

# from riches to rags: an exposition of genesis 39

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Ken Sanner, *October 15, 2004*

*(All Scripture passages from the NIV unless otherwise noted.)*

Most people like "rags to riches" stories. This is a "riches to rags" account.

Marilyn Sanner wrote a lighthearted song that can be put to the tune of the Beverly Hillbillies theme song:

*Come listen to a story 'bout a man named Joe  
Sold into slavery and to Egypt he would go  
Potiphar bought him and put him at the top  
But temptation lived there too and daily wouldn't stop  
The wife you see  
Wanted him*

*Next thing you know she's screaming 'cause he ran  
He wouldn't sin cause he was a righteous man  
Potiphar said, Joe, a cell is where you'll be  
So he bound him head and toe  
And threw away the key*

Here's the biblical version (Genesis 39):

**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. 2 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.**

Our enemies may separate us from friends, relatives, and country; but they cannot take from us the presence of the Lord. They may shut us from outward blessings, rob us of liberty, and

confine us in dungeons; but they cannot shut us out from communion with God, from the throne of grace, or take from us the blessings of salvation.

Joseph's progression:

1. God prospered Joseph when he was just a menial slave.
2. He was moved to live in Potiphar's house.
3. Joseph's life caused an important pagan officer to recognize God. Does your life have that affect on the ungodly?
4. Potiphar promoted him to be his personal attendant and manage his entire household.
5. Potiphar's household and fields prospered under Joseph.
6. Potiphar withdrew from managing and left everything to Joseph to manage.

How long did this take? Eleven years (Joseph was 17 years old when sold into slavery by his brothers.) God's blessing may come slowly.

Joseph must have practiced Eph. 6:5-8: "5Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 6Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, 8because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free."

Joseph was blessed, even in the house where he was a slave. God's presence with us makes us prosper.

Christian approach to success:

1. please God
2. consistently
3. over a long period of time

verses 6b-12:

**Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, 7 and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" 8 But he refused. "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. 9 No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" 10 And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her. 11 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.**

Temptation is like a telemarketer:

- it comes to us when it is least convenient
- it comes back again and again
- it keeps pushing even after you say "No"
- it makes what it is selling sound great . . . but there is always a catch

F. B. Meyer: "We may expect temptation in the days of prosperity and ease rather than in those of toil. Not in the glacier slopes of the Alps, but in the sunny plains; not when the youth is climbing arduously the steep ladder to success, but when he has entered the golden portals; not where men frown but where they smile sweet exquisite smiles of flattery - it is there, that the temptress lies in wait - beware!"

### **6b .Now Joseph was well-built and handsome**

Only two other men in scripture are described as handsome: David and Absalom

**7 and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. ."** (I Cor. 10:13a)

This temptation is so common it's probably been played out thousands of times in countless places every weekend.

Egyptian women were known for their unfaithfulness.

Imagine her rationalizing:

- Joseph, you're 27 years old. You have a man's appetite. You're in your prime.
- You've been a slave for ten years.
- You're not married. You're lonely.
- Don't you have a right to a sexual relationship? This is your chance.
- Potiphar hasn't been a very good husband . . . I deserve some happiness too.
- Maybe your God is even giving you this opportunity.
- It can't be wrong if it feels good.
- Take advantage of this woman who is so infatuated with you.
- Potiphar is gone for the day . . . no one will ever know.
- Just this once!
- Just come close and hold me . . . .it won't go any further
- We won't be hurting anyone

The temptation was:

1. natural: appeals to a right, proper God-given appetite
2. strong: he was away from home, people do strange things when away from home
3. from an important woman: one whose favor would help him forward and it was at his peril if he slighted her, and made her his enemy. Some would say, I yielded because my bread depended on it. I did not dare offend her.

4. after an important promotion: was not when he was a menial slave but after he had "arrived". (F.B.Meyer above)
5. persistent: 10 . she spoke to Joseph day after day
6. perfect opportunity 11 . none of the household servants was inside.

**8 But he refused.:** Do you think this was a spur of the moment decision to refuse?

Three arguments of Joseph:

1. *Who he was* that was tempted - one in covenant with God, who professed relation to him.
2. *What the sin was* to which he was tempted. Others might look upon it as a small matter; but Joseph did not. Call sin by its own name, and never lessen it. Let sins always be looked upon as great wickedness, as exceedingly sinful.
3. *Against whom* he was tempted to sin, against God. Sin is against God, against his nature and his dominion, against his love and his design. Those that love God hate sin.

