

Potiphar's Wife

HER CHARACTER: The wife of a prosperous and influential Egyptian, she was unfaithful and vindictive, ready to lie in order to protect herself and ruin an innocent man.

HER SORROW: To be rebuffed by a slave.

KEY SCRIPTURE: Genesis 39

Monday

HER STORY

*W*e don't even know her name. She is merely presented as the spoiled wife of a prosperous Egyptian official, a miniature Cleopatra, determined to employ her charms to seduce the handsome young Hebrew slave, Joseph.

At the age of seventeen, Joseph was sold into slavery by his half brothers, the sons of Leah. The favorite child of Rachel and Jacob, Joseph seems to have unwittingly done everything possible to ensure his brothers' enmity, even recounting a dream predicting that he, the younger son, would one day rule over them. Envious, the brothers faked Joseph's death and contemptuously sold him to Midianite traders en route to Egypt.

There Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's executioners, bought the young slave and gradually entrusted him with responsibility for his entire household. Even in his exile, everything Joseph touched prospered, as Potiphar couldn't help but notice.

But the captain of the guard wasn't the only Egyptian impressed by Joseph. His wife had taken special note as well. She made her desire plain enough by inviting Joseph to share her bed. The young slave must have surprised his wealthy mistress with his quick rebuff: "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?"

From then on, Joseph did his best to avoid her. But with little else to occupy her time and attention, Potiphar's wife simply waited for her next opportunity, which came when Joseph entered the house one day to attend to his duties. Alone with him, she caught hold of his cloak, whispering once again, "Come to bed with me!" But Joseph could not be persuaded and instead fled from her, leaving his would-be seducer alone with her lust, furiously clutching his cloak in her hands.

She wasted no time accusing him of attempted rape. When her husband heard the news, he was outraged, quickly consigning his favorite servant to prison.

The story of Joseph and how God blessed him even in his prison cell, eventually enabling him to become master of the nation he had entered as a slave, is well known to us. But we haven't a clue about Potiphar's wife. Whatever became of her? Did her husband suspect her duplicity? Is that why he merely confined Joseph to prison rather than executing him, as he had every right to do? Compared with Joseph, the story's protagonist, Potiphar's wife was a hollow woman whose soul was steadily decaying through the corrosive power of lust and hate. Surrounded by luxury, she was spiritually impoverished. Empty of God, she was full of herself.

EGYPTIAN LIFE

*I*n the ancient world, Egypt was considered the world's breadbasket. The Nile River regularly overflowed its banks, depositing rich soil and moisture along the river valley—a perfect place for abundant crops to grow. But fertile ground in Egypt could be found only as far as the Nile reached, a division so pronounced one could literally stand with one foot on rich soil and the other in sand.

Whenever famine struck other parts of the Near East, the starving inhabitants would hurry to Egypt for food: “Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe” (Genesis 12:10). “When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, ‘Why do you just keep looking at each other?’ He continued, ‘I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die’” (Genesis 42:1–2).

In addition to serving as the world's breadbasket, Egypt was the site of many impressive building projects. Some of the pharaohs constructed enormous tombs in which they and their families were to be ushered into the afterlife. Egyptians believed that their bodies were the eternal houses for their souls; therefore they became adept at mummification, preserving the bodies of the dead so thoroughly that some are intact today.

Egypt's building projects were completed at tremendous human cost. Egyptian pharaohs forced the Hebrews into slavery, using them to complete their temples and tombs. Most likely the Hebrew oppression took place during the Nineteenth Dynasty of Egypt under the Pharaoh Rameses. Officials during that time have left behind their notations of the numbers of bricks made each day as well as their complaints at the scarcity of straw for the bricks.

Temples and tombs were filled with furniture of ebony and ivory, elegant vases, and copper tools, as well as gold jewelry and ornaments. Artisans etched beautifully drawn scenes of daily life on the walls of tombs to provide comfort for the one buried there.

As the wife of a high-ranking Egyptian official, Potiphar's wife likely led a life of relative ease and prosperity. According to the story in Genesis 39, Potiphar's household and business matters prospered because of Joseph's influence, and "the blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field" (Genesis 39:5).

The story of seduction and desire is as old as history. Scripture doesn't record if Joseph found Potiphar's wife attractive and desirable. That detail could be considered superfluous since he rejected her because he "could not do such a wicked thing and sin against God." The jaded, older Egyptian woman and her desires provide a stunning backdrop for Joseph's purity, making Joseph and his choice to walk in a righteous manner all the clearer and more attractive.

