

“WHEN EVERYTHING GOES AGAINST YOU”

(Genesis 42:25-43:14)

When our kids were little, we read them all the popular children’s books – and one of them, I remember, was called *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. **SLIDE.** Alexander, the young boy in the story, has one of those days when nothing goes right. Or, as Murphy’s Law says, “If anything can go wrong, it will go wrong, and at the wrong time.”

Alexander says, “I went to sleep with gum in my mouth, now there is gum in my hair, and when I got out of bed this morning, I tripped on the skateboard. By mistake, I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running, and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.” He goes on to talk about a terrible day at school, a horrible visit to the dentist, and a no-good stop at the shoe store. After he gets home, his troubles continue... “There were lima beans for dinner, and I hate limas. There was kissing on TV, and I hate kissing. My bath was too hot. I got soap in my eyes. My marble went down the drain, and I had to wear my railroad-train pajamas. I hate my railroad-train pajamas. When I went to bed, my brother Nick took back the pillow he said I could keep, the Mickey Mouse nightlight burned out, and I bit my tongue. The cat wants to sleep with other brother Anthony and not me. It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.”

All of us have days like Alexander, and how we handle them says a lot about our spiritual perspective. How do respond to bad days? What do they cause you to think about God? What assumptions do you make about God and what is happening? Do you have a game plan for how you will respond when adversity strikes? Today as we continue our study of the life of Joseph, we see three responses to adversity – we see the way Joseph’s brothers respond, the way Joseph’s father Jacob responds, and the way Joseph responds.

We start with Joseph’s brothers. Twenty years earlier Joseph’s jealous brothers sold Joseph into slavery and deceived their father Jacob into believing that his favorite son Joseph was dead. Joseph, meanwhile, spends the next 13 years in Egypt as a slave and as a falsely-accused prisoner before God providentially sets-in-motion a series of events to free him and ascend to second-in-command of all of Egypt. Joseph goes from prison to palace overnight, and is put in charge of the famine relief program – storing up food during seven years of plenty in preparation for seven years of famine. Once the drought hit, people from all over the world come to Joseph for food – and among those who seek Joseph out are the same brothers that betrayed him twenty years earlier.

His brothers don’t recognize him, but Joseph recognizes them. He had the power to string them up by their toenails, but amazingly shows them mercy. But before he reveals himself to them, he needed to know if they had changed. Can he trust that they are not the same guys who callously threw him in a pit and sold him for a few shekels. So he tests them. He speaks harshly to them and accuses them of being spies. “No, no” they say, “We’re honest men. We’re twelve brothers from Canaan – our father and younger brother are waiting for us back home.” Joseph’s heart jumps when he hears his father and younger brother are still alive.

He says, “To prove to me you are not spies, go back home, get your younger brother Benjamin, and bring him to me. Meanwhile, I’m going to keep one of you, Simeon, in prison. When you bring Benjamin back, I’ll know you are honest men, you can have Simeon back, and you can continue to obtain food in Egypt.”

The brothers had no idea that coming to Egypt would turn out the way it did. They thought they’d just get some food and leave. Now they’re between a rock and a hard place. They know their father will never part with Benjamin – his new favorite son – but if he doesn’t, Simeon will die and without access to grain, their whole family will starve to death.

Their response to adversity is to say, “God is punishing us.” Verse 21 says... “They said to one another, ‘Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that’s why this distress has come on us.’” Their guilty consciences, that had laid dormant for twenty years, are awakened and they’re sure God is getting even with them for what they what they did to Joseph.

But their troubles are about to get worse. We pick up the story in verses 25-28... “Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to put each man’s silver back in his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. After this was done for them, they loaded their grain on their donkeys and left. At the place where they stopped for the night one of them opened his sack to get feed for his donkey, and he saw his silver in the mouth of his sack. ‘My silver has been returned,’ he said to his brothers. ‘Here it is in my sack.’ Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, ‘What is this that God has done to us?’”

At first glance it might appear like Joseph is trying to frame them for stealing, but he’s actually blessing them by putting the money they paid for the food back in their bags. It’s a way of saying, “It’s on me.” Joseph has every right to be bitter and vengeful, but he practices what Jesus would later teach – to love your enemies and leave vengeance up to God.

