

Keys to Dynamic Bible Study  
Yahweh is With Us  
Read Genesis 19

The circumstances defied any positive spin on the situation. Most would have denied anything good could be made of it. Although Joseph had been made a slave, the truth is Yahweh was with him.

The wife of Joseph's master passed by him a third time that morning as he sat on a multicolored rug meant to keep the chilled tiled floor from making him uncomfortable. As he sat working on the numbers for his master's accounts, he considered her advances irksome. Her course up and down the halls past his workplace was purposeless, and she was obviously out to entice him. In no way would he jeopardize his favored position—a position only Yahweh could have placed him in--by messing around with the master's wife. Besides, though she may become enraged at his rebuff, he feared God more than her revenge.

Joseph stretched, arching his back. Reflecting, he thought about his seventeen years sitting on warm meadowlands protecting his father's sheep. The ground beneath him had been supple, not unyielding as this floor was. It was his father's concern over his brothers that had led to his enslavement. His father had sent him to locate his brothers who were caring for the sheep. His initial joy at having found them switched to horror as they grabbed hold of him: their jealousy of him had finally overridden rational behavior. He had panicked when they threw him into the pit. His screams had not even disturbed their lunch. Their decision, therefore, to sell him into slavery had probably saved his life.

It was shortly after Joseph had arrived at Potiphar's residence that Potiphar had recognized that Joseph's god Yahweh was with him and that Joseph's abilities came from that god. Thus, Potiphar made Joseph overseer over his house and everything else he owned. *Despite my enslavement, Joseph thought, I am blessed.* That is why he had repeatedly refused the wife of his master when she commanded him, "Lie with me." How could he do that heinous act and, thereby, sin against his God? Still, he was aware of her continued passion. She was resolved, he could see, to get what she hungered after.

He was not aware, at first, that he was unaccompanied in the house. When he realized it, it was too late; Potiphar's wife had grabbed his garments, trying to pull him close to herself. She spoke seductively, "Lie with me." Only after he had twisted this way and that had he been able to free himself. He sprinted outside the house, wearing merely a loin cloth; his garment remained in her clutches. Her shrieks came minutes later, after she was overcome with humiliation. She would show him! With a demonstration of hysteria, first to her servants and later, upon her husband's return, she maligned Joseph's name, holding out the incriminating garment. Potiphar had no other recourse. He had Joseph imprison.

The circumstances seemed to defy any positive spin on the situation. Most would have denied anything good could be made of it. But, though Joseph was hurled into prison, the truth is Yahweh was with him.

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The almost identical words, used in the first and last paragraphs of this narrative, illustrate a Hebrew technique called bookends. Bookends are purposefully placed at the beginning and end of some of the narratives, psalms, or prophetic utterances in the Scriptures. In Joseph's story the bookends are used for two reasons. First, they mark the beginning and end of the narrative, for there were no chapter divisions when the Bible was written. The second reason for the bookends that envelope the story is to inform us how to read it: No matter what was occurring in Joseph's life, his God was there, with him. Perhaps, without the bookends, we might presume that Yahweh was punishing Joseph. His circumstances seem to affirm such an accusation. The bookends that bracket Scripture's story of Joseph—"And the Lord was with Joseph"--advise us otherwise.

We, therefore, read the story with the double pledge of the Lord's presence as a restraint upon a harsh and judgmental conclusion. We are assured that horrendous circumstances do not presume guilt and punishment. Neither does one need an audible voice from heaven to vouch for God's presence. The Joseph narrative persuades us that, in our most grievous moments, Yahweh is with us.