

Bite Size Bible Study

Joseph part 2 #94

By Pastor Lee

Everyone probably knows the story of the patriarch Joseph, with his multicolored coat. But we are seeing it through our individualist culture as opposed to the collectivist culture in which it took place.

This is part two of this study.

Joseph is not sold to some unknown farmer. He ends up at a country estate of a high-ranking Egyptian official, Potiphar, the captain of the guard.

Potiphar's wife takes a shine to Joseph and invites him to bed. Joseph refuses. Good for him, but we should note why. (There aren't Ten Commandments yet.) Joseph states: *"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. 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?"* (Gen 39:8-9). Joseph states he is the greatest person in the house and Potiphar has put everything into Joseph's hand. Notice that Joseph has placed himself above her as well as above all the other slaves. They are his new household unit, but here he has the same arrogance he had with his brothers.

Potiphar is going to know what happened. The wife of the estate owner would probably never have been left unattended. At the very least a handmaiden would be there. If one slave knew, they would all know. It is quite possible the slaves knew what really happened. If so, then Joseph's alienation of them is even more poignant: they won't come to his rescue. She lies to Potiphar and says that Joseph tried to seduce (or rape) her.

Potiphar is enraged. We have no idea whether Potiphar loved this wife, but he would have cared about the dishonor (shame) and the lack of loyalty shown to him by either his wife or his favored servant.

He has two choices:

- He publicly supports his wife's story: a slave has attacked her. The punishment – the slave would be executed.
- He publicly supports his head slave and disgraces his wife. The result was he would divorce her.

It seems that whatever Potiphar decides to do, he loses. He clearly doesn't believe his wife's story, because Joseph isn't executed. But if he sides with his wife, then he loses the best estate manager he has ever had. An honest and successful manager was hard to find. On the other hand, if he sides with Joseph, then he must divorce his wife. Since she hasn't committed adultery (at least according to the story he got), if he divorces her the bridal price, almost certainly the estate, will go back to her family. Thus, Potiphar can keep the estate and lose his manager, or he can keep the manager and lose the estate.

Potiphar decides to keep the estate (his wife). But notice that not only is Joseph not executed, but he is placed in the best prison in Egypt, the one where the king's servants are placed. Joseph is given a new community and again rises to prominence in this community. But this time, Joseph doesn't alienate his new community. He has, at last, learned how to live as a member of a community. Finally, Joseph is ready to be used by God to be put in charge of another community: Egypt.

But this is not the climactic end of the story. This is only part one in the restoration story. The happy ending where we celebrate the saving work of God comes at the end, when Joseph and his brothers and father are restored. Joseph uses his status to care for his family. He provides for all his brothers' families, as he should have done at the beginning. More than that, they are relationally restored as brothers who care for one another (Gen 45:14-15). The dysfunctional family is restored.

This is how the collectivist culture would see this story. The family, kinship group, is restored. The individuals are restored to the kinship community.

It is interesting how we can read the same story from different cultural perspectives and find a new insight to human behavior and how God works in each one.

This has been excerpted from:
E. Randolph Richards & Richard James
"Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes"
pp 11-17 Part 1 Social Structures of the Biblical World

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