

“WHEN GOD IS WITH US”

The overarching theme of this chapter is set in sharp contrast to the episode involving Judah and Tamar in the preceding chapter. You will remember that Judah’s troubles with Tamar all began when he decided to leave the covenant community, the place where God’s blessing resides. Though Judah would eventually be restored, there was a sense in which he turned away from God during his years among the Canaanites. And this resulted in a great deal of trouble for him. Joseph, however, who was removed from the covenant community against his will, was not abandoned by the Lord during his time in Egypt. This is emphasized by the fact that the phrase “The LORD was with Joseph” is repeated four times in this chapter. Here we see how the Lord providentially preserved Joseph, and even made him prosper, during his time of forced exile. And the Lord did this in spite of the fact that Joseph continued to experience unjust treatment at the hands of the people around him. As we study this passage tonight, I want to focus upon what it can teach us about the difference that God’s presence makes in the lives of his people. We will consider three points in this sermon: first, God’s presence sometimes causes his people to be respected and sometimes causes them to be rejected; second, God’s presence enables his people to withstand temptation; and third, God’s presence ensures that all things work together for the good for those who love him.

We begin with the first point: *God’s presence sometimes causes his people to be respected and sometimes causes them to be rejected.* We can see both of these things in what happened to Joseph after he was bought by Potiphar. Joseph’s master saw that the

LORD was with him, and this caused him to put Joseph in charge of all of his affairs.

Potiphar did not turn away from his Egyptian idols and start worshipping Yahweh, but he was able to see how Joseph's faith had made him into a man of high moral character.

Potiphar sensed that he could trust this man. And as the story unfolds, we see that he was right. Joseph proved to be worthy of his trust.

This sort of thing often happens to those who cultivate a close communion with God. People who walk with God reflect his character, and this does not go unnoticed by unbelievers. They can see that the godly are different. And sometimes, this results in believers being placed in positions of influence. It is what happened to the prophet Daniel when he was exiled in Babylon and was chosen to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's court. And the same kind of thing can still happen today. It is sometimes the case that decisions about promotions, or about who will be retained when jobs are being cut, come down to the small things that set one employee apart from the others. And it is sometimes a Christian's character that sets him above his or her fellow employees. A Christian should do all that he can to distinguish himself in everything that he does - not to win praise for himself, but to bring honor to the name of the Lord. Because we know that the Lord is with us, we should do all of our work as unto him.

However, it is not always the case that a believer's righteousness and integrity are rewarded. Sometimes it is the exact opposite. We even see this in the case of Daniel, who was eventually cast into a lion's den for his refusal to compromise his faith. And the same thing happened to Joseph while he was serving in Potiphar's house. His refusal to

acquiesce to the advances of Potiphar's wife resulted in the false accusations that led to his imprisonment. Likewise, there are Christians today who have ended up losing their jobs because of their unwillingness to do what their employer asked when it would mean compromising their faith. Joseph's experience in Potiphar's house illustrates both ends of the spectrum: sometimes the Lord's presence with believers causes others to respect them, and sometimes it cause them to reject them.

This brings us to our second point: *God's presence enables his people to withstand temptation.* The Lord was with Joseph, but that did not prevent him from having to endure the enticements of Potiphar's wife. God permits his people to be exposed to temptation. He uses our temptations to humble us, to remind us of our dependence on him, and to test and strengthen our faith. God sometimes protects us from temptation, but he does not always do so. He does promise us that he will never allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10. And it is important for us to remember this, especially when we are faced with temptation. If you are a Christian, there is no time in your life when you are doomed to give in to temptation. God always provides a way for you to escape, a way for you to endure the temptation. He did so for Joseph, and Joseph took full advantage of the means of escape that God provided for him.

The Lord delivered Joseph from this temptation, but this does not mean that it was easy for Joseph to resist the advances of Potiphar's wife. Joseph was not passive when it came to resisting this temptation. He had to do all that he could to heroically and persistently resist this woman who would not take no for an answer. It was a hard fought

victory for Joseph. Victories over temptation always are, but they are also always worth it. C.S. Lewis reflected upon this when he wrote these words:

“Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.” [*Mere Christianity*, 132]

Whenever we experience victory in the face of a particular experience of temptation, we are made that much stronger to face future temptations. It is worth the effort to resist temptation, even though it is very hard for us to do so.

It was certainly not easy for Joseph to resist the temptation that faced him in this passage. Potiphar’s wife was relentless in her pursuit of him, but he was just as relentless in his refusal to give in. And when she was so bold as to grab hold of him one day, Joseph simply took flight. He was determined not to allow this woman to ensnare him. And it was his awareness of the fact that God was with him that enabled him to resist her. Joseph knew that such a sin would not only be a breach of his master’s trust, but it would

also be a sin against God. When we remember that the Lord really is with us, we will be that much more serious about resisting temptation.

Joseph did the right thing, but he was not rewarded for doing so - at least not at first. He was cast into prison. He did what the Lord wanted him to do, but he was actually punished for doing so. There are times when this happens in a believer's life. There are going to be times when it happens in your life. And when it does, you need to resist the temptation to doubt that God is still exercising his most wise providence over your life. Those are the times when you truly have to live by faith and not by sight. That is what Joseph had to do when he was thrown into prison. He could not see how things were going to work out, but he kept on trusting that the Lord was with him. And when we trust God in those kinds of situations, we will often find that we can begin to see glimpses of how God is at work. Perhaps Joseph saw this when he reflected upon the fact that he was only cast in prison. Normally, a slave who was accused of this sort of thing would simply be put to death. Even though Joseph was being punished unjustly, God protected him from what could have been much worse.

We come now to our third point: *God's presence ensures that all things work together for the good for those who love him.* We are not always able to see how the Lord is working in our lives. I am sure that Joseph had no idea of what the Lord was doing when he allowed him to be falsely accused and put in jail. But God was working out his purposes. He was still with Joseph. He was working through Joseph's circumstances to ensure that his kingdom would continue to advance. All of the things

that happened to Joseph conspired together to bring him to the place of influence that he would eventually attain in Pharaoh's court. If Joseph had remained a servant in Potiphar's house, he never would have met Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker in prison. He never would have interpreted their dreams correctly. The cupbearer never would have told Pharaoh about Joseph when Pharaoh was perplexed by a strange dream of his own. Joseph may have been tempted to feel that God had left him when he was unjustly put in jail, but the Lord was still with him. And this becomes evident at the end of the passage when, once again, almost exactly as when Joseph began to serve in Potiphar's house, Joseph found favor with the keeper of the prison. Once again, he won the respect of an unbeliever and was placed in a position of influence.

It was God's presence with Joseph that made the difference during his time in Egypt. The one thing that matters in life is whether or not you enjoy communion with the living God. It is a believer's sense of fellowship with God, and the joy that he finds in that fellowship, that enables him to live a holy life and to persevere amid the trials that he has to face. Christian faithfulness is the fruit of the communion that we enjoy with God. This is what we see in this passage. Joseph did not obtain the blessing of God's presence by living a holy life. It was the other way around. It was God's presence in his life that enabled him to resist temptation and persevere in faith. This is the only way anyone can live a Christian life. In the words of Walter Marshall,

“believers should not act *for* life, but *from* life. They must act as those who are not procuring life by their works, but as such who have already received and derived life from Christ, and act from the power and virtue received from him.” [*The Gospel-Mystery of Sanctification*, 172]

We will never have the strength to endure all of life’s difficulties in faith unless we are convinced that God is with us. The way to live for God is to know that, because of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf, we live in communion with the living and true God. And he will never, never forsake us.