

Genesis 39:5-15 (DHT)

From the time that Potiphar made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, “Lie with me.” But he refused and said to his master's wife, “Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her.

But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me.” But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, she called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house.”

Introduction

I rarely listen to secular music; but if I do, it is usually John Mayer. One of my all-time favorite albums is his record, “Battle Studies.” One of the songs from this record describes well where our culture is at when it comes to sex. Consider these lyrics:

Young and full of running; tell me where is that taking me?
Just a great figure eight; a tiny infinity
Love is really nothing but a dream that keeps waking me
For all of my trying, we still end of dying; how can it be?
Don't say a word, just come over and lie here with me
Cause I'm just about to set fire to everything I see
I want you so bad I'll go back on the things I believe
There I just said it; I'm scared you'll forget about me
So young and full of running all the way to the edge of desire
Steady my breathing, I'm silently screaming: ‘I have to have you now.’

Where does the life in pursuit of sexual desire lead; to go just a little bit further; just one more time? When we push the limits of our sexual inclinations to the edge of desire, we find there is no edge. The pursuit is circular, going on and on until the restlessness of lust leads to compromising our values, the belief that true love is unattainable, and our inevitable death. The gains from these pursuits are only momentary, lasting only as long as we continue to fuel the flame; yet, at the end of the day, they still leave us empty, unfulfilled. All this from John Mayer!

The root of our culture’s casual-sex revolution is lust, and the most major, modern manifestation of lust is pornography, stimulating and inflaming us with vivid, explicit content. In 1997, at the advent of the internet revolution, pornography largely moved from print to digital, making the battle against lust all the more difficult. 23 years later, the largest online distributor of pornography reports that of the five *billion* hours of porn watched annually through their website alone, 61% is on smart phone devices.¹

By the age of 18, 93% of boys and 62% of girls *admit* to have viewed porn, with over half being first exposed by age 11.² 64% of young adult males and 56% of young adult women “actively seek out pornography.”³ Active porn viewing also correlates to divorce, increasing the likelihood by 200%.⁴ Sad of all, porn-use among professing Christians is nearly identical to porn use by non-Christians.⁵ This is not just a teenage boy or singles issue; porn affects all demographics at alarming rates. Viewing porn is only exasperated in times of isolation. That same online distributor of pornography reported in spring 2022 that there was a nearly immediate spike in usage correlated to increases in COVID quarantines.

Genesis 39

Our starting passage is from Genesis 39, which will be a springboard toward a biblical theology of *resisting* sexual temptation. Joseph, the youngest son of Jacob, was betrayed by his brothers, and out of jealousy over their father’s special garment, they sold Joseph into slavery. His buyers later sold him to a high-ranking official to Pharaoh, named Potiphar. The more

¹ Anderson, Monica. “Parents, Teens and Digital Monitoring.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/01/07/parents-teens-and-digital-monitoring/>, 2016.

² Covenant Eyes. <https://www.covenanteyes.com/pornstats/>, accessed Jan. 2020

³ Barna Group, “The Porn Phenomenon: The Impact of Pornography in the Digital Age.” 2016.

⁴ Covenant Eyes

⁵ Starr, Penny. “Pornography Use Among Self-Identified Christian Largely Mirrors National Average, Survey Finds.” <https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/penny-starr/pornography-use-among-self-identified-christians-largely-mirrors-national>, 2015.

Joseph did for Potiphar, the more success came Potiphar’s way, so naturally Potiphar elevated Joseph more and more until he was the chief of staff, the real man behind the curtain.

Moses tells us Joseph was *handsome in form and appearance*. Joseph had everything going for him: independence, power, physical attraction, empowerment by the LORD. Well, not long after learning these qualities we read that Potiphar’s wife swiped right on Joseph. She *cast her eyes*. Another translation says she *looked longingly*. This is what lust is. She didn’t just look at him, smile, and go about her business at an appropriate social distance. She looked at him, and kept looking... and kept looking. She saw someone she desired in a way that was outside God’s intentions, for Joseph was not her husband. She made her move, in an attempt to recreate the movie she was playing in her head. Lust overcame her.

