

TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

Doing What's Right Even When Life Treats You Wrong *"How To Deal With Shattered Dreams"*

Genesis 37:2-20

It was bedtime. Mom and Dad had already sent little Jimmy upstairs to get ready for bed and they assumed he was asleep. But as Mom tiptoed into his room to check on him to make sure he was all covered up before she went to bed, she found him, not asleep, but sitting quietly by his window staring at something outside.

"What are you doing, Jimmy?" she asked?

"I'm looking at the moon, Mommy."

"Well, it's time to go to bed now. You can look at the moon tomorrow night."

As little Jimmy reluctantly turned away from the window and crawled into bed, he looked into his mother's eyes and said, *"Mommy, one day I'm going to walk on that moon."*

I don't know what went through his mother's mind when he made that statement. She probably thought, *"Well, that's just a foolish childish dream, a farfetched fantasy!"* But 32 years later, little Jimmy, **James Irwin**, stepped out of his Apollo 15 lunar module spacecraft onto the surface of the moon and became the 8th man in human history to actually walk on the moon.

A famous French philosopher once put it like this: *"To accomplish great things, we must not only act, but also dream; not only plan, but also believe."* One of America's great writers, **Carl Sandburg**, reiterates this very same truth. He once wrote, *"Nothing happens unless first we dream."*

But what happens if God plants a dream in our hearts and in our minds and it just doesn't happen? We believe it. We see it. We share

it with others...but it just doesn't happen. In fact, the further we go in life the less likely it seems that this dream, this vision, God has

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planted in our hearts and in our minds will ever come to pass. And we find ourselves sitting amidst the smoldering ashes of decimated dreams.

That's what I want to talk about this morning – **How To Deal With Shattered Dreams**. We're in the midst of a series of sermons entitled **"Taking The High Road – Doing What's Right Even When Life Treats You Wrong."** It's a character study of the Old Testament patriarch who was named **Joseph**.

If anyone had a good excuse to take the low road in life—to become bitter and hard and rebellious and vengeful—then certainly it was Joseph. His family mistreated him. His boss's wife falsely accused him, ruined his reputation and caused him to lose his job. A man whom he helped climb to the top and who promised he would remember him and help him when he got to the top, forgot him.

I mean it was just one tragedy after another. He is sold by his brothers into slavery. He does what is right in the face of temptation. He does what is honest. He does what is honorable. He does what is respectable and appropriate but instead of being rewarded and blessed for doing the right thing, he is punished and chastised and thrown into prison.

It would have been so easy for him to have taken the low road in life—to have become sour and cynical and mean—but he didn't. He took the high road in life. Even when he had been wronged; even when he had been thrown unjustly into prison; even when others forgot about him and mistreated him; Joseph lived his life with integrity, with grace, and with love. He took the high road.

And God lifted him above all of these obstacles in life and blessed him. And through him, brought blessing to his family and to his community and to all of those around him.

Not only should he be an encouragement for us to do what is right even

when life treats us wrong, but beyond that—even though he lived 3500 years ago—there are some precious and practical lessons he can teach us today that will help us to find and take the high road in life.

So that's why we're focusing upon the life of Joseph this summer. Now

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one of the very first things Joseph had to wrestle with in life was this problem of unfulfilled dreams. When he was just a young man, God planted a dream in Joseph's heart and mind that inspired him and gave him hope and encouragement.

He believed in this dream so much that he dared to share it with his father and his brothers and his family. They laughed at him. They ridiculed him. They sarcastically nicknamed him "*Dreamer*." Even his father rebuked him harshly for talking about this dream.

But the dream wouldn't die. God brought it to him a second time. And even though it seemed crazy to everyone else, Joseph believed it. He didn't understand it all, but he believed it. However, as the days and weeks and months and years went by, the likelihood of this dream ever coming to pass just seemed to move further and further away.

It began to fade. It began to just kind of wither away. Instead of experiencing his dream, what he experiences is a nightmare. Everything turns out wrong. He finds himself in the midst of a prison, in bondage, in a foreign land, sitting in the middle of all kinds of shattered dreams and broken promises and bitter disappointments.

And so let's look at what he did and how he responded and where it led him. The details of this dream are found in the **37th chapter** of the book of **Genesis** beginning with **verse 2**.

This is the account of Jacob. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had. We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves

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gathered around mine and bowed down to it."

His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.

Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the thing in mind.

Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them."

"Very well," he replied.

So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." So he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?"

"They moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'"

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. 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. They we’ll see what comes of his dreams.”

Genesis 37:2-

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If you know a little bit about the life of Joseph then you know that they didn’t carry out this plan. They didn’t kill him. They didn’t throw him

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down into that deep inescapable pit. But they did sell him into slavery. There was a caravan of Ishmaelite merchants heading to Egypt and Joseph’s brothers sold him as a slave to these foreign traders.

