

God's Presence in Our Hard Places

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[0 : 00] Let's turn to Genesis 39. Every word of scripture written to us because our God loves us and wants us to know the truth.

! Lead us into life that is truly life. Well, here's Genesis 39, part of that instruction sent by his love. Now, Joseph had been taken down to Egypt.

Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.

When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant.

Potiphar put him in charge of his household and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph.

[1 : 09] The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So he left in Joseph's care everything he had. With Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

Now, Joseph was well built and handsome. And after a while, his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, Come to bed with me. But he refused.

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?

And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even to be with her. One day, he went into the house to attend to his duties and none of the household servants was inside.

[2 : 16] She caught him by his cloak and said, Come to bed with me. But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had ran, had run out of the house, she called her household servants.

Look, she said to them, this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us. He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. And when he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.

She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. Then she told this story. That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me.

But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house. When his master heard the story, his wife told him, saying, This is how your slave treated me.

He burned with anger. Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him.

[3 : 27] He showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. 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.

The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

Amen. Let's hear it preached. Did you ask God for wisdom this week when you were at work and you needed it?

When you ran into some trouble or bumped into some need, did you pray for wisdom? Did you claim the promise? It's actually those kind of questions that really have been on my heart this week.

We've heard a lot about God lately. We've heard a lot about our God when we've talked about his power and his patience and his wrath and his wisdom, his eternity, his trinity.

[4 : 45] The trinity. And my question for you, the question especially for myself, but to all of us is, do I know him better, though?

We've heard a lot about him, but do I know him better? Is it making any difference? Am I believing more than before? Am I living on these things more than I was before we started this series?

Am I thinking of Hebrews chapter 4, and it's talking about the Israelites who died in the desert. And they had, the author of Hebrews says, they had the same promise.

They were being offered to live with God in God's land. That was the promise. And it says the message they heard was of no value to them.

Because they did not combine it with faith. That promise, that good news was of no value. It didn't do them any good. Because they didn't combine it with faith.

[5 : 47] They heard the promise, but they didn't receive it. They didn't welcome it into their hearts. They didn't open up their hands of their heart and bring it in and live upon it. It stopped at the ear gate.

It never got down to the heart. It never got down to life. That's the question I'm asking you and asking myself.

Is God's patience making you any more patient? Is God's patience and power helping you? Are you combining the message with faith?

I'm thinking of Jesus' words at the end of the Sermon on the Mount when he says, those who hear these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man.

And when we have our wits about us, our spiritual wits about us, we do pray and we do cry out, Lord, I don't want to just be a hearer.

[6 : 45] I want to be a doer. I want this to make a difference. Or I'm thinking of Isaiah. Remember the Lord said, go up on the mountain, go up on a high mountain and say to Israel, say to Judah, behold, your God, this is your God.

We've been looking at our God. And what a tragedy it would be to merely look at him and not love him. Or merely look at him and not live upon him.

That would be a tragedy, not to receive him, not to change. And so, let's commit to, to press in, to press on, to really walk with our God, to receive him, to live upon him in all of our troubles, in all of these problems, to not be mere professors, but real believers.

Be real believers. And, with that, with that commitment, and I hope you will commit to that too, with that commitment in front of us, I want to look at tonight's topic.

And tonight's topic is God's presence, in hard places. God's presence in hard places. Now, we teach our children, very early on, where is God?

[8 : 04] And the answer is, God is everywhere. God is everywhere. Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? The psalmist asks.

In Bremerton, Washington, the state of Washington, there is a United States submarine base. And there's also the Free Grace Baptist Church. And I don't know if it's true right now, but it used to be true anyways, that there were some of those officers, and the submarine, were also members of that little Reformed Baptist Church there.

And so, these officers, for months and months, will be down under the water, thousands of feet, or at least a thousand feet under the ocean.

And there they are, in their bunk, in their little tiny bunk, in the submarine, sleeping, under hundreds and hundreds of feet of water.

Is God with them? Colonel Jeff Williams has spent over 500 days in space, mostly on the International Space Station.

