

Commentary on Genesis 39:7-21
International Bible Lessons
Sunday, January 1, 2012
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The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Series*) for **Sunday, January 1, 2012**, is from **Genesis 39:7-21**. Five **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse by verse **International Bible Lesson Commentary** below. The **Study Hints for Thinking Further**, which are also available on the **Bible Lesson Forum**, will aid teachers in class preparation and in conducting class discussion. For additional **International Bible Lesson Commentaries**, see the complete and comprehensive **International Bible Lessons Commentary Index**. The weekly **International Bible Lesson** is posted each Saturday before the lesson is scheduled to be taught at **<http://InternationalBibleLessons.org>** and in **The Oklahoman** newspaper.

International Bible Lesson Commentary

Genesis 39:7-21

(Genesis 39:7) And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me."

Joseph's brothers sold him to some caravan traders who sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, the captain of

the guard for Pharaoh. God so blessed Joseph that Potiphar placed Joseph in charge of all the business of running his house. Since Potiphar was rich and famous as a servant of Pharaoh, he needed a reliable person to care for all of his household business and all of the other servants. Then, Potiphar's wife tried to tempt Joseph to sin.

(Genesis 39:8) But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand.

Joseph tried to reason with Potiphar's wife and give her good reasons for not sinning. He also refused her temptations. He explained to her the high trust that her husband had placed in him, and he was not going to violate her husband's trust. Joseph also knew the law of God, handed down to him by Jacob and written on his heart by God, and he did not want to sin against God or violate the trust that God had placed in him when He blessed him.

(Genesis 39:9) He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

Joseph called what Potiphar's wife wanted him to do "great wickedness." Because he saw sin for what it truly is and not what a sinful culture may consider sin, he called it "great wickedness," which also gave him greater strength to refuse her temptations. Joseph proved himself faithful in the sight of God in what might seem to some in our culture today a "small thing," but his faithfulness in this "small thing" prepared him for greater responsibilities in Egypt.

(Genesis 39:10) And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her.

She tempted Joseph everyday, so she kept the pressure of temptation upon him. Perhaps his daily refusals added fuel to the fire of her passion. In order to defeat her efforts at tempting him, Joseph refused even to spend any time with her other than what his household duties required of him. He would not even walk partially down the road to sin by being with her in any way other than what his responsibilities required of him. This was a good strategy on Joseph's part.

(Genesis 39:11) One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house,

On this crucial day, Potiphar's wife (who has remained nameless) tempted Joseph when he might

have succumbed because no one else was in the house to witness their sin, but Joseph knew that God would see them, and he did not want to sin against God, Who would see, or against Potiphar, even though he might never learn of their sin, or against Potiphar's wife, for she would be involved if they sinned together.

(Genesis 39:12) she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside.

Joseph chose not to take even one step down the wrong path toward sin, so even though she had grabbed his garment, he was not going to physically touch her, which might lead them into sin or force him into a violent confrontation to keep his garment. He chose to flee from her presence and sought to escape by running outside of the house where he would be in the presence of other servants (which would have kept her from following him).

(Genesis 39:13) When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside,

Potiphar's wife failed repeatedly to tempt Joseph to sin, and in her anger (which may have turned to hatred for him because of his many refusals), she saw her opportunity to get her revenge against someone who had repeatedly spurned her advances. Joseph had refused to lie with her and lie about it, so she

chose to lie about Joseph and how she got his garment.

(Genesis 39:14) she called out to the members of her household and said to them, “See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice;

When Potiphar’s wife called out to her household servants, some of them may have seen Joseph fleeing from the house without his garment (which would serve as circumstantial evidence against Joseph). Probably none of the household staff who knew the truth would have dared call her a liar. She also expressed racial hatred for a Hebrew, though she had wanted to sin intimately with a Hebrew. She may have felt superior to Joseph, but morally speaking Joseph was superior to her. She also blamed her husband for this situation, for he was the one who brought Joseph, a Hebrew, into their house (somewhat similar to Adam blaming God for giving him Eve, a woman, see Genesis 3:12 – “The woman whom you gave to be with me. . .”).

