

Go to Jail!

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 19th of November 2000.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Go to Jail! and is from Genesis chapter 39 verses 1 to 23.

The odd spot in yesterday's age said it all. Jealous Russian boyfriends are hiring a team of professional seducers to test their beloved's fidelity before tying the knot.

The husband-to-be introduces an imposter to set the trap. And then comes the sting. And then, most fiancées fail to resist.

It's almost inevitable, isn't it? The seductress weaves her spell and charm and even the best intentions of men fall.

[1 : 14] Or the glamorous playboy allures and even the noblest of women are drawn. It happened in the Great Gatsby. It even happens on the Bill.

It happens in TV program after TV program, book after book, film after film. And every day in real life as well. People are seduced into having sexual adultery and affairs.

Well, after all, life is lived in the face of seduction and temptation and deceit. And the attraction of illicit, immoral sexual activity is strong.

We're sexual beings. It is a strong attraction for many people. But what makes Genesis 39 so striking is that Joseph didn't yield.

He stayed pure despite the temptation. Despite the constant pressure, we're told that the woman, day after day, tried to tempt him to have sex with her.

[2 : 20] But he keeps his distance. Certainly at the first level, this is a chapter that gives us a striking illustration of a person who is morally upright in the face of sexual temptation.

And at least at the first level, that's the meaning that we are to understand from this text. But the consequences of his moral upright character leads to an even more intriguing moral dilemma, as we'll see.

Joseph, who's the key character, the hero of this story, is not the Joseph who's the father of Jesus, but this is the Technicolor dreamcoat variety. He's been sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. We heard the account of that last Sunday night in chapter 37. Those Ishmaelite traders took him down to Egypt from Israel or Palestine, and there they sold him into the house of a man called Potiphar.

He's an Egyptian. He's a nobleman. He's the captain of the guard of Pharaoh's court. He's quite a senior civil servant, it seems.

[3 : 33] A significant person indeed. And as a slave of Potiphar, Joseph does particularly well. Indeed, everything that he turns his hand to prospers.

Blessing abounds in the work of Joseph in the house of Potiphar. And it seems to be implied in these verses 2 to 4 that there are at least three stages of promotion for Joseph.

Joseph. We're told in verse 2 that he was in the house of his Egyptian master. And it seems to imply that maybe initially he was out in the fields.

The lowest of the slaves were outside. So he's promoted to be an inside slave. More important things get done inside the house and he's promoted because he's done so well outside in the fields, presumably.

Secondly, perhaps there's a promotion indicated by the words in verse 4 that he found favour in his sight and attended him. So that not only is he working inside a promotion, but now he's a personal attendant of this man called Potiphar.

[4 : 47] But again, there's another step perhaps implied because the end of verse 4 tells us that Potiphar made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.

He is the chief slave. The one above all the other slaves. Now, maybe there's not three distinct steps of promotion, but it does seem to imply that Joseph has done well and he's been moved into more and more senior places so that at the end of the sequence everything in Potiphar's house is in his hands, we're told.

Potiphar had total trust in him. Verse 6 tells us that. So, the man left all that he had in Joseph's charge and with him there he had no concern for anything except for the food that he ate.

Which doesn't mean imply that he's gluttonous. It's just probably because Joseph was a foreigner he would be precluded from attending to the actual food that this man ate.

Probably that's what lies behind that comment in verse 6. And Potiphar's house as a result of all of this is richly blessed. So, verse 5, for example, tells us that from the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptians' house for Joseph's sake.

[6 : 08] Everything's going well. And here is a little glimpse if you like of one of those promises to Abraham in fact being fulfilled. Those who bless you I will bless. And here is a person from another race being blessed by God because he in turn is blessing Joseph a descendant of Abraham to whom the promise was made in chapter 12.

Apart from verse 1, the man is never mentioned by name. His name is Potiphar but everywhere else he is the master or the husband or his master. So that throughout the story what becomes stressed is not just that Joseph worked for Potiphar but that he was the master and Joseph the slave.

And what it highlights throughout the story is Joseph's trustworthiness, Joseph's loyalty and faithfulness to his master. So above anything else in the story Joseph is absolutely loyal and faithful to his master.