As you read the drama unfold, you may expect Joseph to respond in sin. He kept refusing, *but one day...when no one was home...* But he doesn’t give in. Our culture would see Joseph as a weak-link, a wimp; and question his true masculinity. “The world begs us to believe that our authentic selves are only found in giving in. It promises hero status if we submit to our attractions. Our desires whisper, like a serpent in a garden, that there is no death in going against God’s Word.”⁶ Potiphar’s wife *said, “sleep with me,” but he refused*. Without any hesitation, Joseph resisted sexual temptation, and not just once, but *day after day*. This adulterous woman would not leave this man alone despite his consistent resistance. And why does he resist? Because it would be a wicked act against his boss, her husband, *and* a sin against the LORD.

Although porn detaches you from reality, there are a few parallels to Joseph’s experience with Potiphar’s wife. Joseph did not have to try hard to give in. Sinful sexuality was available at his fingertips on a daily basis, *yet* he resisted. He also was more comfortable sprinting naked outdoors than being clothed indoors in her grasp—Joseph prioritized innocent humiliation over guilty humiliation. If you follow the Word of God and honor the LORD with your body, and culture thus questions your true manhood or womanhood, that is innocent humiliation and it glorifies God. Joseph preferred humiliation from men on earth to humiliation from God on the Day of Judgment. He was focused and prepared for when temptation came his way.

⁶ Rachel Gilson, “My Same-Sex Attraction Has an Answer.” *Christianity Today*, March 2, 2020.

Reality of Temptation

The NT speaks often of temptation as a reality in the Christian life. In his short epistle, James writes twice of what to do “when” we are tempted, not if (Jas. 1:2, 13). Paul writes the ways of the flesh and Spirit are opposed to each other to the utmost degree. We are unable to live according to both (Gal. 5:16-17). When we live by the Spirit, the tension from our flesh only intensifies. This tension is why, like Paul, we do things we don’t want to do, and we don’t do things we do want to do (Rom. 7:14-20).

Peter and Paul tell us the devil lurks around, looking to devour an unprepared child of God, ensnaring us to set aside the will of God to carry out the will of Satan (1 Pet. 5:8, 2 Tim. 2:26). Our flesh uses sexual desire to lure us, and when we take the bait *by indulging* ourselves in that sexual desire, we give birth to sin. When we feed that baby sin, it grows into adult sin, rewiring our brain into justifying it as normalcy all the way to our inevitable death (Jas. 1:14).

Hebrews tells us Jesus was tempted in every way we are, yet without sinning (Heb. 4:15). So is being tempted the same as committing sin? No! Jesus was tempted as we are yet without sin because he always resisted temptation. These temptations were real and caused Jesus to suffer. Jesus’ temptations drained him emotionally (Mark 14:33-34). But Jesus never succumbed to temptation. The intensity never alleviated; the pressure never released. This is the tension of resistance to sin. A life absent of resisting temptation is a life headed toward Hell. For the Christian, the *persistence* of temptation is assumed, and the *resistance* to temptation is expected.

How Christ Handled Temptation

In the wilderness, Satan began each temptation to Jesus with “if you.” This is also precisely what Satan did to Eve in Eden; wedge a little question in there to get the tempted one to second-guess the clear Word of God. Jesus responded to every “if you” with “it is written.” Jesus rejected the premise of each of the temptations and responded by quoting Scripture aloud. Each time, Satan tempted Jesus to elevate his own will above the will of the Father. At the end of the temptation narrative, Luke writes that Satan departed from tempting Christ *until another opportune time* (Luke 4:1-13). Jesus didn’t graduate from temptation following this episode in the wilderness. Satan can’t stop; temptation won’t stop.

