

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, June 16, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

GENESIS 39:9,23

“How could I do such an immoral thing and sin
against God?” (Good News Bible)

“The Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in
whatever he did.” (New International Version)

HE HAD THE COURAGE TO SAY “NO”

On Monday of last week (June 10, 1991), the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), by a vote of 534 to 31, rejected a 200-page report which had been prepared over a three-year period by a 15-member commission of theologians and sociologists, psychiatrists and lay members of the church. This report recommended that in certain circumstances, sexual intercourse outside of marriage is not only permissible, but actually commendable.

Now while we applaud that overwhelming rejection of an immoral document, we are not blind to the fact that this firestorm, which has received international media attention, has besmirched the good name “Presbyterian,” and has done irreparable harm to the witness of the Christian Church across America.

Here are decent, thoughtful young people all around us, struggling to live a clean life, but bombarded on every hand by sexual temptation. What are they to think when they see so-called leaders of a major denomination in our country even proposing such a preposterous statement which would legitimize sexual activity among the unmarried and among homosexuals, and would even sanction extramarital intercourse? To my knowledge this is the first occasion in the long and honored history of Presbyterianism that a church report has come out flatfooted and said, “On the matter of human sexuality, the Bible is simply wrong and outdated in its moral teaching.” What blasphemous nonsense.

Now today we are going back to the Old Testament to take a look at a chap named Joseph, whose life is a refreshing corrective to the immorality propounded in the report to which I have made reference.

Joseph went from being a slave in prison to being the second highest ranking person in Egypt which was one of the most powerful nations in the world at that time. He went from the pit to the palace. He was a success story. And his life and career shows us that what counts in life is not your circumstances, but your character.

Let’s quickly review Joseph’s circumstances. His story is told in Genesis, chapters 37 through 50, and it’s got it all. It’s got revenge, deceit, lust, seduction, attempted murder, violence, the charge of attempted rape, and a prison sentence. I mean, it would make a great

NBC mini-series!

The first 30 years of Joseph's life -- nothing went right for him. He was the second to the last of 13 children. There was a lot of rivalry and bitterness in the family. His older brothers were jealous of him. As a matter of fact, Genesis 37:4 (Good News Bible) tells us that "(his brothers) hated him so much that they wouldn't speak to him in a friendly manner." One day they plotted against him, and decided to kill him, but one of them said (Genesis 37:22, Living Bible), "Let's not kill him... let's throw him into this well, so he'll die without our touching him!" Soon after they put him down the well, some merchants came along, so they dragged Joseph up, sold him to the merchants for 20 shekels, and he was taken to Egypt where he was sold as a slave to a man named Potiphar, who was an important officer in Pharaoh's army, the captain of the palace guard.

Joseph was transparently honest and trustworthy, and soon he was put in charge of everything in the household. And it was just at this point in his career that Joseph encountered the fiercest temptation of his life. Here he was, physically strong, and very attractive. Girls, he was a real heartthrob -- the ancient counterpart of a modern Robert Redford! And do you know what happened? Potiphar's wife had eyes for Joseph, and she tried to seduce him. And the Bible says in Genesis 39:7 (Good News Bible), "After a while his master's wife began to desire Joseph and asked him to go to bed with her. He refused... but she asked him day after day." Believe me, folks, sexual harassment in the work place is at least 4000 years old! And it works both ways; then and now, the women have been as adept at propositioning as the men.

Now this leads me to point out two things, and I want you to get hold of this:

1. Temptation usually strikes in days of prosperity rather than in days of adversity. So it was with Joseph. He was now an accepted and trusted member of Potiphar's household. Dame Fortune was smiling upon him. His star was in the ascendant. He was climbing the corporate ladder. And at this precise moment, the temptation came -- which reminds us that we should always be on our guard, especially when things are going well for us. I sometimes think that God allows difficulties and problems and adverse circumstances of one kind or another to torment us in order to keep all sorts of horrible temptations from conquering us.

2. Your very talents and capabilities may be the instrument in Satan's hand to drag you down. Like Joseph, your good looks, your ability, your charm and charisma may introduce you into a social set where it will be made very easy for you to fall into evil habits.

I remember, years ago, how a teenage girl told me about feelings of guilt which tormented her because she had begun to drink. Do you know what she said to me? "I simply hate the taste of the stuff, but I'm popular, and it's so hard to refuse!"

Dr. A. Herbert Gray, in his fine book titled Men, Women and God, says this: "I never pass a pretty girl in the street without thanking God for such loveliness, and asking God to give her strength to overcome the special temptations which must come her way." The more God has endowed and blessed you, the more you need the power of Christ in your life to keep you from yielding to temptation.

So there is Joseph with this nymph who is out to seduce him; and one day her passion got the better of her, and she grabbed him by the robe; and in a fine piece of evasive action, Joseph slithered out of it -- and there he is, running for all he's worth through the house in his B.V.D.s, like a Scotsman without his kilt (I made up that part!); and he lost his coat, but he kept his character. And so she framed him.