He is a faithful steward in everything in his master's house. And the way it is described too in verses 2-6 the verbs that are used suggest that it is not just we are not just talking about one incident of blessing and prosperity but that this was a consistent pattern.

Joseph was consistently faithful consistently loyal and consistently successful and Potiphar's house was consistently blessed as a result.

[7 : 39] And one more thing about Joseph it is almost tacked on as an afterthought at the end of verse 6. We are told at the end of verse 6 that Joseph was handsome and good looking.

Not just handsome and not just good looking. Handsome and good looking. And the two go together for emphasis. That is he is drop dead gorgeous basically.

He is an Adonis of the ancient Egyptian world. And he is just like his mother who is the only other person in the Bible who is described in those terms. Handsome and good looking.

Back in chapter 29 that is Rachel his mother. It is like Princess Di and Prince William I guess. Each is to different eyes good looking. And the girls would have drooled over Joseph like they drool over Prince William.

But there is the problem. Because at least one married woman did the same. She drooled over Joseph. In fact Mrs. Potiphar gawked and lusted after him.

[8 : 48] We are told in verse 7 that after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph. And we are meant to imagine I think Mrs. Potiphar sitting down watching the slaves doing all their business around the house and she is just watching Joseph go backwards and forwards and her eyes are fluttering and her mouth is open and she is drooling down there thinking gosh what a gorgeous slave my husband has brought into my house.

And so she says to him lie with me. What an extraordinarily blunt demand. Lie with me. Presumably she said something more.

Presumably that is not the only chat up line that she used. But it's very blunt and we are not told that she said anything else because what the teller of this story is trying to get us to see is just how unashamed she is in her lust for him.

There is no sort of weaving sort of little innuendos here and there like oh my shoulders are sore could you massage them or something. Just lie with me.

What sort of a woman is this? She is the opposite extreme from Joseph. She is a bad egg. She is devious conniving and lying as we are going to see shortly.

[10 : 10] She is certainly brazen in her attempts to commit adultery. And in contrast to her two Hebrew words lie with me is three in English but two in Hebrew Joseph replies with 35 words.

He doesn't just say no but he actually gives a full account of himself and why he refuses. His character is in clear contrast to hers the way the story is told.

So in verse 8 Joseph refused and said to his master's wife look with me here my master has no concern about anything in the house and he has put everything that he has in my hand.

He is not greater in his house than I am nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself because you are his wife how then could I do this great wickedness and sin against God and what Joseph says about himself there could almost be termed bragging but we know it's not because it's true because the earlier verses have told us that it's true Joseph is a faithful and loyal student in his master's house and his master has given him everything in his house in effect to look after except of course his wife Joseph is being honest and the three reasons he gives for refusing to commit adultery with his master's wife Mrs.

Potiphar are that firstly he doesn't want to abuse his master's trust his master's given him everything in the house to look after except his wife and he will not cross the boundary of that trust the second reason is he doesn't want to offend his master he doesn't want to snub him by doing something with his wife that he shouldn't and the third reason lies at the end of his speech and the most significant reason of all coming at the climactic point of his refusal how could I do this great wickedness and sin against God you see it's not just a sin against the master though it is that it is also a sin against God and remember this is before the days of the Ten Commandments to tell you that even from the beginning adultery is a sin against God we're meant to see here somebody of impeccable character the description of

[12:33] Joseph in this chapter is of somebody who is above reproach who is in a sense flawless in the way he responds to the situation he faces he's flawless in word and deed but Mrs.

Potiphar is determined to get her man and she won't take no for an answer so in verse 10 we're told that although she spoke to Joseph day after day so that clearly implies that she's not heeded his refusal and every day she's saying to him come on lie with me Joseph declined who can imagine what she did each day after the first refusal the new perfume that she sprayed on the new makeup the short skirts and low cut tops perhaps who can imagine the winks as Joseph went about his business the fluttering eyelashes the other little comments that she might have made in the midst of lie with me and Joseph day after day refused to yield day after day and we're told at the end of verse 10 that not only would he not lie with her that is have sex with her but he wouldn't even lie beside her is the expression that's used there it is almost suggesting that maybe she has said with him look we don't have to have sex just lie on the bed next to me or on the couch recline next to me no he says

