

KNOWN IN THE UNKNOWN: God Knows You and Is for You (Genesis 39:6b-23)

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January 17, 2021

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When David and I were in college, one of my closest friends had a habit of asking the same question on a regular basis. When we'd sit down to catch up, she'd say "So, how's your heart? Tell me, how are you doing?"

This wasn't a question she reserved for only her family or closest friends. I frequently heard her widely ask this question. I remember many a time overhearing her say to David or one of our other friends "How's your heart? How are you doing?"

This is a question David and I still ask each other, sometimes half kidding, but always with sincerity. It's a great question, isn't it? It really makes you stop and think...how is my heart? How am I doing?

There are all kinds of unknowns in our lives right now, unknowns about the pandemic and unknowns about what's ahead for our country in the days/weeks/months ahead of us, a time of transition ahead for our church, as well as all kinds of questions and unknowns in our person lives. Last week, Pastor Melissa reminded us that, even when we are surrounded by unknown, we are not alone. Today, we'll continue to look at the story of Joseph in Genesis, a person who faced many unknowns, all kinds of ups and downs, and how God is present with Joseph but also how God knows, Joseph and is for Joseph—and how this shapes our lives as followers of Christ.

As we heard last week, in his youth, Joseph is a tattletale—he speaks poorly of his brothers to important people, he is a braggart—arrogantly telling his brothers of his dream that they would one day bow down to him, and he is the favorite of his father—which is never the brother you want to be in the family with lots of brothers. It's important for us to note the Joseph introduced to us last week is a young man completely consumed with himself, who doesn't seem to give any thought to the way his words and actions affect other people, and certainly no thought to what God thinks about him. This is Joseph in his immaturity.

Today, we pick up the story after Joseph's brothers decided that rather than killing him, they'd sell him into slavery. The brothers sell him to Ishmaelites who sell Joseph to the Midianites, who sell Joseph to Potiphar in Egypt. Potiphar is a high-ranking official in Pharaoh's Egypt, he's the captain of the guard. Potiphar comes to trust Joseph greatly and ends up putting Joseph in charge of everything in his house. Potiphar had so much trust in Joseph, the text says, that Potiphar no longer even concerned himself with really anything about his household.

One of the beautiful things about these early stories of God's people in Genesis is all that's not said in these stories, all the room left for interpretation. What makes this beautiful is that we can see ourselves in these stories and these stories in our lives. We can begin to see ourselves in what's going on in this story with Potiphar's wife and Joseph.

There's a broad range of interpretation about what happens in this story. Some interpreters believe Joseph had feelings for Potiphar's wife, or that they may have both been interested in each other. Some interpreters see Joseph using his good looks and irresistible charm to get himself into a tricky relationship with a woman who is more mature and powerful than he is. In other words, he gets himself into a situation he can't handle not realizing that Potiphar's wife is going to destroy him no matter what he does. Some interpreters see a problem with the way women, and particularly foreign women, are portrayed in some of these Old Testament stories; somehow it's always the woman or the foreign woman who represents and carries evil. When women are demonized or characterized as singularly seductive, this becomes problematic.

So we can't be sure exactly how Joseph got himself into this situation with Potiphar's wife or that we understand fully what's going on here. But there is one thing that's very clear to me in how Joseph responds to the advances of Potiphar's wife. Something in Joseph has changed. The Joseph of Egypt is not the Joseph of Canaan. This is not the boy who swaggered in his father's fields in his fancy robe bragging to his brothers, flaunting his father's favoritism, arrogant and self-absorbed.

Notice what Joseph says to Potiphar's wife in response to her advances—"I cannot do this because it would be a grievous sin against my master and against God."

Think about what Joseph could have done here. Remember, Joseph is a man of powerful dreams and he dreamed that someday his brothers would bow down to him—someday he would have power over them. After his dark journey from the pit in Canaan to serve as a slave in the house of Potiphar, why not accept the advances of Potiphar's wife? Why not say yes to this dangerous dance? Why not use his charm to plot with Potiphar's wife to kill Potiphar and somehow become the master of Potiphar's house. Maybe the captain of Pharaoh's guard.

But something in Joseph wins out over the allure of power or pleasure or infatuation or desperation to get out of his situation. What wins out within Joseph is the trusting relationship he has with Potiphar and Joseph's reverence for God.

Life brings us all kinds of situations like this. Times when we make choices. Am I going to unleash my anger in hurtful ways or deal with it in healthy ways? Am I going to protect and preserve trusting and precious relationships or chip away at the trust and security of my relationships? In moments of uncertainty and unknown, will I seek rest and refuge in God or will I try to power through with my own strength? The list goes on and on. I'm sure that in your own life you have a list of situations in which you're trying to be faithful, or where you may not be sure what the right decision is.

What happens in Joseph is the same work that Christ does in the people who seek to follow him. Christ shapes who we are on the inside; not just what we do or think or say, but the kind of people we are. And the hope for Christ-followers is, through grace and the presence of God's Spirit, Christ will form us to be the kind of people who think, speak, and act the way Jesus did. You can see that this is much deeper than us making right choices or speaking the right words or having the right thoughts. It's about allowing Christ to be who shapes our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls.

God had to do some pretty hefty soul-shaping, maturing, faith-building work in Joseph's soul in order for Joseph, in the moment, choose that which moved him closer to God.

The good news for you and me is that God does this same hefty soul-shaping, maturing, faith-building work in our souls so that, in the moment, we are the kind of people who choose to move closer to God, so that we are not just the kind of people who make the right decisions and speak the right words, but the kind of people who seek Christ's shaping and molding work within us.

So Joseph makes what many of us think was the right decision here. And then he gets punished for it, He winds up in another pit, but this time it's prison. Maybe you can think of a time when you sincerely tried to do the right and faithful thing and it backfired on you.

But notice something about this next part of Joseph's story. The circumstances in Joseph's life—being thrown in prison for doing the right thing—do not change the spiritual trajectory of Joseph's life or God's faithfulness in Joseph's life. "While he was in jail," it says, "the Lord was with Joseph and remained loyal to him"

This tells us something powerful and important about God. God knows Joseph and is for Joseph. God is faithful to the promise God made to Joseph's ancestors.

The same is true in our lives. God knows us. Intimately, personally, and far better than we know or understand ourselves. God is for us. Now, think about that. The opposite reality would be that God is against us. That God has it out for us. That God is a judge and punisher looking to sentence us and make us pay up on our debts.

It's amazing to think that these kinds of ideas about God circulated in the ancient Near East thousands of years ago. I'm not an expert on ancient Near Eastern religions, but I do know that other religions around the land and Canaan and Egypt did not worship a god with the power to create the universe who was also personally invested in the lives of humans. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is steadfast in love and covenant faithfulness. So, when we say that God knows us and God is for us, we are claiming the truth that even when we are facing powerful unknowns, we are known, God is moving toward us, because this is God's nature.

In whatever unknowns, tough decisions, difficult situations you are facing, what does it look like for you to move closer to God?

How is God inviting you to settle down into that place of deep trust? The place where your soul, your mind, your body, your heart can rest in God's steadfast love, can accept the beautiful, life-giving, tender shaping and forming that Christ can do in your soul, so that when you are "in the moment" you can show up as one shaped by Christ to act like Jesus?

I want to encourage you not to be shy with God. I want to encourage you to ask God to help you hold nothing back from God. These are days of ups and downs, lots of factors out of our control, unexpected twists and turns. But, remember that God is not limited by our circumstances or our failures. In every up and down, in every unknown, in every unexpected twist and turn of your day, God is there. God is coming to you in those places. And God knows

you and God is not coming after you to tear you down or condemn you. God is for you—seeking to help you make Christ the Lord of your life in all things.

I hope that this week, you can sense Christ seeking you, asking “How is your heart? How are you doing?” And as you spend some time in God’s presence reflecting on that question, I hope you can feel in a personal way the trajectory of God’s presence in your life—which is toward you—knowing you and being *for* fullness of life within you.

Most of all, I pray that your heart will turn back again and again this week to resting in God and entrusting all of yourself to Christ so that not only can you think and speak and act in ways that are loving, but you can be a more loving person because Christ is at work in you.