

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
July 1, 2018

Oh, for an Unshakable Faith
A Faith Prepared for the Test

Genesis 39

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

⁸ But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. ⁹ No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" ¹⁰ And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

¹¹ One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. ¹² She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.

¹³ When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, ¹⁴ she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. ¹⁵ When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁶ She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷ Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me."¹⁸ But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁹ When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. ²⁰ Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined.

It is time for a pop quiz. The quiz is at the top of the NoteSheet on the back of the worship folder. Circle the correct answers.

1. At what age did Joseph face the greatest challenge to his faith?

17 25 30 39 56 110

So how did you do? Let's see. At what age did Joseph face the greatest challenge to his faith?

At 17, Joseph was sold into slavery. He was taken from his privileged position as a child in a family and became just one of perhaps hundreds of slaves. He was thrown into a different culture. To lose family. To be immersed in a new culture. To lose your freedom or suddenly find

brand new freedoms. These are incredibly difficult tests that Joseph faced. They are the same challenges that young women and men face as they go into the military or go off to college.

Yes, 17 is a time of the greatest challenge for Joseph and for us!

But what about 25? Joseph has prospered in the household of Potiphar. It must have taken him a number of years to rise through the ranks. Finally he is powerful and successful in Potiphar's household. Power and success are often an aphrodisiac. Potiphar's wife is interested. More than interested. She propositions him. How will Joseph respond? He might claim sexual harassment, but who will believe him? Is this just another step he should take in the ladder of success?

Yes, young adults as they enter maturity are often challenged with sexual temptations. The world around us says that it is prudish to wait for sexual fulfillment until marriage. If you want to keep the guy, you better give it. If you want to be a man, you better expect it. And after all, you love each other. What can it hurt?

Yes, 25 is perhaps the time of greatest challenge for Joseph and for us.

But what about 30! At this age Joseph became second in command of all Egypt. Power corrupts and absolute power like Joseph had corrupts absolutely. Ever seen someone become a workaholic to the detriment of their family? Success becomes the all-important goal in life.

Yes, the early 30's is the time when our faith faces its greatest challenge for Joseph and for us.

But 39 is appealing. That is when Joseph is in a position to stick to his brothers. They sold him into slavery. Now they come down during a famine to buy bread. Now is your chance Joseph! Stick it to 'em!

Have you ever seen people get more cutthroat in business? The more successful they are, the more they can bully their way through situations, whether it be at home or at work. Life becomes all about them as they go through their midlife crisis.

Yes, the late 30's is the time of greatest faith challenge.

But at 56 Joseph's dad dies. His brothers are filled with fear. Will he try to get revenge on them? Wow, is this up to date. Do you know any families where, when mom or dad dies, the siblings start a feeding frenzy, not just on the inheritance, but on each other too? Finally, the time for kid gloves is off. I can really tell them what I think and treat them the way they ought to be treated. Haven't you heard older adults say, "I don't care what anyone thinks. I can say whatever I want!" and people around them snicker when they aren't the target of the barbs but resent the judgment and criticism when it is aimed at them.

Wow, I think people my age face the greatest faith challenge as that desire for revenge is no longer tempered by the weight of an older generation.

How many of you circled 110? That is the age at which Joseph died. That is the ultimate faith challenge, isn't it? Will I be able to stare down death with the firm confidence that it is not death to die?

So what is the correct answer? All of the above. Joseph faced numerous faith challenges. And so do we.

I've called this a pop quiz because God never gives announced tests. He always gives pop quizzes. God never tells us in advance when the tests are going to come. You always have to be ready. And Joseph's story can help us with that.

So let's take a look at the test. What is on the test? Wise King Solomon in Proverbs tells us in advance the one question that is the essence of every pop quiz, every faith challenge that comes into our lives. The one question is: Do you fear God? He wrote: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10).

That's how Joseph passes his test. When Potiphar's wife propositions him, he doesn't say, "This will be bad for my career." "Potiphar will get angry." "What will other people say?" There is really just one response: "*How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?*" Joseph feared God and passed the test.

But what does it mean to fear God? What did Joseph know about God?

Joseph had good reason to be terrified of God's anger. He is only about 10 generations removed from the Flood. His great grandfather Abraham had seen fire come down and destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. How often don't you suppose the account of Lot's wife came up around the campfire? God was rescuing her from Sodom and Gomorrah and all she did was look back in longing at those wicked cities and she became a pillar of salt.

Wow! Ours is a terrifying God!

Friends, do you understand that we have reason to be terrified of God too? Don't think that we are safe as New Testament Christians. Remember that Jesus' strongest words were for religious people like us. How often didn't he talk about the reality of hell where 'the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched' (Mark 9:48).

But fear of God is not just terror. It is also reverence. A "wow" of awe at God's grace. Joseph had seen that too!

Wow! God had rescued Noah from the destruction of the flood. Wow! God had chosen Abraham out of a heathen family and appeared to him again and again. Wow! God had appeared to his father Jacob, whose very name means deceiver, and changed his name to Israel, the man who wrestles with God and "wins" in the sense that God blesses him.

And we too have reason to be in awe of God's love. Wow! God knows all the "F's" that appear on your pop quizzes. Have you been sexually active out of marriage? God knows. Have you seen things on the internet that you should not have seen? Have you watched "romance" movies that end up in sex? Have you used your position of power at work to get revenge on a co-worker? Have you envied someone else's success at work or at home?

Wow! The list of "F's" just goes on and on. Pop quiz after pop quiz. "F" "F" "F" "F"

But the God who knew in advance all your failures sent his Son to bear the consequences of your failures. Every “F” deserved death. And Jesus experienced that death on the cross for you. The big red “F” on your test has been covered by the big red flow of blood from the Savior’s cross. There is no “F” that stands against you. God looks at you and says, “Wow! Another perfect score! Well done!” And we sit in our chairs amazed because that is not the grade that we deserve. All that because of Jesus.

Joseph’s fear of God was not just terror. It was also a “Wow” of reverence. And ours too.

Our fear of God will always be a mixture of this terror and reverence. Recall that we are a split personality. By birth we were controlled by the sinful nature. The only proper response of that sinful nature is terror! Look out! God is going to get you! That is why Adam and Eve scurried for cover in the Garden of Eden and Cain, when God confronts him after murdering his brother, says, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

But God’s grace performs a miracle in our hearts. He creates faith in the Savior who took our failure upon himself. So there is a part of us that just goes, “Wow! Look at God’s grace.”

This is what we confess in Luther’s Small Catechism in the Conclusion to the Commandments:

What does God say about all these commandments?

He says, "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."

What does this mean?

God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. Therefore we should fear his anger and not disobey what he commands. But he promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore we should love and trust in him, and gladly obey what he commands.

Fear is a sliding scale. When our faith is strong, our fear will be more awe of God’s grace. When our faith is weak, the terror will be more likely the motivator. But the key is that God has to become larger so that our relationship with him is the deciding factor in every test. Do I fear God?

I want to close with some really great news! You can copy the answers of others.

God doesn’t want us to face our pop quizzes alone. He wants us to work together so that we encourage each other.

So my question is, Are you close enough to godly Christians to copy their answers? If you are 17, are you making sure that you stay connected to Christians whether you are going off to college or the military, are you staying connected to those who believe back home so that you are not facing the sexual temptations alone?

Are you close enough to a faithful Christian who can say, “Hey, you are putting down the wrong answer” when you are making work or anything else in this world more important than your family?

Are you close enough to a faithful Christian who can speak honestly to you and say, “Don’t worry about those reasons for bitterness and that desire for revenge. That won’t satisfy you. Fear God.”

Even the disciples needed that kind of close friend. In our gospel lesson Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23-24).

So this is my question... who is in your life helping you be prepared for God’s pop quizzes? That’s why this fall we are going to be organizing new small groups.

And it doesn’t even have to be a long-term relationship. It can be an earnest conversation between two Christians.

This past week, I was speaking with our new 2nd grade teacher Talia Spiegelberg. I don’t think she realized that as I was speaking to her, she was letting me copy her answer.

She told me that when she was at UW Madison on the track team, she had a tough choice to make. They practiced every Sunday morning. She asked if she could practice other times. They wanted her to bend her faith so that she could keep running track.

This was one of God’s pop quizzes. But Jesus was everything. So she gave up track and committed to the UW Campus Ministry in an incredible way.

That’s the ultimate answer. I want a faith that sees only Jesus. That’s what Colossians 2:10 says: “You have been given fullness in Christ.” Lord, help me move my desk so close to you, that I not only see your answer, but that you are the only answer. Do I fear God? In my view when I’m this close to Jesus, there is no other answer. Yes, I am in awe, in reverence of God’s love and forgiveness. Let everything else be gone. If I have Jesus, I have all I need.

That’s the words of the psalmist in Psalm 73. This is our goal. When the pop quizzes come, we can say with the psalmist: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Amen.

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My Next Steps toward an Unshakable Faith

- **Keep your eyes on the goal:** Memorize Psalm 73:25-26 as an example of the unshakable faith you are seeking: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”
- **Make a commitment to get closer to Jesus:** Commit to daily Bible reading to allow Jesus to become larger in your eyes. Free Bibles and Bible reading plans are at the Welcome Center.
- **Pray for an unshakable faith:** Read Psalm 84 each day this week, pausing after verses 4 and 8 where the Hebrew word “selah” or “interlude” indicates that the author wanted you to pause there. After verse 4, pause to praise God for the privilege of coming into his presence. After verse 8, pause to pray for help through whatever the Valley of Baka (Valley of Weeping) that you are going through.

GroupWork

1. What was an “ahha!” or a question that you had as you listened to the message this week?
2. Read Genesis 39. Do you feel this sexual temptation was the greatest test of faith that Joseph experienced? Why or why not?
3. What makes sexual temptations so critical to a person’s faith life? See 1 Corinthians 6:18-20.
4. Often we fail tests of faith. What might a person learn as he/she looks back at a time of failure?
5. The message mentioned the two extremes of “fear of God” – terror and respect.
 - a. Read Exodus 20:18-20. How does this kind of fear keep us from sin?
 - b. Read Psalm 130:1-4 (in the New American Standard Bible translation). How does this kind of fear keep us from sin?
6. Read Psalm 84:1-4: What do you enjoy about the time you spend “in the courts of the LORD” either in public worship or private devotion time.
7. Break up into groups of 2 or 3. Read Psalm 84:5-8. What are the Valleys of Baka (valleys of weeping) you are going through. Pray to the LORD God Almighty for each other.
8. Close by reading together Psalm 84:9-12 as an encouragement and blessing upon each other.