On the first day of their journey home, when they stop for the night, one of the brothers opens his sack of grain to feed the animals and says, “Guys, you might want to take a look at this. My money – the money I used to pay for grain – it’s here in my bag.”

Have you ever gotten incorrect change back from a checker? What you do says a lot about you. You could say, “My lucky day – their mistake, my gain.” Or, if you’re honest, you’ll return to the store, explain what happened, and give the money back.

Even though the brothers are innocent, they feel the full weight of the trouble they’re in if they’re caught and questioned. Their hearts sank and they trembled – the same Hebrew word used to describe an earthquake. It’s the word used to describe Isaac when he heard that Jacob tricked him into giving him Esau’s birthright. The brothers began to shake, and they said, “What is this that God has done to us?”

It's an interesting response. On one hand, they rightly recognize that God is behind all the events that are occurring – but they attribute all their adversity to the fact that God is punishing them. Is that true?

In the big picture of the Bible, God has sovereignly chosen these twelve sons of Jacob to be the foundation of a great nation – the nation that will bring Jesus into the world. But in order to use them, God needs them to be faithful to Him and these brothers are anything but that – they're dishonest, they're worldly, their selfish – and God arranges a series of misfortunes to bring about their repentance.

Sometimes when we're going through hardship we think, "What did I do? What did I do to make God so angry to punish me?" What you need to remember – if you are God's child – is that the punishment for your sin was paid for by Jesus on the cross. 1 Peter 2:24 says that Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross. Any anger, any punishment you deserve has been absorbed by Christ and you are no longer under His wrath. The only ones God punishes are those who refuse to bow their knee to Christ and accept His forgiveness.

But as a loving father, God is committed to disciplining His children to bring us back in line with His will, and make us more like Christ – and there's a difference between punishment and discipline...

- The purpose of punishment is to inflict penalty for an offense – the purpose of discipline is to lovingly train for correction and maturity.
- The focus of punishment is past misdeeds – the focus of discipline is future correct acts and motives.
- The attitude of punishment is hostility – the attitude of discipline is love and concern.
- Punishment results in fear and guilt – discipline results in security and restoration.

God does not punish His children, but He does discipline us. Hebrews 11:7-11 puts it like this... "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Joseph's brothers needed God's discipline, and it was painful. It had to be painful because they were tough nuts, and each new adversity they go through makes them more aware of their sin and brings them closer to repentance. We don't know all the reasons why things happen to us, but perhaps the trials and difficulties you're encountering is God's loving discipline to correct you and restore you – to train you to be more like Christ. When you have this perspective, you can embrace adversity with a positive attitude, knowing it is for your good.

The second response to adversity we see in this story is the response of Jacob. When the brothers arrive home, they say, “We have something to tell you, father, and I think you better sit down.” In verses 29-34 they review the crazy events of their trip... “When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them. They said, ‘The man who is lord over the land spoke harshly to us and treated us as though we were spying on the land. But we said to him, ‘We are honest men; we are not spies. We were twelve brothers, sons of one father. One is no more, and the youngest is now with our father in Canaan.’ Then the man who is lord over the land said to us, ‘This is how I will know whether you are honest men: Leave one of your brothers here with me, and take food for your starving households and go. But bring your youngest brother to me so I will know that you are not spies but honest men. Then I will give your brother back to you, and you can trade in the land.’”

As Jacob is still reeling from the brother’s report, verses 35-36 says... “As they were emptying their sacks, there in each man’s sack was his pouch of silver! When they and their father saw the money pouches, they were frightened. Their father Jacob said to them, ‘You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me!””

Jacob has walked with God for a long time, but Jacob is still Jacob. Under the pressure of adversity, he responds by saying, “Everything is against me!” Have you said that? I think of someone like Job, who had one bad thing after another happen to him. His flocks and herds are stolen – his children die when a roof collapses in on them – and he’s afflicted with painful sores from head to toe. This is how Jacob feels... “Everything is against me – Joseph is dead, Simeon is likely dead, and now they want to take Benjamin from me – what more can I take?”

At this point Reuben, the oldest son, steps in and makes an extreme offer. Verse 37... “Then Reuben said to his father, ‘You may put both of my sons to death if I do not bring him back to you. Entrust him to my care, and I will bring him back.’” Knowing that his father holds him responsible – as the firstborn – for Joseph’s death, Reuben is desperate to regain his father’s trust and status as the oldest son.

