

UNDRESSED FOR SUCCESS

GENESIS 39:1-23 NOVEMBER 9, 2022

How do you define success? That's a question that *Gallup* and *Populace* asked thousands of Americans in 2019. They found that "there is a stark difference between how Americans define success and how they believe *others* in society define success. Most Americans believe others in society define success in status-oriented...terms, but less than 10% apply this standard to their personal definition of success. The study revealed that there is no 'average' definition of success. Instead, everyone tends to have a highly unique, personal view of success." Important areas listed by respondents included education, relationships, and character.¹

How do *you* define success? I ask because there's a lot of talk about success in our passage tonight. *We* read it and see a story of an innocent young man being falsely accused of a crime and unjustly imprisoned. But God's commentary on this situation is: "Joseph is doing *great!* He's a *successful* man in a very exciting position!"

Really? He's a slave and a prisoner. How is *that* success? Is the Lord giving us some PR spin here?

What God considers success is brought home to us when we read the Apostles' descriptions of the Christian life. Paul said, "I'm a slave to Jesus Christ - bound to serve the Lord for all my life." Peter, James, John, and Jude said the same. In Romans 6, Paul went even further and said, "*Thanks be to God* that we Christians have become slaves to righteousness." In three letters, Paul also identified himself as the Lord's *prisoner* and invited Timothy to *share* in the sufferings of the Gospel.

Let's see how God can call being a slave and prisoner *success* as we read Genesis 39.

Genesis 39:1 - Now Joseph had been taken to Egypt. An Egyptian named Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and the captain of the guards, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there.

We're going back 20 years or so from the end of chapter 38. The story picks back up when Joseph was sold by his brothers and he had a very hard time, according to Psalm 105.

As far as being trafficked goes, it wasn't as bad as it *could* have been. He wasn't sent to a copper mine or a granite quarry. He's bought into a wealthy house of an Egyptian official.

Linguists struggle a bit with what Potiphar's job was. The Hebrew words say he was the "chief slaughterer."² Some think he was Pharaoh's butcher, similar to the chief baker who we'll meet in chapter 40. Most commentators believe he was the chief *executioner* and captain of Pharaoh's

¹ Success Index *Populace + Gallup* <https://populace.org/research>

² Susan Brayford *LXX Genesis Commentary*

guards. That's reflected in most translations. There is also significant evidence to indicate that Potiphar was a eunuch.³

Genesis 39:2 - ²The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, serving in the household of his Egyptian master.

Joseph became a successful man, yet he had no wealth, no freedom, no friends, no family, and no escape plan. As the tale unfolds, we see Joseph had no intention of fleeing back to Canaan. In fact, chapter 41 shows that, after a while, he was content to *forget* his home and family.⁴

What made Joseph successful was that God was *with* him and was *working* in his life. About two thousand years later, Stephen, the first martyr of the Church Age, would say that, during this time, God was with Joseph and was rescuing him from all his troubles.

In God's mind, success is all about our nearness to Him and His ability to accomplish His will in and through us. Despite the danger Joseph was in, despite the dead-endedness of his situation from the human perspective, we see that Joseph had an abiding faith in the Lord. He may not have *understood*, but he certainly *believed* that God was *still* worth obeying and honoring and trusting.

One study Bible puts it this way: "[successful] does not mean wealthy, but that he was...making progress in his situation."⁵

He was making progress because the Lord was *with* him. The Lord had been with Abraham and with Isaac and with Jacob. He had not only *promised* it, but He *proved* it to be true. Here's the best part: The Lord is with *you*. He will never leave you or forsake you. He is *with* you and *that* is what brings true success to our lives.

Genesis 39:3-6a - ³When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord made everything he did successful, ⁴Joseph found favor with his master and became his personal attendant. Potiphar also put him in charge of his household and placed all that he owned under his authority. ⁵From the time that he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house because of Joseph. The Lord's blessing was on all that he owned, in his house and in his fields. ⁶He left all that he owned under Joseph's authority; he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

At this point, Joseph is between 17 and 20 years old. God has gifted him with incredible maturity and administrative skill. He would end up benefiting from his experience running this household and later the prison when he's given the task of administrating all of Egypt. Still, it's not that God *had* to get him into this job first. Daniel would have a similar position in Babylon without having any prior administrative experience that we know of. We don't want to make the theological mistake of

³ For a long discussion, see *Brayford*. Also, Henry Morris *The Genesis Record*

⁴ Genesis 41:52

⁵ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

thinking God *causes* bad things to happen to us because it gives us some ability we'll need later on. These are the events that happened to Joseph, but we shouldn't say they were God's idea.

