

Genesis 39

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[0 : 00] Big questions, followed by big answers, lead on to big decisions. This morning we were considering a big question, the question posed by Jesus to His disciples and posed to each of us, who do you say I am? And we noticed that how we answer that question will have implications, though we didn't, for reasons of time, dwell on those greatly. But if you answer the question as Peter answered the question, and remember how he answered the question, who do you say I am?

The Christ of God, the Son of the living God. If that is your answer to that big question, then the decisions that you take in life must reflect that confession. There can't be a divorce between declaring who Jesus is and the life that you live and the decisions that you take day by day. There must be a coherence between these things. What you think of Christ must determine the manner in which you live your life and the manner in which you take big decisions, and indeed small decisions.

I wonder, is it easy when faced by big decisions to make the right decision? I imagine that all of us here in the experience of life that we have, whether it's a short life or a longer life, we all know something of what it is to be faced with big decisions. And we're conscious that though sometimes those decisions may be straightforward, there are other times, are there not, where it can be extremely difficult. Sometimes we don't know what the right decision is. Maybe there's a desire to do the right thing, but we genuinely struggle to know what the right thing is. But is it not also the case that sometimes we know what the right thing to do is, but it's still tough to make the right decision, to do the right thing. This evening I want us to move from those broad generalities, though I imagine that you can identify with what I've said even in that broad way. But I want us to move from that to consider the real world and a real life situation. And I want us, as we do, to learn from the manner in which a young believer, Joseph, faced with a big decision, made the right call, and did the right thing. And of course we're referring to the chapter that we've read concerning Joseph and Potiphar's wife. I want to really spend the time that we have available largely on this matter of how it is that Joseph took the decision that he took when faced with the temptation that he was faced with. But just very swiftly we can remind ourselves of the circumstances that Joseph finds himself in. Indeed, we're told those circumstances at the beginning of the chapter. As we are perhaps in some measure familiar with what had gone before, Joseph has paid a heavy price for taunting his brothers. You remember how it was he'd received this favored treatment from his father, the coat of many colors, and how he taunted his brothers, and the dreams that he had, how that were a source of great pride to him, and how his brothers, in the face of such taunting, did such a wicked thing in selling him into slavery. And indeed, there at the beginning of the chapter reference is made to that reality, how Joseph had been taken down to Egypt, and there he was sold to Potiphar as a slave. So here is Joseph, far from home, far from his loved ones, though some of them had loved him very little, but far from all that he knew, all that he was familiar and comfortable with. And here he is in Egypt, seeking to serve God in a strange land among strange people. And what is the problem that he faces that we are concerned with this evening? I imagine there were many challenges, no doubt many decisions that he had to take that we're not even familiar with, that haven't been recorded for us. But we do have recorded this big decision that he had to take. And we've read the account. We don't need to repeat what we have read.

But Potiphar's wife wants to have sex with Joseph. She's luring Joseph. She's seeking to seduce Joseph day after day. This is her concern. And the big decision that Joseph has to take is, will he succumb?

[5 : 28] Will he have sex with her, or will he not? Will he sin, or will he not sin? That's a decision. We decide to sin. Now, sin is more than a bad decision. Sometimes, perhaps, there's a reluctance to even use the language of sin, and we just speak about bad decisions. And while it would be

wrong to present sin as only a bad decision, it's more than a bad decision, it's more than a bad decision. But it certainly is a bad decision. And Joseph has a decision to make. Will he do the right thing, or will he do the wrong thing? This is his big decision. Joseph is not alone in having to face big decisions. Perhaps each of us this week will have to face big decisions. We'll certainly face decisions. Perhaps they won't be as dramatic as the one that was facing Joseph, or perhaps they will. Perhaps it won't be in this area of our lives, as was the case with Joseph, a matter of sexual behavior. What he would do?