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

And when her devoted husband came home, she told him, “That Hebrew slave... tried to rape me!” (Genesis 39:17, Living Bible). So he's thrown into prison for a crime he didn't commit.

But, do you know something? Joseph had something going for him that made all the difference in his life. The key verse in Joseph's story is Genesis 39:23, “... the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.” Three times in the story we are told that the Lord was with Joseph. You know, you plus God is always a majority. Now why was the Lord with Joseph? Because of his character. Now what was the component part of his character that made him so different? What do I do when circumstances seem to work against me? What do I do to make my life count? How can I make an impact when everything seems to be conspiring to make me mediocre and sinful?

You do what Joseph did. And what did he do?

Joseph maintained his integrity.

Joseph was a young man of absolute moral purity. In fact, he was so pure that they had to make up stuff about him. And I pray that you will always live in such a way that people would have to concoct lies in order to accuse you of wrongdoing.

Genesis 39:10 tells how the boss's wife came to Joseph... “And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even to be with her.” Can you imagine the internal battle going on in Joseph's mind? But he would not give in.

You know, it was when I got to this point in the preparation of this message that a thought came to me which I think is of crucial importance. Did you ever realize that Joseph said “No” to this temptation about 470 years before Moses, on Mt. Sinai, received from God, on the tablet of stone, the Seventh Commandment which said, “You shall not commit adultery”? Joseph didn't need to see the Commandment etched in stone by the finger of God. Why? Because it was already etched upon his heart by the God of absolute purity Whom he served!

God writes his law upon the hearts of everyone everywhere. We don't need to be told that certain things are wrong. That still small voice within tells us that there are things we must not do. That is why the “heathen” are without excuse. Listen how Paul describes the heathen in Romans 1:20-25: “Ever since God created the world, His invisible qualities, both His eternal power and His divine nature, have been clearly seen. Men can perceive them in the things that God has made. That is why such people are without excuse. They know God, but they do not

give Him the honor that belongs to Him, nor do they thank Him. Instead... their empty minds are filled with darkness...Therefore God has given them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity... They have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worship and serve created things rather than the Creator.” And remember --there are millions of those heathen all around us right here in the USA.

Joseph certainly didn't fall into that trap. Would you notice at least eight factors which went to make up Joseph's temptation?

1. **Sexual passion.** Just think of the intensity of the temptation. Joseph was a normal, full-blooded young man, whose hormones were in high gear; and here, in the house, day after day, with no one else around, this sultry, attractive, fascinating woman made suggestions to Joseph. It was an appeal to the passions of the body which he must have felt with such hot instinct that he could very well have told himself that by responding to these suggestions, he would only be “doing what comes naturally.”
2. **Romance was involved.** You can just hear Potiphar's wife saying her little piece in her most seductive accents --telling him how frustrated she was with her husband's ineptitude at love making - whispering in Joseph's ear that she not only wanted him, but that she needed him. She may not have been much older than Joseph, but she was certainly more experienced; and there is a kind of feminine mystique that has the sinuous fascination of the serpent. Joseph was assailed by the flattery of her affection.
3. **His own hunger for love and sympathy and understanding.** As a slave, Joseph might easily have given way to self-pity. After all, he had been “sold down the river” by his own brothers. Life had punched him in the solar plexus, and he was hurting; and here was someone whose love and understanding would compensate for that. Here was healing for his inner pain.
4. **Calculations of advantage also entered into the situation.** It would have been to Joseph's advantage to cozy up to the boss's wife, especially since she had the hots for him. To please her would secure his further promotion. To cross her would make her his foe and ruin his hopes of future prosperity. This woman, powerfully and strategically placed, if he encouraged her devotion to him, might carry his interests far.
5. **He was far from home and friends.** Can't you imagine him saying, “Aw, shucks, who would know anyway? Why not enjoy a little philandering? Why not espouse the philosophy which says, ‘When in Rome, do as Rome does’? Who would ever find out anyway?” Isn't that the attitude of lots of young folk across this country going off to college? I suspect the freshman theme song is “Free at last, free at last!”
6. **There was in the temptation a built-in alibi for his conscience.** He could excuse his conscience by the plain fact that even if the situation was questionable, he, certainly, had not provoked it. He could have repeated with Adam the old words of the Garden of Eden story -- “The woman You put here with me -- she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Genesis 3:12).

7. **And there was his sense of hopelessness and God-forsakenness.** He could very well have said, "I'm a slave against my will in a foreign country. I mean, life has not gone as I planned it. I've lost my dream; I may as well lose my morals too. Life is tough. I owe it to myself to get in on a little pleasure. Who cares? And besides, what has God done for me?"

