

JOSEPH: Living with Integrity - PART 3

How Can I Be free?

By: Dr. Derek Morris

Preaching passage:	Genesis 37:12-35
Subject:	How Joseph's brothers reacted when he came to meet them in Dothan.
Complement:	They were filled with anger; they threw him into a pit and then sold him as a slave to Midianite traders.
Exegetical idea:	When Joseph came to meet his brothers in Dothan, they were filled with anger, threw him into a pit and then sold him as a slave to Midianite traders.
Homiletical idea:	You don't have to live a life filled with regret!
Purpose:	To encourage my hearers that they don't have to live a life filled with regret but they can find freedom by dealing decisively with the past, living purposefully in the present and planning courageously for the future.

When Joseph finally located his brothers on the outskirts of Dothan, he was probably happy to see them. But Joseph's brothers were not happy to see him. Joseph had been sent by his father to bring supplies to his 10 older brothers who were grazing the flocks several days journey north of their family's encampment. We can read the story in Genesis 37:18-20. "But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. 'Here comes that dreamer!' they said to each other. 'Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.'"

Joseph's oldest half brother, Reuben tried to save Joseph's life. But instead of rebuking his brothers for their violent intentions and sending Joseph back home in safety, Reuben made this suggestion, recorded in Genesis 37:21. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him." The inspired record tells us that Reuben's secret intention was to rescue Joseph at a later time and send him

home to their father. “So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it.”

Apparently, as Joseph’s brothers sat down to eat their meal, Reuben decided to take a walk. He had wanted to speak in Joseph’s defense but he had remained silent. While Reuben was gone, a caravan of Ishmaelite traders passed by. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. One of the other sons of Leah, Judah, said to his brothers, recorded in Genesis 27:26, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.”

That’s a strange logic, isn’t it? If he’s your brother, your own flesh and blood, a more logical response would be not to sell him into slavery! Am I right? But eight of Joseph’s half brothers agreed with Judah. “So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.”

Surely somewhere during that terrible ordeal, Joseph might have asked himself the question which is the title of our message today, “How can I be free?” “How can I get out of this pit?” And after he was sold to the Midianite traders, who were actually also his relatives, descendants of his great uncle Ishmael, I’m sure that he also might have asked the question, “How can I be free?” I doubt if his distant relatives offered him a seat on one of their camels. He was probably dragged behind a camel, his wrists bound and a rope around his neck. Wouldn’t you ask the question, “How can I be free?”

But I don't want to focus primarily on Joseph today. I want to focus on Joseph's brothers and then I want to focus on you and me. I'm sure that when Reuben returned and learned that his brothers had sold Joseph into slavery, big brother Reuben was filled with regret. In fact, Scripture tells us so, in Genesis 37:29-30. "When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes." Perhaps at first he thought that his brothers had killed Joseph. Filled with regret, Reuben went back to his brothers and said, "The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?" Why was he silent when he should have spoken up in Joseph's defense? After all, he was the oldest son. He was responsible for the well being of his younger brothers. And I also have no doubt that once the intense emotions of the evening wore off, Joseph's other brothers were also filled with regret. What would happen to their brother when he arrived at the slave market in Egypt? Would he even survive the brutal treatment that he might expect from an Egyptian taskmaster?

Joseph's brothers undoubtedly also regretted the impact that their impulsive behavior would have on their father Jacob and on their youngest half brother Benjamin. Young Benjamin had already lost his mother and now he had lost his brother Joseph. Scripture records that Joseph's brothers decided to make a plan of deceit. Genesis 37:31-35. "Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, 'We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe.' He recognized it and said, 'It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.' Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. 'No,' he said, 'in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son.' So his father wept for him."

I am absolutely certain that Joseph's older brothers were filled with regret as they thought about their brother's uncertain future and as they witnessed their father's grief. They probably also asked the question, "How can I be free?" Not free from a pit, or free from slavery, but free from a lifetime of regret.

Have you ever done something that you should not have done, and really regretted it? Or not done something that you should have done and really regretted it? Have you ever been overwhelmed with feelings of regret? Then maybe you have also asked the question, "How can I be free?"

