

Resisting Temptation | Tom Peryer | Genesis 39:1-23

15th June 2025

INTRODUCTION

I'm sure you are all familiar with the game of snakes and ladders. I don't know if the ancient Egyptians had a game like it. But this story of Joseph which are in the middle of feels very much like a game of snakes and ladders. And we shall see that it is the devil who deals in snakes and the Lord who deals in ladders.

This episode in the life of Joseph is very much snakes and ladders. In the first part of the story (verses 1 -6) we find Joseph climbing up the ladder as he becomes more and more successful in Potiphar's house. *'The Lord gave him success in everything he did ... he found favour in Potiphar's eyes'* and as a result of Joseph's honest and skilled stewardship we read *'From the time Potiphar put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph.'* In the same way, faithful, honest upright Christians are a means of blessing to others – whether they know it or not and whether they are Christians or not. I pray that our presence as a church here in Weston is a blessing directly and indirectly to the village of Weston.

Joseph must have been amazed and delighted at this huge change in his fortunes. Not so long ago, he was literally in the pits, thrown into the empty cistern by his brothers and scared witless. As his brothers admit to one another in chapter 42, *'We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life but we wouldn't listen.'* Then he is sold to slave traders who in turn sell him onto a high-ranking Egyptian official. And now see how he has risen through the ranks to this position of responsibility, trust and comfort. That pit seems a long way away now.

He must be thanking God that he sent a ladder for him to climb out of the pit.

But just when the sun seems to be shining every day and all is well in the world, along comes a great big snake in the form of Potiphar's wife. The Mrs Robinson of Egypt (if you remember the film *The Graduate*).

The dice is rolled, and he lands on this particular snake. First, she repeatedly attempts the seduction of Joseph, a well-built, handsome man, and then when that fails, as the saying has *'hell has no fury like a woman scorned'*.

Now she lashes out with a string of false accusations against 'That Hebrew slave' as she now contemptuously calls him, when lying to the servants and then to her husband about what she says has happened.

Understandably Potiphar 'burned with anger' when he heard this sorry tale and has Joseph thrown into the king's prison. For poor old, or rather young, Joseph, this is a very long slide back down a snake. Back to a pit again. Back to a place of fear and uncertainty as to what is going to happen to him.

But then along comes another ladder or rather He and God between them make another ladder. Because, even in these dire circumstances Joseph remains true to his character and God continues to be with him. Once again Joseph finds favour in the eyes of the prison warden who does what Potiphar did and puts him *'in charge of all those held in the prison'* The warden like Potiphar leaves everything to Joseph to sort out and this chapter of the story ends with the words *'The Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.'*

This ladder is not quite as tall as the first one but even so, he is back in a privileged position and he can take comfort from that. He can take comfort from the fact that he has acted honourably and with all integrity. He can take comfort from as the writer puts it *'The Lord showed him kindness'* even in this difficult situation.

THE TEMPTATIONS AND TESTING HE FACED

Let's now look a bit more at the temptations he faced or perhaps it might be better to say the tests he faced. The tests to his character. The tests to his faith.

Of course it is painfully obvious what the biggest test he faced in this chapter but it is not the only one. But let's address that biggest test. The test to his sexual integrity and the test of his faithfulness to Potiphar, the one who owned him.

I don't think it is right to go into too much graphic detail – it is a bit early in the morning for that, but clearly, we have here a handsome, capable man who obviously had charisma and charm. And maybe he is only 19 years old. Here is the older woman, the wife of his boss who day after day pesters him to have sex with her. Had he given into her seduction, not many would have blamed him. He is a young man, vulnerable in this position and he probably recognised that saying 'no' would probably land him in trouble. And indeed, it did.

But Joseph had the moral integrity and the moral courage to say “no” and to walk or – better still - run away from the situation. Although in the process he loses his cloak he does not lose his integrity. Matthew Henry commenting on this passage writes: *'It is better to lose a good coat than a good conscience.'* And of course, as you will remember, this is not the first time Joseph has been stripped of his royal robes.

The great twentieth century Old Testament theologian, Walter Bruggeman, who died this week wrote in his commentary on Genesis: *'Joseph has a sense that he is a man of destiny, a destiny not to be squandered on a fling of passion.'*

Don't forget too that in Joseph we have a picture of Jesus, someone of even greater integrity *'who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.'* And he too lost his cloak when he was betrayed and unjustly accused.