I'm not even going to do that I will not lie beside you let alone lie with you in having sex but even more than that the end of verse 10 tells us that he would not only lie beside her but he would not even be with her he's keeping his distance and a fair distance at that presumably what it means is that even though he has some contact with her he is trying never to be with her alone keeping out of the way keeping other servants around keeping out of her clutches so to speak too many Christians fall sexually at least because they think they are strong and they can take strong steps towards somebody thinking they won't go further but they are foolish because they do not realize how weak they are sexual attraction is strong and the pressures of our society to be promiscuous sexually are very strong indeed you don't have to look at many television advertisements you don't have to read many novels or see many films or watch many

TV programs before you realize that some sort of adulterous affair or sleeping around seems to be quite acceptable so do it too many Christians think they are strong enough to resist so they can flirt or be with somebody or go with somebody or be perhaps a little bit too affectionate and think they're going to be strong enough not to go too far but they end up falling because they're weaker than they think they are and go further than they ought and Joseph by refusing not only to have sex but not to lie beside her and not even to be with her is giving us an example of how we are to deal with temptation not to court temptation but in fact to flee it too many Christians know that you should not cross over that boundary but instead of keeping well away from the edge they try and live their lives leaning over the top thinking that somehow they're safe but they're not because they're weaker than they think they are keep out of places of weakness keep out of places of vulnerability if you're traveling with your work be careful where you stay and with whom you stay and with whom you travel don't go if you're vulnerable to sexual activity while you're away from home it's not worth it or take your spouse or take a colleague whom you can trust

I remember one experienced Christian minister at a clergy conference once saying stay behind the desk it's a blunt advice for a clergyman or a counsellor but it's safest because too many Christian leaders or pastors or counsellors or ministers fall because they become too compassionate and too affectionate with people in need so they come in effect metaphorically speaking at least if not literally around from their desk to hug or to embrace or to comfort or to put an arm around somebody in need and they've taken a step of vulnerability and the other person is vulnerable and they end up going where they do not intend to go but where they're drawn into too far over the if you're vulnerable when you're particularly tired be especially careful if you're vulnerable after a couple of drinks don't drink know that you're weak not strong and don't think you're so strong that you can go where you ought not to go

[18:49] Joseph went nowhere near her he kept his distance from temptation and it is what the Bible consistently teaches us to do keep our distance from temptation flee it in fact as he does in a few verses time I think most Christians who fall sexually begin unintentionally that is they don't wake up and think I'm going to commit sexual adultery or immorality today but rather through relationships that just somehow develop along the wrong paths they get involved and they fall they lose control their weakness overcomes them and they end up going where they ought not to go Joseph gives a wide berth to temptation it is the Bible's teaching consistently we are not strong enough to deal with it we should keep clear of it we are weak the lascivious that is lustful

Mrs. Potiphar acts rather desperately one day when Joseph went into the house to do his work and while no one else was in the house what did she do she caught hold of his garment saying lie with me the word is violent that is caught hold of it's as though she jumped out from behind a doorway and grabbed hold of him around his neck grabbing his shirt or cloak or jacket as though she was ripping it off him that's the force of the word there she's desperate this woman and Joseph flees he does exactly what he should do in that situation this is not a place to reason it out it's a time to run and he ran as he should and he left his garment behind in her hands we're told in verse 12 well a woman scorned is a dangerous thing and

Mrs. Potiphar turns nasty and conniving how often that's the case where one act of sin in this case lust and desire for sexual immorality compounds and snowballs into others here downright lies but it's always the case one sin leads to another sin leads to another getting worse getting bigger compounding and snowballing until somebody is just trapped in the slavery of sin as she is here her lust leads to lies sin leads to more sin and so she says to the other slaves in verse 14 she cries out and says to them see my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us he came into me to lie with me and I cried out with a loud voice and when he heard me raise my voice and cried he left his garment beside me and fled outside notice how there she's trying to appeal to her other slaves in effect to back her up so she passes some of the blame for Joseph onto her husband he's not there he's out at work in the office it almost reminds us of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden all over again one blaming the other or blaming

