verse 7, "And after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, 'Come to bed with me!'"

It sounds like prime time television, doesn't it? This happens all the time in our society with its sensuality. Verse 7 is so contemporary.

Verse 8 is not. Notice the first three words, "But he refused." Joseph *refused*. He said *no* to this wealthy and powerful woman's offer.

How? How did this warm-blooded young man do it? How did he overcome the temptation and keep his purity? He resisted on two grounds.

A. Joseph resisted temptation on ethical grounds (8-9a). "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. ⁹No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife."

What's Joseph saying to her? "No! I won't yield to your enticement, and here's the reason. *It wouldn't be right.*"

This is key. The first reason that yielding to temptation is wrong is because sin is wrong. Sin is a violation of an absolute moral standard. The sin of adultery, specifically, is a gross ethical violation of another person's God-given rights. In this case, it's Potiphar's rights. "My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are *his wife.*"

"Thou shalt not commit adultery." That is the seventh commandment (Ex 20:14).

Stack up against it the common rationale. “But I don't love my spouse any more. We're not compatible and don't have any feelings for each other any more. Besides, I love someone else and I can't live without them. So what's wrong with moving from this person to that one?”

Joseph tells us. Violating a marriage covenant by having sexual relations *wouldn't be right*. It is morally wrong and must be resisted on ethical grounds. That's why Joseph said *no*.

But that's not the only reason, and in fact, it's not the most important reason for the child of God to turn from sin. As Joseph told Mrs. Potipher in verse 9, “How then could I do such a wicked thing *and sin against God?*”

B. Joseph resisted temptation on spiritual grounds (9b-10). The reason for saying no to sin is not because we love morality. And it's certainly not because we fear the consequences of getting caught. Joseph could have easily rationalized. He was far away from his family. He was in a pagan society where immorality was accepted.

And besides, he didn't initiate the sexual advance. She did. He could have rationalized this quite easily, “After all, she is my boss.”

But he resisted the temptation. And here's why. He knew that if he yielded, he would be sinning against the most important person in his life. *God*. Because God was real to Joseph, he hated and shunned the very thought of doing anything that would displease Him.

Not to earn His favor, but because of it. Joseph knows he belongs to the Lord because the Lord chose his great-grandfather, Abraham, and initiated a covenant relationship with him and his descendants. He knows the Lord is going to work through his family to provide salvation for the peoples of the world. And he has put his hope in the Lord and in the redemption He is going to provide.²

That's how Joseph resisted the advance of Potiphar's wife, first on ethical grounds, but most importantly on spiritual grounds. He said *no* to temptation.

So that was that, wasn't it? He said *no*, and the problem went away, right?

No. Notice verse 10, “And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.”

Let the force of those words hit you. *Day after day*. She kept coming at him. She couldn't entice him, so maybe she could wear him down with her constant seductive advances. Day after day.

You've been there, and Joseph gives offers us a very practical model for how to stand. At the end of verse 10, he does two things that are vital if we're going to resist temptation.

1. Joseph recognized temptation. He saw it for what it was. “He refused to go to bed with her.” Here's the KJV rendering, “He hearkened not unto her.”

If we're going to stand, we must not be ignorant regarding the temptation process which is clearly explained in James 1:14-15.

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”

Here are the stages in the temptation process. It's like a chain:

² Hebrews 11:22 says Joseph died looking ahead. “By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.”

Temptation < Lust < Enticement < Conceived < Sin < Death

This is critical. To resist temptation, we must make a decision to break the chain, by God's help. We must refuse to play with temptation, to say *no* to it when we first detect it. As James 4:7 exhorts, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you."

If you struggle with impulsive buying, I don't recommend you scan through the shopping channels. "I'm not going to buy, but I wonder what they're selling today?"

That's true with whatever entices your heart. Sex. Food. Power. You can't avoid temptation altogether, but you must recognize how it works, and when it begins to feed your lust, don't take another step on that path.

Notice the next practical step Joseph took. First, he *recognized* temptation. Then...

2. *Joseph avoided temptation.* The final words of verse 10 are essential, "He refused to go to bed with her *or even be with her.*"

Did you catch that? Joseph not only said *no* to the temptation, but he also put as much distance as he could between himself and the potential sin. He refused even to be with the woman.

