

Integrity

Meant for Good Series Week 2: Genesis 39

9/3/17

Welcome/intro

This is week 2 in a new series of messages called “Meant for Good”—if you’re new, let me get you up to speed

We’re going to look at the crazy life of a guy named Joseph in the Bible—some of the highest highs and lowest lows all wrapped into one life of anyone in the Scriptures

And as we read this story, there’s going to be lots of easily relatable things about it: to start with family drama and dysfunction, lots of it

And last week the story of Joseph’s life kicked off when he’s 17 and the favorite son of his dad

And his older brothers hated him for it so they sold him to slave traders going down to Egypt and told their dad he’d been killed by a ferocious animal

And by the end of that story last week all of us felt much better about our own family dysfunction!

This is just the beginning of this story where we’re going to see two things are true in life:

first, hot mess happens. if we live long enough we’re going to experience pain and difficulty in this life, sometimes that happens TO us, we’re victims, and sometimes we create or generate the mess

secondly, the good news is that no matter how bad the mess, there’s a God who is bigger than the mess who has the power to redeem the mess

And this morning, we’re going to pick up the story where Joseph has been sold off into slavery, by his own brothers, and he’s hundreds of miles from his home

And to this point in the story there’s been zero mention of God whatsoever in the story

And the question to start with today is this:

when life takes an unwanted or unexpected turn and leaves you in a place that you did not want to go

how much permission do you give yourself to do something that you would not have done prior to the disappointment you just experienced?

You lose your job, maybe unfairly, and you explode on Facebook: “I wouldn’t normally post something like this, but given what just happened to me today, I’m just going to go ahead and say everything I’m thinking about my former co-workers and my stupid boss who just fired me!”

Ever do something like that OR see someone else on your newsfeed do something ilke that? Never really ends well, does it? All it does is complicate a hard situation with a bad decision.

If you're a Jesus person here, this question can take on a spiritual dimension: "If God didn't prevent this terrible thing from happening, then maybe I don't need to do life his way any more."

If I'm going to be left here and stranded here and abandoned by God, maybe I should just show him by drinking way too much or go back to that old drug habit that I kicked
maybe I should just go ahead and indulge rather than fight back the temptation to look at that web site

If God's going to forget about me, then maybe I should just say "forget him and forget about doing things his way. This hasn't gotten me anywhere!"

Ever hear someone say something like this, ever think something like this yourself?

This kind of internal dialogue and decision-making is happening all the time

This morning, we're going to start by finding Joseph in a place that he does not want to go, sold into slavery by his brothers, God's done absolutely nothing to stop this chain of events

And we're going to see how and why Joseph chooses to live a life of integrity when he has plenty of reasons not to do so

And in the process, you and I are going to be challenged to choose integrity, even though we might have our own reasons to not do so

And even though the reality is that choosing integrity might not immediately lead to the blessings and benefits that we want

Bible/No Bible: 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. ²The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.

Now let's pause here because this story gathers together a couple of things in these sentences that we don't think should go together but here we see that they do.

The first ones are some of the things that we like: ***the Lord was with Joseph*** AND ***he prospered***

We like that. But then there are these OTHER elements to this story that we think shouldn't and couldn't co-exist alongside this reality:

Taken to Egypt and ***in the house of his Egyptian master***

If the Lord was with Joseph and wanted to make him to prosper, wanted to bless him
it would seem that God WOULDN'T have let him be taken down to Egypt and that he
WOULDN'T be a slave to an Egyptian master!

Joseph is miserable! He doesn't want to be in Egypt, he doesn't want to be a slave, nothing
about his setting or his context is to his liking or where he would want to be

AND YET we find that the Lord is WITH him and that the Lord is blessing him, prospering him,
causing him to flourish in a context and a situation that he did not like and would not have
chosen for himself

So here we have to wrestle with these two realities that we think are mutually exclusive but
unfortunately are not:

***The Lord's with-ness and our experience of misery are not mutually exclusive; blessing
and pain are not mutually exclusive***

Blessing and misery can and sometimes do co-exist at the same time in the same life

This does not mean that we shouldn't make changes where we can to a miserable situation.

By all means, if you're struggling in a miserable situation at work or in your family life,
let's go to work to make changes that will make the situation a little bit better!

But it does mean that God being with us and us being in a miserable situation are not mutually
exclusive

And in fact we often meet God in more profound ways when we're living in slavery in
Egypt than when we're fat and happy in the home that we'd prefer, don't we?

