

“WHEN LIFE SPINS OUT OF CONTROL”
(Genesis 37:12-36)

I want to start today by reading a short list of life experiences and then ask you what these things have in common...

- Number one, joining the Marines.
- Number two, getting married.
- Number three, riding on a roller coaster.
- Number four, undergoing a surgical procedure.
- Number five, sitting in the passenger seat.
- Number six, watching someone you love go through a serious illness.

Did you guess what these all have in common? They all involve a loss of power and control.

- Anyone serve in the military? Who calls the shots? Not you. On the first day of boot camp your drill sergeant says, “I own you.”
- How about getting married? Do you give up some power and control? Oh yeah.
- You can decide whether or not to get on a roller coaster, but once you’re buckled in it takes you wherever its’s going to go and you have no say in the matter.
- When the doctor operates on you and you’re under anesthesia, your life is in his or her hands.
- When you sit in the passenger seat, you’re giving control of the car to someone else, which I might add is especially unsettling when you have a teenage driver. You become the proverbial back-seat or side-seat driver, trying to control things from afar.
- When you love someone who is going through serious health issue, you feel powerless – you want to fix and make it go away, but you can’t.

The need to be in control of our surroundings and circumstances is strongly ingrained in our being – whether it’s controlling our time, our money, our health, our family’ well-being – we want our life to be predicable and safe – yet much of what happens in life is out of our control. One of the keys in life is learning to trust God when things spin out of our control – and this brings us to the story of Joseph.

Joseph becomes a key figure in God’s unfolding plan to save the human race and restore the world, and his life in several ways pictures the life of Jesus. Joseph’s story tells us what happens to the family of Jacob – the family God has chosen to fulfill His promises. If Jacob’s family does not survive, there is no Jesus and there is no salvation.

Last week we saw how Joseph was hated by his brothers. They hated him because he was a good kid and the favorite son of their father. It didn’t help when Joseph went to his father with an evil report of what some of the brothers had been up to – and their hatred for him only grew when their father gave him the coat of many colors signifying that he was chosen to be the patriarch of

the family – and their hatred peaked when Joseph told them that he had a dream where all eleven of his brothers, and well as his father and mother, bowed down to him.

As we pick up the story today, we see Joseph’s privileged life suddenly comes crashing down – and it is one of the greatest stories to teach us that when life spins out of control, we can trust that God is in control and will work all things together for good in His time. Not a single person here this morning is immune from hardships, and Joseph’s story has been a source of comfort to Christians down through the centuries.

Starting in verse 12 we read... “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” (12-14).

Raising sheep was the family business, (**SLIDE**) and here we find Joseph’s ten older brothers off grazing Jacob’s sheep near Shechem, about sixty miles north of where their father was living in Hebron. We know from earlier in the chapter that Jacob was in the habit of sending his 17-year-old son Joseph to check on them. Jacob’s sons had a reputation for getting into trouble, and it’s likely they tried to get as far away as possible from the watchful eye of their father.

Why would Jacob, who knew how much his sons despised Joseph, send Joseph all alone into a hostile environment, sixty miles away from home? One of his servants could have checked on them just as easily. The answer is found in Psalm 105:16-17 where it says, speaking of God... “He called down famine on the land and destroyed all their supplies of food; and he sent a man before them—Joseph, sold as a slave.” Behind the scenes, God was orchestrating the details that would have Joseph sold as a slave in Egypt, and used Jacob’s sending his son out to the brothers as part of His plan to use Joseph to save his family from extinction.

The remarkable thing is that God is never mentioned in chapter 37 – not once. But as the story unfolds in later chapters, we can look back and see God working providentially behind the scenes to accomplish His plan. What we might consider coincidences or chance encounters are what theologians refer to as providence. Providence is the Christian doctrine that God is actively involved in the world and the lives of His people, working through the ordinary flow of life to work out His plan – and this chapter is one the classic texts on God’s providence.

Joseph was not blind to his brother’s hatred, and he could have begged out of going, but he joined a long list of biblical figures who said, “Here I am.” When young Samuel heard the voice of the Lord, he said, “Here I am. Speak, for your servant is listening.” When Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord say, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah said, “Here I am, Lord, send me!” The kind of person God uses, someone said, is summed up in the acronym FAT – be faithful, be available, and be teachable. I have a feeling Joseph knew going to his brothers so far away from home was dangerous, but when his father said, “Go,” he said, “Here I am.”

In the same way, God the Father sent His Son to seek and to save those who were lost. He knew His mission involved suffering and death, and yet he said in John 8:29... “The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.” God has also sent us into the world as His ambassadors, and our response should be “Here I am,” and be willing to go despite the danger and the cost.