Jesus suffered through the temptation to disregard his mission and feed his self-interest. When his time to die had just about arrived—when the temptation to disobey was strongest—

Jesus went to Gethsemane. But Jesus did not go alone; he took with him three of the disciples he had known the longest. He invited some of his close friends to be with him in his suffering, and to pray for his strength (Mark 14:33-34). Part of this episode also involved him praying alone. While suffering through intense temptation, Christ was vulnerable, during which, he wanted and needed his friends for support. Through this, Christ is not only our savior from our sins but is also our savior *in* our temptations.⁷ In Christ, we have a victor who battled every kind of temptation for us and won. And in him, we also win. In his victory, we are given the example, far better even than Joseph, of how to put sinful sexuality to death.

The Resources God Gives Us to Endure

In the apostles' writings to the Church, we find a real fixation on this concept of suffering *through* temptation like Christ. We ought to view the temptations and trials that come our way as opportunities to suffer for the sake of Christ. When you resist temptation, that is suffering. Resisting and enduring temptation is suffering to the glory of God. Paul says we endure through and flee from temptation by using the resources God has given us (1 Cor. 10:13-14). I have identified seven you can incorporate in your life starting today.

The first resource given to us is repentance. We are commanded to flee *from* the sinful passions of the flesh by fleeing *to* the fruits of the Spirit. Put off sin and put on Christ. Repentance is a change of mind about who you are and who God is shown by a 180-change in behavior. Repentance begins internally and is demonstrated externally.

That said, repentance is manifested differently depending on the circumstances; a measure of self-control necessary here may not be necessary there. If you notice you are constantly tempted to look at pornography in your room before bed, you may decide to intentionally avoid taking your phone with you into your room at night. We live in a society where taking sending and receiving inappropriate photos with others is an ordinary part of life for much of the young adult population. Perhaps it is time for you to delete that app from your phone, or to unfollow that model or celebrity. Perhaps it is time to give your passcode to your spouse, parents, or roommates, or commit to changing the channel when provocative content comes on. These are good acts of repentance that help us resist sexual temptation. It is imperative to take drastic efforts to protect our thoughts, words, and deeds from sinful sexuality.

⁷ This reference comes from Jackie Hill-Perry, though I do not have a specific reference.

The second resource comes from reading the Bible. You cannot quote Scripture aloud in the midst of temptation unless you are actively reading Scripture. If Satan prowls around looking for an unprepared child of God, then we must prepare before he attacks for when he attacks. It seems basic, but it’s so important—read your Bible!

The third resource is to reject the premise of the temptation. Like Jesus, respond to every “if you” with an “it is.” As soon as you start to question the clear Word of God, the devil gains a foothold in your life. Peter tells Christians to resist temptation with firm faith (1 Pet. 5:9)—to rest in our confidence in God’s Word, and the promise of the Gospel that our sins have been covered, we have been made right with God, and Christ really was raised from the grave to reign as our king.

The fourth resource is refusing to face temptation alone. Remember that no suffering is unique to you—no one suffers alone (1 Pet. 5:9). This is two-fold. This means no matter how bad your most intense or shameful temptation is, you are not the only one to suffer with that specific temptation. *And* it means that even if you do not experience the same temptation as your friend, you can still suffer together as one who is also tempted—as one who also shares the human condition of original sin.

In times when you respond to temptation in sinful ways, you need mature Christians to confess your sins to, who can hold you accountable, but also assure you of your forgiveness by reminding you of the Gospel (Jas. 5:13-16). Mature Christians who can walk with you back to life by the Spirit. “True healing mostly takes place through the sharing of weakness.”⁸ Some of my most formative relational experiences have been in sharing my weaknesses to others and theirs with me. Refuse to face temptation alone and refuse to deal with your sin alone.

The fifth resource comes from prayer. When David was confronted about his immorality with Bathsheba, his repentance began with prayer. You can use his prayer in Psalm 51 as a guide. When you face temptation, pray alone, but also pray with your Christian friends, with your spouse, with Bible study members, and with church leaders. Prayer is also another way to refuse to face temptation alone.

