

The Upward Spiral of Integrity

Good morning! Before we get into God's word I want to wish all the moms out there a Happy Mother's Day. I know some of you moms and grandmas may not be able to celebrate with all your loved ones because of the lock down, but I pray it's a special day for you and you know how much you're loved and appreciated.

You may have read about a controversy brewing on Capitol Hill about four senators who sold large amounts of stock on the day a private briefing on the coronavirus took place. The accusation is that they illegally used inside information to sell off stock before it crashed. This week it came out that the brother in law of one of these senators also sold a ton of stock on the same day. I don't know if these senators are guilty of insider trading, but at the very least it looks bad. The irony is that if they did sell off based on insider information, they may have avoided losing their money, but lost their integrity in the process. Their stocks didn't crash, but their reputations did.

We're in a series called Upward Spiral: Life Lessons from the Story of Joseph and this morning we're looking at the Upward Spiral of Integrity. There are times when we have to choose between good circumstances and good character, because one going up means the other goes down. Either our stocks will crash, or our integrity will.

That's exactly the choice Joseph faces in Gen. 39. Joseph's brothers sold Joseph to some Midianite traders who were on their way to Egypt. Let's pick up the story in chapter 39:1.

39 Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. ² The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. ³ His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. ⁴ So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. ⁵ From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. ⁶ So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

Things are looking up for Joseph. He's still a slave in a foreign land, but the guy who bought him, Potiphar, notices that everything Joseph touches prospers. So Potiphar puts him in charge of everything, so confident of Joseph's competence and character that it says he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

That's when trouble begins to brew. Let's pick up the story in the second half of verse 6.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. ⁷ And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." ⁸ But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. ⁹ He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" ¹⁰ And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

¹¹ But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, ¹² she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.

Day after day Mrs. Potiphar tries to seduce Joseph until finally one day when no one else is around she grabs him by his coat and demands that Joseph lie with her. At this point Joseph has a choice to make: lose his coat or lose his integrity. Let's pick up in verse 16:

¹⁶ Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, ¹⁷ and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. ¹⁸ But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house."

¹⁹ As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, "This is the way your servant treated me," his anger was kindled. ²⁰ And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison.

Joseph held onto his integrity...and paid dearly for it. Unjustly accused by Mrs. Potiphar, his reputation was dragged through the mud. Potiphar was understandably furious, although there are indications that he may not have totally believed his wife's story, and he threw Joseph into prison.

Joseph's circumstances quickly spiraled down, but his integrity spiraled up. Let's look at three spiraling upward lessons from this portion of Joseph's story.

Spiraling Upward Lessons:

1. The first step towards integrity is to admit that our integrity is broken

The Hebrew word for integrity means "completeness" or wholeness. An integer in math is a whole number. Integrity is being whole through and through. The same in private that we are in public. The same on the inside that we portray on the outside. Complete. Whole.

Which means that if we are going to walk in integrity, the first step is to admit that our integrity is broken. We aren't whole through and through no matter what our outside image is. Go deep enough and you will find unwholeness, cracks, flaws in our integrity. Our integrity is broken.

Remember that Joseph isn't a picture of you and me, he's a picture of Jesus Christ. Joseph is one of the few people in the Bible that has no flaw mentioned. His character and integrity as recorded is pretty much perfect. That's not because he was actually sinless, but because Joseph is a picture of Jesus.

Like Joseph, Jesus was tempted and didn't sin, then he was unjustly accused. And like Joseph, it was all part of God's plan to save the world. Jesus the Perfect, Innocent One died on the cross for our sin, our broken integrity. The first step of integrity is to admit our integrity is broken. We are sinners in need of a Savior and Jesus is that Savior we so desperately need.

So we don't start by seeking integrity, we start by seeking Jesus. When we come to Christ in faith, God forgives our broken integrity, cleanses us of our sin, and then by the Holy Spirit begins to work to make us men and women of integrity. Not to be saved but because we are saved.

The first step is to admit our integrity is broken. First step, not the last step. God cares about our integrity and so do people watching our lives. Joseph's life wouldn't have been the same if he had given in to Potiphar's wife, nor would the lives of all those Joseph's life touched been the same. Not by a long shot.

We aren't saved by integrity, but we are saved for integrity. And that begins by being honest with God and admit that our integrity is broken and we need a Savior. We need Jesus.

The second upward spiraling lesson is that...