Verse 38... “But Jacob said, ‘My son will not go down there with you; his brother is dead and he is the only one left. If harm comes to him on the journey you are taking, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in sorrow.’” If you’re a parent, there’s a lot to learn from Jacob about how not to parent. From the very beginning he set his family up for dysfunction by favoring one wife over another. Which is another lesson to learn – only marry one person – it makes marriage much easier. Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, and when Rachel gave birth to Joseph and Benjamin, he loved them more than the other brothers. Here he talks like he only has two sons – one is already dead, and I’m not about to give up the other. Benjamin stays.

As the leader of the family, Jacob should have said, “I don’t know why all this is happening, but I do know that God has a plan and God can be trusted. If Benjamin is needed to get more grain, I will trust God for His safety. He has a plan and purpose for our family and He will see us through.” But Jacob is not walking by faith, he’s walking by sight. His perspective is horizontal, not vertical.

Jacob's decision to not let them take Benjamin, however, does not alleviate the effects of the famine. 43:1-2 says... "Now the famine was still severe in the land. So when they had eaten all the grain they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, 'Go back and buy us a little more food.'" Jacob stubbornly delays as long as possible, but as they get down to their last bag of grain, he says, "Go and buy just a little food. Perhaps if you ask for just a little bit of food, the head guy in Egypt won't require you to bring Benjamin."

Verses 3-5... "But Judah said to him, 'The man warned us solemnly, 'You will not see my face again unless your brother is with you.' If you will send our brother along with us, we will go down and buy food for you. But if you will not send him, we will not go down, because the man said to us, 'You will not see my face again unless your brother is with you.'" At this point Judah begins to assume leadership in the family. Judah would be the line through which Jesus came, and ever since he repented of sleeping with Tamar in chapter 38, he is showing more and more signs of being a changed man. He says, "Dad, there's no way we can get more grain without Benjamin."

But Jacob is very focused on Jacob, and plays the blame game. Verse 6... "Israel (the name God gave to Jacob) asked, 'Why did you bring this trouble on me by telling the man you had another brother?'" In other words, Jacob asks, "Why didn't you just lie? Why did you tell them you have a younger brother?" Jacob's name means "deceiver" and Jacob's fallback whenever he was in a tight spot was to lie. Why didn't you just lie?

Now Judah makes a common-sense proposal. First, he appeals to the severity of their situation. Verse 8... "Then Judah said to Israel his father, 'Send the boy along with me and we will go at once, so that we and you and our children may live and not die.'"

Then Judah offers to take responsibility for Benjamin's life. Verse 9... "I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him here before you, I will bear the blame before you all my life." You might recall that Judah was the one who suggested that they sell Joseph rather than kill him and get nothing for it. Now he steps up to the plate and shows responsibility.

Then, in verse 10, he confronts the stubbornness of his father... "As it is, if we had not delayed, we could have gone and returned twice." This was a nice way of saying, "We wouldn't be in this mess if you weren't so bullheaded."

With his back against the wall, Jacob finally relents, but not before he comes up with one last scheme. Verses 11-12... "Then their father Israel said to them, 'If it must be, then do this: Put some of the best products of the land in your bags and take them down to the man as a gift—a little balm and a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds. Take double the amount of silver with you, for you must return the silver that was put back into the mouths of your sacks. Perhaps it was a mistake.'"

Jacob was a schemer from the time he was born. He was used to figuring out problems by his own ingenuity and cleverness. God had to break him of this pattern in Genesis 32 when He wrestled Jacob to the ground and broke his hip. He weakened him so that He would rely on God's strength and not his own. But old patterns are hard to break, and Jacob once again thinks of a human way to get out of this jam: Give the man in Egypt some of our best Canaanite gifts, give him back the silver and say it was all a mistake." Whatever the problem was, Jacob tried to devise a plan to get out of it.

In verses 13-14 he says... "Take your brother also and go back to the man at once. And may God Almighty grant you mercy before the man so that he will let your other brother and Benjamin come back with you. As for me, if I am bereaved, I am bereaved." For a brief moment he looks to God and appeals to His mercy, but he quickly turns to self-pity... "As for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved. If none of you comes back, I'll just have to live with it."