The sixth resource God has given to us is the joy of worship. Through singing hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs alone and with others (Eph. 5:18-19), we remind ourselves of the goodness of God and of the Gospel. *No power of Hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from*

⁸ This is a classic quote from Henri Nouwen.

his hand. Till he returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I stand. When we sing words like these, we remind ourselves that our suffering is not in vain, and thus we can find joy in our suffering (Jas. 1:3-4). Suffering through temptation is challenging, but we must make an effort to find joy in our resistance to temptation, knowing that enduring-tension glorifies God.

The seventh resource God has given to us is his Spirit. We cannot draw near to Christ without using the chief resource he gave to us when he ascended to heaven, the gift of the Spirit, who thankfully in these days is not practicing social distancing.⁹ Jesus, when he was tempted in the wilderness had the Spirit with him. He relied on the Spirit’s guiding and presence with him in the midst of his temptation. If you are a Christian, that same Spirit dwells within you. Rely on that same Spirit to lead you as you live in resistance to sin. By relying on the Spirit, we minimize our will and elevate God’s will.

So to recap these seven resources God has given to us: repent, read your Bible, reject Satan’s “if you,” pray, share your weaknesses, worship, and rely on the Spirit.

Conclusion

However, it must also be said that you cannot put sinful sexuality to death without first believing the Gospel! We must set aside our pride to be lords of our own bodies and instead give ourselves over to the one who already has that authority. Christ already did what we cannot do. So, hand yourself over to Jesus as your Lord and believe that his life, death, and resurrection has reconciled you back to God! Only then is putting lust to death truly attainable.

I can testify personally to its attainability. For over four years, I kept my addiction to pornography hidden in the shame of my self-crafted golden-image. I was convicted of my sin, so I got accountability partners, but they did not even follow their own advice. So I ignored their advice and self-righteously pretended to control my sin. Just one more time, I said to myself. After several years, all those one-more-times added up to *a great figure eight, a tiny infinity*. There was no edge of desire; it went on and on, *day after day*. When I gave myself permission for one more time, it was never just once more.

But after four years of pretending, I was convicted again to deal with this sin. I began to take this sin seriously, yet it still took nearly two years for me to recognize I was truly free. Pornography is just one byproduct of the age-old temptation to look at other image-bearers of

⁹ This came from a Facebook status update from Sam Allberry.

God with *lustful intent*, but sinful sexuality takes many other forms such as sex before marriage, sex after marriage with someone who is not your spouse, masturbation, and indulging same-sex attraction to name a few. All these temptations are the “practical outpouring of original sin,” with which we all share from birth, and for which we all must rely on Christ’s victory to overcome.¹⁰ Regardless of what yours may be, if you can resist pornography, I am confident there is no other form of sinful sexuality you cannot also put to death.

By God’s grace, I have *practiced* self-control when it comes to pornography for about eight years.¹¹ I have practiced for when temptation flashes through my mind, and when those temptations come every day I now have years of practice behind me to help me resist. Consistent resistance will not make our sinful desires and temptations go away, but it will give us a greater power to say no in order to walk down a better road.

In response to this message, one of your teenagers, your spouse, or a friend may confess something that makes you uncomfortable. You may feel inclined toward a passionate response. I must insist, though, that you be gentle with one another, remembering that your sins offended our most Holy God, requiring you to be eternally separated from him. But Christ went to the cross to pay the debt you and I rightly owe to the Father. God did not sweep our sins under the rug; he dealt with our sins in such a way that satisfied his justice, led us to freedom, and restored our relationship with him. Justice, freedom, and restored relationship: this is the essence of reconciliation, which was granted to us by the Cross.

So let us always keep in mind what God did for us, and therefore share that reconciliation with others (2 Cor. 5:11-21). Let us find joy in our suffering knowing our resistance to sin glorifies God. Let us find peace knowing our savior who died and rose for us suffered through every kind of temptation we are—including lust—in order for us to be truly reconciled to the Father. Let us cling to Christ in our failure, and credit the Spirit in our success as we strive to go and sin no more.

Let’s pray.

¹⁰ Rosaria Butterfield, from one of a variety of videos on YouTube.

¹¹ Based on February 2015.