2. Sometimes we have to choose between our circumstances spiraling upward or our integrity spiraling upward

Integrity cost Joseph big time. He lost the confidence of Potiphar, whose trust was replaced by anger. Joseph lost his position, his reputation, his freedom, even his witness. Potiphar attributed Joseph's success to the Lord being with him, but now he saw Joseph as the man who assaulted his wife. Talk about downward spirals, his circumstances were flushed down the toilet. And at the same time his integrity spiraled upward.

Joseph could have avoided all this pain by giving Potiphar's wife what she wanted. Just give in. Just do the wrong thing. No one will know except you and her...and God and life will be so much easier. Doing the right thing brought a world of hurt down on Joseph.

A lot of times the crossroads we'll find ourselves at is take this road and our situation crashes. Take that road and our integrity crashes. Hold onto your stocks and you lose a ton of money. Sell your stocks and you keep your money but lose your integrity. The big question is which is worth more and we'll talk about that in a minute.

But first, it's important that we face this reality: sometimes doing the right thing won't be the easy thing to do. It won't be the "blessed" thing to do in the sense of making our circumstances better. Not immediately.

I've met people who are disillusioned and even bitter against God cause at some point they chose to do the right thing and instead of their situation getting better, it got worse, and they decided God let them down, didn't keep His promise.

Somewhere along the way, they got the idea that if their integrity spirals downward, so will their circumstances, and when their integrity spirals upward, so will their circumstances. In the long run that will be true, but in the short run, we need to know that sometimes integrity will cost us.

Ps. 73 is an honest grappling with this. Why do the wicked prosper? They do wrong and they have not troubles, their bodies are healthy, their bank accounts keep growing. Me, I try to obey God and my life is full of afflictions. He's standing at that crossroads and he's seeing that way too often when integrity spirals up, circumstances spiral down, and when integrity spirals down, circumstances spiral up. What gives, God?

He even admits that when he saw this, his foot almost slipped. His faith almost slipped. And then in verse 17 he says he entered the sanctuary and saw their final end. He saw the big picture. And that brings us to the third spiraling upward lesson.

3. In the big picture of life, good character is worth far more than good circumstances every time

If I were to ask you how you're doing, chances are you'd answer based on a very narrow snapshot of your life. What's going on, what your circumstances are right now. You probably wouldn't say, "I'm doing good. Twenty years ago I had a good job, things were going really well with my family, and there was this

one day when the weather was perfect.” You wouldn’t answer based on 20 years ago, you’d tell me what was going on in your life now.

- Good – I’m getting married in a month
- Not good – I just got word I’m losing my job
- Good – our daughter just got accepted at MIT
- Not good – doctors found a spot on my lung and want to do some tests

We think of life in snapshots – what does the snapshot of our life look like right now? And we usually judge that based on our circumstances. What is the snapshot of Joseph’s life look like right now? Verse 20:

²⁰ And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison.

That takes about 6 seconds to read, but that was Joseph’s snapshot for years. He would be in that prison for three years. And if we read ahead we know what happens, but Joseph didn’t know. So we might expect him to be miserable and discouraged and bitter. Let’s look at the end of chap. 39:21-23

But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. ²² And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. ²³ The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph’s charge, because the LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed. Gen. 39:21-23

Joseph wasn’t bitter, he was buoyant! Joseph had a faith that didn’t measure his life by the snapshot, he looked at the big picture. In the big picture he had a clear conscience, he knew the Lord was with him, and he knew the Lord had good plans for his life. Joseph was rich even when he was poor, loved, even when he was hated, innocent, even when judged guilty, spiraling upward, even when all his circumstances were spiraling downward.

Listen, the snapshot of where your life is right now is important. The Lord cares if your circumstances are hard – He does. If you can improve your circumstances in a way that doesn’t involve doing wrong, by all means do it!

But God cares more about your character than your circumstances. He is more interested in working on your character than working in your circumstances. In the big picture view of our lives, good character is worth far more than good circumstances every time.

We can get to integrity from here

Here’s the good news: no matter how you’ve sinned, no matter how broken your integrity is, no matter where your life is, you can get to integrity from here. The first step to integrity for all of us is to admit our integrity is broken. We are sinners. Jesus didn’t come for the healthy, he came for the sick, he didn’t come for the man or woman of impeccable integrity, he came for the sinner.

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Confess your sin to God, be honest about where your integrity is broken, repent of that sin, which means turn away from it – and turn towards God and the blessed plan He has for your life and your character. Receive His forgiveness full and free and walk in His light. By the grace and power of the Lord Jesus Christ, we can get to integrity from here, no matter where “here” is.

Let's pray together.