

JOSEPH: Living with Integrity - PART 4

The Cost of Integrity

By: Dr. Derek Morris

Preaching passage:	Genesis 39:1-20
Subject:	What happened to Joseph when he chose to live a life of integrity in Potiphar's house?
Complement:	Even though he was falsely accused of dishonorable behavior by Potiphar's wife, he was still honored by Potiphar and most of all by God.
Exegetical idea:	When Joseph chose to live a life of integrity in Potiphar's house, he was honored by Potiphar and most of all by God even though he was falsely accused of dishonorable behavior by Potiphar's wife.
Homiletical idea:	Choose to live a life of integrity, no matter what the cost.
Purpose:	To encourage my hearers to live a life of integrity even though not everyone agrees with them, knowing that God will honor them and that their lives will be a difference in the world.

We are not told how many weeks it took for the Ishmaelite traders to travel south from Dothan to Egypt, but we do know that after about one week of being dragged behind a camel Joseph would have passed painfully close to his family's encampment in Hebron. Just over the hills to the east, his younger brother Benjamin was running around the family tents. His aged father Jacob was probably wondering how many more days it would be until his favored son Joseph returned. Joseph was so near and yet so far. I have no doubt that there were times when Joseph had to wipe his eyes with his forearm because he was blinded by his tears.

Somewhere between Dothan and Egypt, Joseph had a life-defining choice to make. Would he believe the truth that no matter how troubled your past, no matter how turbulent your present, that God has a good plan for your future? Would he deal decisively with the past, dare to live purposefully in the present and plan courageously for the future? Would he choose to live a life of integrity, a life that honored God, no matter what the cost? The answer is found in Genesis chapter 39.

Let's start reading Genesis 39:1. "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.” We will learn that Potiphar was an honorable man, a man of integrity, who held an important position in Pharaoh’s court. Potiphar apparently noticed something special about this young Hebrew. Joseph wasn’t whimpering in the corner. Joseph wasn’t cursing and fighting. Joseph stood calmly with the confident assurance that the God of his forefathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob was with him.

Scripture records in Genesis 39:2, “The Lord was with Joseph.” That is a phrase that will be repeated in this story. “The Lord was with Joseph, and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.” Don’t miss that. Joseph quickly earned the trust of his Egyptian master, Potiphar. How did Joseph do that? By dealing decisively with his past, and living purposefully in the present; by living a life of integrity. Not only did Potiphar allow Joseph to live in his own house, but Potiphar trusted Joseph. It would have been customary to castrate any slave who had direct access to the master’s family but Joseph conducted himself with such integrity that Potiphar honored him by not making him a eunuch even though Joseph was privileged to live in his master’s house.

Genesis 39:3-4 “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.” Potiphar realized that Joseph was the recipient of supernatural blessings. Potiphar was almost certainly a polytheist. The Egyptians believed that there were many gods, including the Pharaoh himself, and they prayed to these gods for temporal blessings. It was clear to Potiphar that Joseph was blessed by his God, Yahweh. Now Joseph was not only living in the master’s house, but he was elevated to the position of Potiphar’s personal attendant. Why? Because Potiphar noticed that Joseph was a man of integrity. I’m sure that Joseph’s promotion didn’t make him popular with the other slaves.

I have no doubt that there was jealousy and rivalry. We're not told what happened to Potiphar's previous personal attendant. Did he die? If so, other slaves were hoping for that promotion. Was he executed or demoted? If so, he would certainly have resented Joseph for taking his place. And Joseph was always so "good". Joseph refused to steal from his master's household like some of the other slaves. Joseph worked diligently, even when his master wasn't looking. Joseph chose to live a life of integrity, whether anyone was looking or not. He chose a life of integrity, no matter what the cost.

After Potiphar promoted Joseph to the position of his personal attendant, Potiphar noticed that his household was blessed. Genesis 39:5 "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. So he left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate." Potiphar was a wise man. He saw that the blessings of Joseph's God rested upon the entire household and so Potiphar left everything in Joseph's care. Potiphar trusted Joseph completely because Potiphar knew that Joseph was a person of integrity. Let me pause for a moment to say that we need more men and women of integrity like Joseph today. Don't we? Some of you who are employers, some of you who are managers, supervisors, you would love to hire people of integrity like Joseph, wouldn't you? Then let's be that kind of person ourselves. Let's live a life of integrity, no matter what the cost, and let's see the supernatural blessings of God come down. Wouldn't it be a wonderful testimony if your employer, your boss, came to you and said, "My company is blessed because you work here! The God that you serve is blessing me because of you!" That was the testimony of Potiphar.

