

*With the Love of God*  
*Joseph: More than a Dreamcoat Part 3*  
July 21, 2019  
Trinity Bixby  
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[Genesis 39 \(VOICE\)](#)  
[Hebrews 13:1-6 \(CEB\)](#)

Today, we pick up with Joseph's story pretty close to where we left off, though there's an interlude chapter about his brother that we've jumped over. Joseph's brothers sold him as a slave to a passing caravan, and they in turn took him to Egypt, and sold him to an Egyptian official named Potiphar – or *po-ti-phe-RI-ah*<sup>1</sup>, a name that means “Gift of Re,” the Egyptian sun god.<sup>2</sup> Despite being enslaved by an Egyptian, the Bible makes it clear that God has not left Joseph – quite the opposite, in fact. Indeed, with God's love, Joseph makes things better for himself - and everything that Joseph does makes Potiphar more wealthy, and gives him more free time. I love that the Bible says the only decision Potiphar needed to make was what to eat! Joseph's not free, but his decisions are respected, and as Potiphar's second in command, he's already in a pretty good place.

But, the scripture tells us, there's a problem. Joseph is, it says, “a bright and attractive young man,” and he draws the attention of Potiphar's wife. Have you ever known someone so attractive or charismatic that when they walk into a room, everyone looks toward them? A friend of mine in college had that spark, and was inevitably cast as the lead actor in every show he tried out for. He put in the work in memorizing lines, and studying his craft – don't get me wrong – but I definitely felt jealous about how he drew the attention of the crowds. Maybe you've known someone similar.

In fact, there's a great old story about Joseph that illustrates this. Potiphar's

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<sup>1</sup> This is as best I can reconstruct Late Egyptian pronunciation (made especially difficult because hieroglyphics do not contain vowels!). English readers may “hear” it better written “Poe-tee-fair-REE-ah.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrew, Greek and English have similar names: Nathaniel/Netanyahu (Gift of God/the Lord), Johnathan (The Lord's Gift), Theodore/a (God's gift), Dorothea (Gift from God)

wife – known as Zulaykha in this version – is teased by her friends for her infatuation with that Hebrew boy. For several weeks, they laugh at her, until Zulaykha invites them over. Covertly, she asked for their help in the kitchen, peeling fruit – and then she calls Joseph into the room. When he comes through the door, all the ladies peeling fruit find the knives, somehow, got away from them, and they cut themselves, and Zulaykha says, “See? And I have to see him everyday.”

I wish that the Biblical story had more of Zulaykha’s background, or anything about her beyond her actions. Despite never speaking directly in the text, we learn the name of Potiphar – in contrast to his wife, who speaks but is never named. I will continue to use Zulaykha, however, as I think it’s important to refer to people by their name, rather than only by their relationship with someone else.

Well, Zulaykha has become infatuated with Joseph, and orders him to “lay down with her.” Now, Joseph has to make a difficult decision. He’s a slave, forced to work for the wellbeing of the household – and forced to follow their commandments. But this commandment would force him to break the peace and wellbeing of the household – and, as he says, “Why would I do something so clearly wrong and sin so blatantly against God?” Though we are reminded time and time again in this story that the Lord was with Joseph, this is the first time that Joseph has directly spoken about God. The love of God allows Joseph to see things beyond his immediate situation, to see the consequences of following through with this demand.

But Zulaykha doesn’t listen to his “no.” Joseph has clearly answered, not giving consent, and yet she pursues him. Joseph tries to avoid her, to avoid her advances, but she manages to arrange a moment alone with him nevertheless. She grabs onto his clothes, but he manages to slip out of them and run away. This is the second time that Joseph’s clothes get him in trouble – first, it was the fancy coat that his dad made for him that his brothers pulled from his back and covered in blood. Now, even the clothes he wears as a slave in Egypt are snatched away from him.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased from Jacqueline Lapsley, [Commentary on Genesis 39](#)

And while Joseph gets away, Zulaykha decides that she will get revenge on him for rejecting her. This, too, is awfully familiar to us today. In many of the personal stories shared in the midst of the Me Too movement, people feared for their safety or that the other person would try to take spiteful revenge. It's clear that people of all genders can be filled with rage, making choices to hurt each other rather than going their separate ways.

In some ways, it may be worse today –there are many people today who feel that they are “owed” a partner. Instead of seeking a true partner, listening for God's urging and leading, these people insult and demean others with little provocation beyond a simple no. On social media especially – perhaps because of the impersonal nature of being separated by a computer screen – the vile words and vitriol that people write to others are sad, and honestly, quite frightening.

A friend of mine recently shared that she regularly has strangers reaching out to her Facebook page – and as soon as she says she's only interested in talking to friends from real life on Facebook, these strangers change from trying to be charming to trying to be threatening. And she has messages like this on a weekly – and sometimes daily basis. Such a barrage of fear is terrible for anyone to deal with, and doesn't lend itself in listening to God's lead in seeking a romantic partner.

In this story, Zulaykha lies to everyone, telling them that Joseph tried to force her, rather than the other way around, and uses his clothes as evidence to send him to prison. And this, too, should be unfortunately familiar to us. In the state of Oklahoma, just over one of every hundred adults in the state are in prison, nearly twice the national average – and nearly ten times higher than anywhere else in the world. And while some of them are guilty of the crimes, and do need to be set apart from the rest of the population, as Jacqueline Lapsley points out, “a shocking number of [the US prison population] are incarcerated because of false evidence, coerced confession, procedural malfeasance, other legal incompetence, or all of the above.”<sup>4</sup> If you add to that the number of people who are in the migrant detention

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

camp, waiting for months at a time just for a chance to claim asylum, while separated from their family – it’s no wonder that Jesus calls us to preach “release to the captives.” As the author of the letter to the Hebrews writes, “remember prisoners as if you were in prison with them, and people who are mistreated as if you were in their place.” You see, Genesis tells us that going to prison wasn’t the end of Joseph’s story. God was with Joseph, helping him to befriend fellow prisoners, and even be selected for limited authority over them. Maybe Joseph remembered his father’s stories; God told Jacob, later renamed Israel, “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go... I will not leave you.”<sup>5</sup> The author of Hebrews echoes these words centuries later – “I will never leave you or abandon you.”

God has immersed Joseph in God’s presence throughout his whole life – and even so, Joseph’s life has not been an easy one. No one sold into slavery, falsely accused of sexual impropriety, and imprisoned has had an easy life – but God’s presence has helped Joseph immensely. With the love of God, Joseph is able to give a clear answer to Zulaykha. With the love of God, you can also give clear answers to difficult questions. With the love of God, Joseph lifts up those around him, and makes things better, no matter his circumstances. With the love of God, you can make things better for everyone around you, no matter the circumstances. With the love of God, you can choose to not be filled with rage, and instead put yourself in the place of others.

In line with the author of Hebrews, with the Love of God, we can love each other like family. With the love of God, Open up our homes to guests. With the love of God, remember prisoners like you were in prison with them, and put yourself in the place of the mistreated. With the love of God, honor marriage – don’t cheat, don’t cause someone else to cheat. After all, God has said, “I will never leave you or abandon you.”

May the love of God fill you with peace. May the love of Christ lead you to act

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<sup>5</sup> Gen 28:15

in righteousness. And may the love of the Holy Spirit inspire you to let your yes be yes and your no be no. Amen.