In the midst of suffering, God's work in Joseph's life rippled out to the edges of Potiphar's estate. It was so evident that even this pagan executioner could see, "The Lord is with this kid."

God wants to bless others through our lives and, when people look at us, He wants there to be a visible testimony of Who He is and what He does. This wasn't just true of Joseph and Abraham, it's true of our lives as well. God told the exiles in Jeremiah 29:

Jeremiah 29:7 - ⁷Pursue the well-being of the city I have deported you to. Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for when it thrives, you will thrive.

Christians are given this command in First Timothy:

1 Timothy 2:1-4 - I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, ²for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. ³This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, ⁴who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

In Philippians, we're told to look to the interests of others. Jesus said in Matthew 5, "Let your light shine...so that people may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Our lives are supposed to proclaim the power of God and the Person of Jesus Christ. Remember, Potiphar was *surrounded* by false idols. None of these Egyptian deities did *anything* to help his family or his crops or his nation. Then *Joseph* came into his life and Potiphar said, "You know what...there's a *real* God working through this young man's life and I need more of that."

The question is: *Does my life proclaim that God is with me?* Is that a visible truth to the world? Or does my God seem to function the way Ra did for Potiphar? There should be a *profound* difference between the gods of this world and the God of heaven and earth. It's meant to be as different as light is from darkness. God doesn't want His work in us to be stealth, He wants it to be self-evident.

Genesis 39:6b-10 - Now Joseph was well-built and handsome. ⁷After some time his master's wife looked longingly at Joseph and said, "Sleep with me." ⁸But he refused. "Look," he said to his master's wife, "with me here my master does not concern himself with anything in his house, and he has put all that he owns under my authority. ⁹No one in this house is greater than I am. He has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. So how could I do this immense evil, and how could I sin against God?" ¹⁰Although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her.

There's another element of Joseph's success here: He was very successful in overcoming temptation. Potiphar's wife came after him day after day after day. Though this is a very

uncomfortable situation for him, it's instructive for us. Sometimes we convince ourselves that we're not strong enough to overcome temptation, but that's not true. Joseph could not *remove* this temptation, but he could *refuse* it. And he refused because he had a firm belief system that told him how to navigate life. His faith determined what was right and what was wrong in his daily life.

Potiphar's wife *commanded* him to sleep with her,⁶ but he said, "I don't have to obey you because that would be wrong - Not just an offense against my boss who trusts me, but wrong morally, *and* a sin against God."

This chapter and the last have a lot to say to us about guarding our sexuality and the dangers of going outside God's boundaries. The New Testament explains that sexual sins are unique because not only do you sin against God and another person, but you sin against yourself.⁷ We're told that God has called us not to impurity but to holiness in regard to our sexuality. Ephesians says we're not to have even a *hint* of sexual immorality among us.⁸ When a person engages in sinful sexual activity, they are rejecting God.⁹ But it's not all about *not* doing something. When we obey God's directives concerning our sexuality, 1 Corinthians tells us that we can glorify God with our bodies - and that is a wonderful thing.

So, what *are* the rules? We live in a society where all sorts of sexual activity is celebrated, especially the perverse variety. So, as Christians, what is God's definition of holy, successful sexual activity? The Bible's answer is: The monogamous, heterosexual union of one biological man with one biological woman in a relationship maintained as long as both live. That is what God commands.

Genesis 39:11 - ¹¹Now one day he went into the house to do his work, and none of the household servants were there.

Archaeologists have discovered an ancient papyrus from around this period that gives a record of all the slaves and their jobs in an Egyptian house. It lists 80 slaves.¹⁰ Potiphar undoubtedly had *dozens* of workers in the home. Potiphar's wife likely sent them all out so she could spring her trap.

Some commentators chide Joseph for being where he shouldn't be, but what was he supposed to do? When you're at *your* job and people around you aren't working, do you say, "I guess I don't need to work either?" And you're not a *slave*! Joseph is being faithful. He goes in to do his work.

Genesis 39:12 - ¹²She grabbed him by his garment and said, "Sleep with me!" But leaving his garment in her hand, he escaped and ran outside.

