

TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

Doing What's Right Even When Life Treats You Wrong *"How To Trust God Even In The Midst Of Dark Days"*

Genesis 37:17b-36

During the closing days of World War II, a small group of Allied soldiers entered an abandoned Nazi concentration camp to search it, secure it, and inspect it. What they found there was, of course, horrific in many ways.

But as they were rummaging through one of the little prison cells, they found some words that one of the prisoners had scratched on the wall. Here's what it said.

I believe in the sun—even when it's not shining.

I believe in love—even when I can't feel it.

I believe in God—even when He is silent.

I want to talk this morning about the trustworthiness of God. If anybody knew about unfair treatment, about being wronged in life, about bad things happening to good people, it was Joseph.

We've been looking the last few weeks at Joseph's life and exploring some of the lessons we can learn from him about living life victoriously.

Now here's what we've discovered so far. **It's not what happens to us in life that really counts. What counts is how we respond to it.**

Charles Swindoll, one of the great Christian writers of our day, has put it like this: *"Life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond it."*

Basically there are two roads we can travel along in life—a high road and low road. The high road is not an easy road. It's not heavily traveled. It is incredibly narrow and oftentimes it's just downright difficult and demanding. But it leads to life, to joy, to peace and to happiness.

The low road, on the other hand, is smooth and easy and appealing. It is spaciouly wide, heavily-populated, fashionable and trendy. But it leads to death and destruction.

Jesus put it like this one time. *"Wide is the gate and broad is the road the leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road the leads to life, and only a few find it"* (Matthew 7:13b New International Version). So He urges us, *"Enter through the narrow gate"* (Matthew 7:13a New International Version).

Or, in other words, *"Don't just follow the crowd and do what looks easy and painless and comfortable. Take the road less traveled, no matter how difficult or lonely it appears to be."*

That's the road Joseph traveled on through life—the high road—and not only was he richly blessed by God in the end but God also brought blessing through him to his family and to his children and to his descendants and to anyone and everyone around him.

And so I've entitled this series of sermons about Joseph's life: **"Taking The High Road—Doing What's Right Even When Life Treats You Wrong."**

From time to time, people will ask me, *"Why should I read the Bible? That was written two thousand years ago! It's old. It's ancient. How is something that happened to some guy who lived in the Middle East thirty-five centuries ago raising sheep and goats relevant to me?"*

Well, let me give you a couple of verses of Scripture to chew on this morning in your mind – **1st Corinthians 10, verses 6 and 11.** *"Now these things occurred as examples, to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things....These thing happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us."*

Do you understand what the apostle Paul, who wrote these words, was saying to us? These stories—like the story of Joseph—were written down and preserved for us that we might learn and benefit from their experience. And if Joseph's life teaches us anything at all then surely it teaches us about the trustworthiness of God.

You talk about dark and difficult days, Joseph's life is just littered with all kinds of heartaches and disappointments.

- He was mistreated by his family. His brothers hated him.
- He was mistreated by society. He became a victim of human trafficking—was sold into slavery.
- He was mistreated by his supervisor at work. Although he was a model employee—honest, hardworking, competent—someone lied about him, and instead of checking out the rumor, his boss just canned him and had him thrown into jail.
- He was mistreated by his friends. He helped a friend who was deeply troubled and depressed. He was there for him. But when this friend finally got all of the broken pieces of his life put back together, he just forgot about Joseph, deserted him, abandoned him.

In fact, as you begin reading Joseph's story it is just one tragedy after another. Let me show you what I mean. Please take your Bibles and turn to book of **Genesis, chapter 37**, and let's just look a little bit at Joseph's early history. We'll begin reading with the last part of **verse 17**.

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. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.”

When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. “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.” Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his 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.

As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

Judah said to his brothers, “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.” His brothers agreed.

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.

When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, “The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?”

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. Meanwhile the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

Genesis 37:17b-36 NIV

I'm going to stop right there. You get the picture, don't you? Here's a guy who if it wasn't for his bad luck he would have no luck at all! I mean what an ugly picture of greed and hatred and deception and evil! Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. *How would you have felt about all of this?*

What would it have done to your faith in God? I mean Joseph came from a deeply religious family. His father Jacob was the patriarch of the

children of Israel, the people of God. Joseph grew up hearing all of these stories about God's goodness, God's power, God's promise to Abraham and all of his descendants. But as Joseph begins to live his life and follow God it is just one disaster, one disappointment, one difficulty, one dilemma, one dark day after another.

