

Study Hints for Thinking Further

International Bible Lessons

Genesis 39:7-21

Sunday, January 1, 2012

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Some Bible study groups or classes can further discussion by asking some or all of the **Five Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** below. Others may want to send the bulletin size *International Bible Lesson* home with their students for further study in the coming week to encourage continuing Bible study. The *Study Hints for Thinking Further* below are not actually intended to be answers to the discussion questions, but hints a teacher may use to help students think through and discuss the questions in class.

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?

Since Joseph was head over the entire house, and since we have the hindsight that we have, Joseph could always have taken another slave with him whenever he went in the house and wherever he went in the house. If he had someone with him who could always serve as a witness, Potiphar's wife may have been less likely to try to tempt him into sin. However, she might have always ordered the slave Joseph brought with him to perform some errand for her away from them, leaving Joseph alone with her. It is unlikely that Joseph could have reported to Potiphar what his wife was tempting him to do, for she would have denied it, and Potiphar would likely have removed Joseph from his place of responsibility. Class members will probably have better ideas to share.

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?

The continual and pressing temptations might have been a test to show Joseph how he would act (or should act) when he was in a high place of authority. Joseph passed the test by refusing the temptations. He learned that when tempted he could remain faithful and responsible, and he learned that in spite of doing the right thing unjust people in high places of authority could make him suffer for doing the right thing. Joseph passed the test by not taking advantage of his high position in the house when it seemed he could have escaped detection by Potiphar's husband (but not by God).

It was crucial that Joseph pass the test, because God had bigger plans for Joseph to rule over all of Egypt to save many lives. If Joseph had not passed this test, he would have gone through a period of just discipline and education until God had fully prepared him to rule Egypt under Pharaoh. Joseph's time in prison opened the door for further responsibility and special training from special prisoners in the ways of Pharaoh's court.

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?

Joseph had been trained in the laws and ways of God by his father, and the by experiences of Abraham and Isaac that his father had passed on to him (he knew “the Bible” in oral form, that might also have been written down up to that point, for libraries and museums do have writings from before the time of Abraham). God had written His law on Joseph’s heart even before God wrote them on stone tablets in the time of Moses more than 400 years later. Joseph lived by faith in God, and by trust in the dreams of the future through which God had made promises to him. Joseph knew that adultery would be a sin against God.

Knowing God was his Guide, and that God had placed him in a place of responsibility, and that God could remove him to discipline him if necessary, he could remind himself repeatedly not to sin against God but to obey God. Because of God’s plans for him and through Joseph’s trusting Him, God helped Joseph remain pure in the face of temptations. Later, Joseph learned that God was with him in prison, and that he was not in prison for any sin against God that he had committed; so, Joseph’s prior obedience helped him cope with a changed situation. He had a clean conscience even in prison.

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?

Potiphar’s wife’s word was against any defense Joseph could have given, and he was a mere Hebrew slave. It would be more believable that he had tried to sin against her than her against him. She had his garment and she told a believable or plausible lie about how she got it.

The Bible teaches that there must be two eye witnesses to a crime, but the Egyptians were not using this as a standard and most courts do not use this as a standard today to convict someone of a crime: “A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained” (Deuteronomy 19:15). Without two witnesses, Joseph was convicted on the physical evidence and one eye witness (the witness of the supposed victim). One important thing to remember is to carefully identify circumstantial evidence and consider the quality of the evidence. The evidence given in a court today could be compared to what happened to Joseph before a person votes in a jury trial.

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?

Joseph probably felt hurt since his integrity was questioned and he was unjustly convicted. He could have felt deep anger and resentment toward Potiphar’s wife, which he might have nurtured within his soul rather than trusting in God and believing that even this bad experience could advance God’s purposes. He might have blamed God, but we have no evidence that Joseph blamed God or sinned against God in any way. Joseph would need to work through any feelings of anger, unforgiveness, and resentment.

In prison, Joseph might have quit trying to serve God, thinking it would do no good to keep serving God in prison, but Joseph kept serving and trusting in God even in prison. Joseph lived an exemplary life of responsibility in prison, so he came to the notice of the jailers who gave him greater opportunities to serve others. Joseph proved faithful in the most trying of situations, and he was prepared to interpret dreams of the future under God's direction (and he did so). Therefore, Joseph was eventually released from prison and given greater responsibilities than ever Potiphar enjoyed.

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