Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife

Maybe it’s because I’m older but this winter seems to be colder than normal. I do recall a winter almost 40 years ago when it was 6 degrees below zero but it warmed up to the 50’s in just a couple of days. Although we have not had the bitter cold, we haven’t seen many days above 50 and those days are usually rainy. I talked to my brother in Tennessee yesterday and he said it was 11 degrees at his house so I guess I should be thankful it’s not that cold here. The good news is I have looked at the long range weather forecast and we can look forward to several days of temperatures in the 60’s next week. I think knowing we have warmer weather to look forward to makes it easier to tolerate what we are going through now.

As we study the next 2 chapters of Genesis, knowing that Joseph will be released from prison and promoted to a position of authority makes the story a little easier to read. Joseph did not have that luxury. When he was attacked by his brothers, he had no idea of what to expect. His life thereafter was like a roller coaster, surviving the attack only to be thrown into a pit. He was released from the pit only to be sold into slavery. In chapter 39, his conditions improve then he is sent to prison. The chapter begins with Joseph being sold as a slave to an Egyptian official named Potiphar. While he was still a slave, living in the house of a wealthy man would certainly have been preferable to being a slave of nomads journeying through the desert. Verse 2 says that Joseph prospered so we can imagine that things were looking much brighter to Joseph. Verse 2 tells us why Joseph prospered; it was because the Lord was with him. Potiphar could see that God was with Joseph as well and their relationship began to change. Joseph became more like a trusted employee than a slave and Potiphar had enough confidence in him that he turned over the management of the household to Joseph. As Joseph rose to a peak in his life, a valley soon followed in the form of a disastrous encounter with Potiphar’s wife. She repeatedly tried to seduce him but he rebuffed her. Finally, she tried to drag him to her bed while no one else was in the house. Joseph ran out leaving his cloak in her hands which she used as evidence to convince her husband that Joseph was the guilty party, not her. Potiphar had Joseph sent to prison which is somewhat surprising considering the severity of the offence. Most masters would have a slave put to death for such a crime so it may be that Potiphar suspected that his wife was lying about the incident. Once Joseph was in jail, his prospects again improved as the jailer recognized that Joseph could be trusted to oversee the prison. As with Potiphar, Joseph was successful because God was with him (that line is repeated 4 times in chapter 39).

We can learn several lessons from Joseph’s experiences.

1. Joseph was diligent in his work even as a slave and a prisoner. Paul wrote that slaves should go about their works as though working for God (Eph. 6:5-8). Joseph treated the property of Potiphar and the prison as his own.
2. Joseph resisted temptation. He tried to make certain that he never placed himself in a position where he was alone with Potiphar’s wife. When she tried to lure him to her bed, he ran from her. James 4:7 tells us to resist Satan and he will flee from us.
3. Joseph was a man of honor. When he was tempted by Potiphar’s wife, he said that he could not betray his master’s trust.
4. Joseph discharged his duties faithfully and advanced to more and more responsibility. As Joseph demonstrated his abilities, Potiphar granted him more authority. Moving on to manage a prison was probably more complex than managing Potiphar’s household but Joseph was equal to the task. This led him to have the skills to later be in charge of Egypt, effectively its prime minister. We should humble ourselves to start at a lower position and prove ourselves before advancing (see the parable of the talents, Matt. 25:14-30).
5. Potiphar saw that his household prospered under Joseph’s guidance because God was with Joseph. In all that we do, we need to remember to give God glory because it may be an opportunity to witness to a lost person.
6. Finally, God was with Joseph because Joseph was with God. His faith in God remained strong during his trials. When tempted, he would not sin against God (v. 9). Joseph spent 13 years as a slave and a prisoner but his faith in God never wavered.