

Messages from Genesis
“When Suffering Comes”

They grabbed him from behind. Joseph was 17, yet he fought with the strength of a man. But he knew his brothers outnumbered him. He tried to struggle and get away, but they wrestled him down, overpowering him and dragging him along the rocky ground. Still squirming violently, he suddenly saw what was going to happen. They were forcing him towards a big hole – the mouth of a cistern. They were going to throw him in!

His heart pounded. Visions of drowning in the dark cistern raced through his mind. Suddenly he felt himself dropping. He screamed, and his body jerked to a thud as he hit bottom. But there was no water. Only mud. The cistern was empty. Panting as he lay on the bottom, he tried to collect his thoughts and calm himself. He knew his half-brothers hated him, but if this was their idea of a practical joke, this was going too far! *If I ever get out of this pit....you just wait till I tell my father.....!*

His thoughts were interrupted by voices. His brothers were talking – and eating! He strained to catch their words. He could tell they were discussing him. “Let’s kill Joseph,” one of the brothers suggested. “Yeah, kill him.” The others seemed to murmur their approval. Joseph gasped. Kill! Brotherly squabbles were one thing. But *murder!* He realized he was dad’s favorite, and they resented this. But he never suspected that they would stoop to murder. A feeling of absolute terror overwhelmed him.

Joseph waited for them to seal the hole of the cistern, leaving him to slowly starve and thirst to death – buried alive! His nightmarish thoughts of slow death were interrupted by voices – now his brothers were talking to strangers. Joseph listened as his brothers haggled with desert nomads over the price of a slave. Then he began to realize that *he* was the slave! Instead of leaving him there to die, he was going to be sold into slavery. He might as well be dead. Life as a slave was *no life*, but a living death. He knew all the stories of slaves being treated worse than animals.

Before long he saw a rope with a noose being dropped into the pit – tightening around his body. He was lifted up out of the pit. He saw the devilish grin on his brothers’ faces as his hands were bound, and he was hauled away by people he had never seen before in his life.

William Barker, in his book, *Saints and Swingers*, has a chapter on Joseph. He calls him “The Tough Breaks Kid”. Many of us know the story of Joseph, being sold into slavery by his brothers. He’s bought by a man named Potiphar, a wealthy Egyptian government official. Joseph is intelligent, hard-working, and trustworthy – and it pays off. Joseph quickly works his way up in Potiphar’s household. Before long he is made manager of Potiphar’s affairs.

But the “tough breaks” hit again! Potiphar’s wife eyes up this handsome young Hebrew, and tries to seduce him. Again and again she tries. Again and again he refuses. Angry and insulted, the lustful woman gets even with Joseph. She frames him, and convinces her husband that Joseph had tried to force himself *on her!* Her husband is furious, and has Joseph thrown into prison – though he’s innocent.

Again, his fortunes take an upswing. He becomes trusted, and is given responsibilities in prison. While there, Joseph (“the dreamer”) uses his God-given ability to interpret dreams. Pharaoh’s chief baker and chief butler – who are also in prison - both have dreams that Joseph is able to interpret. The chief butler is released from prison, and as he’s leaving Joseph says to him, “Tell Pharaoh about me, and maybe I can get out of this place!”

But the “tough breaks” kick in once more! Genesis 40:23 says, “The chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.” *He forgot him!* So there he sits, still in jail - the “tough breaks” kid .

In some ways, every one of us has a little bit – or maybe a lot – of Joseph in us. We experience tough breaks in life. Things happen to us we don't deserve. We're diagnosed with a serious or chronic illness; we ourselves, or a family member gets divorced, and the family is never the same; we lose our job when the company folds, or has to cut back; a loved one dies, perhaps unexpectedly, or at a young age; someone turns against us, because they believed a rumor about us that wasn't true. We all know what it is to suffer.

Now some of the heartache and suffering we go through we bring upon ourselves. We make choices that are unwise or foolish. We say things that hurt and offend people. We self-destruct by not taking care of our bodies, or our morals.

But *undeserved suffering* is part of life. News accounts are filled with stories of people who suffer without deserving it – innocent victims of crimes...war...child abuse...floods...fires...accidents. Unfortunately, some people get clobbered by one tough break after another. As a pastor, I've tried to be there for people who've just had one misfortune after another, all strung together. Often, it's hard to know what to say to them!

When suffering comes for apparently no reason, it's normal to ask, “Why?” “Why did this happen to so-and-so?” “Why did this happen to *me*?” “If God is a God of love, how could He allow such an awful thing to happen to someone who didn't deserve it?” It's natural, and it's *OK* to ask these questions! Great minds, and people with great faith, have pondered why a loving God allows innocent people to suffer, and tried to make sense of this.

There's a mystery about suffering, and no one but God has all the answers to our “why?” questions. The Apostle Paul wrote, “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

I'm not going to dwell on this aspect of suffering today – the “why” of it – though there's certainly a time and place for that. But there's another question that's just as important as the “why” question...that's the question: *How am I going to respond when suffering comes?* Isn't this really the most important thing in the end - since bad things that we don't deserve are *going to happen* to all of us. How are we going to deal with it? We can't always control what happens to us – but we can control *how we respond to what happens to us in life.*

Sometimes we can respond by blaming ourselves, and saying God is punishing us for something we've done. A husband and father of 3 small children died. His widow, faced with raising the 3 youngsters on her own, wrote this to a well-known pastor: "I've tortured myself thinking of all the human failings I have had in the past in our lives together and how I could have been a much better wife. I keep telling myself that I must have done something *awful* to deserve this." Many times I've heard someone say, "I think maybe God is punishing me for the bad things I've done."

While there are specific Scripture passages you can quote that seem to say this, I believe the overall witness of Scripture is that this is not true! For instance, consider Job in the Old Testament. Job goes through horrible suffering, and his religious friends insist that he must have done something terrible, and God is punishing him. Job flat out says over and over, "That's not true!" And in the end, Job is proven to be a righteous man. The Book of Job negates this simplistic idea that if we are suffering we must have done something bad to deserve it.

This was a common view in Jesus' time, and I believe Jesus dismissed this. In John chapter 9, Jesus encounters a man born blind. Jesus' disciples ask Him, "Who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Jesus' answer: Neither this man, nor his parents! Another time Jesus said that God "causes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45).

Bad things just happen in this fallen, broken, sinful world. So, when tough breaks come your way, don't go down that road of blame and guilt and say that God is punishing you. That is not helpful!

If we look at Joseph, and how he responded to unmerited suffering, perhaps he can teach us. The Bible doesn't give us a lot of details about how Joseph handled his "tough breaks". What the Bible *doesn't say* about how Joseph responded tells us a lot! It doesn't say Joseph ***complained*** about his fate. It doesn't say he became a ***bitter young man***. It doesn't say Joseph ***lost his faith*** and walked away from God.

These are responses that some of us can make – and do make – when life takes a turn for the worse. Some people slip into a negative mindset, and spend all their days complaining, perhaps pitying themselves. Some become bitter. Going through difficult times hardens their heart, and sours them on life. Others give up their faith in God. "Well, if this is the reward I get for trying to live right and believe in God, who needs Him?" Joseph went down none of those roads. As we read the story of Joseph we can see that he continued to remain ***morally upright***. He refused to give in to Potiphar's wife and her seductive advances. And Joseph continued to remain ***trustworthy and loyal*** in his responsibilities. Joseph did what it says to do in 1 Peter 4:19, "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator."

One more thing about Joseph, and his undeserved suffering: *God was with Joseph!* Genesis 39:2a says, "The Lord was with Joseph..." (after he was sold into slavery). Genesis 39:21,

after he's put into prison unjustly, "But the Lord was with Joseph, and showed him steadfast love....". Genesis 39:23 "The Lord was with him (Joseph)...". The writer takes great pains to get this across! *God was with Joseph!*

Notice, Genesis 29:21, "The Lord was with Joseph, *and showed him steadfast love*". "Steadfast love". The Hebrew word is "chesed". That's a special word describing the love God has for His people – those whose lives are surrendered to Him. Remember, too, what Jesus said to His followers, "Lo, I am with you always..." (Matthew 28:30).

Very often, when we suffer, we feel so alone. We don't feel God near at all. Maybe we even feel God-forsaken. But if we're followers of Jesus, remember His words: "I'm with you always."

Most of you by now have heard or read the poem, *Footprints in the Sand*. Even if you know it well, listen again to what it says for times when we go through the "tough breaks" that are a part of life here on earth:

"One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.

"In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was one only.

"This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints, so I said to the Lord,

"You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?"

"The Lord replied, 'The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you.'" - Mary Stevenson, 1936.

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