Every one of us needs to follow Joseph's example. And quickly too, before the lust conceives and produces death.

Proverbs 4:14-15 "Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evil men. ¹⁵ Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way."

Proverbs 4:23-27 Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. ²⁴ Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. ²⁵ Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. ²⁶ Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. ²⁷ Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil."

1 Thessalonians 4:3 "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you should abstain from fornication."

1 Thessalonians 5:22 "Abstain from all appearance of evil."

2 Timothy 2:22 "Flee youthful lusts."

Twenty-five years ago *USA Weekend* ran an article entitled, "The Secret Sins of Teens," written by a school teacher near Washington DC by the name of Patrick Welsh. He begins as follows:

"As a High School teacher, I have seen enough of the new moral universe of teenagers to terrify me as I watch my daughter, 9, and my son, 11, move closer to adolescence. The teenage years always have been a time of experimentation for kids and anxiety for parents. But the range of today's teen experimentation would alarm even the most liberal parents—if only they would face up to what is going on."

He continues, "Will my son and daughter cave in to the pressure to have sex as soon as they turn 14 or 15, as so many of today's youngsters are doing?"

"Pretty much everyone in school has had sex," says Tera Anderson, a 15-year-old sophomore at Meadowlake High in Lynwood, Wash., who participated in USA WEEKEND's teen values survey. Well, not everyone. But 27 percent of 15-year-old American girls were sexually active in 1988, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute. That was up from 19 percent six years before..."

"A Centers for Disease Control study released this year (1992) found that 29 percent of high school seniors have had four or more sex partners."

“Kids feel that if they have sex just within their group of friends it’s safe and easy. No one gets hurt,” says Avara Pearson, who was in my senior English class last year. “If a couple breaks up, they find other partners in the group.”³

That was twenty-five years ago. Those high school students are now in their 40s.

Young people, Joseph's example has much to say to you about how to relate to the opposite sex. Don't get involved in a relationship with someone who's not sold out to Jesus Christ. It may be fun for awhile, but a harvest is coming later.

You may be here today involved in a compromising relationship that is strangling you spiritually. You need to break it off. You need to do what Joseph did and put as much distance between you and the other person as you can, before it's too late. Keep yourself pure until marriage.

But the teens aren't the only ones. I may be talking to some adults right now who are flirting with fire. You're getting too close to someone of the opposite sex. Oh how we must fight to have eyes only for our God-given spouses!

There's more to the story. When we choose to flee from temptation, we mustn't expect the world to applaud. For Joseph, things actually went from bad to worse, at least humanly speaking.

First he faced rejection by his brothers. But the Lord was real. Then he faced temptation by Potiphar's wife. Again God was real. But then he faced a third test.

III. When the Lord is real, it shows in our response to misrepresentation (11-23).

Verses 11-12 “One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. ¹² 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.”

Joseph hightailed it out of there as fast as he could. But in the frenzy, Potiphar's wife grabbed his outer garment, and her wicked mind went to work. She decided to fabricate a story.

Verses 13-15 “When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.’”

A couple of things strike me from this. First, notice how Joseph's coats keep getting him into trouble (see 37:3). And second, what a scoundrel Mrs. Potiphar was! In one scene she is a seductive, whimsical, persistent woman controlled by her passions and fantasies. In the next, she becomes an irate, aggressive, deceptive, emotional, hysterical conquerer.

Do you know what her root problem was? She was enslaved to herself. All she could think about was herself, to the point of being unfaithful to her husband, and perhaps even worse, she was willing to send an innocent man to prison.

What she did next represents the depths of her depravity. Verses 16-18 “She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷ Then she told him this story: ‘That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. ¹⁸ But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.’”

Think of her nerve! She's been unfaithful to her husband, but now she calls on him to protect her.

³ USA Weekend, August 21-23, 1992

How did Potiphar respond? Verses 19-20 “When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, ‘This is how your slave treated me,’ he burned with anger. ²⁰ Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined.”

I’m not convinced Potiphar believed his wife’s tale, at least not totally. If he had, I don’t think he would have incarcerated Joseph. I think he would have *executed* him. After all Joseph was only a slave, a piece of property to him. He could have punished him however he so desired.

