



NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOE PART II: DECISIONS, DECISIONS

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
September 5, 2004*

We're continuing our look at the life of Joseph – the bigger than life character from the Old Testament. Last week we looked at how he started out in his journey of faith in God, and how the kinds of questions he faced are the kind that we face.

Joseph's dad gave him a fancy coat, and all his brothers were jealous, because they knew he was the favorite. So they hated him. Things were getting pretty tense, and that's where we pick up the story today.

Genesis 37:12-25

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." Then 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 have 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. 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.

Isn't that terrible? It's hard to believe anybody could be that mean to their brother or their dad.

I've read this story since I was a kid, but as I was studying it this time, what really hit me about it was what it has to say about making decisions. People all through this passage are choosing directions for good or bad.

We said last week that Joseph provides a practical example for us about what it means to follow God, and there is a lot we can learn from these verses about making good decisions. That's a really big topic – knowing the right thing to do, knowing what God's will for your life is. And we won't be able to cover every aspect of it this morning. But Joseph's story gives us some key ideas to keep in mind.

Do you ever think about how many decisions we make in a day? They're coming at us constantly. Some are small: Should I get up or hit the snooze button? Which socks do I want to wear today?

Some are bigger: How should I spend my time? Where do I want to go to school? Who should I marry? What should I do with my life?

There are different ways to arrive at answers to those questions, and there are at least three distinct approaches we can find in this story. Let's look at what Joseph did first.

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.

Joseph was obeying orders. I would say what shaped his decisions was that he was

ON A MISSION.

Joseph was sent out by his father with very explicit instructions of where he was going, why he was going and what he was supposed to do. It was not an easy assignment – Shechem was about 50 miles away from home. He was going to see brothers who hated him, and he was supposed to basically tell on them. Last time he did that, they weren't too happy about it.

Still, it wasn't a hard decision, because Joseph loved his dad and wanted to obey him. But what happened when he got to Shechem? His brothers weren't there.

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

This is where I can relate to Joseph. The boy wandering around in the fields, trying to figure out what to do next. We can start out on a quest, feeling like we have specific

instructions from God. And we follow those instructions to a T. But eventually, we reach a point where the details get fuzzier. The road map ends. We lose the clarity of the initial call. And we look around and see nothing but empty space. What are we supposed to do? How do we know?

Joseph could have turned around and gone back home. He had done as much as his dad had asked. He could have said, “Well, I went where you said, and they weren’t there. I guess we’ll just have to wait until they get home.”

Joseph saw the bigger picture, though. He knew what his father’s intentions had been, and the main point wasn’t the specifics of his trip, but the purpose, which was locating his brothers.

That gave Joseph both **the freedom and the responsibility** to explore other places. So when the man showed up who said, “I heard your brothers talking about going to Dothan,” Joseph knew immediately what he was supposed to do next. He didn’t stand there and think, “Hmmm. Dad said Shechem. I’m not so sure about going to Dothan.” He knew his job, and that helped him in his decision to go ahead, even though it was a change of plans.

Knowing your mission, your purpose in life is a fundamental piece of decision making. If we don’t know what we’re about, it’s tough to evaluate whether or not some things are good choices. If we’re on a mission, even the small decisions take on greater importance.

Let’s say I wanted to become a world class unicyclist, and to compete in the Mr. Unicycle Universe contest. Let’s say I dreamed about it, I read books about it and I got all the right gear.

One day my friends are all going to play video games and my coach has told me I need to practice for 3 hours. There’s nothing wrong with hanging out with my friends. They’re nice people, and they play nice games that my parents would let me play. But if I choose to do that, it’s not going to help me reach my goal. I use the fact that I’m on a mission to become the world’s greatest unicyclist as my way of coming to a decision.

As Christians, it is important for us to take our decisions seriously. Listen to what Paul told Titus:

Titus 3:8

And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.

We are supposed to be careful, watching what we do. We’re on a mission – to follow Christ, to be obedient to God. That fact alone should shape how we make our decisions. Things that contradict that goal or just distract us from it are things to avoid.

So that's really the first question: Do we have a clear idea in our heads of the bigger picture? If not, our decisions will be messy. They may be even IF we're clear, but at least we will have a guiding principle in making them.

I once heard an elderly woman who was a retired missionary speak in a church. When she came home to the states, there was a young college student who was writing a report for a class, and the assignment was to interview someone about their understanding of the meaning of their life. She said, "That's easy. To know him and make him known."

There was no question in her head what life is all about. Do we have that singular focus shaping our lives, every aspect of it? Decisions made in light of a mission become more clear.

What's your purpose? Jesus gave us two foundational pieces:

Matthew 22:37-40

Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the Prophets hangs from them."

It takes a lifetime to unpack what that looks like for each one of us. How do I love God that intensely, given the way I'm wired, the gifts he's given me, the interests I have? It will look different for each of us. How I will show my love to my neighbors will be different from the way you do. But if we share that common purpose, it will help us in deciding how we live our lives.

The writer of Genesis gives us an example of what it looks like when there is no guiding mission. Most of Joseph's other brothers exemplify this approach to decision making, which I call

ON THE FLY.

"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..."

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.

I call this method of decision making “on the fly” because the brothers repeatedly decided things based on the circumstances that presented themselves.

1. They saw Joseph coming and decided to commit murder.
2. They saw some cisterns close by and decided to throw Joseph in.
3. They saw the Midianites coming and decided to sell Joseph to them.

Everything they did was shaped by the opportunities at hand and what they stood to gain personally from it. There was no thought to the consequences. There was no evaluation in terms of how their choices would affect their father or Joseph. It was done with complete disregard for anyone else. Only the moment mattered.

In shopping, they call it the impulse buy. Whatever you see that you like goes into your shopping cart. You do whatever you want as you get the chance to do it.

1 Corinthians 6:12

Just because something is technically legal doesn't mean that it's spiritually appropriate. If I went around doing whatever I thought I could get by with, I'd be a slave to my whims.

Sometimes we can even make it sound like a very spiritual way to make decisions. I know I have used it before. When Karin and I were first trying to move up to Washington from California, we threw the decision back on God, saying “Ok God, if you open a door, we'll take it as a sign that we're supposed to move.” In other words, we would do something if the opportunity came along.

But not every open door is from God. Paul certainly didn't think so, even when it was a great open door.

2 Corinthians 2:12-13

Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia.

God expects us to use the wisdom he has given us to evaluate each situation, and not just do something because we can. Possibilities aren't signs. When we look for God to open doors, we're really relying on circumstances to determine our steps. It gives too much power to the events in our lives, rather than to the mission that is supposed to be guiding us. God certainly can intervene, but those times are the exceptions rather than the rule.

One thing we've been learning as a new church board is just how many opportunities there are out there to help, programs to start, new things we could do. And what we have had to realize is that we can't do it all. We have limited resources, limited time, limited staffing. So what do we do? We have to channel our energies into what we is most closely in line with our mission. We have to say no as much as we say yes.

1 Thessalonians 5:21

Test everything. Hold on to the good.

That's good advice. Explore the possibilities. Check out your options. But don't assume they're all from God. Test them. If they don't fit with your larger purpose or mission, they could take you further from your goals.

Joseph's brothers were simply operating on the fly, doing whatever whenever they could. It ended up causing a lot of unnecessary grief.

There was one brother who didn't quite agree with them all and that was Reuben.

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...

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?"

Reuben had a bit of a conscience. He felt badly about the whole situation. But he didn't act on his instinct. His method of decision making was to put things

ON HOLD.

Reuben had a wait-it-out mindset. He hesitated to act, which ended up being the same as going along with his brothers. You would have thought that he would have at the very least told his father what really happened, but instead he kept silent just like all the others.

When we don't know what to do, waiting is the right thing. The Bible says over and over to wait for the Lord. But once our heart tells us what is right, we can't just do nothing. It is giving up our responsibility and letting events unfold, rather than doing the hard work of following through on what we know is right.

I played soccer for one year in high school. I was terrible. So many kids tried out that they had to create an extra team for the ones who weren't very good. I was about the worst of the bunch.

I played defender, and I would usually mess up and the other team would get past me. In one game, I let them through, and my coach started yelling at me, giving what were obvious instructions. It made me mad, and I yelled back, "I KNOW!" So he yelled back at me, "Then DO IT!!"

It's not enough to have things straight in our heads. It doesn't do us any good unless we actually act on it.

James 4:17

Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

Sometimes what keeps us from making a decision is that we know it would be hard to follow through. Deciding is often costly and painful, because it means giving up other possibilities. So we delay the decision. We put it on hold. We hope it will go away. We hope someone else will decide for us.

Rick Warren, author of **The Purpose Driven Life** says this about not waiting to act, particularly when it comes to fulfilling our purpose of loving other people.

Why is now the best time to express love? Because you don't know how long you will have the opportunity. Circumstances change. People die. Children grow up. You have no guarantee of tomorrow. If you want to express love, you had better do it now. What do you need to cut out of your schedule to make that possible? What sacrifices do you need to make?

The best use of life is love. The best expression of love is time. The best time to love is now.

Back before most of you kids were born, Quaker Oats had a series of commercials hosted by a man named Wilford Brimley. He looked like somebody's grandpa, and he'd tell you to eat your oatmeal, and then he'd say, "It's the right thing to do."

Most of us would like it if God was like Wilford Brimley, a kind grandpa who would tell us directly the right thing to do. Instead, God has given us authority to make our own decisions. We have a responsibility to not just put things on hold and hope for an easy out to show up somehow.

What's so amazing to me, though, is one last thing about the way all these people decided, and that is that our decisions are

ON TO SOMETHING BIGGER.

Making right decisions can be an overwhelming prospect. Joseph's story shows that even when we mess up, even when we make bad decisions, there is something bigger at work.

Years later, when Joseph met up with his brothers again, he had some perspective on the bad decisions they had made, and he told them,

Genesis 50:20

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Centuries later, the first disciples would say almost the same words about Jesus when they talked to the Jewish religious leaders. After Jesus was killed and rose again, Peter said, you had him crucified, but God raised him from the dead and now salvation comes through him.

God's will is so powerful and so big that he can still do what he wants to do even when we choose the wrong things, even when we get off the mission. God is always in control. We make the best decisions we can knowing the wisdom he has given us, and the mission he has given us. Then we commit it all back into his hands and trust that he will work all things for the good.

We're going to share in the Lord's Supper in a few minutes, and as we prepare for it, I'd encourage you to think about Christ, and the hard decision he made to go to the cross for us. His resolve to be obedient, to be faithful to the mission his Father gave him, cost him everything.

What decisions are you facing this week, and how are you going to evaluate your options? Are you making choices on the fly, just being directed by whatever opportunities come your way? Do you know what it is you're supposed to do, but you're struggling actually acting on it? And do you have a strong sense of your purpose in life, what God has called you to do?