

## "AND WHEN THINGS GO WRONG, WHAT THEN?"

TEXT: "And they lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt" Genesis 37: 28

### INTRODUCTION

When you stop to consider it, it really is amazing that Joseph, the son of Jacob, ever amounted to anything at all. For one thing, he was his father's pet - the son of his father's favorite wife, the child of his father's old age. This didn't help Joseph in his relationships with his brothers. Recall that line from the Book of Genesis: "And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him".

Not only was he his father's pet, but he also let it go to his head. Remember his dreams. "We were binding sheaves in the field" he told them, and "lo my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf". The implications suggested by the dreams were so plain that Jacob felt it necessary to rebuke his son. Joseph had a bit of a superiority complex, and it didn't help matters between him and his brothers.

### DEVELOPMENT

I'm sure you remember the main facts of the story of Joseph - the brothers were tending their father's flocks and Jacob called Joseph to him and sent him out to see about them. You can imagine how they felt when they saw him coming. That coat of many colors - the badge of paternal favoritism - was like a red flag in their faces, and they began to plot against him. Some of them were ready to make a quick end of him by putting him to death. But Reuben took up for him and suggested that they put him in a pit, thinking that later he would take him home. But just about that time they looked up and saw a caravan on its way to Egypt. One of the brothers, Judah, had a bright idea. "Let's sell him to these people; we'll save ourselves the guilt of murder, and more than that, we'll make a little money." So, "they lifted up Joseph out of the pit and sold him for twenty pieces of silver; and they brought Joseph into Egypt."

So quickly can things go wrong. One moment, the fair-haired son of a well-to-do farmer with bright hopes of a happy and prosperous future. The next, a slave - the coat of many colors gone and in its place only the binding bonds of a galling servitude.

One thing which has made Joseph live so vividly in the imagination of the centuries is undoubtedly the fact that his story is so true to life. We all have things go wrong for us. In college, in business, in marriage, in health, in our hopes for our children. Joseph lost his colored coat of privilege and was sold into slavery. And when things go wrong, Joseph is a good man to know.

### I. WE MAY OR MAY NOT BE RESPONSIBLE

For one thing, his story reminds us that when things go wrong, we may or may not be responsible. Sometimes we are, sometimes we are not. Joseph was and he wasn't. The cause of the trouble was the hatred of his brothers. That hatred was fanned by two flames. One was his own big-headedness, which, of course was inexcusable. But the other was the unmistakable and unconcealed favoritism of his father. The first was probably brought about in part by the second. If Jacob had shown more sense in dealing equally with all his children, as every father should, Joseph would never have supposed that he was anything more than the little brother of the bigger boys. But, be that as it may, the story suggests that when things go wrong - we may or may not be responsible.

Sometimes we are. Whenever our difficulty arises from a condition which is the consequence of our own choice - we are responsible. Here's a girl who falls in love. She idealizes her lover. He is the sum total of all her desires. He is "the prince charming on the white charger". He proposes. She accepts. She supposes that life with such a man will be pure bliss. They are married. Gradually, or suddenly sometimes, the rose color of romance fades, and she discovers that he is not at all the kind of man that she had thought. The coat of many colors is gone. Things have gone wrong, but she is responsible. It was she, and no one else, who said "Yes".

Then, too, there are times when we are not responsible. We find favor in the eyes of the teacher, not at all from our own choosing, and become the teacher's pet. Forever after we must endure the ridicule of the school. Or we work hard and save for our old age, and a time of inflation cuts our savings in half. We study hard and win a degree and hang out our Doctor's shingle and get off to a good professional start - then South Korea is invaded and before we know it, the practice is no longer ours. We're working for Uncle Sam. The father eats sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. He met misfortune like a man, so the story goes....."he blamed it on his wife". Human nature's tendency to evade responsibility is so strong to overwork this point, but it is still true that sometimes - when things go wrong, we are not responsible.

## II. RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RESULT

There is a second thing that Joseph has to tell us. When things go wrong, we may or may not be responsible for the cause, but we are responsible for the result - and the result depends on how we meet the situation.

We can meet it with cowardice. I wonder what was in Joseph's mind during that camel ride from Dothan down to Egypt. He may have entered into an argument with the Almighty. It might have gone like this: "So this is the way you run things, is it? All right then, I'm quitting...signing off. What have I done to deserve this? I was trying to do what my father told me to do, wasn't I? I was looking out for my brothers to bring a report back home. I was doing my best to do my duty, and this is all the thanks I get. I'm quitting. I'm through. I've always tried to follow your rules and do what is right, but now I'm going my own way - sow my own wild oats, have my own sweet time." When things go wrong, how many folks there are that take that road. They blame God and kick up their heels. For the unlucky businessman, it may be the bottle and the brothel. For the disgruntled wife, it may be the divorce court. For the unhappy husband, it is a new triangle.