One scholar writes:

⁶ Brayford

⁷ 1 Corinthians 16:18

⁸ Ephesians 5:3

⁹ 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

¹⁰ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

*"Mrs. Potiphar becomes...aggressive...She drags him by his clothes. The verb implies a...forceful action. [She] was doing more than merely grabbing Joseph."*¹¹

In response, Joseph runs for it. It was not the time to talk or reason with her. It was time to remove himself from this situation. Joseph is to be commended.

Genesis 39:13-18 - ¹³When she saw that he had left his garment with her and had run outside, ¹⁴she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "my husband brought a Hebrew man to make fools of us. He came to me so he could sleep with me, and I screamed as loud as I could. ¹⁵When he heard me screaming for help, he left his garment beside me and ran outside." ¹⁶She put Joseph's garment beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷Then she told him the same story: "The Hebrew slave you brought to us came to make a fool of me, ¹⁸but when I screamed for help, he left his garment beside me and ran outside."

It's safe to say everyone in the house knew what kind of lady Mrs. Potiphar was. She's bold and brazen. But now she's been embarrassed and is potentially in legal danger since adultery was a serious crime. So she starts building a case to frame Joseph.

In our culture, there's a lot of talk about "fake news" and how there are two sides to every story. It's interesting - she *did* have "evidence," right?¹² But what she said was a total lie. The truth didn't come out for a *long* time. But the Lord knew and He *loves* truth and He saw to it that what *really* happened was brought to light and proclaimed around the world through the Scripture.

Keep the truth buckled around your waist and remember that the Lord knows even when others may believe a lie about you.

Genesis 39:19-20 - ¹⁹When his master heard the story his wife told him—"These are the things your slave did to me"—he was furious ²⁰and had him thrown into prison, where the king's prisoners were confined. So Joseph was there in prison.

Who was Potiphar mad at? The language is ambiguous.¹³ Let's remember that he was Pharaoh's executioner. He has a ton of authority. And this crime would have been a capital offense.¹⁴

Let's also think back about what we know. Potiphar was likely castrated. His marriage was probably political. His wife wasn't afraid to have an affair. In fact, she was brash enough that Potiphar felt the need to specifically tell Joseph, "You're gonna be in charge of everything, but don't sleep with my wife." And then, instead of killing Joseph, which would've been within his rights, he sends him to the political prison. Some commentators think that Potiphar was even the warden at this prison.¹⁵

¹¹ Brayford

¹² Kenneth A. Mathews *Genesis 11:27-50:26 The New American Commentary*

¹³ See Waltke, Davidson, *Faithlife Study Bible Notes*

¹⁴ Robert Davidson *Genesis 12-50*

¹⁵ Gordon Wenham *Genesis*, August Dillman *Genesis Critically And Exegetically Expounded vol. 2*

It was a lose-lose situation for everyone. What did Joseph think? He went from being the son of preference to a pit to a penthouse to a prison and, ultimately to the palace.¹⁶ As he was carted off to his cell, was that the end of his success? Had he slipped through the Lord's loving fingers?

Genesis 39:21 - ²¹ But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him. He granted him favor with the prison warden.

The Septuagint puts it this way: "the Lord was with Joseph and poured down mercy upon him." Kindness or mercy there is that beautiful word for God's love *hesed*. As far as the Lord was concerned, Joseph was *still* a success story. They were still together. And, in fact, God said "Joseph is experiencing a *downpour* of My faithful, tender love right there and then."

Genesis 39:22-23 - ²² The warden put all the prisoners who were in the prison under Joseph's authority, and he was responsible for everything that was done there. ²³ The warden did not bother with anything under Joseph's authority, because the Lord was with him, and the Lord made everything that he did successful.

There's that word again: *successful*. This does not square with what we're told to think success is. We're told by our culture and our sinful hearts that success means more for me. Upward for me. Better comforts and circumstances for me. More power for me and people like me. God stands totally *against* those ideas in this passage. He tells us, with bold, block letters: *Joseph was successful*. Success was measured in heaven not by the strength of stock performance but by the strength of faith's application. It was measured not by earthly power but by the presence of God. The Lord would say, "Am I with you? Can people see My work in your life? Then you're successful."

If *that* is the measure, our efforts in life will look a *lot* different than those of the unbelieving world because the goals are entirely different. It's not about us gaining or harvesting or moving up, but simply being *with* the Lord Who, Proverbs 2 tells us, "Stores up success for the upright."

¹⁶ R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning And Blessing*