And for the next 13 years of his life, Joseph found himself in a foreign land, away from his home, away from his family, away from everything he ever knew, being passed around like a piece of meat. The last several of those years, he found himself locked up in a prison suffering punishment for something he didn’t do.

Now just stop for a moment and think about this. Think about how difficult this must have been for Joseph. Think of how depressed he could have become. God plants this dream in his heart and in his mind...and then reinforces this dream with a second dream that carries the very same message.

God says, “I’m going to elevate you to a place of leadership and honor and authority. Even though you’re the youngest in the family, I’m going to lift you and bless you and empower you.”

But almost from the moment Joseph is given that dream, bad things begin to happen. He is not elevated and honored—he is despised and hated and persecuted. He is not raised to a place of leadership—he is cut down and cast down and put into bondage. He is not empowered and granted authority—he is thrown into prison and caged like a wild animal...and seemingly forgotten.

You talk about a shattered dream! *Don’t you imagine Joseph must have spent a lot of time just trying to figure out what God must have meant by that dream? He must have wondered, “Did I miss some-thing here, God? Did I just mistakenly imagine that You spoke those words to me? Was that not really from You but just indigestion or something? Was it just something I ate that made me dream silly dreams?”*

Joseph could have become so bitter, so angry at God, so upset with life, so cynical and hateful and mean. But he didn’t! He didn’t take that low road. He took the high road and God used him in a

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wonderful way to bring blessing to his family and blessing to his descendants and blessing to anyone and everyone around him. **How was he able to be victorious in the midst of this shattered dream?** I believe it’s because he did at least 3 things.

He looked forward instead of backward. He looked up instead of down. He looked out instead of in. Now if you’re one of those persons who likes everything in nice, neat, little packages...and you just have to have it all organized into an outline, well, that’s your outline. It’s incredibly simple...but the impact is unbelievably profound.

How do you deal with shattered dreams? What do you do when God plants a vision in your heart and in your mind...and then nothing happens...it isn’t fulfilled? Maybe you’re there right now...living in the midst of broken dreams.

You were going to have this perfect home and wonderful marriage...and it has been a living hell...and it’s all broken and shattered and in ashes. You were going to have these long years of retirement to just enjoy life. You have worked hard and now it’s time to reap the rewards...but then this “thing” shows up on the x-rays and now it’s not fishing and golf but trips to the hospital and the doctor’s office.

God gave you this vision for ministry and you prayed about it and you worked hard and you prepared and you took that gigantic step of faith and you put your life on the line...and it has just turned out disastrous.

God lead you to this dream job. You knew it was His hand that directed you here...and now you find yourself with no job.

I don't know what your broken dream might be but here's what we learn from Joseph to do if and when that happens.

First, Look Forward Instead Of Backward. Now our tendency is to look backward and ask "why" and to second-guess ourselves and to second-guess God and to just dwell on what could have been and what might have been and what hasn't happened.

But here's the problem with that kind of mentality. Listen to the words of **Helen Keller**. Now if anyone knew anything about disappointment

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and tragedy, it was Helen Keller. An illness when she was just a child, 19 months old, left her deaf and blind. But listen to what she says. "*When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.*"

You know, I have read and re-read the story of Joseph over and over again and I can't find him anywhere asking the question, "Why?" "Why me?" "Why this?" "Why now?"

I can't find anywhere Joseph looking back and saying, "*But, God, You promised. You gave me this dream. You gave me this vision. Why isn't it happening? Why aren't you doing something about this dream?*" **He didn't look back. He was always looking forward.**

I read an interesting story the other day about a little boy in Decatur, Michigan who was deeply interested in photography. He saw an ad in a magazine one day describing this wonderful book about photography and he thought to himself, "*If I'm ever going to be a photographer then I need to know everything there is to know about photography.*" And so he sent away for this book.

But the publisher made a mistake and sent him instead a book about magic and ventriloquism. It had taken him several weeks to finally get this book and so instead of sending it back and waiting several more weeks for the book about photography, he decided he would just read this book about ventriloquism and he learned how to throw his voice.

He was so good at it that he created this wooden dummy (or puppet) whom he named **Charlie McCarthy** and on Sunday evenings millions of people across the United States would turn on their radios so they could listen and laugh and be entertained by the antics of **Edgar Bergen** and his make-believe sidekick, **Charlie McCarthy**.

Edgar Bergen could have looked back and said, "*What a mistake! What a waste of money! What a disappointment!*" But he looked forward and that made all the difference in his life.

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Near the close of his life, the apostle **Paul** wrote a very personal letter to his young friend, his spiritual son in the faith, **Timothy**. And in this letter, he tells Timothy one of the secrets to his success in life. Here is what he said, "*One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*"

(Philippians 3:13-14).

In other words, "*I look forward, not backward.*" Now here's the second thing we learn from the life of Joseph that we need to do in dealing with shattered dreams.