I want to share some very practical counsel with you today as we talk about how we can be free from regret; how we can avoid a lifetime of regret. We want to live with integrity. We want to honor God in our speech and in our actions, but we have all done things and said things that we regret. So how can we avoid a lifetime of regret? I want to share three strategies with you today, and if you would like to take notes, you'll find a sermon outline sheet in your bulletin.

Strategy #1: Deal decisively with your past.

There was nothing that Joseph's brothers could do to change the past. Joseph was gone. They could not bring him back. They could not undo the wrong that they had done. So what could they do, and what can we do when we find ourselves in a place of regret? We can deal decisively with our past. First, ask for forgiveness. If you sinned against God, ask God to forgive you. I'm so thankful for the promise of God's Word found in 1 John 1:9! "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." If you have wronged people, where possible, ask those wronged to forgive you. That isn't always possible. Joseph was gone. His brothers could not ask him to forgive

them at this point in their lives. You may have done something that you regret and you don't even know where the person is that you wronged. But where possible, ask that person to forgive you. Deal decisively with your past. Ask for forgiveness, from God and from those that you have wronged. Second, learn from your mistakes. Why did you end up in the compromising situation? What support would have helped you to live with integrity? How can you avoid repeating the same mistake? Learn from your mistakes. And thirdly, choose not to focus on past mistakes. Perhaps you were expecting me to say, "Forget the past!" I'm not sure that it's possible to forget the past, but you can choose not to focus on past mistakes. One of my favorite words of counsel from the Bible is found in Phil 4:8. I'm quoting from the NKJV."....." That's good counsel! And if it's true, then it is also true that you should not focus on past mistakes.

So what's the first strategy for avoiding a lifetime of regret? Deal decisively with the past. Second, ask for forgiveness, from God and from those you have wronged. Finally, learn from your mistakes, and choose not to focus on past mistakes.

Strategy #2 There's a second strategy for avoiding a lifetime of regret. Not only should you deal decisively with the past, but secondly, live purposefully in the present. You don't want to keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. So what does it mean to live purposefully in the present? Let me offer three practical suggestions. First, make decisions based on principle, not emotions. Emotions can change from moment to moment. When Joseph's brothers were filled with rage, they were out of control. They were ready to tear Joseph limb from limb. Selling their brother to Midianite traders seemed like a good option to them; after all he was their flesh and blood. That was a much better option than killing him wasn't it?

Actually, both of those options were unacceptable. If they had made their decision based on principle rather than emotion, they would have chosen option #3 - send Joseph home and take some time out to cool down. It is always dangerous to make impulsive decisions based on the emotion of the moment. If you are going to live with integrity, if you are going to live without regret, make decisions based on principle, not emotions. We find many principles to live by in the Word of God. We discussed one such principle in part 2 of this series on Joseph: that there is a time to be silent and a time to speak. You can find hundreds of principles in the Word of God that will help you to live with integrity, to live a life without regret. I've had several opportunities in the past few days to follow that principle of truth! But you don't need to know hundreds of principles of truth in order to live with integrity, to live without regret. There are just two foundational principles for life. Do you know what they are? Jesus tells us that there are just two foundational principles for life. Only Matthew records these words of Jesus, and I'm thankful to him for that! Matthew 22:37-39 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."

Let these two foundational principles be the basis of your decision making. Does this action, do these words, demonstrate a love for God and a love for people? If you want to live a life free from regret, you need not only to deal decisively with the past, but also live purposefully in the present. Make decisions based on principle, not emotions.

But living purposefully in the present involves more than just making decisions based on principle. It also involves building on past successes. Don't sit around making excuses. Don't focus on what you can't do, what you can't accomplish. Build on past successes. Have you

noticed times in your life when you followed God's leading and you experienced great successes? Build on those past successes. Perhaps someone asked you to teach a Bible lesson for the children, and you really enjoyed it. People told you that you really connected with the kids! Build on that success. Or maybe that didn't work out for you, but someone asked you to sing in a quartet and you sounded great! You've even thought about joining the choir! Don't focus on what you can't do. Build on past successes.

