



## NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOE PART III: RESISTING THE PULL

*Jeff Peabody  
New Day Church  
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We're back again with another look at the life of Joseph. We've been examining what his experiences have to tell us about following God. We've talked about God's calling on his life, and last week we looked at how he went about making decisions, based on his mission in life.

When we last left him, his brothers had sold him into slavery and let his father think he had been killed by wild animals. This morning we pick back up with Joseph on the next phase of his journey.

### **Genesis 39**

*Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.*

*The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.*

*Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"*

*But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. 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?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.*

*One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.*

*When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."*

*She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."*

*When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.*

*But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.*

It's a good thing Family Sunday was last week! We're definitely into PG-13 material here. Honestly, there are a lot of other sermons I'd rather preach. This is tough stuff this morning. But preaching is a funny thing: It isn't just picking a topic and running with it. When you're tied to a text, if you're dealing with it honestly, you can't make it say something you want it to say.

The subject of course is temptation, and Potiphar's wife is the picture of seduction. In contrast, Joseph is the picture of virtue – not even giving her the slightest bit of ground.

Some role models are almost discouraging, they're so perfect. Joseph sets the bar awfully high for the rest of us. He's a rock. And the author highlights how stellar he is by a contrast with his brother.

We skipped the chapter just prior to this, because it's all about Joseph's older brother Judah. But let me give you a quick summary: It's the story of how Judah ended up sleeping with his own daughter in law, Tamar. She actually tempted him to do it by making him think he was sleeping with a prostitute. It's wrong on so many levels.

Joseph had another brother who slept with his stepmom. This boy did not have a genetic trait that would help him control his sex drive. So he stands out as someone who overcame the odds and managed to do the right thing.

What can we learn from what he did to fight temptation? Most of us have already failed at one point or another in our lives, sometimes over and over again. How do we become people of integrity? If Christ is really in our lives, how does that make a difference when we're in a situation that plays on our worst desires?

First off, let's define temptation. This isn't a dictionary definition, but it fits what we're talking about this morning.

**Temptation is the magnet pulling us where we shouldn't go.**

For Joseph, the temptation was to have sex with his boss's wife. Mrs. Potiphar was literally pulling Joseph, both verbally and physically where he knew he didn't belong.

You may or may not identify with Joseph in this area. You could be sitting here this morning saying, "That's not really something I struggle with right now." But temptation isn't just about sex. That's certainly a big one. But by our definition, you could be tempted to do a lot of things that pull you where you shouldn't go. For example, in this culture, one huge temptation is to pursue wealth. We don't even know how materialistic we've become, and we are constantly told we should be worth more and spending more, and that pursuing those things will ultimately make us happy. Paul didn't mince any words about that philosophy.

**1 Timothy 6:9-10**

*People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*

There are other forms of temptation that we may not always even think about, like the temptation to talk about people. There's really no need to tell everybody our opinion about what someone else is doing, but that urge to open our mouth just pulls and pulls at us until we can't stand it any longer and we have to tell SOMEONE what we think.

Temptation is all about the urges you feel to do what you know is wrong. Maybe it's about food. Maybe it's watching television when you should get some sleep. Maybe it's being lazy instead of helping your spouse. Maybe it's being a workaholic and so wrapped up in your job you're neglecting your family. Maybe it's giving in to fear or despair. If one area holds no power over you, then it isn't your temptation. But just when you think you might be off the hook, you're back on it, because

**Temptation is a universal phenomenon.**

Metaphorically speaking, we've all been taken to Egypt like Joseph. As long as we are in this world, we are living in Potiphar's house. We're all in a place that's not of our choosing, trapped in bodies and minds that are susceptible to various desires. And just as Joseph had no control over what Potiphar's wife did, we have no control over how Satan

chooses to tempt us. This side of eternity, we will not be able to escape temptation. It is part of the human condition. Everybody deals with temptation. Even Jesus was tempted.

There's an old story about an Egyptian Christian named Anthony who lived in the late 200s and early 300s. He wanted to escape temptations, and so first he moved from the big city to the little village. He cut off all his family ties and responsibilities. He sold his possessions. He kept moving further and further out, first to the outskirts of town, then a little further, until finally he was living as a hermit out in the desert, all the time seeking to escape temptation. But he found that even in the middle of nowhere with no one around, his temptations still tormented him.