Look Up Instead Of Down. Last Sunday I gave you what I believe is the key verse in Joseph's story? *Do you remember what it is?* It occurs not just one, not just twice, but several times. It's that little phrase that appears first in **Genesis 39, verse 2**, "*The Lord was with Joseph.*"

He was with him in Potiphar's house when he was sold into slavery. He

was with him, says the Scripture, when he was thrown into prison and persecuted for something he didn't do. Through every step of this wild and challenging journey with all of its mind-boggling twists and turns, God was with Joseph.

Even in places that were hard and unfair—places where he didn't want to be—God was with Joseph. And he believed that. He trusted in that. He lived by that faith...and that's what carried him through victoriously. He believed that somehow God's hand was in the midst of all of this.

Instead of looking around at all of his circumstances and problems and difficulties and getting bitter, depressed and angry...he looked up and believed that somehow God's hand was in all of this and that God would create good from that which looked so, so bad.

There is another man in the Bible who had to deal with a lot of shattered dreams. I'm talking about **Moses**. He was educated in Pharaoh's palace. He was raised as a prince of Egypt. But he lost all of that and had to live like a refugee out in the desert.

God called him to a great work. ***“Lead My people to the Promised Land,”*** said God. But it was just one heartache, one obstacle, one

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impediment after another. *Don't you wonder sometimes how he ever made it, how he ever kept his sanity, how he ever kept his faith and his smile and his joy?*

The Bible gives us the answer to that question in **Hebrews 11:27**. Listen to the answer. ***“He persevered because he saw him who is invisible.”*** He looked up. He had the eyes of faith. He saw the hand of God in the midst of every disappointment, every difficulty, every danger.

That's the kind of faith Joseph exhibited. I want you to hear what the Bible says in the **41st chapter of Genesis**. Beginning with **verse 50**.

Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, “It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.” The second son he named Ephraim and said, “It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.”

Genesis 41:50-52

Even in all of his trouble and in all of his suffering, Joseph saw the hand of God at work. He said, *“All that happened to me aren't just a bunch of unrelated incidents. God has been working and moving and blessing...and so I'm going to praise Him and worship Him and trust in Him.”*

This belief was the anchor that steadied his soul and enabled him to take the high road in life and not the low one. Later on when he could have been so nasty to his brothers and gotten even with them and hurt them just as they had hurt him, he said, ***“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives”*** (Genesis 50:20).

Even in the midst of difficult and trying times...when it seemed that his dreams had been smashed to pieces...he looked up instead of down.

Now here's the third thing we need to do in the face of shattered dreams

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Look Out Instead Of In. When things begin to get tough in life, when challenges come and it looks like our most cherished dreams are just going to get smashed to pieces, there is this tendency to get consumed with our own needs, our own hurts, our own problems. We can get obsessed with *my* plight in life, *my* problems, *my* needs.

But here's what I notice about Joseph. He's always looking out to the needs of others. I mean even in prison he's helping people—the cupbearer and the baker. We'll get to their story in a few weeks. But here's the point. Some of the greatest, most fulfilling, meaningful contributions we can ever make in life is when we dare to get our eyes of

of our own needs, hurts and disappointments and look out with love and care to others.

*Are you familiar with how **Stanford University** first got started?* One of the great universities here in America is Stanford University which is located not far from San Francisco, California. Nearly every year it is ranked as one of the top 5 universities in America.

Actually its proper name is **Leland Stanford University**. Leland Stanford was once the governor of California. He was a very wealthy man and he had one son whom he named Leland Stanford, Junior. Mom and Dad wanted to give everything this world had to offer to their son and so while he was just a young boy they traveled to Europe to immerse him in the history and culture of the world.

But while they were in Italy young Leland became ill. They took him to a doctor, discovered that he had a serious illness, and before they could return to the states, he died. They were, of course, heartbroken and devastated. They returned to California with his remains and said, *“All our hopes and dreams are represented by these burnt ashes. Leland Junior is gone. What can we do?”*

Here’s what they decided. *“Since Leland Junior is gone, here is what we will do. We will make all of the other children in California our children. We’ll raise them and educated them.”* And so they built and endowed Stanford University.

When Leland Stanford, Senior, died, he left a sum of money estimated at

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26 million dollars as an endowment so it might be possible for every boy and every girl in California, regardless of their economic situation or need, to have the opportunity of receiving a university of education.

It is impossible to estimate the good that came from the love and the care that came from this one man who in the midst of his own broken and shattered dreams dared to look out instead of in...who took the

high road instead of the low road...who allowed his bitter disappointments to inspire him to be of great service to others in need.

That’s what Joseph did. **He looked forward instead of backward. He looked up instead of down. He looked out instead of in.** And God used him to bring a wonderful blessing to his family, to anyone and everyone around him, even to future generations.

Man, I want to be a blessing, don’t you? I want to enrich my family. I want to leave a legacy of faith for my grandchildren and my grandchildren’s grandchildren. I want to bring blessing to people around me. And God is able to do that when we **look forward instead of backward; when we look up instead of down; when we look out instead of in.**