Would he do the right thing or the wrong thing? It might be in some other area of life, in the matter of truth, in the matter of integrity, in one way or another. I leave that for your own reflection on the decisions that you will face. Well, this is the big decision that he has to take. And my concern this evening is simply to consider, how did Joseph take the right decision? Now, this is not easy for him. It's a very difficult situation. He finds himself. Sometimes in the matter of doing the right thing, the phrase is used, just say no. And it sounds like a good piece of advice. But just say no often really doesn't cut the mustard. Why would Joseph just say no? Here he is being offered free sex on a platter, and he is a red-blooded young man with sexual appetites. You know, why would he say no? Why wouldn't he take what was being freely offered to him? Well, we want to consider why he didn't take what was offered to him. And I want to identify a couple of factors that are relevant, that are helpful, I think, to identify, but that really lead us in to what I think is very much the heart of the matter. And I think is presented as such in the chapter. But before getting to the heart of the matter that would explain why it is that Joseph was able to say no, to do the right thing, to make the right decision, let's just notice one or two other elements that are relevant.

The information that we have that's particularly pertinent to our concern is what Joseph says in response to the offer that is made to him, there in verses 8 and 9. Potiphar's wife makes this invitation to him, come to bed with me. And what does Joseph say? This is what we want to consider.

[8 : 57] But he refused. Okay, that's what he did. But then in the language that he uses in what he says, it can establish why 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. 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 factors then determine that Joseph says no to this invitation to sin, come to bed with me? Well, we can certainly recognize that part of the reason was respect for and gratitude to his master. His master had bought him. He was a slave. And yet, Joseph is respectful of his master's position as his master. And indeed, there is, we can detect in the language he uses, a sense of gratitude to Potiphar for the manner in which he had treated him.

That's what he says to Potiphar's wife. You know, your husband has put me in charge of the whole household. Your husband has deposited his trust in me. And I, in those circumstances, respect him. And for me to do what you are saying would be a lack of respect to my master. It would be an act of ingratitude to him given the manner in which he has treated me. And it would be wrong on that level to do what you are proposing. So, that's certainly part of the answer to the question, how is he able to refuse? I think it's also true that there is in Joseph a respect for, a recognition of the surrounding cultural norms and morals of the land where he is. It's clear from the language that is used that there was in Egypt, as indeed from where Joseph had come, a recognition that what this woman was proposing was wrong.

It contravened the norms of marriage and of family. It was wrong to do what was being proposed. And Joseph respects that. It would be the wrong thing to do. He says there very clearly in verse 9, No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you. Why?

Because you are his wife. You are his wife. I'm not your husband. You have a husband. And it would be wrong for me as a third party to become your lover, to sleep with you as you are inviting me to do.

So, these things are relevant in understanding Joseph's refusal. But the very heart of the matter is surely what he goes on to say there in verse 9 and in the second part of the verse.

[12 : 12] How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God? Indeed, if we were reading the passage for the first time, and if we read through verses 8 and 9 and we would read of how Joseph makes this constant reference to Potiphar, to the master, and to the master's trust in him,

and to the master's care for him, and his position as the master, you might imagine that the way in which this argument would end would be along these lines. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against my master?

One might have expected that would have been the conclusion to what he would say to Potiphar's wife. It would be entirely coherent. It would follow on from what he had already said. And of course, it would have been true. For him to have accepted the invitation would have been to sin against his master. But that is not what he says.

How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God? In these words, we can identify, we can distinguish three key convictions of Joseph in relation to God that underpin and explain his refusal to do the wrong thing and his ability to do the wrong thing and his ability to take the right decision.

They are three things that go together, but I think we can distinguish. Even in these few words, how could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God? What did they reveal about Joseph's relationship with God? His understanding of who God is? I think they reveal three things. There are certainly three that I want to highlight this evening. I'll mention what they are and then we can just think about them briefly. First of all, in these words, we can identify in Joseph a recognition of God's authority. Joseph clearly recognizes God's authority over him and over his behavior, a recognition of God's authority. But there's also in these words, underlying these words, that is evidence of a knowledge of God's will. In what he says, it's clear that Joseph is familiar with God's will in the matter to hand.

Of what is the right thing to do. There's a recognition of God's authority, a knowledge of God's will, but there's another element, and it's a crucial element, that is a loyalty, or there is revealed a loyalty to God's person. So, let's think about these three things that I would suggest we find in these brief words with which Joseph concludes his explanation of his refusal to sleep with Potiphar's wife.

[15 : 20] How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God? First of all, then, we have here a recognition of God's authority. I'm sure in general terms that was true, that Joseph recognized God as the one who enjoys and exercise absolute authority, as the living and true God, as the creator of the universe, as the one who is altogether sovereign. But here, we're particularly concerned with a recognition of God's authority in the matter of determining right and wrong. And this, of course, is crucial to the matter to hand. Joseph recognizes God's authority to determine what is right and what is wrong. He recognizes, it's implicit in what he says, that he is persuaded that God has the authority to decide on such matters. Even before we proceed to establish what God has decided, there is this fundamental element of recognizing God's authority. Now, this is crucial to the whole area of our lifestyle and behavior, of our moral compass, of what we do and what we don't do. One of the reasons that we are floundering in moral chaos and confusion in Scotland today is for this simple reason, that we have decided as a nation, that we do not recognize God's authority to determine right and wrong. God is not to decide. We will not have this God to rule over us. We don't acknowledge that he has that authority. We're like in the day of the Judges, where we read that every man did what was right in his own eyes. But Joseph, very evidently in what he says to Potiphar's wife, it's crystal clear on this matter. God has the authority to determine what is right and what is wrong. God decides, not the government. We have a government at Holyrood and indeed in Westminster who imagine so foolishly that they can determine what is right and what is wrong. And indeed, they pontificate along those lines. We want to do the right thing, they tell us. And we'll decide what is right and what is wrong. We don't need to submit to any

God who will tell us what is right and wrong. No, we decide. But that's not the case. God decides. Not the government, not your boyfriend, not your flatmates, not the majority opinion, not you. You don't decide what is right and what is wrong. God decides. At the very heart of being a Christian God's authority. God rules. Joseph recognizes God's authority and this is fundamental in explaining his ability, if we want to call it ability, to refuse the enticement of Potiphar's wife. But we said that there's a second element and that is there is evidently in what Joseph says or revealed by what Joseph says a knowledge of God's will. It's one thing to recognize that God has the authority to determine right and wrong. But then the question arises, how can we know what he has determined in any given circumstance or situation? For example, in the case that was presenting itself to Joseph, how did Joseph know God's will with regard to sex? How did he know what was right and what was wrong?

It would have been a difficulty for him had he said, yes, I recognize God has the authority to determine, but what is his perspective? What has he determined in this matter? How did he know? How did he know? Now remember where it is that we are in, in terms of the Bible timeline. This is before Moses. This is before the Ten Commandments. There wasn't a neat, codified law that he could turn to and find, you know, you shall not commit adultery. It's before the Ten Commandments. But of course, even though it was before the Ten Commandments being presented in the manner that they were, it had been clear from the very beginning. Indeed, from Eden, God had made his will clear on this matter. From the very beginning, God had established that sex is a gift from God to be enjoyed within the confines of marriage between one man and one woman. And that was something that, from the very beginning, it was known, and that knowledge would have been passed on from generation to a generation. And Joseph knew that this was so.

Joseph knew God's revealed will in the matter to hand. He didn't need to ask for guidance. He didn't need to spend a night in prayer to God, asking for direction as to what he should do or what he shouldn't do. And let's be careful there. You know, sometimes you hear conversation and talk about decisions to be taken in certain matters, and it all sounds very pious. Well, I want to pray about it.

[21 : 12] Well, let me tell you this, that if the matter to hand is something on which God's revealed will is clear, then you don't need to pray about it. You can pray for the strength to do the right thing, but you don't need to pray for direction, because direction has already clearly been given.

God was nothing if not clear in this matter. You see, we're told today that in the field of sexual ethics, it's all very complex. It's all very complicated.

And at the risk of maybe being deemed simplistic, I would suggest that that simply is not so. It's not complicated at all. Any sex outside of marriage is wrong, period. And it really is that simple.

Now, am I saying that it's easy to follow God's intention? I'm not saying it's easy. It's not easy, but it is simple. It is clear what God has determined.

And should we be, must we be, supportive to those, including ourselves, struggling with matters of sexual identity, of sexual conduct?

[22 : 31] Yes, indeed, we should be. We must be. As sinners supporting fellow sinners. But we don't do anybody any favors by making a simple matter complicated. God's revealed will is clear. Joseph knew that. Joseph was not only one who recognized God's authority to establish what is right and wrong. He also reveals a knowledge of God's will in this matter.

But there is a third, and as I suggested just a moment ago, a crucial element that we can also notice, and it is this, that we find in Joseph a loyalty to God's person. A loyalty to God.

You see, it is essential to know that God has the authority to determine right and wrong. It's necessary to know God's will concerning what is right and wrong. But in the absence of loyalty to and love for God's person, obedience remains an almost unreachable ideal.

So, that's the problem with religion. Religion as a list of do's and don'ts in the absence of a personal relationship. We can know the lists. We can know what the do's are, and we can know what the don'ts are.

We might even in some sense acknowledge that these are good lists. They're God-given lists. But if there is no loyalty to God, if there is no love for God, it's simply not within our power to do what we should do and to deny ourselves those things that we ought not to do.

[24 : 08] We simply can't do it. There must be this element that we find here in Joseph, a loyalty to God. It really just comes through so powerfully in the language that he uses.

How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God? Sin against the God who loves me, who cares for me, who provides for me, the God who has authority, the God who has revealed to me what the right thing to do is.

How could I? How could I do such a thing? Throughout this chapter, the one phrase that repeats itself very tellingly is the phrase that God was with Joseph. The Lord was with Joseph.

In verse 2, the Lord was with Joseph. In verse 3, we read, His master saw that the Lord was with him, was with Joseph. Towards the end of the account, when the consequences of Joseph's refusal lead him to imprisonment, again we read, the Lord was with Joseph.

Joseph. And Joseph knows that this is so. Joseph experiences the Lord's presence with him as he finds himself so very alone, far from home, far from his family in a strange land, but the Lord was with him.

[25 : 29] Joseph knew that, and Joseph knew that, and he was grateful for it. Joseph knows God. Joseph loves God. In the absence of Joseph's commitment to God, and underpinning it, of course,

God's commitment to Joseph, could Joseph have resisted the enticements of Potiphar's wife?

No chance. Now, did his commitment to God make it easy for him? By no means. Not an easy matter. Indeed, we read in the passage how at the critical moment he was forced, if that's the word to use, to run from her.

The temptation was real. It was intense, and he had to run away that he would resist the temptation. It wasn't easy. But nonetheless, this element of his loyalty to God, his love for God, explains to us how it is that he was able to resist such a powerful temptation.

Very briefly, can we just ask a couple of questions to draw things to a close or to tie one or two loose ends up? What were the consequences for Joseph of taking the right decision?

Was it like the man we were talking about this morning to the children, Glenn James? He found 25,000 pounds in a rucksack, and he did the right thing, and he handed it in to the police, and now he's received a much larger sum of money as the public have responded to what he did.

[27 : 07] He's rewarded almost immediately for doing the right thing. Was that Joseph's experience? Well, hardly. He's thrown into prison. He loses his liberty.

He faces at least the prospect of a lifetime behind bars. But it's interesting that even in those circumstances, and perhaps very deliberately, we are told in those circumstances, on two occasions in very short compass, the Lord was with Joseph.

Be it in Potiphar's household as the main man, or be it languishing in the king's prison, the Lord was with Joseph.

The consequences were not pleasant consequences. Yes, it is true that in time, he is rewarded if you wish. He's honored. He's recognized, even within the confines of the prison.

And that is sometimes the way it is, but not always. It's not always the case that we will be rewarded for doing the right thing, certainly not in any tangible or visible way.

[28 : 18] I'm always reminded in this regard of the very powerful testimony of Daniel's friends. Remember when they were faced with the fiery furnace. And what is it that they say to the king?

Our God is able to save us, but even if he does not, we will not bow down before your idol. Even if we're not rewarded for our loyalty, even if we have to face death itself, we will not bow down.

We won't do the right, the wrong thing. It's always the right call to honor God. Always. Always. And that's important for us to be very clear on.

For you to be clear on as you seek to live a life that is pleasing to God, it's always the right call to do the right thing. However difficult it might be, it's always the right call.

Even if there's no apparent reward. I think you could say, and we can say, and I imagine that it was the case with Joseph, that simply doing the right thing was reward enough.

[29 : 25] To know that he was able in this circumstance to demonstrate his love for and loyalty to God. That in itself was reward enough for Joseph.

What would have happened if Joseph had taken the wrong decision? Well, thank God he didn't. But we would imagine that had he done so, it would have been a downward spiral that would have ended in tears or worse.

This would not have been a quickly forgotten one-night stand or mid-afternoon stand or whatever time of the day that it was. But more significantly, the opportunity for Joseph to fulfill his covenant privilege and duty of witnessing to his Lord and being a blessing to the Gentiles around him would have been fatally compromised.

We know, of course, the story of where Joseph ended up and what great influence he exercised to the glory of God. And surely all that would have been fatally compromised had he taken the wrong decision.

And of course, we can look back and say, well, isn't it wonderful that he did the right thing? But there's part of me that is left with a little nagging concern at a personal level, but also as I think of all of you as you consider this story.

[30 : 39] And the nagging concern is this, well, isn't it great how Joseph did the right thing? But what about when I mess up and I take the wrong decision? Maybe you're thinking of an occasion when that is precisely what happened, when you didn't do the right thing, when you went in the wrong direction, when you, even recognizing God's authority and even knowing God's will, your love for God and your loyalty to God was not sufficient and you fell and you sinned and you did the wrong thing.

You're not able to stand shoulder to shoulder with the likes of Joseph. What about you in those circumstances? Well, thank God that God is gracious to us.

God sent his son Jesus for those who make bad decisions, for those who rebel against his authority, for those who sin against his will, for those who fail to show him the love and the loyalty that he is due.

God sent his son for such. He sent his son for us, for you and for me who make bad decisions, who don't do the right thing so often, who sin against him, who sin knowingly against his authority and will.

Now, this is a great truth. Is it a license for sin? Are we to respond to that? Well, we're free to do as we please, for grace will abound.

[32 : 10] Well, by no means. Rather, to recognize the depth of God's love in what he has done for those of us who do take the wrong decisions and sin against him, the depth of his love in providing for us must be surely a stimulus to greater love and loyalty to him.

I don't know what big decisions that you are facing, what big decisions or maybe seemingly small decisions you'll have to take this week, but what I can commend and urge you, do the right thing. Do the right thing. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you that we come and we bow before the God who has and who exercises all authority and yet not as a tyrant, not as some brutal dictator, but who exercises his authority tenderly and lovingly and graciously.

And we thank you that we can bow down before you. What a horrible thing it would be if we were to be kings over our own affairs. What chaos would ensue.

And so we gladly bow down before you. We thank you that you have been pleased to reveal your will in so much of what is the life that we live, that we can turn to your word and we can discover what it is you would have us do.

[33 : 43] We thank you for that. And we pray especially that by your spirit you would so work in us that our love for you and our loyalty to you would deepen and grow, that it would be for us a delight to do the right thing as an expression of our love and loyalty to you.

And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to close our service this evening by singing verses that we find in Psalm 105.

Psalm 105 in Sing Psalms, you'll find that on page 138.

Psalm 105, we'll sing verses 1 to 6 and then we'll also sing verses 16 to 22. There's something of anecdotal, I suppose, interest there in the second part that we're going to sing.

It speaks of Joseph and of what happened to him. What's interesting about the psalm is it gives us details that were not given in Genesis about his circumstances, certainly at one stage when he was sent to prison following the incident that we've been considering.

[34 : 56] Or certainly the flow of the psalm would suggest that that is what is being talked about. But that aside, let's sing to God's praise these verses, Psalm 105, verses 1 to 6 and 16 to 22.

The tune is Walter and we'll stand to sing. Give thanks to the Lord, God, and God, and His name His wonderful deeds to the nations proclaim Sing praises to them and His grace by the Lord Let all those who sing and rejoice in the Lord New truths and ones lecture the Lord and His might Sing out for His face and His wonders recite His miracles too, and his judgments divine, You children of Abraham, Jacob's own life. The Lord brought famine upon their whole land, Their food was destroyed at his sovereign command.

But he sent beforehand his people to save, His scrolls among Joseph sold off as a slave.

His feet within shackles of bronze were confined, His neck put an idol for freedom he pined.

[37 : 08] The word of the Lord was a test to be passed, Till what he foretold was accomplished at last.

The King sends an order to let him go free, The ruler of nations give him liberty.

He purged him in charge of his house and his last, His princess and elders of it is commenced.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen. Amen.