Don't you wonder if at times he felt that even God had abandoned him? Dark days can have a devastating effect upon our faith. You may remember from Scripture that **Job's** wife kind of lost it when the tragedies kept piling up in their life.

They lost their business—everything they owned. They lost the lives of their children in an awful storm. And then Job lost his health—was stricken with an awful disease that brought all kinds of suffering. Until finally Job's wife couldn't take it anymore. She said, ***“Just curse God and die! He doesn't care about you. What difference does it make in trying to serve Him? I quit.”***

When bad things happen to good people we are forced to face one the most important questions of existence – **Who is really in control of life?** There are three basic answers from which you can choose.

You can believe and assume that you are in control. You can with conviction quote those oft-repeated words of **William Ernest Henley**,

**I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.**

I am in charge of my life. But when tragedy comes, when the cold clammy hand of illness gets a hold of your body and changes all of your plans, you suddenly realize, ***“Man, I'm not in charge of my life. I'm not in control. Someone or something else is.”***

You can believe and assume that no one is in control of life. That life is just a series of unrelated coincidences with no rhyme nor reason to it all. Like one of the main characters in **Shakespeare's** play ***“Macbeth,”*** we believe that life ***“is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”***

There's a term for that kind of thinking and philosophy—we call it *fatalism*. No one is in control, just blind fate. But, as someone has wisely said, ***“Fatalism embraces the worst of our fears.”*** And fear, more often than not, is a destructive force in our lives.

The Bible says, ***“Fear involves torment”*** (1st John 4:18 NKJV). *Wouldn't that be an awful way to live your life to be continually tortured in mind and soul?* But there is a third answer.

You can believe and assume that God is in control. Regardless of how dark and disturbing life can appear at times, you can believe and stake your life upon the assurance that there is a God, a Creator, a loving and powerful Heavenly Father, who is at work in this world, often behind the scenes, to bring good out of evil, joy out of sadness, blessing out of brokenness.

That's the conviction the apostle **Paul** had when he wrote, ***“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”*** (Romans 8:28 NIV).

And this was the kind of faith that Joseph had. In the midst of all of this heartache and tragedy and abuse and mistreatment and abandonment, he continued to live his life with faith and with integrity and with grace. He took the high road.

There came a moment in his life when he could have taken out all of his frustrations and his hurt on these brothers who treated him so cruelly. He had the power and the opportunity to get even. He said, ***“Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives”*** (Genesis 50:19-20 NIV).

Or, in other words, ***“Listen, guys. God has been at work here. I didn't know what He was doing. You didn't know what He was doing. None one knew what He was doing. But in the midst of all of this, He was at work to bring good out of the evil. So let's just worship Him and celebrate what He is doing and what He has done.”***

We know the end of the story. God used all of these jagged pieces of life

to put together a beautiful picture of salvation and redemption. The children of Israel, the people of God, were saved, they survived an awful famine, because God was at work behind the scenes to bring ultimate good to His people.

Now here's what should encourage us today. ***“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”*** (Hebrews 13:8 NIV).

But Pastor Mark, you don't understand. I'm devastated. I'm really hurting. My world has come crashing down and I'm just sitting here in the midst of all of the broken pieces. My husband walked out on me. My son is battling drugs. My teenage daughter is pregnant. I lost my job. I've just discovered my spouse has cancer. I've just buried a loved one. I've been double-crossed. People have let me down. And on and on and on!

Let me remind you: Even though Joseph couldn't see or possibly know what God was doing in the midst of all this mess; even though he may have felt that God had forsaken and abandoned him; God was with Him all of the time. *Do you remember the key verse in Joseph's story?* It's repeated three different times. ***“The Lord was with Joseph”*** (Genesis 39:2).

Not only was the Lord with Joseph, He was working behind the scenes to bring good out of all of the evil. And because Joseph took the high road and lived his life with faith and with integrity and with grace, God blessed Joseph and, through him, blessed Joseph's family and his descendants and anyone and everyone around him.

So how do you trust God when you are in the midst of dark days? The answer is found in three P's.