Thirdly, as you live purposefully in the present, stay focused on Jesus. I used to think that my final goal was heaven, or eternal life, but I've changed my mind on that. I don't want to live forever just to live forever. I want to see Jesus face to face and be with Jesus! If you are going to live purposefully in the present, you not only need to make decisions based on principle rather than emotions, and build on past successes, but you also need to stay focused on Jesus. Joseph's brothers didn't have the advantage of the wonderful revelation of God in the person of Jesus, but we do! So get to know Jesus. How do you do that? Learn about Jesus in His Word. He told us that the Scriptures testify about Him. So read your Bible and get to know Jesus. Connect with godly mentors who can model what it looks like to stay focused on Jesus. Connect with a Christian community that will encourage you to stay focused on Jesus. Living purposefully in the present involves making decisions based on principle not emotions, building on past successes and staying focused on Jesus.

Strategy #3 There is a third strategy for avoiding a lifetime of regret: Plan courageously for the future. Have you noticed how quickly life slips by? I'm told that as you get older, life slips by at an increasing rate. Is that true? Perhaps you're just busier than you used to be, or perhaps you realize that your days are numbered! In reality, all of our days are numbered, until

this mortal puts on immortality at the return of Jesus. Every day is precious. Every day is an irreplaceable opportunity. If you don't want to look back at the end of your life and be filled with regret, then plan courageously for the future.

How do I do that? First, concentrate on what is most important. Unfortunately, we often give our attention to what is most urgent. But urgent isn't necessarily important. And our lives can be so filled with urgent that we never get around to that which is most important. I remember reading of one businessman who reflected that he spent his whole life climbing the ladder of success only to discover that it was leaning against the wrong wall! What a tragedy! I don't want to look back on my life and be filled with regret, and I know that you don't either. Concentrate on what is most important.

So what really is most important to you? What should be most important to you? Stuff? I don't think so. What is really most important? Relationships; your relationship with God, serving Him with all your strength; and your relationships with those around you; your family, your loved ones. Isn't that really what's most important? So why are you working longer and longer hours, with little or no time for that which is most important? Where will that leave you at the end of your days? Will you be saying, "Oh, I just wish that I had worked more!" Plan courageously for the future. Concentrate on what is most important.

Second, dare to dream. Don't settle for mediocre. Things that are impossible for us are possible for God. In my favorite book on the life of Jesus, I read this comment: "God's ideal for His children is higher than the highest human thought can reach." *Desire of Ages*, P. 311. I believe that is true! So as you plan courageously for the future, concentrate on what is important and dare to dream!

And thirdly, identify doable steps to accomplish your dreams. It has been said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. And a dream becomes reality by courageously planning one doable step after another and following those steps until you have fulfilled your dreams. When our youngest son was 18 he decided that he wanted to become a CRNA, a certified registered nurse anesthetist. So we helped him to develop a 5-step plan! (Outline steps) And I'm happy to announce that this past week Jonathan began step #4 of his 5-step plan! Concentrate on what is important, dare to dream, and identify doable steps to fulfill your dreams!

You don't have to live a lifetime of regret! You don't need to get to the end of your life and look back filled with regret. Like Joseph's brothers, we've all done things, or failed to do things, that we later regret. But I'm thankful today that we don't have to get stuck in a place of regret. Joseph's brothers were stuck in a place of regret for 13 years. Some people get stuck in a place of regret for their whole lives. But you can avoid a lifetime of regret. You've learned some practical strategies today that will help you to be free!

- Deal decisively with the past;

- Live purposefully in the present; and

- Plan courageously for the future.

Your life may take some unexpected turns, just like Joseph, but when it's all said and done, it is possible to look back without regret. Deal decisively with the past, live purposefully in the present and plan courageously for the future!

How Can I Be Free?

-Finding freedom from regret:

1. Deal decisively with the past.
 - a. Ask for forgiveness;
 - b. Learn from your mistakes; and
 - c. Choose not to focus on past mistakes.
2. Live purposefully in the present:
 - a. Make decisions based on principle, not emotions;
 - b. Build on past successes; and
 - c. Keep focused on Jesus.
3. Plan courageously for the future:
 - a. Concentrate on what is important;
 - b. Dare to dream; and
 - c. Identify doable steps to fulfill your dreams.