

## **With Us in the Storm**

### **Genesis 37:12-36; 39:1-2**

Last week we began a new sermon series on the life of Joseph, and we saw how God was carrying out his plans and purposes through all the details of Joseph's life – even the bad things that happened. We looked at how God is sovereign – he's in control in every situation and he's working all things for our good. I think that's helpful to know, especially when you're going through a tough situation. But how helpful is it?

I've done a lot of long distance running in the past couple years and I remember what it felt like to get back into shape after taking several years off. If you've started running, you know what it feels like. Before your body is in shape, even a 2 or 3 mile run can be really grueling. It's painful and exhausting – your legs burn, your lungs burn, but you have to keep going for another 10, 20, 30 minutes, or more. You have to endure a kind of misery that's not quite bad enough to stop, but bad enough that all you want to do is stop. It's a lot of fun – you should try it!

When I'm on one of those grueling runs, it helps to know that going through that pain and misery will actually turn out for my good. If there was someone on the side of the road every 5 minutes who would yell: "Keep going! This is going to be so good for you!" that would probably help a little bit. But it really wouldn't help that much, especially if I've got some big hills ahead or I've still got a long way to go. Knowing that my misery is good for me doesn't take away the pain or make the next part of the run any easier.

And sometimes I think that's how it feels to know that God is in control and working all things together for our good. That's good theology and it's helpful to know, but when you're in the midst of a miserable situation, you need something more or it can make you feel like you're just a pawn in his game. "ENOUGH ALREADY! I don't care if this will turn out for good! I just want the pain to stop!"

If you're mourning the loss of a son or daughter or spouse or friend, you need something more than knowing that God will turn your horror into something good. The same is true if you or someone you love is suffering through a terminal illness, or if you just lost your job and are on the brink of financial ruin. If your plans and dreams have been crushed, you need something more. We don't know the future and how long we'll have to endure. We have no way of knowing if

things will get better – maybe they’ll get even worse. Knowing God is in control and can use our suffering to accomplish something good doesn’t always bring us comfort and peace. In fact, it can leave us with fear and doubt, worried about what’s going to happen next. Is there something more that God gives to help us endure?

When we left off last week, Joseph had just shared a couple dreams with his brothers that made them hate him, and because of that, he was about to go through a period of serious pain and misery. What effect would that have on him? Would he be able to endure? What would God do to help him through?

Read Genesis 37:12-17.

*<sup>12</sup> Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup> And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." <sup>14</sup> So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. <sup>15</sup> And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" <sup>16</sup> "I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." <sup>17</sup> And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.*

So at this point, Joseph is still enjoying the blessing of being his father’s favorite son. Life was good. He was out on an errand for his father, fully expecting to return home again to life as usual. But when he caught up with his brothers, things took a drastic turn...

Read Genesis 37:18-28.

*<sup>18</sup> They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. <sup>19</sup> They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup> Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams." <sup>21</sup> But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." <sup>22</sup> And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. <sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors*

that he wore. <sup>24</sup> And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

<sup>25</sup> Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup> Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?" <sup>27</sup> Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. <sup>28</sup> Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

So here we see a precarious shifting of events with Joseph's life in the balance. At first they were going to kill him, but then Rueben convinced them to just throw him into a pit. He was the oldest son, so his dad would hold him responsible for Joseph's well-being, so he was going to rescue him. But when he was away the other brothers saw the slave traders and sold Joseph before Rueben returned. (Picture)

If you were Joseph's counsellor at this point in the story, you could tell him, "Don't worry. God is in control! Your brothers wanted to kill you, but Rueben stopped them. And since you got delayed in Shechem, God worked out the timing perfectly so that they didn't kill you but sold you as a slave instead! (By the way, Rueben was going to rescue you and send you back to your father, but with the timing of everything, it didn't really work out. But just remember, God is in control and this is somehow going to turn out for good.)" If I was Joseph, I wouldn't be overly comforted. God's sovereign goodness had landed him in chains as a slave rather than being rescued by his oldest brother. I think he would need something more from God in order to endure.

Genesis 37 ends with his brothers devising a plan to lie to their father about what happened. They led him to believe that Joseph died a violent death and was devoured by a bear or lion and all that was left was his bloody coat that his father had given him. Jacob was in agony for a long, long time. Then, in the last verse we're told where Joseph ended up...

Read Genesis 37:36.

*Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.*

Several commentaries point out that Potiphar was the commander of Pharaoh's bodyguard whose business was to execute condemned criminals. So Potiphar was like the head of the secret service who also turned out to be an executioner. He killed people for a living.

What would happen to Joseph? How would he be treated? Going from favored son of a wealthy patriarch to the slave of an executioner in Egypt would have been an agonizing turn of events. What would God do to help him endure? Would it be more than reminding him of his sovereign goodness? The story continues in chap. 39 and I especially want us to see what it says at the beginning of verse 2...

Read Genesis 39:1-2a.

*Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. <sup>2</sup> The Lord was with Joseph...*

I want to stop there. It would be easy to breeze by that phrase and keep reading, but as I look at this part of the story, I think it's a phrase with tremendous significance... "The Lord was with Joseph..." That phrase shows up again in this chapter, right after Joseph was falsely accused of a crime and thrown into prison. It says in Vs. 20: "And he was there in prison. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love." So at the lowest points of his life, after being sold as a slave and then after being thrown into prison, the very next verse in both cases says, "The Lord was with him." I think that's the key to Joseph's endurance. And I think that's exactly what we need to see this morning. I think that's what we need most when we're suffering in the storms of life.

God is sovereign and he carries out his plans and purposes in every situation – the good and the bad. He is able to use painful circumstances to accomplish good things. That's really good to know. But he's not just a sovereign God who's in control and watches us struggle. He's comes alongside us in the struggle – with us in the storm. He never lets us face our pain alone, he's always right there with us.

When I'm struggling through a long and grueling run and there are hills ahead and a long way to go, it doesn't help that much to know that my misery will end up being good for me. But you know what does help? When a close friend is running with me. I've been blessed to have Luke run with me the past year and a half, and

for me, that's what makes the difference when I'm out on a grueling run. The pain and exhaustion just doesn't seem nearly as bad when I have a friend to help me through. Because of the relationship I often forget about how I feel, and when it does start to hurt I have someone right there to encourage me. That gives me the strength to endure. It makes a monumental difference.

When Joseph was in his misery, God was with him, and I believe that's what gave him the strength to endure. And I believe that's exactly what God does for each of us as well. He's not just sovereign and working things out for our good, he's present with us in the struggle, walking by our side – upholding us. He knows what we're going through and is able to help. Hebrews 2:18 says, *“For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”*

When Jesus saw the pain and misery of the people he ministered to, he invited them in Matt. 11:28: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* 1 Peter 5:7 reassures us that we can cast our anxieties on him because he cares for us. Psalm 23 says, *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”* In Isaiah 43 the Lord says, *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. <sup>3</sup>For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... <sup>5</sup>Fear not, for I am with you.”* Psalm 46:1 declares: *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”* Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 28:20: *“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* And again in John 14:18: *“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”* And his promise to us in Hebrews 13:5 is: *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”*

The thing we need most when we're in the middle of the storm is the unfailing presence of our loving Savior, and that's exactly what he gives us. Jesus is present with us. We have been united to him in a personal way that's closer than any human friendship. He's not just on call and available to help when needed, he's already tuned in and aware. He knows what's happening in every situation and he's guiding and carrying you through. He wants you to experience his presence so that you find his comfort and peace.

So now, the challenge for us is to cultivate our relationship with him so we can experience that and grow deeper and deeper into his love. If we don't know him like that, how will we experience his comfort when we need it most? A stranger doesn't bring a lot of comfort, but a dear friend makes all the difference.

So what are you doing to cultivate your relationship with Jesus? Do you know him as a friend or is he more like stranger? Is he just a person to be studied or a companion you can count on? Jesus has made himself available to you, but you need to make yourself available to him.

You do that by taking time to be with him. For this there's no substitute. Set aside time to meet with him every day, whether that's early in the morning before you go to work or when the kids are still in bed, or another time when you can find some quiet. Bring your Bible or a devotional book – we've got both available in the church bookstore. Read to connect with Jesus, not just to gain more knowledge. Most of us don't need to know more about him; we just need to know him.

Listen to worship music, sing, pray. Write in a journal. Go outside to walk and pray. Delight yourself in the Lord. You don't do any of this as your duty to him – he doesn't need you to do it, you do! It's for you, not for him! You need to connect with Jesus and remain connected to him. Jesus told his disciples in John 15:4-5 *“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”*

God has given us the amazing blessing of his presence when we're going through difficult seasons. He was with Joseph and he will be with you as well, and it's because of his loving presence that we find the strength to endure.