Acknowledge God's Presence Even When You Can't See Him Or Feel Him. Underline that word “presence.” Although you may not be able to see Him or feel Him and it may look like everything is going wrong and that God has abandoned you, He has promised us, ***“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you”*** (Hebrews 13:5 NIV).

Our emotions ebb and flow like the waves of an ocean. Several years

ago, **Dr. James Dobson** wrote a book entitled, ***“Emotions: Can You Trust Them?”*** The answer is no—you can't trust them. They're always changing. You need something solid to stand upon during the time of trouble—something stable to which you can anchor your soul.

That's where the promises of God come in. They're written down in black and white. You can hold them. They are God's eternal word to us. And one of the most precious of all is what Jesus promised us shortly before He left this earth. ***“Surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age”*** (Matthew 28:20 NIV).

When missionary **David Livingstone** returned to his homeland in Scotland after 16 years of very difficult times on the mission field, he was asked to speak to a large group of students at Glasgow University.

His body was thin and frail from the ravages of some 27 fevers that had traveled through his veins. One arm hung useless at his side, the result of being mangled by a lion. After he had spoken to the students, he opened the floor for questions and one young man stood up and asked him, ***“What sustained you in the midst of the toil, the hardship, and the loneliness of being out there by yourself in such a remote place?”***

He thought about it for a moment and then answered. ***“It was Christ's promise, ‘Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end.’”***

The Bible says in **Romans 8:6**, ***“To be spiritually minded is life and peace”*** (NKJV). Acknowledge God's presence, keep worshiping Him, even when you can't see Him or feel Him. It will build trust in your soul and it produce life and peace.

Here's the second P.

Persist In Doing What Is Right. Be obedient to God. Take the high road. Do what is right even when others are treating you wrong. That is what Joseph did and that is why God was able to use Joseph in such a powerful way to bring blessing to his family and to his children and to his descendants and to anyone and everyone around him.

When God sends us a signal, we just need to do it—no questions asked.

It may not make sense to us. But that doesn't matter. For, you see, we see in part and know in part, but God knows fully.

When **Earl Weaver** was manager of the Baltimore Orioles baseball team, he had a standing rule that no one could steal a base unless given the signal.

When Hall of Famer, **Reggie Jackson**, played briefly for the Baltimore Orioles, he felt that was just a silly rule. He thought he knew the pitchers and catchers well enough to judge for himself who he could and couldn't steal on.

So one game Reggie decided to steal without a sign. He got a good jump off the pitcher and easily beat the throw to second. As he shook the dirt off of his uniform, he looked over at the bench and smiled, feeling he had vindicated his judgment to his manager.

When the inning was over, Earl Weaver took Jackson aside and explained to him why he hadn't given the steal sign. For one thing, the next batter was Lee May, the team's best power hitter other than Jackson. When Jackson stole second, that left first base open, so the other team walked Lee May intentionally, taking the bat out of his hands.

Not only that! The following batter hadn't been strong against that particular pitcher. So Weaver felt he had to send up a pinch hitter to try to drive in the men on base and that left Weaver without his best pinch hitter for later in the game when he really needed him.

The problem was that Jackson saw only his own role in the game while his manager saw the whole game.

And so it is with God. God wasn't just thinking about Joseph. He was thinking about the future of His people and the plan of salvation and the work of eternity.

You will never know all that God is doing. The Bible talks about God doing "*immeasurably more than all we think or imagine.*" But when we persist to do what is right even in the midst of awful

circumstances, it builds trust and allows God to not only bless us but to use us in blessing others.

Now here's the third P.

Pray Continually. It's amazing what prayer will do. The Bible says, "*They that wait upon the Lord, shall renew their strength*" (Isaiah 40:31 KJV). Someone has put it like this. "*The man, the woman, who kneels to God can stand up to anything.*"

The apostle **Paul** says it like this: "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me*" (Philippians 4:13 NASB).

So let me close this morning with a quote from one of the greatest Christian writers who ever lived, **E.M. Bounds**. He writes: "*Trust is not a belief that God can bless or that he will bless, but that he DOES bless. Trust always operates in the present tense. Hope looks to the future, trust looks to the present. Hope expects. Trust possesses.*"

And so I encourage you this morning, no matter what you're going through:

- To **acknowledge God's presence** even if you can't see Him or feel Him.
- Commit and **persist in doing what is right** even if it isn't easy.
- **Pray continually.**