

# The Story of Joseph

## *The Pit of Despair*

Part 24 – September 2, 2012

Chapter 39 is hard to process. The more Joseph obeys God, the worse life gets! The more he does right, the more he is done wrong! Mrs. Potiphar accuses him of attempted rape. And by the action Potiphar takes – or rather, the telling *inaction* – it's obvious that Potiphar is fully aware of Joseph's innocence, and yet ...

Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, [Literally, "Round House"; a unique description only used for Potiphar's prison] the place where the king's prisoners were confined. – *Genesis 39:20a NIV*



It likely would've resembled this 2,800 year old, underground, grain silo (at Megiddo), except with halls and cells at its base. Joseph faced three deadly temptations in Potiphar's house: *power* (but he used *his* to bless), *sexual lust* (but he set up and stuck to very clear boundaries), and now the toughest yet: *the wymee!* Picture this silo sealed over, lit only by flickering orange flames. A heavy door screams open, and Joseph, in chains, looks down as he descends into despair and says, "Wymee, Lord? Why me?!"

The third temptation is to give up, and it comes when you try to do God's will, and your apparent reward is regret! We are never more tempted to despair than when life is unfair.

[Joseph will later share his *wymees* with the King's Cupbearer and Chief Baker] "For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a **dungeon**." [In 40:3 we're told it's *in Potiphar's house*, but this is how we know it's *under*] – *Genesis 40:15 NIV*

The Hebrew word translated as *dungeon* is *bowr* [boor]; and it *only* means dungeon because Joseph is imprisoned in it. Otherwise, its common meanings are "pit", "well", and "cistern"! ... *Deja'vu!* Flashback to the *first* pit, back in chapter 37 ...

[20] "... throw him into one of these cisterns [bowr(s)] ..." [22] "Throw him into this cistern [bowr]" ... [24] [they] threw him into the cistern [bowr]. Now the cistern [bowr] was empty ... [28] his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern [bowr] ... [29] When Reuben returned to the cistern [bowr] ... – *Genesis 37:20, 22, 24, 28, 29 NIV*



Potiphar's prison is in the shape of a cistern! Which doesn't go unnoticed by Joseph. He's in *another pit!* Only this time it's far bigger and far deeper, as is the spectacular depth of his fall. In the first pit he lost the rights of a firstborn in a family of shepherds. This time he's the C.O.O. of the second most powerful household in the single most powerful nation in the world! Every servant bowing to him, like in those dreams he had when he was 17!

This is when he'd be tempted to think, "I should've just slept with her! What good has my goodness gotten me?!" And *that's* the wrestling match we all need, in order to sort out who we're *really* serving ... and why! He's about 26, and he was probably hoping God would reward him, for resisting the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife, with a wife of his own; instead, he got a ball and chain ... *no comment*. About Joseph, the Psalmist says ...

**They** bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons ... – *Psalm 105:18 NIV*



Who's this "**they**"? Well, it involves a prominent figure in this pit of despair; the warden. The warden works directly *under* Potiphar, *literally* and *also* according to rank.

But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. – *Genesis 39:20b-21 NIV*

Now *there's* a consolation prize, huh? It's like, while my daughter's in the hospital, and I'm praying for *healing*, God shows me *kindness* by granting me favor in the eyes of the nurse. "That's *all* my righteousness *gets* me?!" Yes! *And*, no!

Yes, that's what *faith* gets you; but no, it's not the *extent*. The pit is *always* about something far deeper and more profound than you can plumb. And *that's* why it's such a wrestling match! Who are you serving, God or self? God? Why? To *get* what *you* want, or to *become* what *He* wants? When is the cost *too high*? When *isn't* it worth it?

The *real* tragedy isn't being *in* the pit – *we all gotta go in the pit* – the bigger tragedy is *wasting* the moment while you're there! Don't be confused by early results; and don't sit in your cell and sulk. Joseph took on unprecedented responsibilities as a prisoner, to oversee the inmates and to virtually *run* the royal prison.

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. [And it wasn't easy ... *transformation never is*] – *Genesis 39:22 NIV*



Maybe he accepted *this* as the fulfillment of the dream God had given him. In it, *bound* sheaves were bowing to him as a *bound* sheaf. Now, the warden would've known who Joseph was, and he had to wonder why Potiphar was putting a *Hebrew* slave, who attempted to rape his wife, in the royal Egyptian prison. And the warden certainly wouldn't have promoted the slave who tried to rape the wife of his boss, the Chief Executioner. It's more than likely Potiphar had explained the situation.

The warden [who quickly realized he'd hit the jackpot] paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, [which, as you might recall from the previous verse, was ... *everything!*] because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did. – *Genesis 39:23 NIV*

The warden “**paid no attention**” even though Joseph could’ve taken advantage; but, it was obvious that Joseph’s integrity bound him in a positive sense far more than chains could in the negative. When life takes your dignity, don’t offer your integrity too!

