

How to respond when bad things happen to good people.

October 26, 2008

Boy, what a couple of weeks we have been having. Every day we see the stock market rollercoaster seem like it about to slow down, and then it speeds up and down another hill we go, screaming all the way.

For many, this season of uncertainty and financial loss translates into real hardship.

How do we handle it when bad things happen to us...when tragedy or terror or some act of violence touch the lives of ordinary, good people?

It is all about attitude and all about faith.

If there is on character in the Bible who had the right to feel angry and vengeful and filled with hatred, it would be Joseph. Joseph is one of the 12 sons of Jacob, who became Israel. Joseph was the son of Rachael, Jacobs second and most beloved wife. It was no secret that the father loved Joseph and his younger brother Ben slightly more than the other 10 sons from Leah, his first wife. You have to remember that Leah was only his wife because he was tricked on his wedding day after working for 7 years for the right to marry Rachael, Jacob's father in law switched the two girls...hiding her under the veil. (Perhaps that is why we now lift the veil for the wedding vows in modern weddings!).

Anyway...Joseph was the favorite son. And Joe was not really astute when it came to his older brothers.

Anyway...his brothers had had enough and they set upon him and beat him and threw him into a pit. They were going to kill him, but instead they decided to make a few bucks by selling him into slavery to a passing caravan. They in turn sold him as a slave in Egypt.

That would be hard enough, but Joseph's story does not end there. While working as a slave, Joseph worked hard and was contentious and careful and was advanced to being head of the household. But the wife of the master had her eye on Joseph, and not in a good way. So she tries to seduce him, and when he refuses she accuses him of rape. He ends up in prison, falsely accused. There he meets a couple of guys who worked for the king. Joseph helps them and they promise to help him too, but forget. So after another 7 years, Joseph continues to work in the prison... until the one fellow remembers Joseph's ability to interpret dreams through prayer and Pharaoh calls Joseph to interpret his dream. To make a long story short, Joseph becomes the Pharaoh's right hand man.

And then it happens. His brothers come seeking help during the famine Joseph predicted. Here was his chance for revenge against those brothers who had done him so much wrong. They were responsible for all the beatings, the humiliation, the years of suffering and imprisonment, and so much more. Joseph sort of toys with them, but in the end he is overcome with compassion and love for his brothers. He forgives them.

Wow. That would make a good movie or perhaps a Broadway show!

How does Joseph endure so much? There are several things that make a difference.

First, Joseph's faith. You knew I was going to say that, didn't you! Joseph had a deep and abiding faith. But his faith was more than an intellectual belief that God might be real. His was a relationship with God in which Joseph talked to God...and listened. It was not that God spoke from the heavens, but rather for the most part a feeling of security and caring that came to Joseph, even when he was sitting in

the depth of the prison. Joseph was convinced that God was with him...regardless of where he was; in the bottom of the pit, in the foreign land, as a slave, as a prisoner...God was there, and God cared for him. He trusted that God was at work.

The New Testament teaches us the same lesson. That God in Jesus is with us wherever we go...and whatever happens to us. It teaches us that God is at work in all things for good, for them that love him. It does not mean that God causes all things. NO, absolutely not. God is Good, and all good gifts come from God. And God is incapable of anything evil. It is against his nature. But God gives us free will...and folks often use it for bad. Joseph is a case in point. It was his brothers, acting in jealousy and hatred that caused his problem. Or Potafar's wife, who wrongly accused him of rape. Or the Pharaoh's servant, who forgot his promise to Joseph for 7 long years. God did not cause these things, and they certainly were not punishment for something Joseph did. They were caused by the bad actions and intentions of others.

But Joseph knew that God was with him. When you are in the bottom of the pit looking up at the sky...you pray. And if your prayers had been formal and perfunctory before...nothing like hitting bottom causes your prayers to become real! And God answered. Not to change his circumstances...yet, but to be with him. To let him know that it was going to be ok, and that God was at work.