If we bring this story forward 3-4,000 years, we see it acted out time and again, in our world. You don't need me to tell you how the wrong use of the sex-drive can have devastating effects on people and society in general. Everyday our news reports carry stories of abusive behaviour mostly by men (not as in this case women). Abuse on partners and on vulnerable people - children, those in care, refugees, people in occupied territories. Everywhere marriages and marriage partners, families and children pay a price for infidelity. The cost in human suffering and in financial costs to the state is enormous. The huge growth in pornography fuels a culture in which adultery, unfaithfulness, abuse and anything goes flourishes. And alongside that the very real abuse and exploitation that goes on there is the world of false accusation.

Would that it were altogether different in the Church. But it is not. Sadly, too many churches, too many Christian leaders and too many ordinary Christians across the world do not have clean hands, much less clean minds when it comes to sexual misuse and abuse. And just as sadly that goes for our own evangelical world. Whether it be the CofE evangelical world or the new churches evangelical world, there is a sorry catalogue and volumes of back stories of failures.

Only this week, it was reported that seven clergy (including a former Bishop of Durham) are to face disciplinary action not because of any abuse they have perpetrated but because, allegedly, they failed to stop or report John Smythe. Justin Welby is not one of those to be disciplined but look how it ended for him.

And even if most or all of us here today have stopped short of actual infidelity or the wrong use of our sexual drive and inclinations, there will be many of us who have strayed too close to that edge in what we have thought, what we have watched, and in what we have imagined and even in what we have done.

One of the results is that in the eyes of many non-Christians, ‘the Church’ is no different to all those other individuals and agencies which are guilty of sexual abuse and fraud— except that we have to wear the badge of hypocrisy. There is much more that could be said on this subject but I’m going to park it there it was not the only source of testing that Joseph faced in this episode of his up-and-down life.

Before I list some of those ways in which Joseph was tested and tempted, let’s remind ourselves what spiritual capital he had to draw on. The answer is virtually nothing. Growing up he had not gone to a synagogue or a church because there were none. He had no songs or hymns that he could sing or listen to. He had no wise older people of faith to counsel and guide him. The nearest he probably got to a church service was some home prayers, maybe and some animal sacrifices. He had no written scriptures to read every day. All he had was the stories of his father Jacob, his grandfather Isaac and his great-grandfather Abraham.

What is more, whilst they all had stories to tell of how God has appeared to them in person and in dreams, had spoken to them, had wrought miracles in their lives. Joseph had none of that. In the whole of the Joseph narrative which occupies nearly one quarter of the book of Genesis, nowhere do we read that Joseph had a supernatural experience of God, unless you count his ability to interpret dreams. Now, compare that with the spiritual resources and foundations that are available to us. There is no comparison.

What Joseph did have was this: *'God was with him'*.

How he knew that I don't know but it must have been in him. Maybe as he grew older he came to realise the truth of it even more.

Twice at the beginning of this chapter, the write says: *'The Lord was with Joseph'* and then we get it twice more at the end of the chapter. *'The Lord was with him'*.

And Paul says, *"If God be for us who can be against us!"* And of course, Jesus himself told his disciples and therefore us just before his ascension. *'I am with you always to the end of the age'*.

Well of course it is not always easy to see or feel or know that God is with us and for us which is why we often succumb to the kind of tests that Joseph faced. So, what were these other temptations or tests? And as I list them (there are nine) see how many you can count as part of your experience and how many you have overcome and how many overcome you:

Firstly: In relation to other people Joseph faced or these tests and temptations:

- The temptation to dish out to other people, the sort of treatment he had received from his brothers and Potiphar's wife; to be like them; to trample on others; to be a bully;
- The temptation to do as little as possible for his employer, his owner; to be a poor steward; to say "I'm a slave, I'm trapped in this situation, I never chose to be here so I will do the minimum
- The temptation to cheat on his employer. Not just to do the minimum but actually to do some pilfering, to abuse the time and of course in Joseph's case to take advantage of his master's absence to line his own pockets and sleep with the man's wife

Secondly: In relation to himself he faced the temptation

- To nurse a grudge; to dwell over and over about how he had been badly treated; to think of ways in which he could pay his brothers and that woman back if he ever got out; to let his ill-treatment eat away at his soul; to allow what the book of Hebrews calls a root of bitterness to grow up and cause trouble'
- To wallow in self-pity; to feel that no one else has ever been treated as badly as this or been given such a poor set of cards; that it's alright for everyone else
- To give into despair and deep depression; to give up altogether.