We often meet God and experience God in more profound ways when we're in situations that
we would not have chosen for ourselves than when we're in the situations of our own choosing
and our own liking

Joseph here as a 17-year-old is having a profound experience of God and it's happening not in
his own home while living in his father's household

but after being shipped off as a slave in Egypt in someone else's household

The text goes on to describe how complete and wonderful God's blessing and how palpable his
presence was:

***³ When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in
everything he did, ⁴ 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.***

***⁵ 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. ⁶ So Potiphar left***

everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

So here we get this wonderful story of Joseph really coming into his own. If this was describing your 17 or 18 year old son, you'd be super-proud of this part of the story!

Way to go, little guy!

Joseph is in a miserable place, but he's found his footing and God's with him and God's blessing the house and the crops out in the field

And Potiphar is seeing how the hand of God is on this guy and give him credit, he gives him promotion after promotion until finally Joseph is running pretty much the whole show!

But the story takes another twist, another person is about to betray him, piling on and adding insult to injury on what's already happened with his brothers.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

Here we come to a point in the story where Joseph is going to get tested at an even deeper and more significant level--As if he hasn't already suffered enough!

Joseph is experiencing an integrity check right here, right now, in this moment with this invitation

And what he's experiencing is something that we see throughout the Scriptures almost from the very first page of the Scriptures, let's call it the **integrity cycle**

And here's how it plays out:

It starts at the **top of the circle** with **God's Presence**. God is **with** Joseph here in Egypt, that phrase will get repeated several times in this passage

We talked a couple of weeks ago about how God is a blessing-biased God and he invites us to participate in his economy of blessing.

We experience **Blessings**.

When God is present, he loves to pour out blessings on his people in order that they might be a blessing to other people: God to Joseph to Potiphar

those blessings might be material like money or great jobs or a great boss or a great place to live or they might be relational blessings or they might be spiritual blessings or emotional blessings

God is the generous source of all good gifts, if we hang out with God long enough and engage with his presence in our lives, he is good to share his good gifts with us

But at some point as we're experiencing those blessings, we will hit **Challenge or Temptation**

At some point we will hit some sort of a challenge or temptation in our lives that will invite us AWAY from doing life God's way
and instead promise quicker and easier rewards or a different set of rewards if we go in a different direction

One of the ways we talk about and define temptation around here from a biblical point of view is "**the promise or lie that life apart from God will be qualitatively better than life with God.**"

The very first temptation recorded in the Bible was that God was holding out on human beings and we'd be better off grasping for something rather than trusting God to give us what is good

Temptation is merely a bill of goods that's attempting to sell the lie that life apart from God will be easier, happier, better than life with God

The road forks here in this integrity cycle—we can either act with **Integrity** or what the Scriptures call (**Obedience**)

Or we choose to do what the Scriptures call **Sin**.

We're going to talk about integrity here in a minute but if temptation is a bundle of promises and lies that life apart from God will make us happier and our lives qualitatively better

Sin, then, is **acting in faith on those lies**. All of us are living our lives based on our faith on some set of promises that some actions will get us the life we want

Technically, there's no such thing as people who have faith and people who don't have faith.

All of us put our faith in some set of behaviors or actions believing that those behaviors and actions will get us something we think we want

If you're here this morning and you think this whole God thing is totally not even a real thing, that doesn't mean you're not a person of faith.

It just means that you've decided to put your faith in something else to make you happy and to help you to live the life you want to live:

money, your spouse, your friendships, your job, your social status, your degrees, your John Deere tractor, your understanding of science or psychology or whatever

And all I'm suggesting here is that if there's this faith thing at work in all of us, that all of us are essentially wired up to live lives of faith

then maybe there's a God who put that wiring inside of us so that we might go looking for him

and maybe the only way that faith current that's running through each of us finds its proper object is if it finally once and for all attaches itself to the God who put it there in the first place

After much weeping and gnashing of teeth, Joseph has had this incredible experience of God's presence and God's blessing

and now, just like all of us, he's facing a fork in the road at challenge and a temptation-- let's see what he does next:

⁸ 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. ⁹ 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?" ¹⁰ And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

[BACK TO INTEGRITY CYCLE IMAGE]

Joseph stares down this fork in the road, where temptation or challenge offers him a cheap off-ramp to a different set of outcomes through a bundle of lies

And he chooses instead the path of integrity and obedience

And this line that he speaks is so powerful and helpful for you and for me as we fight our own battles against temptation and the challenges that we'll all face:

How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?