### **9 . How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"**

I: I who have known the true God and have been the beneficiary of his grace. I who have been redeemed from sin by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

do: How could I do such a thing? As long as the temptation is still in the mind and the sin is not performed, there is room for victory. Temptation is not a sin. I must not do it. French saying: "noblesse oblige" means good breeding imposes obligations. If we are Christ's, we must live right lives. "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth" (I John 1:6)

wicked: sin is sin, it is wicked. How could I do such a wicked thing against God?

God: God, the righteous one, who is altogether good and loving, God the just. I cannot offend God

Joseph does five things that will help us not only refuse the temptation to immorality . . . but to resist just about any temptation:

1. He refused immediately. We have a tendency to walk as close to sin as we can get before we try to get away. It is true of immorality and every other sin. The longer we wait to say "No", the harder it is to do so. Instead of acting decisively against sin we flirt and see how far we can go without "getting into trouble". We stare. We imagine. We fantasize. We say "No", but we play with "yes". The more we play, the weaker we become. Before long we've lost perspective and developed desires that are powerful and destructive. The moment we allow ourselves to debate the merits of wrong behavior we've given the devil a foothold.

2. He counted the cost: Joseph didn't just refuse "because it was wrong" (even though that should be reason enough). He had a realistic view of what was at stake.

- it was a violation of trust . . . Potiphar trusted him. His trust was so great that he didn't concern himself with anything while Joseph was around. To give in to Mrs. Potiphar would be to treat that trust as if it were nothing. How could he do this to someone who had been so kind? His credibility would be gone. His character would be destroyed.
- it was a violation of marriage. 8 ."My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife." Joseph understood that marriage settled the issue. It was not open for debate.
- it was a sin against God. Immorality is wrong! It is contrary to God's direction. Joseph knew that disregarding God's law is to alienate ourselves from our strength and hope.

The biggest problem in temptation is that we focus on what there is to be had and we seldom consider the cost. When tempted to immorality we should consider:

- a) the grief we would bring to the Lord
- b) the reality that some day we will have to stand before Jesus and give an account of their decisions
- c) the people that we will be stealing from (a present spouse, a future mate)
- d) the undermining of the faithful example and hard work of other Christians in our community
- e) a loss of credibility and opportunity to serve and minister
- f) the threat of disease and pregnancy
- g) the embarrassment and disappointment to those who are my family and friends

3. He resisted persistently. Notice that Joseph resisted even though she spoke to him day after day. The text doesn't say it, but I suspect she may have dressed provocatively when Joseph was around. She made lots of eye contact. She took every opportunity she could to touch Joseph.

It takes great strength to resist this persistent pressure to sin. Whatever you are struggling with will be something that seems to bombard you everywhere you go. When Satan senses vulnerability he does not turn away quickly. We must say no immediately and remind ourselves of the cost of sin and we must do it again, and again, and again.

4. *He avoided tempting situations strategically* **10 And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.**

Notice that Joseph stayed away. He didn't go looking for trouble. Joseph was smart enough to

know that no matter how strong he was . . . he could not constantly invite temptation without putting himself at risk. So . . . he avoided Mrs. Potiphar as much as possible.

If you know that something will be a situation that will tempt you . . . stay away! If you know that there are friends who will encourage sin . . . avoid them. If you know that certain practices will stir up sinful emotions or dull your sensibilities. . . stay away.

5. *He fled decisively.* Joseph's job brought him into the household. He had no choice. He tried to avoid Mrs. Potiphar but it was inevitable that they run into each other. So, one day Joseph walked unknowingly into a trap. The house was empty. The servants were all gone and Mrs. Potiphar made her move. She grabbed Joseph and sought to seduce him. Joseph didn't try to reason with her. He ran away!

Sometimes you need to simply get out of the situation that is causing the problem. Jesus tells us to take decisive action. Paul told us to "flee sexual immorality." (I Cor. 6:18). This was not a figure of speech . . . it was a battle plan. This is not the time for explanations. It is not the time to be polite. Your window of opportunity is small . . .run!

"God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out. (I Cor. 10:13b)

If he hadn't refused: he may have acquired a little more influence in Potiphar's house. Could it have lasted?

verses 13-18:

**13 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. 16 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.**

Hell knows no fury like a woman scorned!

**14 . make sport of** = attempt rape

There is no record that the other slaves were impressed with her protest of innocence.

They that walk uprightly should not expect the reward of their righteousness to be necessary or immediate.

verses 19-20a:

**19 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.**

### **19 When his master heard the story his wife told him**

It's hard to believe Potiphar was unsuspecting of his wife's infidelities. She was so shameless, direct, and persistent.