So Joseph blessed the warden of his prison, to God’s glory, his own growth, and the eternal good of his fellow inmates. But, when the enemy can’t conquer from without, he whispers from within (knowing if you endure the pit you’ll get to the palace).

“This isn’t the fulfillment of your dreams; your unjust brothers should be bowing to you. But, you left your father to grieve. And now your dreams are dead ... and it’s *your own* sin that killed ‘em; and now you’re going to die in this hellhole.”

And here’s a shocker ... usually it’s not the *enemy* who’s whispering those words of despair in your ear ... it’s ... *you!* If you spoke to your friends the way you talk to yourself, would you have any friends? No. ‘Cause you’d sound too much like the devil! The only hopeless pit is the one that’s self-imposed. Despair has almost *nothing* to do with circumstances and almost *everything* to do with attitude, perspective, and our definition of success.

Consider it pure joy, [See it as an opportunity to glorify God and grow] my brothers, whenever you face trials [i.e. pits] of many kinds, because you know that the testing [stretching and working out] of your faith develops perseverance [strength and stamina]. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature [wise and well developed] and complete, [able to fulfill your uniquely created purpose] not lacking anything [which you would, if it wasn’t for the pits]. If any of you lacks wisdom [in the pit], he should ask God, who gives [insight and perspective] generously to all [who seek it] without finding fault [for confusion or frustration with the pit], and it will be given to him. But when he asks, [for insight and perspective] he must believe and not doubt [that God is with him in the pit, and working through him strategically for an ultimate, eternal, good] ... – James 1:2-6a NIV

Twice it says, “**the Lord was with Joseph**”, which says as much about Joseph’s faithfulness to God as it does God’s to Joseph. I want you to see something that’s hiding in plain sight: the *final* verses of chapter 39 match point for point the *first* verses.

But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness [39:2 “The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master”] and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. [39:4a “Joseph found favor in [Potiphar’s] eyes”] So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, [39:4b “Potiphar put him in charge of his household”] and he was made responsible for all that was done there. [39:4c “and he entrusted to his care everything he owned”] The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph’s care, [39:6 “[Potiphar] did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate”] because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did. [39:3 “the LORD was with him and ... gave him **SUCCESS** in everything he did] – Genesis 39:20b-23 NIV

The Lord was with him just as much, and gave him *true success*, outside the house, inside the house, and now *under* the house! If you asked Joseph, in the pit, to list what he thought God should do, he would’ve said something like, “Restore my reputation and my position, and maybe get a place of my own on the plantation with a wife and children.”

“That’s pretty good. But, I’ve seen God’s actual list, and it’s a *tad* more ... grandiose. You get the reputation and the wife and kids ... *and* ... you become the second most powerful leader in all of Egypt, *and* you save the entire nation, your father’s family, and the known world from a famine, *and* you establish the 12 tribes of Israel in the land of Goshen where they become a nation, *and* your story will inspire Moses, and he’ll write it as he leads ‘em to the Promised Land, *and* your journey will foreshadow the Messiah, who will bring salvation to the *world*, *and* your pitfalls will inspire and encourage believers until the end of time ... maybe beyond.”

It isn’t that we want too much, but that we settle for too little.

[The Lord declares] “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” – *Isaiah 55:9 NIV*



“So, trust Me. When your heart is troubled and you feel forsaken and afraid, don’t abandon your post in the pit. Because of free will and sin, some battles will be lost ... but victory is assured!”

[Just before His crucifixion, Jesus said] “Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” – *John 12:27-28a NIV*

What a strange battle we’ve been called to, where we fight to save those who attack us, where an earthly loss can be a kingdom win, and an unfair, unjust, untimely death can bring new life. Joseph approached his new post in the pit like Job, who said ...

Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him ... – *Job 13:15a NIV*

And when it’s your turn to trudge those stony steps into a deep, dark, pit where despair presses in, and whispers in your ear, and threatens to crush you, I think the Lord would remind you that, *nobody* gets to choose how they die ... just how they live. And *nobody* gets to choose if they remain in the pit ... just if they remain in My will.

Here’s an obvious truth that’s easily overlooked: when you’ve descended to the bottom of the pit, stop looking down. You’ve just been commissioned and called into action!

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him ... – *Philippians 1:29 NIV*

Show the world where to find what they most need: peace in the storm, comfort in the pain, closeness in the aloneness, joy in the sorrow, and hope in the very pit of despair.

On the way down, Joseph may have said, “Why me?” But, now that he’s there, he’s looking up and asking, “What now?” Then, the lock-bolt at the top of the stairs noisily unfastens, the thick, reinforced door flies open, and crisp bright rays pierce the dusty, dead air, filling the pit with blinding light. Three silhouettes enter, causing a noisy commotion among the VIP inmates. And the warden nudges Joseph, “I’m pretty sure *this* for you.” And *this* ... is where we have to close God’s story for today.