Notice that David doesn't say "how could I do such a wicked thing and sin against Potiphar." I mean, he's just gone on and on about how great Potiphar has been to him and how much he's trusted him

But instead he says, "how could I sin against God"

And here's why:

if you base your integrity decisions on whether or not the people around you are performing in such a way as to DESERVE for you to treat them with integrity, you will always eventually fail the integrity test [REPEAT]

If Joseph's had based his response to Potiphar's wife based on how Potiphar treated Joseph, what happens on the day when Potiphar is grumpy and says something mean to Joseph?

How reliable will Joseph's resolve to be faithful and live with integrity be if he bases his commitment to that integrity on how much someone else deserves it?

Not at all

If you decide to be faithful to your spouse for as long as your spouse deserves your faithfulness, how long will your faithfulness last? About two weeks into your marriage, if you're lucky

If we're going to live lives of integrity, the source or reference point for that integrity has to be rooted in something much more substantial than anyone else's performance or whether or not they deserve it

So Joseph has chosen a different reference point for his decision to live with integrity
and it has only a little bit to do with Potiphar and a whole lot to do with someone much, much more important and less flaky than any human being

How can I do such a wicked thing and sin against GOD?

His primary frame of reference is God—the God who is good and who is almighty and who is powerful and who is over his life, even over his life while he's in slavery in Egypt

And so he chooses to walk in obedience and with integrity, which keeps him IN the integrity cycle

Rather than taking the off-ramp OUT of the integrity cycle into sin

This is not easy, is it? This whole living with integrity thing. Some of us want to be people of integrity, that really matters to us

Others of us, we don't care all that much about it

But here's the thing, whether you want to do the work to cultivate and live a life of integrity or not, you want to marry someone who does

You want to go into business with someone who does. You want your neighbor to. You want your boss to. You want your company treat you with it, in spite of all the temptations that they have coming their way to treat you otherwise.

We want our politicians to have integrity

You want your kids to marry someone who does

Integrity, along with humility, is one of those character traits that we so admire and want in everyone else around us but we don't want to have to do the work to cultivate it in ourselves

This morning, as we look at Joseph, there's an invitation and a challenge to each of us to be willing to develop this level of intentional, God-honoring and people-honoring character in our lives

And one of the primary ways that gets forged is by making the hard decision in the face of temptation and lies to do the right thing

And where we get the resources to do that over and over and over again is by building our character and integrity around God, even if and when you're a slave in Egypt and things haven't exactly turned out the way that you wanted them to

If you're here this morning and you're at the fork in the road called Temptation or Challenge, I want to invite you to see through the lies of false promises

I'm pleading with you and I've been praying this week that you'll have the wisdom to see through those lies—don't be duped by the empty and false promises of sin!

We cannot forge great character by taking the off-ramp of sin. And all temptation is a bundle of lies that you'll be happier and better off without God which categorically is not true

GOD is the source of all happiness—it was his idea! It's his property! We cannot finally be fully happy apart from him.

Joseph is fighting against temptation day after day, making the harder, better decision over and over again, here's what it gets him:

¹¹ One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. ¹² 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.

¹³ When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁶ She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷ Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. ¹⁸ But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁹ When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. ²⁰ Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.

The famous and somewhat cynical author Oscar Wilde is famous for having said, "**No good deed goes unpunished**" or as this clever graphic puts it: "**Saved a turtle from the highway today. Peed on my leg as I was setting him down in safety**"

Joseph does the right thing, and where does it land him? IN JAIL!

Here's the step in this integrity cycle that can be so very hard, can't it? [**back to image**]

The **Results?** Are not always immediately great when you act with integrity. The outcome, doesn't always go the way that you want it to

What we want from integrity is this: **a short-cut to more blessing**—this is a **myth** and it gets perpetuated in Christian circles sometimes through cute Christian trinkets or memes or knick-knacks

But here's the reality: if you want cheap and easy blessing, don't bother with integrity. That's not the path to getting there.

Sometimes doing the right thing doesn't always get you the outcome or results initially that feel particularly warm and fuzzy

And part of the challenge of this whole integrity cycle experience is that sometimes we need to do the right thing, not sin against God

But doing that right thing means we are exposed to pain or heartache or suffering—the Bible and all of history is full of people who make difficult decisions for integrity before God who suffer for it

This is not the easier path. It is the better path. Those are two very different things

So Joseph does the right thing and he ends up in jail as a result. And when this kind of thing happens to us, it can make us ask a very simple and difficult question: "Is integrity worth it?"