8. **Finally, there was the persistence of the temptation.** Failing to persuade Joseph to go to bed with her the first time, she propositioned him day after day after day. And that can be much harder to resist than even the first suggestion. A decent person can be shocked by a sudden, bold temptation to do wrong, and his conscience may recoil. But the shock wears off, and before long the suggestion doesn't seem so strange or so wrong after all. And that's the time when you can really blow it -- when conscience begins to lose its edge -- when sin doesn't seem quite so sinful after all -- when evil, instead of being jet black, appears to be nothing worse than dull gray!

So you can see, can't you, that here was a net of temptation that took great moral strength and courage to break. Joseph could so easily have gotten caught.

Now this is an old story from the long ago, but it is extremely relevant today when this whole subject of sexual activity is being played up to the hilt. Judeo-Christian principles of conduct which once were taken for granted, have been eaten into by what Walter Lippmann once called "the acids of modernity." From Freudian psychiatrists, from movies and TV shows, and magazines and novels, from the modern "liberation" movement, and from a polluted culture, girls and boys have been infected with the idea that sexual control is not only outdated prudery but is actually harmful to the psyche. People today simply scoff at traditional morality. Why resist your impulses when not resisting them is the mark of the "liberated" teenager?

At Harvard and Yale, Princeton and UCLA, Stanford and Georgetown, sexual intercourse is regarded as nothing more than a "biological phenomenon." "If it feels good, go for it!" When Mother Teresa addressed the graduates at Georgetown a couple of years ago and extolled abstinence, they laughed in her face.

So it's like a breath of fresh air to read of this young man, Joseph, and how he dealt with and defeated his temptation. Notice how Joseph handled himself.

1. **When temptation reached out for him, he tore himself away at once.** A young cadet at West Point, in an oral exam, was being questioned on battle tactics. A certain situation was described to him. The surrounding enemy seemed to have every advantage. There appeared to be no loophole of escape. "What steps would you take in these circumstances?" he was asked. "Mighty long ones, Sir!" came the unhesitating reply! And that is how to deal with temptation.

"Flee youthful lusts," says Paul to young Timothy (2 Timothy 2:22, King James Version). Martin Luther once remarked, "I can't prevent the birds of temptation from flying round my head, but I can keep them from building their nests in my hair!" When Potiphar's wife finally attempted to force Joseph to have sex with her, he skedaddled! You couldn't have seen him for dust! Listen to me, folks -- it is never cowardly or immoral to run away from temptation. Do not stay to look at it, for it will master you if you do. Keep away from it if you can. Keep away from friendships, places and situations where you might find yourself tempted to compromise your

Christian standards and ideals.

I have discovered over the years, from pastoral counseling, that the young people who have let themselves go in sexual adventures, can become so cynical and callous that it is virtually impossible for them to really love one man or one woman, or to bring to marriage a pure heart. After all, a marriage ceremony cannot turn a hog into a gazelle. Teenagers who are sexually active later find it extremely difficult or even impossible to settle down and be a faithful partner to one person. That is why there are so many divorces today. The road to happiness is not the perverted philosophy which glamorizes philandering. Many a young person has thanked God that he did “flee youthful lusts” -- that he came to his marriage day clean and pure and with a good conscience. I have never met anyone who was sorry he did. I have met dozens who were sorry they didn't.

2. Joseph maintained a reverent spirit toward God and man. Joseph's respect for his master Potiphar is a deeply moving thing. Listen to what he says to his master's unfaithful wife: “Everything my master 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?” (Genesis 39:8,9). All sin, after all, is basically sin against God.

Joseph had character. He kept his honor bright. Young people, listen to me -- if you sell your honor for a few moments of illicit pleasure, it will leave a stain on your soul that will last till your dying day. It will be something a merciful God can forgive, but it is something you could never forget.

Now there's a very important point here that I want you to get. Sometimes when you resist temptation, you're not going to feel good about it at that time. Indeed, you may feel miserable, especially if others make fun of you. I'm sure Joseph was probably saying to himself when he kept turning down Potiphar's wife, “I've got to be crazy to walk away from this! Nobody's going to know.” Look where Joseph's integrity got him. He gets fired, and he gets thrown into jail! How good do you think he felt about his “integrity”? But here's the point --in the long run it always pays to do the right thing. In the short run, you may feel sad, shortchanged; but in the long run, you will feel glad, and you'll say, “Thank God, I didn't do that!”

As I close, think with me about what would have happened if Joseph had given in. He would never have become Prime Minister of Egypt, and he would never have been the one to save his family, the children of Israel, from starvation. And if they had perished, that fourth son of Jacob, named Judah, would have died. But centuries later, one of Judah's descendants was born in a stable in Bethlehem on a starlit night! Just think of it -- if Joseph had lost his virginity, a virgin birth might never have taken place. Reflect on that, young people, and guard your integrity at all costs. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

AMEN.