



Genesis 37:12-36
The New Normal
Undone By Others

Rev. Brian North
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Probably all of us have had an experience where our lives were impacted by something that someone else said or did, and a “new normal” set in for a time in our own lives. Maybe as a result you had anger toward that person, or resentment or jealousy or bitterness.

When I was going into my senior year in High School I had all of those enter into my life for a few years when my dad lost his job due to a downsizing at the company where he had worked for 25 years. And the person who was responsible – at least in part – for that decision had a son in my High School graduation class – which meant that every day I was reminded of the decision his dad helped make that impacted our family. I was fortunate that in the long run it didn’t impact things like where we lived or what I did after high school – I still got to go to the Harvard of the West, more commonly known as the University of Washington. But there still was a “new normal” that impacted each of us in our family to varying degrees. And part of what took root in me was anger, bitterness, resentment, and jealousy – not just toward those who made the decision, but toward the kid in my class and then toward others in my high school who were in a similar socio-economic status as he was. And then it branched out in college to others – who didn’t have any relationship with him or his family. I had these same negative assumptions and attitude about them simply based on their socio-economic status. That became “normal” for me.

So how do we respond when people do things that deeply impact us and set our lives, or the lives of our family, into a new normal? What can we do so that these negative things don’t take root in us and really start to drag us down? As we continue our four-week series that we started last week on “new normal” this is what we are looking at today. Last week we looked at times when we bring the new normal upon ourselves.

And as we’ll see this morning, the life of Joseph as told in Genesis, gives us a great example. This morning we are reading from Genesis 37:12-36. It’s a little longer stretch of Scripture, but the story of Joseph’s life takes up about

13 chapters in Genesis, so we're only scratching the surface here. The backdrop is that Joseph has 11 brothers and half-brothers. He's the youngest, and Genesis begins the account of his life when he's 17 years old. Joseph has a couple of dreams that he shares with his brothers and his father that anger them because in a symbolic way the dreams paint a picture of the 11 brothers, and even his dad and mom, bowing down to him. This angered his brothers, and sets the stage for the passage we read today...(**Genesis 37:12-26**). Then: **Sermon Title Slide.**

So, could a worse "new normal" be thrust upon someone? We might think this is a story from a bygone era or wonder if it's even true because it sounds so horrible...but even today there are parents who sell their kids into sex trafficking – including right here in America. So pawning off a sibling is not so far-fetched.

What we see is that: **There's a new normal that is thrust upon him against his will through the actions of others.** As we read, he ends up in Egypt, in the household of one of Pharaoh's officials (Potiphar). It's not a smooth road for Joseph the next few years, but he earns the trust of Pharaoh, and at the age of 30 Joseph ends up in a high-ranking position, in charge of Pharaoh's palace, directly reporting to Pharaoh himself.

So, one thing to note right away is that Joseph didn't let his new normal overwhelm him to the point of incapacity. No, this is not the course of life he would have chosen for himself by any stretch of the imagination, but he also wasn't going to let this take him down into bitterness or depression as it easily could have. I had a season of life in ministry one time where I was feeling beat up and opposed, unfairly accused of things with no due process, and it led me into a season of depression. Not to the point that I was non-functional, but to where life was a struggle for 8 or 9 months. I didn't want to get out of bed, I lost a lot of my ambition and drive, and it was a dark season. Joseph manages to stay out of that place, as far as we know.

Second, as you read through the story of Joseph, it is clear that his relationship with God is paramount, and certainly is a big reason he didn't let his "new normal" prevent him from having success in life. He

continues to give God credit for his own talents and abilities. Where some people might “blame God” for the actions of others that lead to their new lot in life, Joseph takes the high road, and continues to turn to God, point others to Him, and give God credit and glory. Perhaps the two dreams he had, and the sense of calling from them that he would be in a place of leadership, helped keep him going. There’s no doubt that when God has given you a mission and a purpose and a calling (we’ll come back to that more, later) that you are able to persevere through all kinds of trials and challenges.

So, a famine sweeps over North Africa and the Middle East. **But because of Joseph’s leadership and God working through him, Egypt was prepared.** Joseph had gotten promoted to be in charge of the nation’s storehouses, and they stored up grain during the robust years to make it through the famine years that were coming. But other places in the region weren’t so fortunate. And that included Joseph’s family back home. All of his brothers but one journey down to Egypt to see if they can buy some grain or other food supplies to bring home.

And wouldn’t you know it: **The person they end up dealing with is Joseph, because he’s now in charge of Egypt’s storehouses.** The brothers don’t recognize him for several reasons. First, they wouldn’t expect a non-Egyptian to be in such a position. The assumption is “everyone’s Egyptian.” Second, because he’s been in Egypt for so long – at least 20 years by now (age 17 arrived, age 30 promoted to work for Pharaoh, plus 7 years of good crops), depending on how far into the 7 years of famine they are at this point – they wouldn’t recognize him. He talks like an Egyptian - in fact, Genesis 42:23 says that his brothers didn’t realize he could understand them because he used an interpreter. So he faked not knowing Hebrew. Also, as the Bangles sang nearly 35 years ago – he walks like an Egyptian. I don’t know that they actually walked different, but it fits. And he looks like an Egyptian. You know the difference between the Hebrews and the Egyptians? The Hebrews want to be saved, while the Egyptians want to be shaved. So he probably had a shaved head (facial hair for sure), which would be completely different from how they’d last seen him. Plus it’s been at least 20 years, with no photographs to help keep the memory strong, and he’s wearing Egyptian clothes – undoubtedly clothes nearly fit for a king because of his high

position. It's a far cry from the home-made clothes of the family they'd last seen him in.