At this point, everything seemed to be going well for Joseph, and then he came face to face with

a major challenge. Her name? Mrs. Potiphar. Genesis 39:6. “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!’” There was nothing discreet or timid about this woman. This was a blatant case of sexual harassment. But slaves had no rights. They were considered personal property. And Potiphar’s wife wanted access to her personal property. I am not naive enough to believe that this was her first act of infidelity. There were other slaves in the household and other men in the neighborhood, but now her dishonorable intentions were directed toward Joseph.

This was a defining moment for Joseph. How would he respond? Potiphar’s wife had done everything within her power to make this moment as seductive as possible: her scanty attire, her enticing perfume. How old was Joseph at this time in his life story? In his mid-twenties. In his prime. And he not only had to deal with the sexual temptation; he also had to deal with the temptation to use the situation for his own benefit. Potiphar’s wife might hold the key to his freedom. If ever there was a time to base his decision on principle, rather than the emotions of the moment, it was now! Scripture gives this testimony: “But he refused.” Then he gave this explanation in his defense, recorded in Genesis 39:8-9 “‘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?’”

What a courageous response; and quite amazing when you think about Joseph’s dysfunctional family! His father Jacob slept with four women. His brother Reuben slept with Bilhah, his brother’s mother. His brother Judah slept with his widowed daughter-in-law, though when he was caught he protested that he didn’t know who she was. He thought that she was a prostitute. What a messy family! Now Joseph was facing an intense sexual temptation, but he didn’t make any

excuses. You know, the kind of excuses that people often make: “It’s my dad’s fault that I’m this way.” Or “it’s my brother’s fault that I’m this way.” No, Joseph set clear boundaries in terms of his moral conduct. He refused the bold proposition of his master’s wife.

You would think that after this clear refusal that Potiphar’s wife would have left Joseph alone. Wouldn’t you? But we read in Genesis 39:10 that she continued her sexual harassment. “And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be alone with her.” This woman was a real problem. She was constantly stalking him, trying to lure him. Joseph is wise enough to stay out of her way and especially to avoid being alone with her.

But Potiphar’s wife made a plan. Genesis 39:11-12 “One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants were inside.” I imagine that Potiphar’s wife had intentionally sent the other servants off on a variety of errands. This was no accident. Having created this opportunity, Potiphar’s wife caught Joseph by his cloak and said, ‘Come to bed with me!’ Notice that she is even more aggressive than before. Having failed to talk Joseph into going to bed with her, she now grabs his cloak.

How do you deal with someone like that? If you are an employee, you can quit your job or file a sexual harassment lawsuit. If it’s someone you’re dating, you can choose to walk away and not look back. I know. People today would call you crazy. Some are out looking for people like Potiphar’s wife to go to bed with them. But if you’re dating someone who is willing to sleep with someone who isn’t their spouse, do you really want that pattern to continue after you’re married? You can choose to walk away and not look back.

But Joseph didn’t have any of those options. Joseph was a slave. Yes, he was his master’s personal attendant, in charge of everything that his master owned, but he was still a slave. So when Potiphar’s wife began to forcefully undress him, Joseph had only one option left. He couldn’t

command her to stop. He couldn't call the police. He couldn't quit his job and look for a more honorable employer. Scripture records that Joseph did the only thing that he could do: "he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house."

What happens next shows the despicable character of this woman? She is not only promiscuous. She is a liar and a mean-spirited loser. I'm sorry. I know that sounds harsh, but I genuinely feel sorry for Potiphar, having to live with this woman. We read in Genesis 39:13-15 "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.'"

I can imagine some of the servants looking at each other, rolling their eyes and shaking their heads. They did not dare to express their thoughts, but they knew Joseph's integrity and they also knew the reputation of their master's wife. But I'm also sure that some of those servants were probably happy to hear a bad report about Joseph, and the gossip spread like wildfire.

Genesis 39:16 "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.'"