**19 . he burned with anger.** The text doesn't indicate what or whom he was angry at:

- angry with the situation?
- that it became public?

To be cast into prison was a relatively light penalty. If he really believed his wife's story, he probably would have had Joseph killed.

### **20 Joseph's master took him and put him in prison**

People in high places need to keep up pretenses.

**20 . prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.** Genesis doesn't describe Joseph's condition in prison but see Psalm 105:17-18 "**he sent a man before them- Joseph, sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons.**" Bound at neck and ankles, he awaited either execution or slow physical decline due to the prison conditions. This treatment was the exact opposite of what he should have received for his repeated refusal to commit adultery with his master's wife.

Some of the "prisons" God's people are enduring today are spiritual abuse, financial difficulty, physical problems, and career discrimination.

Joseph could be asking:

- What kind of God is this, who permits a man who has refused to sin against him - to sink to the depths?
- Where is God?
- Why should lies be believed?
- Why should people be allowed to do what is wrong and make righteous people suffer?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Why didn't God rescue him?

But, Joseph knew three things:

1. Since he was being persecuted for righteousness, his suffering proved he was God's man. -- Jesus said, "**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against**

**you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven..." Matt. 5:10-**

**-- James 1:12: Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.**

2. He had faith in the sovereignty and wisdom of God. Suffering was being used by God to mold his character.
  - God had already done it before in his life.
  - Persecution is often the means God uses to help believers along the road to practical holiness and make us more like Jesus.
  - **". you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith. may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." I Peter 1:6-7**
  - **James 1:2-4: Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**
  - Joseph's humiliation in prison prepared him to be in an exalted position without falling into conceit.
3. Persecution allows the believer to show the supernatural strength of his master.
  - If everything is going well and you rejoice, what makes you different from unbelievers?
  - Persecution is the dark background for the supernatural radiance of Christ to shine. If you are able to rejoice when things are going bad, then Jesus may be clearly seen in you.
  - Is there anything in our character and conduct that reveals Christ?

Prison strengthened Joseph's character, Samson's physical prowess, and John's perception (wrote Revelation while "imprisoned" on Isle of Patmos). God used Paul and Silas' witness in prison to save the Philippian jailer. Paul wrote the great prison epistles (Philippians, Colossians, II Timothy, Philemon) from his prison in Rome.

verses 20b-23:

**But while Joseph was there in the prison, 21 (sim. v.2) the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. 22 (sim. v.4) 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 (sim. v.5) 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.**

His course was parallel to his earlier rise from a menial slave to manager of Potiphar's household.

God gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison - he trusted him to manage the affairs of the prison. A good man will do good wherever he is.

Joseph told his brothers in **Genesis 50:20**: "**You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.**"

God allowed all this to happen to Joseph for a reason. He had to put Joseph in a position where he could be close to Pharaoh. The future of Israel depended on him being the overseer of Egypt's food banks during the coming famine. Have you had something happen to you in the past that you didn't understand until much later?

Billy Graham tells of a friend who went through the Great Depression, losing a job, a fortune, a wife, and a home. He was a believer in Christ and he held tenaciously to his faith even though he was naturally depressed by circumstances. One day in the midst of his depression he stopped to watch some men doing stonework on a huge church in the city. One was busy chiseling a triangular piece of stone. "What are you going to do with that?" he asked. The workman stopped and pointed to a little opening near the top of the spire. "See that little opening up there?" he said. "Well, I'm shaping this down here so it will fit in up there." The friend said that tears filled his eyes as he walked away from the workman. It seemed that God had spoken to him personally to say that he was shaping him for heaven by the ordeal through which he was passing.

### **Conclusions:**

Because God is with a person does not signify that everything will always go well or that he or she will always be spared ruin and humiliation. God is free in his actions toward humans. His actions are by no means simply reactive responses to human actions and attitudes toward him. If God were not free and unpredictable in these matters, God would not be God. However, we have the promise: "**we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love God and have been called according to his purpose.**" Romans 8:28

Wherever an individual or society has been involved in God's story, this story will continue, even though during long periods they may sense nothing of it.

Let us not forget, through Joseph, to look to Jesus, who suffered being tempted, yet without sin; who was slandered and persecuted and imprisoned without cause; who by way of the cross, ascended to the throne. May we be enabled to follow the same path in submitting and in suffering, to the same place of glory.

Joseph's greatest single characteristic was his absolute faithfulness to God in all circumstances.