Second, there was Joseph's attitude. He was the original "make lemonade" type of person. He had a code of conduct and life principals that were not situational. They did not depend upon the situation or circumstance he found himself in. No. Joseph is the same person, with the same morals whether at home in Palestine with his father and brothers, or as a slave in Potafar's house, or in prison, or in Pharaoh's courts. Joseph strives to be the same person. He works with great effort and ability. He acts with honor and is trustworthy. He will not

steal, even giving the chance. He will not dishonor his master and himself, even when pushed by the master's wife. He works hard and others see his ability and his dedication and his morals and he rises to the top in whatever circumstance he finds himself.

And Joseph gives over his anger and his bitterness and his revenge to God. As he prays and experiences the presence of God, he is filled with love and hope. He can not remain angry and will not be consumed with hatred. How could he? God is love, and in him is no darkness at all. Joseph does not allow the root of bitterness to grow in his life. He can't afford to, for in truth it will grow and harm him rather than the one's he hates. If his attitude was bitterness, self pity and anger...Joseph's career as a slave would have been very hard indeed! Who would put the surly, angry, bitter person in charge of anything?

It was because of his attitude Joseph was able to rise up in whatever circumstances. He turns over his revenge, his anger, his bitterness to God. Now I am sure that this took some time, and no small effort on Joseph's part. But it is vital in his ability to move forward. Carrying the past along with you burden's you down as you move forward. Joseph seems to instinctively know that you can't overcome evil with evil, but must overcome evil with good. That sounds smultzy, but it is true none the less. Trying to fight fire with fire, and overcome evil with evil just makes matters worse and the resulting forest fire destroys much...maybe even us. No. Joseph does not allow self pity or anger to be the emotions that define him. He does not seek revenge and does not try and overcome evil with evil...but to live his life in God's presence, wherever that might be, even a prison cell or the bottom of a pit. He seeks to define himself by his own qualities; honesty, hard work, honoring God and others. That is why Joseph stood out in the prison or among the slaves! That is why he was chosen for positions of authority and acquired greater freedom. His attitude shone through in hard circumstances and others noticed.

Joseph seeks to honor God and his masters. He seeks to be faithful, to be honest, to be reliable, and to honestly have a good attitude. He does not allow self pity to rule him, and we can't either.

And finally, Joseph sees the big picture. It does not excuse what his brothers did, but Joseph does not punish them. Instead he forgives them, and he sees that God has caused all these things to work out for the good. As I said earlier, God is at work in all things for good. God does not cause all things and certainly some things are bad. But in and through it all God is at work.

God is working in all things to help us become mature and perfect in our faith. The New Testament says that God uses our trials and tribulations to cause us to grow. Going through persecution or trial makes our faith grow, it produces endurance and endurance produces hope. And Hope does not disappoint.

God is at work in all our trials, using them to grow us into people who are mature and lacking in nothing. Joseph had been through so much in his life, but it all worked together with the help of God to make him the person he became.

Joseph took the long view of life. He knew that God was working in it all, and eventually things would be different. He trusted God for the future.

And remember, God sees all of life...the beginning, middle and end, all at once. And further, God sees the whole of eternity. This life we live, even if we live to be 110, is a brief time compared to eternity. We are, in the end, eternal creatures made to share in God's glory forever. As hard as each day may be, it is only a day, a week, a year. That may not help in the moment, but knowing that this moment too will pass...and

that time is at work in this circumstance (and God is at work over time), things change. It changes our perspective.

“the sufferings of this present age are not worth comparing to the glories that God will reveal”

Maybe our life is like Joseph. Maybe someone has betrayed you...a boyfriend, or wife, or child or some close friend. Maybe you are suffered even though you were innocent, or had great calamity befall you.

I know what it is to suffer without cause. To know pain and struggle as close friends.

But through it all God is with us and cares about us. And our attitude in the midst of it carries us through. And God calls us to see the big picture.

Joseph's story makes a good movie or show...and your life can too if you imitate Joseph's faith and his attitudes.