(Genesis 39:15) and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.”

The evidence she presented could support her untrue claims about Joseph. We do not know if Joseph

defended himself by telling the truth or trying to tell the truth to an enraged husband, who would not have wanted to believe what Joseph would have told him about his wife (however, the Bible did record the truth). Joseph was convicted of the sin he had refused to commit, based only on the lying testimony of Potiphar's wife, since there were no eyewitnesses. She was an influential woman and he was a Hebrew slave; therefore, her story may have been believable to many.

(Genesis 39:16) Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home,

Potiphar's wife did everything we would require of a person claiming to have been assaulted or harassed today. She told her untrue story immediately to others, which some today think makes the story more likely to be true. She kept the physical evidence that she had stolen from Joseph as evidence of his crime against her. If Joseph had fought against her to reclaim his garment, he might have gotten scratches that would have probably condemned him of the crime she accused him of in the eyes of a judge (or jury in modern times). Joseph only knew to flee from sin, which he did. People unjustly accused or convicted of a crime can identify with what Joseph may have felt.

(Genesis 39:17) and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you

have brought among us, came in to me to insult me;

To make her lie more convincing, she told the same story again. Probably, from her point of view, Joseph had insulted her time and again for refusing to sin with her. Furthermore, she tried to make Potiphar feel responsible for “the crime,” which probably made him feel even more responsible to execute punishment for “the crime” against a slave he had trusted. No doubt Potiphar felt betrayed by Joseph, rather than suspecting that his wife had betrayed both him and Joseph. Joseph was convicted for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, which made it possible for Potiphar’s wife to falsely accuse him and present circumstantial evidence to condemn him.

(Genesis 39:18) but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.”

She told a partial truth that she twisted into a lie. He did leave his garment behind and fled, but only after she grabbed it and tempted him to sin. Only after he fled and she saw that he had left his garment in her hands did she raise her voice and cry out. It would always be her word against his word. Joseph’s loose-fitting garment was probably a robe. This would be the second time a robe would get Joseph into trouble (see Genesis 37:3, 4).

(Genesis 39:19) When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, “This is the way your servant treated me,” he became enraged.

Potiphar’s wife lied and insisted that “his servant” was at fault in an effort to make Potiphar more enraged and perhaps feel guilty. Potiphar may have been angry at the way his wife had been supposedly treated and angry at Joseph for violating his trust, as he supposed. On all accounts, Joseph was innocent, but mistreated.

(Genesis 39:20) And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison.

Potiphar was the captain of the guard, so he was not someone you would want to make angry. He put Joseph into Pharaoh’s prison, and apparently without even asking Joseph’s side of the story (which would have insulted his wife even more, that he might take the word or defense of a Hebrew slave seriously instead of listening to her word only). Joseph remained in prison, unjustly held. In prison, Joseph would have the opportunity to use the gifts God gave him in a location the very opposite of where he had been. He would be successful even in prison, for God had a purpose for his life.

(Genesis 39:21) But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer.

In spite of suffering injustice and horrible physical confinement (we cannot expect prisons at that time to have had any comforts), the LORD was with Joseph in a way that Joseph must have felt and understood, for he experienced God's unfailing love for him in very practical ways. We may wonder how believers survive in the midst of horrendous physical and mental suffering, and in this verse the Bible gives us the answer: God will show believers His steadfast love.

Five Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. What might you have advised Joseph if he had confided in you about his problem with Potiphar's wife before she trapped him and he was imprisoned?
2. How might the temptations of Potiphar's wife been a test for Joseph? If her temptations were a test, why would it be crucial for him to pass the test?
3. Why do you think Joseph considered falling into the temptations of Potiphar's wife "sin against God"? How did his understanding of sin help him refuse to fall for her temptations?

4. How did circumstantial evidence convict Joseph of a crime against Potiphar and his wife? If you are asked to serve on a jury, how will you consider circumstantial evidence differently now that you have studied this incident?

5. How do you think Joseph felt when he was unjustly accused, convicted, and imprisoned? Read ahead in Genesis. What might he have done in prison because of this injustice? What did Joseph do in prison? How did this make a difference?

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