The next verse is an interesting one. Genesis 39:19 "When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, 'This is how your slave treated me,' he burned with anger." A casual reading of this passage might lead you to conclude that Potiphar burned with anger toward Joseph. It is certainly possible that this was his initial reaction, though I doubt it. But even if Potiphar's immediate reaction was to be angry with Joseph, his attitude soon changed. Potiphar thought about his trusted slave Joseph. He reflected on Joseph's life of integrity. Even if Potiphar's first reaction

was to burn with anger toward Joseph, his attitude soon changed. I want to suggest that Potiphar burned with anger not towards Joseph but toward his promiscuous wife who had shamed his family name by trying to seduce their trusted slave Joseph.

You say, “Pastor Derek, how do you come to that conclusion?” Well, look with me at the next verse in Genesis 39. Genesis 39:20 “Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.” There is a great deal of information contained in that one sentence; clear evidence that Potiphar continued to honor Joseph for being a man of integrity. In fact, I'm convinced that Potiphar viewed Joseph more like a son than a slave.

But you say, “Joseph ended up in prison! Isn't that proof that Potiphar thought Joseph was guilty?” Let me ask you a question. What punishment would you have expected if Potiphar believed that Joseph had tried to assault his wife? Instant death! What about a second chance? No way. If Potiphar truly believed that Joseph had assaulted his wife, Joseph would have faced immediate execution. No trial. No delay. Instant death! And if, for some strange reason, Potiphar had allowed this guilty slave to live, perhaps because Joseph's God had blessed the household so much, you can be certain that a beaten and bruised Joseph would have joined the ranks of the eunuchs. Wouldn't you agree? But Potiphar does neither. He doesn't execute Joseph, and he doesn't even castrate him. What does that tell you? Potiphar didn't believe his wife's lies. He wasn't angry with Joseph. He was angry with her.

If you're not sure if you agree with me yet, look a little more closely at Genesis 39:20. Notice that Joseph isn't bound and dragged off to the prison by Potiphar's bodyguards. What does the text tell us? Joseph's master took him and put him in the prison. You have to wonder what conversation occurred between Potiphar and Joseph as they walked out of Potiphar's house. Do you imagine Joseph complaining, whining? No. He has learned that there is a time to be silent. He

didn't need to accuse Potiphar's wife. She had already condemned herself. Some other slave might have been guilty of such a crime, but not Joseph.

Potiphar "took" Joseph to the prison, and notice that it wasn't just any prison. What does the text tell us? It was the place where the king's prisoners were kept. I know - it was still a prison. Joseph didn't want to be there. But we know that even today there are white collar prisons where prisoners are treated quite hospitably and there are stinking dungeons where people are left to rot. Potiphar didn't have Joseph dragged off to a stinking dungeon. He took him to an upscale prison where the king's prisoners were kept. Why? Because Potiphar believed that Joseph was innocent. Potiphar knew that Joseph was a man of integrity. Potiphar wasn't angry with Joseph. He was angry with his own wife, and maybe angry with himself that he hadn't protected Joseph from his wayward wife.

But you say, "Why didn't Potiphar just let Joseph go?" I don't have an answer to that question. Maybe that would have been too great of a public humiliation for his wife. Perhaps Potiphar chose to rebuke his wife privately without humiliating her publicly.

So what can we learn from this chapter in Joseph's life? Several lessons. When you choose to live a life of integrity, you will be blessed. When you live a life of integrity, others around you will be blessed. But you also need to realize that not everyone will love you for choosing to live a life of integrity. In fact, some people will intentionally try to seduce you. Some people will intentionally try to cause you to sin. Some people will despise you. Some people will hate you. When you choose to live a life of integrity there is a cost that you will have to pay. But Jesus reminds us that whatever the price we have to pay, we are also blessed when we suffer for living a life of integrity. We can read the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:11-12. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice

and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Joseph chose to live a life of integrity, no matter what the cost. And in this, Joseph was a type of the Messiah who would come. Joseph was a forerunner of the Deliverer, the Savior. Jesus also chose to live a life of integrity, no matter what the cost. And Jesus says to you and He says to me, “Follow Me.” Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

There may be some drastic changes that you need to make in your life as a result of this message today. There may be some things that you need to throw away. There may be some places that you need to stop going, some relationships that need to end. There may be some things that you need to start doing, not to try to earn God’s favor, but because you are a redeemed child of the King. I pray that you will be inspired and challenged today by the witness of Joseph.

Choose to live a life of integrity, no matter what the cost.