

The Lord was with Joseph
Genesis 39

Introduction

After the brothers, in hatred, had sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites, he was taken to Egypt, to the house of Potiphar, the Captain of the Guard. Potiphar was probably part of the Royal bodyguard in the precincts of the Egyptian court with special responsibility for the execution of offenders, under Pharaoh, who had absolute power over life and death. Obviously Potiphar was an aristocrat, high in office, and in court favour.

The Bible often sums up a man's life in a single sentence: **Abraham believed God** (Genesis 15:6); **the man Moses was very meek** (Numbers 12:3); John the Apostle was **the disciple whom Jesus loved** (John 20:2). And Joseph's life is summed up: **The Lord was with Joseph** (Genesis 39:2). This was wonderfully true throughout his life.

We are going to look at this phrase, which we often use in our prayers and benedictions ("The Lord be with us"), and when we are saying goodbye to someone ("The Lord be with you"). Firstly, what does it *not* mean, and what does it in fact mean?

What the Lord's presence does *not* mean

It is important to stress this because it is so often misunderstood. It does not mean having a charmed life or a trouble-free life. The Lord was with Joseph, but that did not stop him being separated from his loved ones, being sold as a slave, being exposed to severe temptation, falsely accused, going to prison, suffering misery and pain. All these adversities and problems arose directly because the Lord was with him!

Contrary to what many think, if the Lord is with you, you will not be free from trouble. We may be saved from the trouble that comes from walking in sin, but other trouble will come precisely because we are the Lord's people. Do not be surprised, but rather expect trouble in a world that has rejected God. Do not feel that God has let you down and forgotten you just because troubles come. Do not fall into the trap of feeling that God lacks power or love when you are suffering.

Nowhere does He promise a trouble-free life, but instead He warned that we are likely to experience troubles. **If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also** (John 15:18-20). **Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted** (2 Timothy 3:12).

*“Why should I complain of want or distress,
Temptation or pain? He told me no less.
The lives of salvation, I know from His Word,
Through much tribulation must follow their Lord.”*
(John Newton)

What the Lord’s presence does mean

If the Almighty God, Lord of heaven and earth, is with someone in His overshadowing, protecting, strengthening, then it must make a clear and unmistakable difference.

- (a) Blessing on daily work. Joseph became a successful man. His master saw that the Lord was with him, and made him overseer, with great responsibility. And for Joseph’s sake, the Lord blessed the household where he worked. Later in prison the Lord showed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of his jailer, and he was entrusted with responsibility for the other prisoners. Everything he handled went well. There were two reasons for this. The first was Joseph’s godly character – he worked as in God’s sight – hard-working, prompt, obedient, trustworthy and reliable, doing everything as if he was doing it for God, doing his best for God. One of the first things that change when someone becomes a Christian is their attitude to their daily work. They become conscientious and thorough. The second reason was direct blessing and prosperity given by God. **The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it** (Proverbs 10:22). **Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained** (1 Samuel 2:30). This is a difficult and complex subject. There is no guarantee that every God-fearing person will be top of the class, the most successful in business, top of the promotion ladder. Some will lose out because they are faithful to God – lose out for a while at least. Yet allowing for different circumstances, very frequently God’s blessing attends the every day work of godly men and women. Christian character and the blessing of God make men and women reliable and conscientious. They get noticed, and even non-Christian colleagues have to acknowledge the qualities and results of having the Christian on board, and prosperity follows.
- (b) Strong in the hour of temptation. The most telling and searching part of the chapter is the temptation by Potiphar’s wife. It was a very typical situation. Egypt was a land of moral pollution. Potiphar’s wife was typical of many women, attracted by youth, good looks, and wanting Joseph to satisfy her passion. The temptation must have been extremely strong. He was away from home, had a young man’s instincts and desires, no one would ever know, it could lead to advancement, and refusal might lead to disaster. She was persistent, trying to wear down his resistance. Pleasing her would have been the easiest way out of the difficulty. But Joseph remembered the Lord was with him. He must not yield to the pressure. He met and overcame the temptation. Note that he recognized the temptation for what it was – sin - **How could I do such a wicked thing**

and sin against God? (Genesis 39:9). He did not beat around the bush, or use euphemisms – “fooling around”, “a little self-indulgence”, “slight indiscretion”. It was sinning against God, besides betraying his master’s trust. The Lord was with Joseph, and he saw sin as God sees it. He avoided the sin, not because of his own reputation or for fear of being found out, but because it was sin “against God” – an impassable barrier. Divine presence blocks the way. **Against you, you only, have I sinned** (Psalm 51:4). All sin is against God finally (whether it is against the law, fellows, society or country).

Joseph did the right thing – he got out of the place of temptation (Genesis 39:12). Sometimes flight is the only answer. To stay, pause, argue or delay would only lead to disaster. **Flee youthful lusts** (2 Timothy 2:22). Don’t parlay with temptation. Don’t linger in the vicinity. “A clean pair of heels and the King’s highway.” As Lot was instructed to do on leaving Sodom, “Escape for your life and do not look back”.

There are valuable lessons here about sin and temptation. Temptation is most likely in times of comfort and ease, often from the least expected quarter, and therefore harder to resist. Many a sailor is prepared for threatened storms, but not the sudden squall. The temptation in itself is not sin. Our natural instincts are not wrong in themselves. It only becomes sin when we gratify them in forbidden ways. No wise man that knows himself dare imagine he is immune from temptation. A sense of God’s presence is the best defence.

*“Temptations lose their power
When Thou art nigh.”*

May God give us wisdom to flee temptation, and strength to overcome. He is the one sufficient power in dealing with evil.

The Lord’s presence caused character to develop

How easy it would have been for Joseph to sit down amid his experience, and brood and sulk, full of bitterness and self-pity. He could easily have been beset by doubt. What about those dreams he had had of the future? They were only delusions. What was the point of serving God? It only led to trouble.

We are either overcome by difficulties, or we overcome them and use them as means of grace and stepping-stones to higher things. When things were at their lowest for Joseph – in prison – he was busy supervising other things. His spirit was unconquerable because of his trust in God. Therefore his difficulties led to spiritual maturity and more opportunities. While in prison he met the chief butler and baker, and through them he came into contact with Pharaoh himself.

When a man has the Lord’s presence, he has His guidance and strength. Iron enters the soul, sufferings are borne patiently, experiences teach him wisdom, courage and resolution, and he is prepared for future service. His confidence in God is deepened. Adversity builds character. Courage, patience and faith grow. These things are never seen when life is easy, but are developed when we are up against it and difficulties abound.

The Lord was with Joseph in adversity, and therefore all he suffered and endured worked out for his good. He learnt to minister to others, and how often we forget our own troubles when we are occupied serving others. God's plan for our life, as with Joseph's, wonderfully embraces adversity and setbacks. We have assurance we are in the Lord's will when we know divine presence and comfort, as we rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him. Troubles are blessings in disguise. C.f. The Lord Jesus was **made perfect through suffering** (Hebrews 2:10).

Samuel Rutherford, the great Scottish preacher in the 17th century, from his prison cell in Aberdeen, wrote, "Christ and His Cross are sweet company and a blessed couple. My prison is my palace. My losses are rich losses. My pain is easy pain. My heavy days are holy and happy days. Lord cut, Lord carve, Lord mould, Lord do anything that may perfect the Father's image in us, and make us meet for your glory."