There's no escaping reality. But there is a degree of comfort in it all:

### **1 Corinthians 10:13**

*No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it.*

The universality of it all means that we're not alone. Other people have endured what we endure, have found it equally challenging to resist temptation. And God has promised that no matter how strong and compelling our evil desires might be, he's got a way for us to stay strong. Sometimes we may not want to resist and so we give in, but we can never say it is because the urge was just too powerful and we couldn't help it.

Temptation's powerful magnet pulls at us all. Another important truth to remember is that

### **Temptation strikes when we least expect it.**

The writer has set the stage very well to let us know that in spite of the terrible things done to Joseph, he was thriving. Potiphar trusted him completely, he was holding a position of honor and responsibility. Several times we're told that the Lord was blessing his efforts, to the point where he pretty much ran the place.

He was in a good spot spiritually, since it said the Lord was with him. This wasn't just a financially or emotionally good time for him – he was on a mountaintop experience with God.

And that's when Mrs. Potiphar makes her move. Right when Joseph's at the top of his game, he faces the biggest test of all.

People talk about temptation happening in a moment of weakness, but it seems to strike most regularly in a moment of strength. Things are going along great, you're not out looking for trouble, when BAM! There it is.

When was Jesus tempted? Right after his baptism, when God the Father had totally affirmed him and said, “This is my Son, whom I love.” It was a peak moment, followed immediately by severe testing.

A friend of mine is on staff at a church plant in California. Things took off right away for them. They had huge growth, they were making a lot of progress. And suddenly, the senior pastor had an affair, and everyone was stunned. We are never invulnerable. We have to be on our guard against temptation in all its forms.

It’s like what God said to Cain:

**Genesis 4:7**

*Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.*

Sin is smooth and deceptive, and it works its way into our lives quietly. It’s good to remember the warning from 1 Corinthians:

**1 Corinthians 10:12**

*So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!*

So what was Joseph’s experience of temptation like? There are three short truths that stand out to me.

**1. Don’t soft pedal.**

Do you know where that phrase comes from? It’s referring to the pedal on a piano that dampens the sound and makes it softer. And sometimes that’s what we’d prefer to do when dealing with temptation, rather than confronting it head on. We’d rather tiptoe around what’s going on.

Let’s look again at the way Joseph responded to Mrs. Potiphar’s seduction:

*"With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. 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?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.*

Joseph cut right to the chase. He said NO. He called it wicked. He called it sin. Those are pretty harsh words to say to someone who has the power to ruin your life. It would have been a whole lot safer for him to say, “Wow – I’m really flattered. I think you’re very pretty, too. If circumstances were different…”

We can’t mess around with fire. It’s too easy to convince ourselves that what we want to do is something less than real sin, so we’ll come up with all kinds of creative ways to

rationalize it. We've got to call it like it is right up front before we find ourselves more interested in pursuing it. And if we're already in the middle of something we shouldn't be, we've got to do some straight talking to ourselves and acknowledge the reality of what we're doing.

Joseph refused to soft pedal, and he did it on a couple of different grounds:

First, **he saw the implications on a human level.** He knew that anything that happened was going to have ramifications. This could not be just a secret relationship – it was going to break the trust he had built with Potiphar. It would damage his character and his ability to be truthful with his boss.

Sin always has implications that ripple out far wider than the initial act. Stopping to consider what those effects will be is one way that can give us strength to stand up to temptation.

**Joseph also saw the implications for his relationship with God.** He called this a wicked thing that would be a sin against God – not Potiphar. When David had his affair with Bathsheba, he said to God, “Against you and you only have I sinned.”

Even if nobody else ever found out something we did, we can't hide from God's eyes. The weight of that stands between us until we are ready to confess it. Whatever we're being tempted to do, is it really worth the guilt we will feel afterwards the next time we're trying to pray?

Joseph's example tells us to call sin for what it is and not soft pedal. In his case, though, straight talk and refusing sin didn't make the temptation go away. In fact, the author tells us that Mrs. Potiphar kept after him every day.