So he didn’t kill him. Instead, he threw him in prison. He sent him to a special place reserved for the king’s prisoners (i.e. political felons).

Think of what this meant for Joseph.

A. First he lost his freedom.

B. Then he lost his reputation—unjustly so.

He faced the pain of misrepresentation. Being a slave was bad enough, but now people are saying he is a wicked slave, a sexual predator in fact.

When a person’s reputation is called into question, you find out something you might never know otherwise. Whether the Lord indeed is real to him or her.

In Joseph’s case, the Lord truly was all he had left. And the Lord was enough.

So often, people treat God as though He were a means to something. He exists to get me to heaven, to give me a good family, to put food on my table and money in my bank account, to put peace in my soul.

The true God is not a means to something. He is the end. He is the summum bonum (Latin for *the highest good*).

And when you know that, the Lord is real in your life, no matter what. No matter what comes, you know you have what matters most. God Himself. And therefore, you have joy and peace and strength to continue the journey and bring honor to the One who matters most to you.

C. When Joseph was at his lowest, God was still real in his life! Notice how the chapter ends in verses 21-23, “But while Joseph was there in the prison, ²¹ the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. ²² 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. ²³ 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.”

The Lord did not forget Joseph. The dark days of prison were God’s way of putting iron in his soul, says Talbot. In fact, in time Joseph will learn that this prison was his stepping stone to the throne.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said this about his own prison experience, “It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually, it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes, not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts. So bless you, prison, for having been in my life.”⁴

This is God’s way. He often uses adversity to strengthen the character of His children, for His intent is that they resemble His beloved Son (Rom 5:3-4; James 1:2-4).

⁴ Taken from C. Swindoll, *Leadership*

Make It Personal: Practical lessons from Genesis 39

Let's consider three...

1. Practice the presence of God in your life.

Joseph learned to live with an awareness of God's presence. It made all the difference in the world.

Do you do that? Until we do, we're missing out on the heart of the Christian life. We can't avoid tragedies and temptations and misrepresentations in life. But we can practice the presence of God like Joseph did.

Billy Sunday once said in a sermon on heaven, "I've thanked God a thousand times for the roses but never for the thorns, but now I have learned to thank Him for the thorns."⁵

But we musn't assume something. To practice the presence of God, we must first have it. And God's Word says we enter life without it, for we are cut off from God. To put it in the words of *the glory road*⁶...

G- God created all things for His glory.

L- Life is meant to be lived, and joy comes, when we live for His glory.

O- Our problem is sin, which is living for something short of His glory.

R- Redemption is what God has provided through Christ to rescue a people for His glorious purposes.

Y- You can now live for the glory of God, by grace alone, through faith alone in the gospel.

This means you can now enjoy the presence of God and live for His glory, but first He must rescue you. He must regenerate your wayward heart and give you a new heart, one that believes in His Son and the sacrifice He made for you on the cross.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved," says God's Word. Saved from the penalty of sin. Saved from going your own way and learning to live God's way and for God's glory.

When Christ is your Savior, you can now practice the presence of God day by day.

2. When the Lord is real in your life, others will see it.

God was *real* in Joseph's life. And others saw it.

Potiphar saw it in verse 3 ("His master saw that the LORD was with him"). The warden saw it in verse 23, "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."

I'm not saying that Potiphar and the warden believed in the God of Joseph. Undoubtedly they worshiped the pagan gods of Egypt (Potiphar means "he whom Ra, the Sun god, has given"). They may not have believed in the God of Joseph, but they couldn't help but see the reality of His presence in Joseph.

The same goes for us. Do people know that the Lord is *real* to you? Do they hear you give Him credit for what happens in your life? Do they see Him working in your life?

I don't want people to see me, but God. And when He's real in my life, others will see it.

3. When it doesn't seem like the Lord is real, know that He is. He is in control and working to accomplish His good plan. He invites us to trust Him.

⁵ Taken from Dorsett, p. 175.

⁶ A message preached on Sunday evening two weeks ago, "The Glory Road: A Biblical Framework for Life."