Is integrity worth it when the results are totally mixed and there's plenty of evidence that people who have made integrity-laden decisions have suffered or struggled as a result?

Is integrity worth it when sometimes you know that if you chose differently you might be spared pain or difficulty? Is integrity worth it when the immediate results have a question mark behind it?

Here's how the Joseph story closes:

But while Joseph was there in the prison, ²¹ the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. ²² 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. ²³ 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.

Here at the end of this story, we end where we started this section of Joseph's story: **the Lord was with him, the Lord was with him, and he gave him success in whatever he did**

[Back to the integrity cycle image]

Do you know why integrity is worth it, even if the immediate results have a giant question mark behind them?

Because it positions us to remain in God's presence. And it positions us to remain in the path of his work and his blessing

Integrity in the face of challenges and temptations is worth it because sin always results in **Separation** and broken relationship with God.

Sin always breaks relationship—if you lie to your spouse, you’re breaking relationship, whether they know about it or not

Sin always breaks relationship somewhere, always disconnects us from a holy and perfect God and always leads us outside the path of his presence and the blessings he might give to us, \ which aren’t always material, aren’t always like Joseph’s blessings

Some of the most joyful and most peaceful people I know are the ones who have been the most poor.

And some of the most miserable and stressed and selfish and shallow and petty people I’ve met have been very well off

It turns out that finances aren’t the only way that God can bless us that matter—it turns out just like in marriage, the relationship is the gift, the person is the blessing, that’s the best thing that your spouse can give you: him or herself

And it’s the best thing that God can give us, too. Not stuff, Himself.

Ultimately it is worth it to live with integrity because it keeps us in relationship with God, it keeps us positioned with God, able to be in his presence and cultivate a relationship with him, which is the greatest gift he can give

And so this morning, **our Take-WITH:**

What’s your relationship like with the integrity cycle?

Take it from the top: **PRESENCE (circle)** If you’re not a Jesus-follower, the invitation this morning is to **step in** to a relationship with the God of the universe, to know his love and to know his grace and mercy

and to know that you are loved, even if you end up in places you’d rather not go and even if life doesn’t turn out exactly as you would like for it to

If you’re a Jesus follower and you know you’re in God’s presence, know he’s with you, but you’re not seeing much of the blessings, how are you doing with the **waiting?**

If you’re experiencing the **blessings (circle)**, how are you doing at learning the crucial discipline of **thanksgiving?**

The times when so many of us struggle to remain faithful to God aren’t the hard times, it’s the times when life is great and we get busy and distracted and lose focus on the God who is over those blessings

If you’re here this morning and you’re at the spot of being **challenged or tempted (circle)**, this morning hear this word: **temptation is a lie** that life apart from God is better than life with God

Don’t believe that lie. Don’t believe it. Don’t buy it. It’s not true.

And if you've already cycled out of this picture, if you've off-ramped into **sin** and you're here knowing that you know you've missed the boat, dropped the ball, made some mistakes.

Hear this news: it may be true that you have blown it, fallen for the lies, maybe many times over

But what Jesus has done is lay down his life to offer **forgiveness to** you of all your sins so that you might be ushered back into the top of this cycle all over again.

We're going to celebrate that in a moment as we take communion

And finally, if you're in a place where you made the hard decision to walk and live with integrity and you feel like all you've gotten in response is a slap in the face

the **results** in the short-term have been nothing but miserable and difficult

Are you willing this morning to put a **stake back in the ground** and say that you will be a man or woman of integrity regardless, because it keeps you in the place of connection with God

Integrity positions us to remain in the presence of God, this is the best good he could give us and along with him he very graciously gives us many other blessings as well

This morning as we look at this cycle, the reality is that every single one of us has, at some point or another, off-ramped out of this cycle into sin. The reality is we don't always choose to do the harder, better thing, do we?

And the result is that we've landed in a broken relationship with the God of the universe, separated from God and apart from his blessings by the choices we've made

And so what we celebrate this morning is that God sent his Son to earth in part to be the only one who never once broke this cycle, the one who never once off-ramped into sin, never once bought the lie that life apart from his Father was better than life with his Father

He walked this path of integrity all the way up to and including to the place of his execution. His cycle of integrity led him to his own death

And as he sees that coming, just up on the horizon, he has a last meal with his closest friends. And he tells them what's about to happen: this bread is my body, this cup, is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins

For every time we've believed the lie that life apart from God is better than life with God, for all the times that we've chosen to break relationship and step out of the presence of God

God himself has chosen to forgive it, at great cost to himself

[COMMUNION TRANSITION]