Thirdly: In relation to God, he faced the temptation

- To abandon belief and trust in the one true God altogether; to spiritually walk away from him; to say to God "I want nothing more to do with you" and then
- To fall in with the Egyptian culture and it's much more developed religious life; to pledge allegiance to one of the 1500 and more Gods recognised by the Egyptians; when in Egypt to do as the Egyptians do.

I am pretty certain that he faced all of these tests and temptations and maybe there were moments, or periods of time when he did indeed give into them. In that pit – when shackled on the journey to Egypt, when thrown into prison and shackled once more, when let down by the baker and the cupbearer in the next chapter.

Do you recognise in your own lives any of those tendencies? Or of all too-easily falling at the first fence of some of those tests? Well if you do, then of course you are not alone. Throughout scripture, throughout the history of Christianity, we see people facing those challenges, those tests of their faith and their following of Jesus Christ.

And in Joseph's case as indeed in our cases, it is sometimes true that doing the right thing, trying earnestly to follow God's leading or just trying to stay true to him either gets us directly into trouble or certainly does not prevent trouble coming our way. Joseph did the right thing and look where it landed him. How many times I wonder in his head did he say to himself *"If only I had done what she wanted, maybe I wouldn't be where I am today."* Or maybe he was made of much stronger stuff.

Although Joseph wouldn't have known either the psalms or any modern worship song-psalm, he might perhaps have prayed something like this contemporary song:

*When You don't move the mountains that I'm needing You to move;
When You don't part the waters that I wish I could walk through.
When You don't give the answers as I cry out to You,
I will trust, I will trust, I will trust in You.*

CONFRONTING TEMPTATION AND TESTING

So, what is the remedy for overcoming times of testing and temptation? Well, I can only be very brief now but here are four well-known ways.

- 1) **Spot the warning signs:** We are all much more vulnerable to giving into our weaknesses when we are tired, when we are under stress, when we are not well. Those are the times when we lash out, when we reach for the bottle or the screen, when we give into negative feelings about others, about ourselves and about God. I don't know if you know the phrase 'hangry'. It means that feeling of irritability that comes over some people when they are hungry and a bit of food in their stomach restores their spirits. So keep awake and alert to the signs and situations when you are likely to be most at risk.
- 2) **Stay well clear** of people, situations and things that can bring you down. St. Paul says *'Run from anything that stimulates youthful lusts'* and he could well have added 'senior lusts' too. Proverbs 4 says: *'Don't do as the wicked do, and don't follow the path of evildoers. Don't even think about it; don't go that way. Turn away and keep moving.'*
- 3) **Search and use the Scriptures:** When Jesus was tested in the wilderness, he quoted scripture back at the devil.
- 4) **Seek out Soul-Mates:** This has been a theme of Practicing the Way. Seek out confession and accountability - Enjoy the companionship of those who call on the Lord with pure hearts.

CONCLUSION

I'm drawing to a close now. For all of this talk, I have focused on the role of Joseph in this episode and how he stood up to the tests he faced but let's give God the last word. Throughout this series of snakes and ladders, God was somehow working in all this. God is working his purpose out goes the hymn. His sovereign plans and his purposes related not only to Joseph, but also Joseph's family. It included their descendants and through Christ it includes us.

The story of Joseph is a perfect example of the co-working partnership between the actions and designs of a sovereign God and the actions of an obedient follower of Christ. In the end, Joseph was fully justified and fully reconciled.

Somehow in a way which is beyond our comprehension God is working his purposes out in the myriad upon myriad events and people that have lived, are living and will yet live. And he can work them out even through the wickedness and failings of humanity to ensure that in the end his good and perfect will comes true. We have the foretaste of that working his purposes out in the birth, death resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

As Peter told the crowds on that first Pentecost Sunday

‘This man Jesus was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.’

So, as we reflect on this episode in the life of Joseph and of the greater Joseph, Jesus himself, in the words of Hebrews 12

‘Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.’

Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER

God, the author of all good, we come to You for the grace another day and another week will require for its duties and events. May we engage in nothing in which we cannot implore Your blessing, and in which we cannot invite Your inspection. Prosper us in all lawful undertakings, or hold us up when disappointments come. May every person be made good to us by prayer and Your will. Teach us how to use the world and not abuse it, to improve our talents, to redeem our time, to walk in wisdom toward those without, and in kindness to those within, to do good to all, and especially to our fellow Christians. And to You, O God, be the glory. Amen