But there are other folks who say: "I may or may not be responsible when things go wrong, but I am responsible for what I do about it." And so they meet the situation not with cowardice, but with courage. This is the way it was with Joseph. He could easily have taken the low road out of the situation. Potiphar's wife took a real interest in him. But Joseph was not the kind of man, who when things were going against him, threw duty to the wind. He stood up straight and steadfastly refused to defile himself. Again, things went wrong. Because he tried to do what was right, he was lied about by his temptress - arrested, put in jail. It was the second time the same thing had happened. But you can hear him talking to himself there in prison. "I may or may not be responsible when hard luck hits me, but I am responsible for what I do about it". He therefore refused to blame God and become bitter. He rose up to meet his defeats with calm courage and so, when the time came, he was ready to play the role he was destined to play.

Who was it who said: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going". This is the kind of man that Joseph apparently was. This brings us then to the next chapter in his life's story.

III. MAKE IT PAY OFF

Suppose we consider now a third thing that Joseph has to tell us. We can deal with the situation in such a way as to make it pay off.

For example, Joseph's predicament was turned to personal profit. He became Prime Minister of Egypt and his rise to power was directly related to his bad luck. Had he never been sold into slavery, he would never have met Potiphar. Had he never met Potiphar, he would never have been thrown into jail. Had he never been put in jail, he would never have met the king's baker. Had he never met the king's baker, he would never have been asked to interpret the king's dream. Had he never become an interpreter, he would never have been made Prime Minister.

Translated into terms of life, that means that sometimes success is nothing but failure turned inside out, that it is possible to take profit out of loss, that no man need be defeated unless he wants to be - because out of every situation he can emerge a better man if he has the will to do it. An oyster takes a grain of sand which irritates and tries to get rid of it. When it cannot, it takes that same grain of sand and makes a pearl out of it.

Thomas Edison, when he was a boy, received a blow on his ear which made him deaf. But he said later that his deafness kept out distractions and helped him to concentrate, and that his concentration was largely responsible for his success in his experiments. In one of George MacDonald's books there is a woman who has met sudden sorrow. "I wish I'd never been made" she complains bitterly, to which her friend quietly replies, "My dear, you're not made yet!" "You're only being made - and this is the Maker's process". Put alongside that an incident from a play of Ibsen's. "Who taught thee to sing?" one of the characters asks another. And the answer comes, "God sent me sorrow". What happens to us is never the most important thing. The most important thing is how we take what happens to us and what we do with it. Joseph reminds us once again that we can make our difficulties pay dividends.

And this is true - not only for ourselves, but also for others. For the story does not end with Joseph's being made Prime Minister. Because he was elevated to that high position, he was able to save his brothers and his father. The famine in Palestine, you may recall, drove them to Egypt in search of food, and Joseph, through his influence at court, found a home for them. When things go wrong, we have a chance to help, not only ourselves, but to render a kind of service to others which fortune's favorites can never give.

A man in an automobile accident was faced with losing his sight. The surgeon told him that he could save just a little of one eye, but that the other eye would have to be taken out and a glass eye put in. It was a dark moment for him. Watching his face, you could see him go down into the pit. But he came up smiling and this is what he said: "All right doctor, I consent. But if you have to put a glass eye in, put one in that has a twinkle in it."

IV. LET FAITH GO TO WORK

Finally, Joseph has a fourth thing to tell us. When something goes wrong we may or may not be responsible. We may not be responsible for the cause, but we are responsible for the result. Meeting the situation with courage we can turn the result to good account. And fourth - courage can feed on the faith that God is our friend and is always standing by to help.

You may recall that dramatic scene which is the climax of our story. Joseph brings his family to live in Egypt. The brothers who sold him into slavery are now completely in the power of Joseph. After their father's death, they are afraid he

will wreck his vengeance. They come and fall before him in fear and beg forgiveness and Joseph makes this answer: "Fear not....it was not you who sent me here, but God. God sent me before you to preserve life".

What a faith that is! To believe, when things go wrong, that it is not God's doing, but man's misdoing. To believe, when things go wrong, that there is above and beneath and all around us a good God who desires the best for us. To believe, when things go wrong, that there is an all-loving Person with an almighty purpose, who can help us take the bad and turn it into good. To believe, when things go wrong, that in spite of all that seems to happen to us, there is always a God standing by, who is on our side and who means good and who can make it good for us. What a faith that is!

Robert Louis Stevenson once said: "I believe in an ultimate decency of things; aye, and if I woke in hell, would still believe in it". I want to take my stand on Stevenson's side. I believe in an ultimate decency of things; and if I woke in hell, would still believe in it. And that is the faith which I covet for you because - when things go wrong, it is that faith which can give you courage.

LET US PRAY      And now, O God, may the spirit of faith and courage that was in thy servant of old - Joseph - be also in us. When things go wrong, help us to see wherein we may have failed and been responsible. And then give us strength to fashion something good and purposeful out of the experience, always believing "all things work together for good". We ask this in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen

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