So they show up looking for food and don't recognize Joseph. **Joseph, of course, sees a *possible* reunion with his family, and everything he does after this is about that *possibility*.** These are brothers who completely betrayed him and abused him previously. Does he *want* to reconnect with them? Have they changed so that he can *actually* have a relationship with them...or if he reveals himself to them is he just going to regret it?

So he tests them to find out about their character. First, he casually inquires about their family situation – who all are they providing food for – are their other siblings, their parents, etc. At least some of the family information he would know whether it's true or not because he's one of them. But then he treats them somewhat harshly, making demands, accusing them of spying, putting them in prison for a few days, keeping one of the brothers longer than that and promising to release him only after the other brothers return home and came back with the one brother who stayed at home. But he could have done much worse if revenge were really his motive. For instance, he could have made them slaves to earn the grain.

Mostly, however, he was looking to test their character. Have they changed? Would they abandon another brother, or would they come back for him? Are they honest? Can he have a relationship with them, or not? This isn't just about forgiving them...it's about what happens after he forgives them.

And...they pass the tests. They come back to Egypt with the other brother, and they're honest about other things he's tested them in. And so now all of the brothers are gathered together. And finally, in Genesis 45 we read: **Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it (Genesis 45:1-2).** So he's in a room with just his brothers. They still don't know who he really is. And he starts crying in front of them – loudly. It was heard in other rooms of the palace or wherever they were. This

is emotional stuff – up there with the birth of your children, having your children get married, and the Seahawks winning the Super Bowl. Then we read this:

“But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come close to me.’ When they had done so, he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.’” (Genesis 45:3-5). These are clearly not the words of a man who is holding a grudge, and hatred, and bitterness, and envy...toward his brothers. **This is a man who has forgiven them.** He has moved on from the past, and is ready to return to relationship with them, and so he reveals his true identity to them.

Of course, we also cannot ignore his statement that “God sent me ahead of you.” And we should not ignore it. Because really, this is the key to living in a new normal that someone else puts us into. We cannot see the big picture or understand how events will unfold. But God does. **So don’t dwell on the past indiscretions: look for God’s presence in the present and what He’s doing now. When we do that, God will take our hardships and use them in good ways.** Some of the hardships – as Joseph says here – are even within the framework of God’s will. The brothers shipped him off because of their own jealousy of Joseph, not even realizing that his presence in Egypt would be their saving grace one day.

But Joseph recognized it. And it got him through this season of life. 20 years (at a bare minimum) he was separated from them. 20 years of persevering, living into the calling he had upon his life. And ultimately, the two dreams that he had of his family bowing down before him, came true. Not that he made them servants or slaves or that he was King of the land or anything like that...but they were at his mercy. And because Joseph forgave them, because Joseph refused to believe that the “new normal” meant God had abandoned him, because he refused to give into hatred and bitterness and a desire for revenge, because Joseph saw God’s hand in the whole thing: he was reunited with his family, he saved his family, and God brought something glorious out

of a terrible event.

For those of us who are Jesus-followers, this outcome should not surprise us. Not just because most of us already know the story of Joseph. It shouldn't surprise us because this is how God operates. Romans 8:28 puts it like this: **“And 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)**. Obviously, the key thing here is God's work and God's will. But let's not diminish the words that are important for our part in this as well. That this is for “...those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Our calling is to love God. Jesus says it's the first of the great commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. And the purposes of God are all about His Kingdom. So we love God for the sake of His Kingdom.

No matter what “new normals” may get thrust upon us by others, we can keep loving God (there's no law against “loving God”) – **knowing that He first loves us – and living into the calling that's upon our lives here and now**. That “here and now” is the emphasis Jesus puts on these kinds of things. For instance, in John 9 we read this: “As he [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ [In other words, was this “normal” thrust upon him because of his parents or brought on by his own actions (this week's and last week's topics).] ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him’ (John 9:1-3). Jesus is not as interested in the past indiscretion as much as he is in what God is doing *here* and *now* and going forward – and all for the sake of God's Kingdom.

Jesus experienced something similar in his own life. Betrayed by his friends, thrown into a sham of a trial, put up on the cross...he didn't do anything that deserved all of that. Talk about a “new normal” that comes at the hands of other people. But what does he say from the cross about those who led him into this place? Does he dwell on the sins of others that put him there? No. He says (among other things), **“Father forgive them, for they don't know what they do” (Luke 23:34)**. He keeps living in a way that honors God the

Father, even as his earthly life is undone by others. He is completely focused on the “here and now” and what His Heavenly Father is doing. He keeps living into the calling of loving God and living for the benefit of God’s Kingdom.

And that’s the calling we have as well – even when someone does us wrong and causes an unpleasant new normal. Love God and look for what He’s doing here and now that will benefit the Kingdom, rather than letting past wrongs dictate our present or our future. And when we live into that calling, God will do something good with our situations in life – just as he did with Jesus, just as he did with Joseph, just as he has undoubtedly done in your own life as well. God is faithful. He will keep working for good in your life, even when we feel completely undone by others. Let’s pray...Amen.