READ GENESIS 39

1. Joseph was brought down to where? _____.
2. Where did Joseph live? _____.
3. Did Joseph find grace in the master's sight? _____. If so, what duties were he given?
_____.
4. Who cast their eyes upon Joseph? _____.
5. What did she try to do to him? _____.
6. Did Joseph give in to her demands? _____. If not, why? _____
_____.
7. Did she get Joseph in trouble? _____. If so, how? _____
_____.
8. Who did she tell? _____.
9. Did her husband believe her? _____. If so, why? _____.
10. What happened to Joseph? _____.
11. Was the Lord with Joseph? _____. If so, why do you say this? _____
_____.

HER LEGACY IN SCRIPTURE

Read Genesis 39:6-7

1. What character trait was Potiphar's wife lacking? Why do you think she was attracted to Joseph, beyond the fact that he was "well-built and handsome"? _____

2. Like Potiphar's wife, what do you wish you had that you don't have? Is it something you shouldn't have? If it is, ask God to help you root it out of your spirit. _____

3. Imagine the life you think Potiphar's wife might have led. What might drive a woman to be so consumed with lust that she'd attempt such an open seduction? _____

Read Genesis 39:9

4. Where do you suppose Joseph got his knowledge of right and wrong and his ability to reject sin? What do you think Joseph's life might have been like if he had given in to Potiphar's wife? _____

5. What legacy has sin or a rejection of sin left in your life? _____

6. What might Joseph's life have been like if he'd given in to Potiphar's wife? _____

7. What legacy has sin or rejection of sin left in your life? _____

Read Genesis 39:10

8. Why do you think Joseph avoided contact with Potiphar's wife? Contrast how these two characters responded to temptation. _____

9. If temptation of a certain kind keeps coming into your life, how do you respond? _____

Read Genesis 39:16-17

10. The story Potiphar's wife told her husband was just that, a story, a piece of fiction.

Describe what you think Joseph's feeling might have been when he heard the "story"?

11. Why do you think Potiphar's wife made up the story she told her husband? What does her lie tell you about her as a person? _____

12. Like Potiphar's wife, have you ever accused someone unjustly? What were the circumstances? How did you deal with the sin involved and correct the wrong? _____

13. Temptation is fact of life – even Jesus was tempted. What temptations do you face? How do you deal with them? _____

HER PROMISE

*T*he promise of God is revealed in this story not so much through Potiphar's wife as through Joseph and his response to her. On the surface, if we look at Joseph's situation in this one story, it may appear that he is merely a pawn in the intrigue of the household of Potiphar. As before, he is rejected and tossed aside. He looks like the fool, the loser. However, God's continued blessing is on Joseph. Within the context of this one story, it may look as if Joseph has lost. But in the context of his life, he is nothing but a winner. Indirectly — through Potiphar's wife and her sexual advances toward Joseph — God reveals his promise to bless those who follow him with uprightness (an old-fashioned word, but a good one!) and integrity.

Promises in Scripture

I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity.

— 1 CHRONICLES 29:17

*Blessed are those
who do not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but who delight in the law of the LORD,
and meditate on his law day and night.*

— PSALM 1:1–2

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

*Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

—PSALM 51:10

- REFLECT ON: Genesis 39.
- PRAISE GOD: Because he not only shows us what is right, but he gives us the strength to resist temptation.
- OFFER THANKS: That he invites us to enjoy an intimate relationship with himself rather than the empty pleasures this world offers.
- CONFESS: Any tendency toward becoming emotionally or physically involved in an off-limits relationship or any tendency to covet what does not belong to you.
- ASK GOD: To help you break the habit of fantasizing about relationships you wish you had.

Lift Your Heart

*W*e know what happened to Joseph after he was falsely accused, but we don't know anything about Potiphar's wife. Write a short account from your own imagination, entitled "Whatever Became of Potiphar's Wife?" You can give her a happy ending or a sad one, just make sure it's believable. Try to put yourself in the story. You could be Potiphar's wife, her mother, her maid, her little sister, or whatever character you dream up. Does anything hit you as you ponder her story's conclusion?

Lord, I don't want my soul to feed on empty pleasures, to long for what belongs to someone else. Instead, increase my hunger for you and create in me a pure heart, one that you will find irresistibly beautiful.