Jacob is a case study in how not to respond to adversity, and I want to quickly point out six ways he reacted so that we can learn not to do the same. Number one, **he responded with fear**. He clung to Benjamin, fearing the worst. Benjamin was no longer a boy – he was probably about 23 by this time – and he was still being overprotective. If you're a parent, it's important that you release your children to the Lord, and says, "They're yours – I will be a good, responsible parent, but I will not give into worry and fear because they're in your hands." That's not easy to do, but it shows God your trust in Him.

Number two, **Jacob responded with negativity and pessimism**. Are you a pessimist? Sharla often accuses me of being one, especially when it comes to rooting for a team. I rarely think my team is going to win, and I can think of all kinds of reasons they'll lose. Jacob was all doom and gloom – if something can go wrong, it will go wrong. He was convinced he'll go down to his grave in sorrow. God doesn't ask us to deny the reality of adversity, but He calls us to live joyfully and optimistically. Instead of focusing on everything that can go wrong, focus on His promise to be with you each step of the way and that He will work all things together for good.

Number three, **Jacob was self-centered**. Boy was he... "Everything is against me... why did you bring trouble on me... if something happens to Benjamin, all my happiness will be gone." Me, me, me. The leader of a family looks not to his own interests, his own comfort – but focuses on the welfare of his family. The same is true in church. When we come to church, we are not to think of what I want – what I like – but as Philippians 2:4 says, "Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

Number four, **Jacob blamed others for his problems**. Blaming others goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden... "The serpent tempted me, it was his fault... the woman gave me the fruit to eat, it's her fault." It reminds me of the story about G.K. Chesterton, the famous British author, who was asked by the London Times to respond to the question, "What's wrong with the world?" He wrote, "Dear Sirs: Regarding your article 'What is wrong with the world?' I am. Yours truly, G. K. Chesterton." It is only when we take responsibility for our own actions and responses that we can begin to overcome our problems.

Number five, **Jacob was stubborn**. Any stubborn people out there? “Benjamin is not going to Egypt!” he says. Even when faced with possible starvation, Jacob digs his heels in. Stubbornness is a sin of pride that puts your opinions, your needs, and your feelings above everyone else’s. Jesus could have easily added an extra beatitude that said, “Blessed are the flexible, for they are pliable in God’s hands.” God wants us to be flexible, ready to change and adapt to the various circumstances we encounter.

Number six, **Jacob relied on human schemes rather than trusting God**. When there’s a problem we instinctively shift into problem-solving mode because we want the pressure of our problem relieved as quickly as possible. But the longer we walk with the Lord – over time – our instinctive response is to turn straight to the Lord and trust Him to help us solve our problems. As Proverbs 3:5 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” In other words, don’t turn to God as a last resort when everything else has failed, look first to God.

In the story of Joseph there is one adversity after another, and we see three different responses. Joseph’s brothers respond by saying, “God is punishing us – He’s getting even with us for our sin.” Jacob responds by saying, “Everything is against me – if anything can go wrong, it will go wrong.” Only Joseph has the right response. He says, “God intended my adversity for good – He sent me to Egypt in order to save my family.”

The only way you can make it through a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day is to trust that God is accomplishing something in your life – even when, like Joseph, you can’t see what it is. We learn more in adversity than we ever learn in prosperity. In adversity God is shaping and molding us to be more like Christ – and the more you submit to what He’s trying to accomplish, the more peace and calm you will experience even in the worst of days.

As we turn our thoughts to communion, we remember that Jesus willingly entered our world of adversity and suffering. He was not immune from the daily struggles we all face, and He could have said, “Everything is against me!” On his worst day – being placed on the cross – 1 Peter 2:22 tells us how He responded... When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” In His darkest moment, Jesus trusted His Father.

Hebrews 12:2 explains the reason He persevered through extreme adversity... “For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame.” Instead of focusing on the temporary pain and injustice He was subjected to, Jesus focused on eternal joy of seeing countless sinners, like you and me, be forgiven of our sin and made right with God by Jesus dying in our place.

The Lord’s Table is for those who have put their trust in Christ for salvation, and if you have done that, He invites you to remember His death until He comes.