Verses 14b-17 says... “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.”

Sometimes you wonder why certain details are in the Bible, but this shows once again how God is working behind the scenes to fulfill His plan. Joseph is lost – he’s wandering around in circles, when he just so happens to run into a total stranger who knows where his brothers are. Some ancient Jewish commentators think the stranger was an angel in disguise, sent from God for this moment. Whoever the stranger was, he showed up at the right time and right place to get Joseph where God wanted him to be – another sign of His providence.

His brothers are in Dothan, another 13 miles to the north. Does this mean anything? It sure does. **(SAME MAP SLIDE)** Dothan was located on a major trade route that ran from Gilead to Egypt, which is going to set the stage for Joseph to get to where God wanted Him.

At this point in the story, Joseph’s life is going well. He has the love and trust of his father, he knows through his dream that God is going to use him in a great way, and he is wearing the coat of many colors meaning he is destined to be the leader of the family. Joseph has life under control. But beginning in verse 18, his comfortable life takes a disastrous turn.

Verses 18-20... “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.”

The book of James says that sin, once it is full grown, leads to death – and this is not the only time in the Bible where jealousy is the motive for murder – Cain killed Abel because God looked more favorably on his sacrifice – King Saul chucked a spear at David because he was becoming more popular than himself – the Jewish religious leaders were envious of Jesus and plotted to kill him.

Joseph’s brothers sneer and say, “Here comes that dreamer – let’s kill him and see what becomes of his dreams.” If they had accepted God’s revelation through Joseph’s dreams, they would have realized that God was using Joseph to save their family. But all they cared about was their pecking order in the family and wanted to put an end to both the dreamer and his dream.

In Matthew 21 Jesus alludes to this story in a parable where he talks about the owner of a vineyard who sends his son to collect the fruit of the harvest... “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him” (Matthew 21:38-39). The son is Jesus – He came unto his own people, and His own received Him not. They did not accept Him as their Savior, and handed him over to be crucified.

The plan was to kill Joseph and say that a wild animal killed him. But Rueben, the first-born, has a moment of sanity. Verse 21-22... “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 wilderness, but don’t lay a hand on him.’ Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.”

We’re not told Rueben’s motives, but it was quite noble of Rueben to intervene on Joseph’s behalf since Rueben, as the first-born, was first in line to receive the coat of many colors. He did not want to bring sorrow to his father, so as the older brother he talked them out of killing Joseph and throwing him instead into a pit or cistern until he could take Joseph back to his father.

Verse 23-24... “So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it.” They take the symbol of Joseph’s superiority – his royal robe – and strip it off him. It must have given them a cruel sense of pleasure to strip Joseph of his special robe... “Look at you – you’re no better than us – what do your dreams tell you now? – does it look like we are bowing down to you?”

After stripping Joseph of his robe, they follow Rueben’s plan and throw him in an empty cistern. A cistern was a deep pit dug out limestone or clay that was used in dry climates to collect rain water. Cisterns were often shaped like a bottle with a very narrow opening at the top and becoming wider the deeper it went. It was impossible to climb out, and with very little sunlight it was extremely dark, and at night it was completely black. Joseph is still a boy, only 17 years-old. One minute he’s out looking for his brothers, and the next minute he’s at the bottom of a deep, dark pit. I have read that prisoners who are locked in solitary confinement, without any sunlight or human interaction, slowly begin to go crazy. Joseph is not just in a large hole he can see out of – he is in a dungeon. He’s hit rock bottom.

Have you been there? What’s the lowest place you’ve been in your life? What’s the deepest despair you’ve felt? What’s the deepest grief you’ve experienced? What’s the darkness moment you’ve had? That’s where Joseph is, and you can relate because we’ve all been there, and maybe you’re there right now.

When you’re in the darkness of the pit all the Christian cliches we use fall flat... “When God closes a door, He opens a window.” Not in a pit – there’s no windows in there. “God never gives you more than you can handle.” I think being tossed into a dark pit with no way out is a bit more than I can handle. “God is good all the time.”

True, but I'm sure there were moments that Joseph doubted God's goodness. The times when God seems absent are by far the hardest times to go through. You cry out to him in the darkness and there is no answer. That is the tension we are meant to feel in this story.

Verses 25-27... “As they sat down to eat their meal (imagine how calloused you'd have to be to do this to your brother and then sit down and casually eat a 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.”

In another act of divine providence, a caravan of traders happens to be going by at that very moment on their way to Egypt to sell their merchandise. At this point, Judah, son #4 in the birth order, assumes the role of leader, and after his emotions have had a chance to calm down a bit, he acknowledges that Joseph is flesh and blood and suggests that they not kill him. But any compassion ends there when he says, “Let's at least make some money, and how convenient that this caravan is just now passing by.”