Saying no isn't a magic bullet. It's not the death of temptation. Just because we refuse to give in won't make the desire to give in go away. In fact, it may make the temptation all the more persistent as it tries to wear us down. That's why Joseph resorted to a second strategy:

## **2. Don't stick around.**

Joseph was in the clutches of this woman. She was making one last desperate attempt, throwing herself at this man. And rather than reason with her and try to explain his way out of it, Joseph knew he had to just get out of there. There comes a point where it's too dangerous for us to face the same temptation over and over and we need to bolt.

Even when Jesus was being tempted, he finally just told Satan, “Get away from me.” Up to that point he had been resisting with Scripture verses and arguments, and he finally knew that it was time to just put some distance between them.

When something proves to be a big temptation for us, we're not called upon to just be strong. We're called to get out of there. There are guys who won't go into book stores, who won't go to movies rated above PG, who won't go online – not because there is necessarily anything wrong with those things, but because they're trying to give themselves a wide berth from places where they have experienced temptation. They know they'll eventually be worn down in those settings, so they stay away.

Jesus told his followers, "If something keeps causing you to sin, cut it off. Get away from it." Paul told Timothy to flee the evil desires of youth. We don't have to try to be the heroes who stare down temptation every time. We shouldn't stick around.

A final piece of advice from Joseph's life would be this:

### **3. Don't expect a medal.**

It was a rough go for Joseph for a long time after his decision. He lost his job, he got thrown in jail and forgotten for years. Nobody came up and patted him on the back and said, "Way to go, man." In fact, he got accused of being the one who had started the whole thing.

Winning a battle with temptation doesn't mean it's going to feel good or that anybody is going to notice. It will probably actually feel lousy and you'll wonder if you did the right thing. That's just the nature of the fight. Doing the right thing can be a lonely path where we're misunderstood. We'd like to think it would feel really good, but in reality it often doesn't.

There is an encouraging note at the end, though.

*But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden.*

Over and over in this story, we're told that the Lord was with Joseph. He was with him before he was tempted, he was with him during the whole ordeal, and he was with him in the aftermath. And it says that he showed Joseph kindness.

God is with us through our struggles with temptation. And he's with us when we've fought hard and are feeling discouraged. He's able to show us kindness and sympathy, because Jesus went through the process of being tempted. He knows how hard it is – the Bible says angels came and took care of him after his temptation experience.

### **Hebrews 4:15**

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet was without sin.*

There may be no medals, no instant gratification for fighting temptation. But we'll know the presence of the Lord with us – a Lord who understands completely and who will be kind and sympathetic to our situation.

Two questions as we close:

1. What is my magnet?

I might not have even mentioned what pulls at you this morning. Can you clearly name what your area of temptation is? Have you ever written it down in black and white? Identifying it clearly is one way of not soft pedaling on the issue.

2. What strategy will I use to resist it?

Do I need to consider the implications? Are there people or places I need to avoid? Christ's strategy was always prayer. He told his disciples to pray so they wouldn't fall into temptation. It's harder to give in to sin when you're in the middle of talking to God. What will be your strategy for resisting the pull of temptation?

There may be a nagging question for you this morning as you listen to all this. Maybe you're in the middle of a disaster, and you're asking "What if I've already failed?"

Like I said before, we've all failed at one time or another. But if you're feeling that weight especially this morning, I'd like to leave you with one note of hope.

Remember what I said about Judah's miserable failure with Tamar? He made a fool of himself and changed both of their lives forever, because Tamar became pregnant. It was a mess if there ever was one.

But listen to this: It's Judah and Tamar who end up in the lineage of Jesus. For all their mistakes, God still put them in Christ's family tree rather than Joseph, who would have seemed more fitting.

To me, that speaks of God's incredible grace. He doesn't choose us because we're so good at resisting temptation. He chooses us because he loves us and his holiness and perfection is enough for all of us.

There is redemption available. There is hope and forgiveness and the chance to start over. Christ's victory over sin and temptation is ours for the taking. Even after we've failed, when we come to him, we can have the same experience Joseph had of knowing that the Lord is with us. And we can then actually stand up to whatever tugs at our hearts, we can resist the pull, knowing we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength.