

# The Joseph Chronicles

## An Undivided Heart

Genesis 39:7-21

July 9, 2016

### Today

We live in a world where the line between right and wrong is often blurry. Political, business and religious leaders speak about transparency. They ask us to believe and trust what they say.

More often than not, however, what we see is greed, self-righteousness, a thirst for power, and blatant disregard for law. Leaders will do anything; say anything, often contradictory things, to get what they want – a vote, a business deal ..... The message seems to be clear: if no one catches you, just go right ahead and do what you want.

**Ethics are generally understood as moral principles that govern a person or a group's behavior.**

**synonyms:** moral code, morals, morality, values, rights and wrongs, principles, ideals, standards (of behavior), value system, virtues, dictates of conscience

They guide us as we relate to the world around us – every culture and society functions within an ethical framework. For the world, however, ethics seems to be a moving target. A popular term is “situational ethics” in which a person's ethics may change depending on the circumstances they find themselves in. **Situational Ethics:**

- Teaches that **ethical** decisions should follow flexible guidelines rather than absolute rules, and be taken on a case by case basis.
- Takes into account the particular context of an act, rather than judging it according to absolute moral standards. There are no universal moral rules or rights - each case is unique and deserves a unique solution.

Ethics cannot be boiled down to a list of do's and don'ts. God gave us 10 Commandments but then gave us hundreds of stories of people who grappled with ethical dilemmas. There are victories and there are failures.

Think of the 2 stories of Abraham and Sarah:

- **Genesis 12:10** - There is a famine in the land and so they go to Egypt. Sarai must have been a beautiful woman because, even before getting to Egypt, Abram decides that he will tell a lie to the Pharaoh to protect himself (he told the Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister. In fact she was his ½ sister). Pharaoh took Sarai and gave Abram livestock – in other words Abram profited from his lie.
- **Genesis 20** - Sometime later Now Abraham and Sarah tell the same lie to King Abimelech...

The Bible says that we shouldn't lie (Ex 20; Col 3:9; Prov 19:5). Abraham decided that in these 2 situations he should lie – a white lie (1/2 sister after all) because he believed his life is in danger – **Situational Ethics**.

For Christians, ethical dilemmas maybe even more challenging because what society and culture deems ethically correct may go against Biblical principles. **But for the follower of Jesus, ethics and ethical behavior is rooted in scripture, and is not based on whim or circumstance.**

Bribery, for instance, in many cultures of the world is not only acceptable but expected in order to get anything done.

- **Exodus 23:8** - And you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of the just.
- **Deuteronomy 16:19** - You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous.
- **Ecclesiastes 7:7** - For oppression makes a wise man mad, and a bribe corrupts the heart.

For Adventists specifically, keeping Sabbath holy can force them to choose between faithfulness to God and keeping their jobs or providing for their families.

Recently, I was sitting in a church service where a man gave a testimony on having to work on Sabbath, and justifying his choice by saying that it was okay because he gave the money he earned that day to the church – **Situational Ethics**.

- **Exodus 20:8** - Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

- **Exodus 31:13** - But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, "You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for *this* is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.
- **Isaiah 58:13-14** - If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot From doing your *own* pleasure on My holy day, And call the sabbath a delight, the holy *day* of the LORD honorable, And shall honor it, desisting from your *own* ways, From seeking your *own* pleasure, And speaking *your own* word, <sup>14</sup> Then you will take delight in the LORD, And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; And I will feed you *with* the heritage of Jacob your father, For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Now let's turn to the story of Joseph found in Genesis 37-50. This story provides a rich image of ethical challenges, both individually and corporately.

- Joseph was 1 of 12 brothers – by 4 women.
- He was the oldest child of Jacob's favorite wife – but the 11<sup>th</sup> son over all.
- Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob even though he is not the eldest.
- The elder 10 brothers hated Joseph because of the favoritism shown to him by their father.
- Joseph's brothers attacked him with intent to kill, but decided instead to sell him into slavery in Egypt – he became a slave to Potiphar, Captain of the Guard.
- Joseph was faithful to God and he became the house steward – Potiphar also benefitted.
- Potiphar's wife became infatuated with Joseph and made sexual advances toward him. After rejecting her, she accused him of rape.
- Joseph was thrown into prison and was there for 3 years.
- Joseph remained faithful to God, in spite of his circumstances and he found himself elevated to a trusted position in the prison.
- After 3 years Joseph found himself in front of Pharaoh to interpret 2 dreams – 7 years of plenty / 7 years of famine. As a result, Joseph was released from prison and given the position of 2<sup>nd</sup> in command for all Egypt.

**Let's highlight 4 moments in his life that helped him and will help us develop God-centered ethics:**

#### **Crisis and Growth:**

At the outset of Genesis 37 Joseph is described as a spoiled brat who goes running to his father to tell on his brothers every chance he gets. Additionally, we notice the preferential treatment he receives from his father. When Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery his whole world collapses. Throughout the rest of the story we see this process of crisis and growth:

- **Ellen White (PP):** But, in the providence of God, even this experience was to be a blessing to him. He had learned in a few hours that which years might not otherwise have taught him. His father, strong and tender as his love had been, had done him wrong by his partiality and indulgence. This unwise preference had angered his brothers and provoked them to the cruel deed that had separated him from his home. Its effects were manifest also in his own character. Faults had been encouraged that were now to be corrected. He was becoming self-sufficient and exacting. Accustomed to the tenderness of his father's care, he felt that he was unprepared to cope with the difficulties before him, in the bitter, uncared-for life of a stranger and a slave.

Then his thoughts turned to his father's God. In his childhood he had been taught to love and fear Him. Often in his father's tent he had listened to the story of the vision that Jacob saw as he fled from his home an exile and a fugitive. He had been told of the Lord's promises to Jacob, and how they had been fulfilled--how, in the hour of need, the angels of God had come to instruct, comfort, and protect him. And he had learned of the love of God in providing for men a Redeemer. Now all these precious lessons came vividly before him. Joseph believed that the God of his fathers would be his God. He then and there gave himself fully to the Lord, and he prayed that the Keeper of Israel would be with him in the land of his exile.

His soul thrilled with the high resolve to prove himself true to God--under all circumstances to act as became a subject of the King of heaven. He would serve the Lord with undivided heart; he would meet the trials of his lot with fortitude and perform every duty with fidelity. One day's experience had been the turning point in Joseph's life. Its terrible calamity had transformed him from a petted child to a man, thoughtful, courageous, and self-possessed.

Joseph's gentleness and fidelity won the heart of the chief captain, who came to regard him as a son rather than a slave. The youth was brought in contact with men of rank and learning, and he acquired a knowledge of science, of languages, and of affairs--an education needful to the future prime minister of Egypt.

This process of crisis/testing is a part of God's plan to transform Joseph from a spoiled brat to a mature man with the gifts and wisdom to save a nation. Joseph was not alone in this. Verse 39:2 tells us that the Lord was with Joseph, as a slave, as a steward, as a prisoner, as a VP

Crisis and testing lead to growth and transformation – 2 vital characteristics of any follower of Jesus.

#### **Temptation and Victory:**

Temptation is also a part of Joseph's story. Scripture tells us that Joseph was quite something to look at. Not only was he good looking but he was also well built. At some point he attracted the attention of the Lady of the house. Mrs. Potiphar was blunt and to the point, "lie with me" AND she keeps after him day after day with the same proposal.

- **Ellen White {PP}**: But Joseph's faith and integrity were to be tested by fiery trials. His master's wife endeavored to entice the young man to transgress the law of God. Heretofore he had remained untainted by the corruption teeming in that heathen land; but this temptation, so sudden, so strong, so seductive--how should it be met? Joseph knew well what would be the consequence of resistance. On the one hand were concealment, favor, and rewards; on the other, disgrace, imprisonment, perhaps death. His whole future life depended upon the decision of the moment. Would principle triumph? Would Joseph still be true to God? With inexpressible anxiety, angels looked upon the scene.

Joseph's response provides an explanation of his rejection of Mrs. Potiphar:

- **Genesis 39:8-9** – "Behold, with me *here*, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. <sup>9</sup> "There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?"

**Joseph's answer reveals the power of religious principle.** He would not betray the confidence of his master on earth, and, whatever the consequences, he would be true to his Master in Heaven. Under the inspecting eye of God and holy angels many take liberties of which they would not be guilty in the presence of their fellow men, but Joseph's first thought was of God. "How . . . can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

**Besides destroying his master's trust, Joseph's main argument is a God-centered recognition that any sin not only affects human relationships but first and foremost invades and distorts the human-divine relationship. Sin destroys relationships on all levels.**

Temptation requires some sort of a response. We either say YES and fall or we say NO and gain victory. As with Joseph's experience temptation doesn't just come after us once, but over and over again, which requires perseverance (the Armor of God). No means No – every time. Joseph experienced shame / humiliation in resisting Mrs. Potiphar's advances (scripture says he lost his loincloth in the process of running away) But for Joseph, a little embarrassment was nothing compared with the relationship-destroying results of sin. God's honor was more important to Joseph than his own honor or his own freedom for that matter.

Joseph suffered for his integrity, for his tempter revenged herself by accusing him of a foul crime, and causing him to be thrust into prison. Had Potiphar believed his wife's charge against Joseph, the young Hebrew would have lost his life; but the modesty and uprightness that had uniformly characterized his conduct were proof of his innocence; and yet, to save the reputation of his master's house, he was abandoned to disgrace and bondage.

#### **From Prisoner to 2<sup>nd</sup> in Egypt:**

Joseph also faced the temptation to seek revenge against his brothers. Now that he was the 2<sup>nd</sup> most powerful man in all Egypt, Joseph could have had his brothers tortured and killed for what they did him. No one would have noticed the deaths of 10 foreigners. While Joseph did test his brothers, he did not seek revenge and in the end recommended they be given the best land in Egypt.

Joseph faced temptation and he chose fidelity to God over immediate pleasure/reward. He was victorious.

#### **Me vs. Him:**

Mrs. Potiphar's proposition is a clear representation of "ME". Her motives are completely self-centered. She had no regard for anything or anybody.

Joseph's response was the exact opposite. He only took into consideration his employer and his God. We are reminded that God is always in the picture. He is a part of every ethical equation and as followers of Jesus, God must always be a part of the process and we must always seek His perspective.

In the Gospels, Jesus was placed in positions where he was seemingly caught between only 2 choices. Either choice would get him in trouble (Matt 16:1-4; Matt 22:15-22; Mark 11:27-33). But ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS he came up with a third choice – a third response no one had considered. **Jesus was at all times biblically ethical.**

#### **It Is God:**

Sometimes we wonder where God is when we are in the midst of hardship. Certainly, in the story of Joseph God does not save him from the pit, nor from slavery, nor from prison and that seems rather harsh to us especially when Joseph refused to sleep with Potiphar's wife because of loyalty to God. We think Joseph should have been rewarded not tossed into prison. However, God's voice can be heard through the blessings brought to Potiphar's house and Pharaoh's prison because of Joseph. God showed Joseph, through dreams, the exalted position he would someday occupy and then God went about using circumstances and the choices of others to make sure those dreams came true.

Joseph understood this. When Joseph finally revealed to his brother his true identity, they were absolutely terror stricken. They saw before them the death sentence they so well deserved. But notice what Joseph said:

- **Genesis 45:1-8** - Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, "Have everyone go out from me." So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. <sup>2</sup> And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard *it*, and the household of Pharaoh heard *of it*. <sup>3</sup> Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. <sup>4</sup> Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup> "And now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup> "For the famine *has been* in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. <sup>7</sup> "And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. <sup>8</sup> "Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

## Take Aways

While humans plot and plan, God is silently at work – through slavery, times of testing, in prison, in the highest positions in the land. All along God planned to preserve: a man, a family, a nation, a world. Because of Joseph's fidelity, God turned what was meant to destroy into something that saved and restored.

- **Isaiah 25:1** - O lord, Thou art my God; I will exalt Thee, I will give thanks to Thy name; For Thou hast worked wonders, plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness.
- **Jeremiah 29:11** - For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.
- **Romans 8:28** - And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.

Despite the behavior of others and the circumstances he found himself in, Joseph chose to remain faithful to God. **Joseph's ethics transcended his surroundings.** He behaved as if only One person was watching.

When God becomes part of the equation, we cease to live circumstance-centered lives and begin to live God-centered lives.

Let us, like Joseph, live a life that seeks the applause of heaven.