Verse 28... “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.” What's a life worth? In Joseph's case, not much – he was worth twenty shekels, about the price of a handicapped slave. Joseph was betrayed by Judah for twenty shekels of silver, and Jesus was betrayed by Judas for 30 pieces of silver. Both showed a calloused indifference for human life.

Rueben is not present when the decision to sell Joseph is made, and verse 29 says... “When Rueben 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?’” Rueben is panicked – as the oldest, he will be held responsible.

The brothers come up with yet another devious scheme. Verses 31-33... “Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornate 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.’”

When sin is not acknowledged and confessed, it leads to other sins to cover up the first sin. What brought President Nixon down was not the Watergate break-in, but the coverup. Proverbs 28:13 says, “He who covers his sins will not prosper,” and yet people still think they can defy this principle and escape the consequences. The brothers keep getting deeper and deeper into trouble as they try to cover their tracks.

You may have noticed something else here that some would call karma or poetic justice – but the Bible calls it the law of sowing and reaping. Years earlier Jacob deceived his father Isaac by killing a goat and using the goatskins to disguise himself as his hairy older brother Esau in order to steal his blessing. Now Jacob is being deceived by his sons in the exact same way – they kill a goat and use its blood to make it seem like it’s Joseph’s blood. Galatians says, “Be not deceived, God is not mocked – whatever a person sows that shall they also reap.” Here God allows Jacob to reap the consequences illustrating how no one gets away with sin.

Verses 34-35... “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, ‘I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.’ So his father wept for him.” It’s tragic to see the one sin affects so many people – we never sin in isolation – sin affects everyone around us. Not only do the brothers do harm to Joseph, their deception brings unbearable grief to their father who goes into mourning and refuses to be comforted. Later we find out that he was still grieving twenty years later. And the brothers themselves would pay a huge price later in the story for what they do to their brother.

Chapter 37 ends by saying... “Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.” Not only does God get Joseph to Egypt, he places him near the center of power of Egypt, which sets the table for the rest of the story.

Imagine that you’re Joseph – you’re still just a boy – you’re 17 – and you have no control over your life – you’ve been betrayed by your brothers – you are destined to be a slave to someone else for the rest of your life – and as far as you know, you will never see your father again. Do you think Joseph said, “God, where are you? I thought I was destined to do great things. Where are you, Lord?” He doesn’t know it yet, but things are going to get much worse.

But in Joseph’s story, and in all of our stories, you have to let the story play out. Likewise, none of you are at the end of your story, and in the middle of every good story it always feels like all hope is lost. That’s why you keep watching to the end of the movie. If you take a snapshot of your life at any given moment, it may seem like there’s no evidence that God is in the picture. It’s only by looking back that you can see God’s presence in the moments where it seems like it’s absent. The story of Joseph teaches us not to judge our lives on one moment or one season of life – it teaches us when we’re trying to figure out what God is up to, that it takes a long time and a lot of faithfulness.

One of the best loved and most quoted verses in the Bible is Romans 8:28... “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.” Joseph never read Romans 8:28, but he experienced the truth of this verse and saw what the hand of God could do when his life spun out of control. Years later he would look back on all these events of this day and say to his brothers... “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20).

Nothing that happened to Joseph was good – what happened to him was evil. Cancer is not good, divorce is not good, the death of a child is not good. God does not cause these things – they come as a result of the fall and the fact that we live in a sinful, broken world. Sometimes we fall into our own pit through the foolish choices we make.

Many things that happen to us are not good, but God causes them to work together for good. God is still in control, even when things seem completely messed up. God can take something that from a human perspective seems totally evil and ugly, and redeem it for good. God is so great that He can work out His purposes when people are doing their worst.

The ultimate example of this is the cross...

- When Jesus' disciples saw Him being arrested, they thought, "This is not good."
- As they watched a whip tear into His back they thought, "This isn't good."
- As they Jesus be blindfolded and hit in the face with a stick and a crown of thorn was put on His head, all they could see was evil.
- As they watched His hands and feet nailed to a cross and His body hang in shame on the cross for six grueling hours, it appeared as though God was absent.

Yet God takes all these things that were not good and He used them to save us from the pit of hell. And Jesus never would have died on the cross for our sins if Joseph's family had not survived. In His providence God was moving and guiding Joseph down to Egypt to raise him to prominence in order to save His family.

I don't know what your story is, or what kind of pit you've been in or may be in right now. But I encourage to let your story play out. Don't judge your entire life only on what is happening right now. When life spins out of control, trust the God who controls all things and know that in time He will work everything together for good.