

“Don’t Cross That Line”

Genesis 39

Series: Behind the Scenes – the Story of Joseph Week 2. Overcoming Temptation

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

August 30, 2026

A gang of deer is visiting my backyard. I never see Bambi and his homeboys. But I see their handiwork. They are trying to help me trim my Hosta and other shrubs. They leave behind fertilizer for my grass. I see more of them standing guard on Stony Hill Road ready to cross the line and jump into my path without warning.

Years ago, while driving across the midwest in a little white hatchback, my brother-in-law collided with a buck. It shattered the windshield into fragments. Though fatally wounded, it still rose and ran off into the woods. When the police arrived, they found my brother-in-law dazed and bruised. “Are you all right buddy?” they asked. “Yeah, I’m okay,” he answered, “just a little shaken.” Their next question startled him. “Do you want the deer?” “The what?” he said in amazement. “The deer. Do you want it?” “No,” he replied. And with that, they ran off into the woods to bring it in. After the car was repaired, he sold it to me. Whenever it acted up, which was frequent, my family said the ghost of the deer was in the car. They called it the Deerslayer.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety estimates there are 1.5 to 2 million deer-vehicle collisions in the United States every year which cause 1 billion dollars in vehicle repairs, 10,000 injuries and 150-200 fatalities. The most dangerous time? October to December – peak mating season. Paul Shelton, Illinois state wildlife director, says “They’re concentrating almost exclusively on reproductive activities, and are a lot less wary than they normally would be.” Deer aren’t the only creatures wounded or destroyed by temptation. All it takes is one step over the line.

No person alive is immune to temptation. Even Jesus faced temptation, worse than all we endure put together. He did not sin or succumb. The same cannot be said of us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a great theologian and a martyr who died in a Nazi concentration camp, wrote this description of the power of temptation.

In our members there is a slumbering inclination toward desire which is both sudden and fierce. With irresistible power desire seizes mastery over the flesh. All at once a secret, smoldering fire is kindled. The flesh burns and is in flames. It makes no difference whether it is sexual desire, or ambition or vanity, or desire for revenge, or love of fame and power, or greed for money or, finally that strange desire for the beauty of the world, of nature. Joy in God is in course of being extinguished in us and we seek all our joy in the creature. At this moment God is quite unreal to us, he loses all reality, and only desire for the creature is real; the only reality is the devil. Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God... The lust thus aroused envelops the mind and will of man in

deepest darkness. The powers of clear discrimination and of decision are taken from us ... It is here that everything within me rises up against the Word of God.¹

Like a tidal wave, temptation and desire can unexpectedly knock us off our feet. Temptation is clever. It comes in a multitude of forms. Someone has defined lust as “an attitude demanding that a natural instinct serve unnatural desire.” Eating is a natural instinct. But an emotional dependence on food is unnatural. Drinking is a natural instinct. But drinking to deaden the pain is unnatural. Work is a natural instinct. But overworking to prove your self-worth is unnatural. Love is a natural instinct. But a sex life out of control is unnatural. Anger is a natural instinct. But explosive outbursts are unnatural.

Lust can twist anything natural into an unnatural desire. You can be tempted by a shiny new car or a classic old house, an offer of money or a position of importance, great deals on Amazon or a sure bet on a gambling site, an invitation to the in crowd or a relationship outside your marriage. Our culture used to discourage and even prevent temptations such as gambling, drugs, drinking, sex, greed, overeating and spending. Now, it promotes them by setting up the easiest way to access and act out with them through your phones. You don’t have to think. Just click. The recent case against Meta is starting to wake us up to the impact this has on our children and teens but the truth is these things are not good for any of us.

Lust works from the inside. Like a spy behind our battle line, it undermines our resolve and weakens our defense until we cave in. Strangely enough, when we fight it with will power and white-knuckle resistance, lust either becomes stronger until it defeats us or it takes on another form. Those who quit smoking cold turkey usually find that some other desire takes its place. How can we stand firm against the onslaught of an enemy so clever, cunning and seductive?

Joseph shows us the way. When we last saw him, the seventeen-year-old stumbled along tied to the back of a camel. His envious brothers sold him as a slave to a passing caravan headed for Egypt. Arriving in that rich land Joseph is bought by a royal official named Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh’s guard. Yet “the Lord was with Joseph” (Genesis 39:2). The boy is successful in every task assigned him. Potiphar notices the lad is specially gifted. Over the years he is promoted through the ranks of the servants until, in his twenties, Joseph is named head steward over Potiphar’s house. Now he commands all the servants and manages all the finances. The entire estate, its house and fields, are his domain. Consequently, the house of Potiphar receives blessing upon blessing. With Joseph in charge, Potiphar can attend to Pharaoh’s business without a single worry. Potiphar keeps only two things from Joseph: the food on his table and the wife in his bed. Joseph’s power is great but limited. There are lines he dares not cross.

This is the first thing to notice about temptation: Watch out for Success. We are vulnerable not only when we fail but also when all is well. Success and Power are powerful drugs. Ego convinces us we deserve whatever we can get. With nearly all Potiphar’s house in his grasp, it would be so easy for Joseph to reach for what remains.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Temptation (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Collier Books, 1953), 116-117.