[9 : 17] And he's a Christian, and he's written a book, The Work of His Hands, A View of God's Creation from Space. He's a believer. And so, is God with him? When he's way up there, on the International Space Station?

Well, the psalmist says, where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you're there. And if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

God is everywhere. God is everywhere. God is here. God is right next to you.

God is everywhere. He fills his creation. But the Bible talks about him being especially present, uniquely present, with his people, wherever they go, wherever they go, wherever you are.

God is uniquely and specially present there, to love you, to help you, to care for you, to be with you. But here is Joseph. Here's Joseph. And we read it.

[10 : 24] He's in a hard place. He's in a hard place. Well, how did he get here? His brother sold him into slavery. That story has been drilled into us since we were young children.

But I want you to think about it again. Your brothers sell you as a slave. How would you feel? What kind of emotional baggage would you be carrying along?

I'm sure initially he was certainly crushed and devastated and hurt. But now here he is in Potiphar's house. He wasn't where he wanted to be. This wasn't where he wanted to be.

And he's not doing what he wanted to do. Being Potiphar's steward, being the best prisoner in the prison, was not what he wanted to do.

Serving an Egyptian master, living as a slave, taking care of someone else's property, that's not what he wanted to do. Yes, he rose to the challenge, but we can't be just thinking this would be his ideal situation.

[11 : 35] When he was looking for a job, he wasn't filling out the application to be Potiphar's steward down in Egypt. Yeah, God had big plans for him, but Joseph didn't know that.

It's easy for us to read what we know about Joseph into Joseph's life, but at that time, Joseph didn't know about that. He didn't know what was going to happen.

As for all he knew, this was going to be a dead-end job. Here I am, away from my family, and I'm going to live and die in Egypt, rising no higher than being Potiphar's steward.

Not where he wanted to be, not doing what he wanted to do. And it was a place of constant temptation. I'm describing a hard place.

This is a place of constant temptation. You know the story. Potiphar's wife, day after day, she becomes obsessed with him, throwing herself at him, day after day, refusing her, avoiding her, not even wanting to be in the same room with her.

[12 : 40] Have you ever gone to work and you're with someone that you do not want to be with and you're going to do whatever you can to avoid them? When they come into the room, you find some way to get out of there.

Well, that's what it was like for Joseph. That was Joseph's life. And now eventually he's falsely accused. He's set up. He's thrown in prison. And now he is in an Egyptian prison.

Whatever comfort he had experienced before, that's gone now. He's in prison in Egypt.

I just want you to think about the heat. He was in a hard place. And that's the problem we're looking at. When you find yourself in a place that you don't want to be, doing something you wish you weren't doing, in a place of constant temptation, now, you probably all have been there.

We've all been there. In a job that we wouldn't have picked, with people we'd rather not work with. As a little boy, you never said, when I grow up, I want to do that.

[14 : 01] And you never say, you never say that these people are a dream to work with. And it's every day. Maybe it's not work.

Maybe it's a house, or a neighborhood, that you wish you could move out of, but you can't move out of. Maybe it's a marriage, to a person, who is hard. Who's unfair.

Who's unkind. Maybe you don't have someone like Potiphar's wife, throwing yourself at you, but they are a constant temptation.

The place is a place of constant temptation. The people there just want you to sin. Men, do you know that? When they find out you're a Christian, and now they want to make you sin.

They want to drag you down. They find out you're a Christian, and they want to see you fall. They think it's funny or something, and they like putting stuff under your nose, to get you to sin.

[15 : 00] For young people, it can be going to college, for going into high school, for getting that first job, and that's what they want. And you say, it's a hard place, and I'm stuck here.

Now, that's the problem. There's so much about God that can help you in that. There's so much about who God is, and what we have in the Lord Jesus that can help you.

But what I want to look at this evening is, in this passage, we saw Joseph's key to success, so to speak, in a hard place. How he dealt with a hard place.

We saw it three times in this passage, and did you catch it, as Pastor John was reading it? There was a defining, deciding fact, that made this hard place, a blessed place for Joseph.

Just look at it. Verse 3, The Lord was with him, and the Lord gave him success, in everything he did.

[16:03] Verse 21, The Lord was with him, and he showed him kindness, and granted him favor, in the eyes of the prison warden. And verse 23, The Lord was with Joseph.

The Lord was with Joseph. If you want to do an interesting study sometime, look at chapter 38. It's a story about what Judah, gets himself into.

And it's a mess, and he's tempted by sexual sin, and he falls for it, and it's just a real ugly, nasty mess. He goes almost out of his way, to get into sin.

And you know what it never says about Judah? It never says the Lord was with Judah. But for Joseph, the Lord is with him.

Joseph is living with this reality, and that's really how they can, that's how we can thrive in hard places. That's how our children can thrive in hard places. Our husbands, our wives.

[17:09] That's the secret, so to speak. The Lord was with Joseph. Joseph. Now, in my Bible, and I'm sure it's probably the same in your Bible, that word Lord is in all caps, which is God's covenant name.

And so here is Joseph. He's living with his covenant God, in relationship with God. This is not generic God, so to speak, but this is the relationship God.

This is God that Joseph has a relationship with. And so Joseph doesn't go down into Egypt alone. The Lord went with him. Because Joseph was his. And he was, the Lord was his, and Joseph was his.

The Lord was by his side. So Joseph didn't work in that hard place alone. Joseph didn't do his work, his chores, with, alone. He did it with the Lord, present with the Lord.

And so Joseph was relating to God this whole time, as he's in this difficult place. He's with his covenant God. And Joseph knew God was with him, and he counted on it, and he believed it.

[18:17] He put them, he put him at his right hand. So when Joseph woke up in the morning, he could say, the Lord is with me. The Lord is right here.

And he lived like that. God was there. The Lord was not some sort of territorial God of Palestine. Egypt called Ra, Amun-Ra, the God, the King of the Two Lands.

The God, the King of the Two Lands, of Upper and Lower Egypt. And it says, the Egyptian says, he gives light to the Two Lands. So he's this territorial God.

God. But our God doesn't recognize man-made boundaries. Our God doesn't recognize human boundaries. The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.

And so when Joseph went down to Egypt, God didn't stop at the border. God went with Joseph. And that's our God. And so are you down in Egypt, in Potiphar's house?

[19:23] Not where you want to be, not doing what you want to do, under constant temptation. Well, God is with you, believer.

God is with you. You can count on it. Joseph had no one. No other believers.

Not a single believer. Not a single true worshiper. He doesn't have anyone except the Lord. And the Lord is enough.

The Lord is enough for Joseph. More than enough. And he's enough for you. He's enough for you. I think that's what we are most afraid of.

Is coming to a day, or coming to a place, and finding ourselves all alone, and abandoned, and God not there. God not there to help us.

[20:30] Not close enough to help. But the Lord was with Jonah when he was in the belly of the great fish. Jonah had a conversation with the Lord down in the depths of the ocean.

And then when he went to far away Nineveh, the Lord was with Jonah. The Lord was with Jeremiah at the bottom of that muddy well that the king put him down into. And he's with you on the road when you're driving.

And he's with you at work with those ungodly workers. And he's with you when you're at home with those kids. And he's there. And believer, he's there to bless.

God's presence with Joseph meant blessing for Joseph. And that's what I want you to see. And that's what I want you to hold on to. That your God is beside you.

He's with you. He's with you. With you. Where you are at to help you. He's physically, so to speak. He is present there. He doesn't send help so much from afar.

[21:44] But he sends it from right on hand. It's like if you're plowing a field, he has his hands on that plow with you. He has his hands on those wheels, that wheel with you.

He's the one who can put his words and his thoughts into your heart and into your mind. The Lord says, I'll be a voice behind them whispering in their ears.

This is the way. Go in it. That's how close he is. Now, we do that with our young children, don't we? We don't send them out into the wide world to wander the streets all by themselves. Wherever they go, we're with them.

Mamas, you don't leave your little ones out all by themselves, and neither does God. He's of greater compassion, greater mercy and care than we ever could be.