God the woman you gave me made me eat Adam said but also she talks about how her husband has brought this Hebrew man among us that is here's the woman of the house drawing in us with her slaves maybe she had little to do with them usually but here she is appealing to her slaves saying us we're the victims here drawing them into her story so that they are on her side notice how she uses a little bit of racism the Hebrew man was brought in anti-semitism in its earliest form perhaps notice too how she reverses the order of truth that is the truth that we're being told was that Joseph fled then she cried out but she said she cried out then Joseph fled she got the truth but she inverted the order so it's actually a downright lie but by keeping elements of the truth there her story is sounding a little bit more plausible

I suppose and notice how she lies about the garment he left it there beside me she said whereas the truth is he left it in her hands because she ripped it off if he left it beside her it implies that the slave's response is not recorded the next words are again the woman as soon as hubby gets home in verses 17 and 18 when he got in she told him the same story but it's slightly different because now she's appealing to her husband to back her up not the slaves so there are few little differences in the way she tells the story to try and get his support notice how she says the Hebrew servant before it was the Hebrew man because she's talking to slaves so she doesn't want to denigrate them by saying a Hebrew slave it's just a Hebrew man but now she can denigrate the slaves because she's appealing to her husband whom you have brought among us came in to insult me but as soon as

[24 : 43] I raised my voice and cried out he left his garment being left in the wrong spot she's a devious woman she's telling the story to appeal to two different groups to get them to back her up and the husband believes her and he's enraged and he puts Joseph in prison why Joseph isn't executed for adultery we're not quite sure he probably should have been it might mean that the husband actually doubts his wife's story but nonetheless Joseph ends up in prison some people have no dress sense and for the second time in his life his clothes have got him stuck Joseph's technicolored dream coat led to the jealousy of his brothers and they used the coat as evidence of a lie that he'd been killed by a wild animal we saw that last week and now the second time another garment taken off a raving lustful woman and again used as evidence of a lie that he tried to rape her

Joseph it seems comes unstuck with clothes clothes maketh some men but obviously not Joseph but what's more disturbing this time than last week's story when he's in effect betrayed by his brothers is that this time he is unimpeachable in his character you see last week we saw how his brothers betrayed him there was a sense of understanding about that that is he seems to be a bit arrogant and a bit boastful to his brothers because he's had some dreams that he is the chief of them and they're all bowing down to him and he's the favorite of his father and he's wearing this rather glamorous coat so you've almost got a bit of sympathy with the brothers but not here he's above reproach every word and every action has been absolutely right here so where's God in all this how does he end up in prison we're told at the beginning of this chapter that God was with him it led to his success it led to his promotion it led to the blessing on Potiphar's household but where's God now isn't God in the business of rewarding the righteous isn't God in the business of honoring those who honor him isn't God in the business of justice well how can Joseph end up in prison so unjustly isn't God supposed to stop this sort of thing happening what kind of a God is it who will let somebody of such fantastic character as Joseph end up wallowing in an Egyptian jail well God has not abandoned Joseph of course because the last three verses of the chapter keep emphasizing the fact that God was with him in jail but it's as though the story is starting all over again instead of being in Potiphar's house where God is with him and giving him blessing and promotion and responsibility now he's in jail and there's blessing and there's promotion and there's responsibility in jail and we're going into the same cycle all over again it seems what's

God doing with Joseph it doesn't quite seem fair for the rest of the story of Joseph the next 11 chapters the name of the Lord Yahweh that's the name that's used in those opening verses and closing verses of this chapter is not used again apart from Jacob's blessing in chapter 49 the name God is mentioned a few times but never the name of the Lord but nonetheless we're meant to see that at every point of the story both in the initial part of the potiphar's house and in jail and in between when he's betrayed by this woman as well as everything else that follows in the next 11 chapters the Lord was with him at every point never abandoned always with him the point is that obedience to God does not bring immediate reward Joseph's maltreatment is evidence of that obedience does not preclude somebody from trouble and strife and testing and trial Joseph's maltreatment is evidence of that but too many Christians get bitter with God when things go wrong see see see the ultimate destiny that he promises those who are righteous in his sight [32 : 53] Amen can help see in words you there