In 1492, the year Columbus sailed to America, Rodrigo Borgia was elected Pope Alexander VI. Though supposedly Christ's representative on earth, he was no different than any worldly prince. He bought the election with bribes, lived in luxurious palaces, placed his own family in all the high offices of church and state and made deals with the surrounding kings. Supposedly celibate, Pope Alexander VI had numerous illegitimate children by several married women. The sixty-one-year-old Pontiff openly flaunted his current mistress, a girl in her teens. All this was common practice for church leaders of that day. It's no wonder that twenty-five years later, Martin Luther began the Reformation. Let's be clear: Catholics are no worse than Protestants. All of us must be on our guard against temptation, especially when things are going well.

Joseph, however, knew how to handle success. And he did so by drawing the line and staying well behind it. When Potiphar's wife saw that Joseph was a handsome, well-built man, she invited him to her bed. The attraction was predictable. Potiphar, who was constantly away on business, neglected his wife. Moreover, she, like Joseph, was considered a possession of the Master. The two of them would have much in common and perhaps a friendship developed between them. It takes very little imagination to see that resentment toward Potiphar, mixed with attraction to Joseph, could lead to this seductive scene. All that was needed was the opportunity of a secret rendezvous.

Yet when she propositioned Joseph, he drew the line and stayed behind it.
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? Genesis 39:9

We are only tempted by what is off limits. Joseph knows his master's wife is on the other side of the line, and he refuses to cross it. To avoid a fall, we must clearly draw the line and then stay ten steps from it. It's dangerous to dance on the edge thinking we can resist.

Temptation requires three things: Inner Craving, Outer Trigger and Secrecy. Without the Inner Craving, a person will simply pass the offer by. It presents no problem. The Outer Triggers scratches the itch of the Inner Craving. It promises something unreal and unnatural even though it is very powerful. The Secrecy allows it to happen and promises the lie that no one will know or find out. In this scene, the Outer Trigger is the offer from Potiphar's wife. The Secrecy is the empty house. Temptation is also a process. Little by little, through small compromises and rationalizations, we are drawn to the brink until it's nearly impossible to stop. Potiphar's wife keeps enticing Joseph. Will it trigger the Inner Craving in Joseph?

Thankfully, no. How? He is loyal to his master and, even more, faithful to God. "How can I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" Today we tell people to resist temptation because it is bad for their health, they may get a disease, they might be arrested, their marriages and families may break up, they may even die. All those are valid deterrents. But for the Christian, those concerns pale in comparison to the fact that temptation draws us away from God. It's not God who moves, but us. Remember that Bonhoeffer said temptation makes us turn from the Creator and "seek all our joy in the creature. Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God."

Our temptation becomes our petty god. It cuts us off from the strength, the help, the peace, the joy, and the love of the True God. We become progressively obsessed and consumed by our temptation until it eventually kills our relationships, our inner spirits, and even our lives.

Instead of fighting the temptation on our own power, it's best to do what Joseph did: turn it over to God. Why? Because temptation will not stop after one refusal. Potiphar's wife asked him repeatedly, day after day. That's why surrender to God every day, every hour, sometimes every minute is essential. If we fight, it will win. If we take flight, it waits for the next opportunity. But if we surrender it to God, and stay far back from the line, He can overcome it.

The best way to surrender it to God is with the help of other people. Accountability helps us break the power of fantasy and secrecy. This is what the founders of AA discovered many years ago: you can't get well alone. The way to surrender to God is to find a confidential, supportive group of people who are seeking freedom from the same temptations. If you are concerned about what your family members are accessing on their phones, I recommend a Christian app called covenanteyes.com which provides monitoring, accountability and support on all devices. If you are struggling, talk with me, talk with a counselor, talk with a trusted, confidential Christian friend. Don't let shame and guilt silence you and keep you from the help and healing God wants to give you.

One day, when all is silent in the house and all the servants gone, Potiphar's wife grabs Joseph's tunic. He flees into the courtyard of the home, leaving his cloak in her hand. To divert suspicion from herself, her attraction turns to rage. With a piercing scream she accuses the Hebrew of trying to assault her. The other servants, probably jealous at this foreigner's success, turn him over to the master. Amazingly, Potiphar, captain of the guard, does not execute him on the spot. Perhaps he knows about his wife's infidelities. Instead, the young Hebrew is thrown into prison. The end of the story reminds us that resisting temptation does not guarantee everything will turn out fine. But if we stay with God, He promises to stand by us. And as we shall see in the next chapter, it proved to be the right choice for Joseph.

Draw the line, stay ten steps away from it, surrender the desires to God daily, ask others for help. Donald Grey Barnhouse, a famous Presbyterian Pastor in Philadelphia, knew a man who was in an unhealthy relationship with a woman. When he went into the army for two or three years she drifted from one guy to another. The man in the meantime met a Christian woman, fell in love and married her. When he returned home from the army with his bride, his old girlfriend drove by the house one evening. She dropped in to see her old flame and meet his wife. But the wife was not there.

They laughed about old times. Finally, the first girl confessed that she'd never gotten over him. As she moved closer to him on the couch, he noticed old feelings start to stir within. If he simply reached out his hand, she was his.

But there was something much more within him. Glancing over to a picture of his wife, he picked it up and showed it to her. He went on to praise his wife to the skies. In that moment all of the love between him and his wife was greater and more wonderful than ever. He was never more joyful in his life.

His old girlfriend eventually got up to leave. As he helped her on with her coat, she said, “Yes, she must be quite a girl if she can keep you from reaching.” In the rush of desire, God showed him the line. By the grace of God he didn’t cross it.

Where’s your line?