And so he never sends you into a hard place without him going there first. And without him staying with you. And that should be an encouragement to you.

[22 : 46] I mean, I can't really apply this in every particular situation that is here, but I hope you'll take it and apply it to yourself. And I want you to.

Maybe you're all alone. You're single. Maybe you're alone in your widowhood. And I just wanted to say he's there with you.

If your husband or wife is gone, Jesus hasn't gone. He hasn't gone anywhere. Or maybe your family is all far away, but the Lord isn't far away.

He's in your home. He's in your room. He's right beside you. And when you talk to him, you know, your voice doesn't travel up to the third heavens before it gets to his ears.

It doesn't have to shoot through the sky and all the atmosphere before God hears it. His ears are right there. He is right there. And maybe someday you'll be in a hospital or in a nursing home and we don't like to think about that, but what about then?

[23 : 51] Will he leave you then? Never. Never. He's with his people. He's right beside them all the time.

And that should be an encouragement. But more than, but beside being an encouragement, it should be a way to help us to say no to sin.

That really is a lesson that's on the face of this passage. Think of Joseph. Does he have this temptation to sin? Yeah. Did he have the desire, the natural desire to do this?

Yes, he's a normal man. Did he have the opportunity? He has plenty of opportunity. And I want you to think about everything that sin was offering him as he's there.

Now, hard places are easy places to sin, aren't they? You get yourself stuck in a hard, hard place. It begins to, it's easy to take sin and start to really be tempted by it.

[24 : 51] Maybe. And so I want you to think about what sin is offering Joseph here. There's comfort. There's pleasure. There's a sense of power. Maybe a sense of fairness. After all, what did he do to deserve this?

Didn't he deserve some nice things? Life wasn't going his way. It would be easy for him to start feeling sorry for himself and starting to want to self-medicate himself with Potiphar's wife.

Wouldn't that be nice? Doesn't he deserve some of this? There was surely temptation on the outside and then there's also this temptation going on in his own heart.

No doubt, in his flesh, good arguments for giving in. And we want to say, men, if we're honest, how long would you stand? But Joseph stood.

And what was it that gave him the ability to stand in that hard place with this temptation constantly there? Well, he tells us, how could I do such a wicked thing against God?

[25 : 51] He has this presence, this abiding sense of the goodness of God and the holiness of God and the presence of God. He was living with God and he knew it and he felt it.

It was true. He counted on it. He lived like it. And whenever we give in to sin, it's because we don't really think God is there.

We don't really think that God is there with us. But by putting him at our right hand, seeing him there is a powerful help against sin.

But it's not just the mere presence of the Lord that in a way makes us afraid to sin. That's definitely true. But Joseph didn't need to sin to find comfort or peace or pleasure or anything like that.

Self-medication. He didn't need to because he had God with him to bless him. And when you have God with you to bless you, you don't need what sin is offering you.

[27 : 03] If God's with you, you don't need it, so to speak. It has no power. It can't offer you something you don't already have. And really, this is the great, one of the great keys that turns every heart that's locked up in sin because Jesus is Emmanuel.

He is God with us. He is God present with us. God for us. And so Jesus comes and he is God clothed in the gospel. And believer, there's nothing, this is so important for you to hear and to believe, it's so important for me to hear and to believe, there is nothing that sin is offering you that you don't already have or already are promised in him.

when you live on your Emmanuel, sin loses its power over you because I have everything I need in him.

I'm experiencing comfort. I can go get comfort from him. I can experience joy because I can get it from him. And when life doesn't seem fair, that's okay. I have him to talk to about.

I have him to sympathize with. He's here with me. And so I don't need, so to speak, to sin. Sin loses its power.

[28 : 28] It's temptation when we're living on Jesus with us. But it's not only keeping us from sinning in those hard places, it's obeying.

It's obeying. It's actually doing what we're supposed to do. Joseph here is, he's a slave in a place that he doesn't want to be with people he doesn't want to be living with.

And wouldn't it be easy for him to just skate by? Just to do the bare minimum? To just sort of make it through? I've been in hard places, work I don't want to be doing, and that is the constant temptation.

I'll just bone this in and wait until something better comes along. But that's not what Joseph did. Joseph rose, he rose to the occasion.

He did tremendous work in a hard, hard place. And the way that worked in his heart was the Lord was with him.

[29 : 33] He counted on it. He was working for God and not for man. And so God's presence is a wonderful help and encouragement to obedience.

Not just to keep us from sinning, but to actually obey. Think about, isn't that what Jesus pointed to again and again on the Sermon on the Mount? Because the Lord sees what is done in secret and he will reward you.

So, you know, I might not see what you're doing. Husband and wife might not see what you're doing. People here might not see what you're doing. People out there might not see what you're doing. But the Lord sees because he's with me.

and he'll reward me. And so I'm going to obey. And so the presence of God should put a spring into the step of our obedience. If we're seeing this as I am living out my life of obedience in the presence of God, the God who rewards them, rewards us.

So, if God's here, well, that helps me to obey. That encourages me to press on in obedience. Now, there's just one last thing I want to say.

[30 : 43] And it's this. If God is with you in those hard places, there's hope. So it's not only a help against sin and a help towards obedience, it really is. It helps us keep our hope alive.

Why was Joseph down there? God had a plan for it, didn't he? It was going to take time for it to develop and to work out, but God was planning to use him to save many lives, to save his own life, to save the life of the Egyptians, to rescue Jacob and his brothers, and ultimately to rescue the godly seed from which the Messiah was going to come.

God had a big plan. And humanly speaking, the only reason we're here is because Joseph was down there.

God had a plan for the Messiah. God had said this is where the Messiah is going to come from and he's going to keep this line alive.

Well, how is he going to do it? Well, he has to do it with Joseph. God had a huge, big, wonderful plan for Joseph to rescue his people. He had a good reason for being there.

[31 : 59] He had a plan and a purpose and he was working toward it. And that's what our father is doing with us in those hard places.

Maybe not to the same extent, not to the same degree that he was using Joseph, but God has his reasons. God has his reasons.

I'm sure you have seen that in your life. I have seen it in my life. Places that I didn't want to be at the time, I am so glad looking back I was there. God's presence with us helps us to keep our hope to say, you know what, the Lord is working this for my good.

He's working this all for good. And it helps us to hold on to our hope until those good things begin to come to fruition. It was going to take years, but Joseph was going to see it.

And you know what, we too are going to see it, the good that God is going to do. And so if you're in a hard place, you're not where you want to be, you're not doing what you want to do, really.

[33 : 07] It's a place of constant temptation. I want you to remember the Lord is with you. It's easy to look at that and say, you know what, I must have made a wrong turn somewhere.

But that's not true. The Lord was, Joseph was right where he was supposed to be. Remember the Lord is with you, and the Lord has a plan, and it's a plan to use this time and use this place for your good, for your joy, even for your rescue.

Now, where is he working out this plan? He's working it out on the ground with you in your life. he knows what he's doing.

So press on, brothers. Press on, sisters. Let's pray. Lord, it would be so good for us to remember these things, to remember the truth that you are with us always, that you are everywhere, that there's no place that we go, or find ourselves, that you are not there, there to help, there to love us, there to care for us, there to encourage us, there to see us and warn us against sin, there to encourage us to obey.

And I know some of my brothers and sisters are in hard places. They're doing things that they don't really want to be doing right now. and so I would pray that you would remind them that as they're going through their day, they're not there by accident, but there is a purpose and they're not there alone.

[35 : 06] You are with them. So I pray that you would encourage them and Holy Spirit, I pray that you would take this truth and really make it real to their hearts, that they would count on it and live upon it.

They might know the love of God in those hard places. Pray that this truth would keep us from sinning, that we would remember that you are watching, that you will see all that we do, you see all that is done under heaven, and so I pray that that would make us more holy.

So Lord, please send us on our way with a sense of your presence, knowing it, and living on it, depending upon it, believing it. Pray this in Jesus' name, for his sake, amen.