

Trusting God in Tough Times Genesis 39

We are continuing to look at the life of Joseph this morning. We've seen how Joseph was the favorite son of his father Jacob and how that got him into trouble with his brothers who hated him because of that. We've seen how they captured him and sold him to some slave traders and then tried to cover it up by telling their dad he was eaten by wild animals. And the last time we saw Joseph was when he had just become a slave in Egypt.

So as we've looked at his story, we've looked at some of some of the things God does when we go through difficult or painful circumstances in life. We've talked about God's sovereign goodness in every situation whether good or bad and how he can work all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose. We've also talked about how God is with us no matter what we're going through. In the midst of our sufferings he is not standing on the sidelines and watching us struggle, he's in the struggle with us, giving us everything we need to endure. Today we're going to talk about our response in these situations and the effect that has on us and the people around us.

God has created some amazing creatures on this planet and one of the things that's amazing about them is how they protect themselves from danger. I found some articles online that describe animal defense mechanisms.

Opossums – just saw one dead in the middle of the road this week, but now I'm not so sure because a possum's defense mechanism is to play dead. But they don't do this on purpose – it's an involuntary response, like fainting. When they play dead, they bare their teeth, foam at the mouth and secrete a fluid that gives off a bad smell. These all make it look very much like it's dead and it can stay that way for a few minutes or a few hours.

Turkey Vultures have one of the most disgusting defense mechanisms I've heard of. If you see them on the side of the road feasting on a dead carcass, make sure you stay away because if they feel threatened they are able to vomit the putrid contents of their stomachs up to 10 feet away in order to keep from being disturbed.

Skunks, as we all know, have a very effective defense mechanism to keep from being harmed. They actually try to deter predators at first by hissing and stomping their feet, and by arching their backs and lifting their tails. And if those don't work, we all know what comes next. They are actually specially equipped with glands that can be aimed to precisely direct their spray, which can reach distances of 10 feet or more.

A turtle defends itself by shrinking into its shell which is usually big enough and round enough to make it really hard for a predator to fit in it's mouth.

A monarch caterpillar is poisonous.

A fish has scales.

A porcupine has quills.

And then there's this fascinating creature... human beings.... You and I have all kinds of different defense mechanisms we've learned for when we face tough times and feel threatened. And in some ways, we resemble the animals we just looked at. (Picture) Sometimes we freeze up and can't do anything. Sometimes we spew putrid things out of our mouths – bitterness and anger. Sometimes we pull into a shell and try to hide. Sometimes we harden ourselves and put up walls. Sometimes we shoot quills by attacking or accusing.

Things often get ugly when we're going through tough times. We've learned how to cope and survive by using all kinds of protective natural responses that usually drive people away – even those who aren't a threat. And when we respond like that, people don't see anything different in us than anyone else. They don't see any evidence that we believe in a sovereign God who's good and who's with us to help us. Even though God is like that, the way we respond might not show it. How do you respond when bad things happen in your life?

Today we're going to look at some very difficult situations that Joseph found himself in and see what ended up happening. My hope is that these things will help us learn to respond by faith when we're going through tough times and no longer in fear. We pick up Joseph's story right after he was sold as a slave in Egypt. A man named Potiphar bought him, who was the captain of Pharaoh's

bodyguard and who was also in charge of executing condemned criminals. What would happen to Joseph? How would he respond to his agonizing situation?

Read Genesis 39:1-6a.

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. ² The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. ³ His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. ⁴ So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. ⁵ From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. ⁶ So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

This is really amazing. If you don't really think about it, you can miss the significance of what's going on. Joseph went from being the favored son of a wealthy herder, to a slave in Egypt – a piece of property. And the man that owned him killed people for a living. He was also an Egyptian, which meant he worshipped all kinds of false gods and not the one true God. Talk about a tough situation. You would expect that all of Joseph's defense mechanisms would come out – you'd expect quills of bitterness and resistance to come firing out. You'd expect him to rebel and cause trouble. How could he serve a pagan like Potiphar?

But he didn't rebel. He served Potiphar and served him very well. So well in fact, that as we read, Potiphar put him in charge of everything in his house. Joseph was in charge... a slave... It's supposed to be the other way around, but Potiphar was so impressed by what he saw in Joseph and so impressed by the success Joseph brought him, that he elevated him to the highest position in his estate.

Joseph's response made a huge difference in his situation. We aren't given the details, but the pretty solid assumption here is that Joseph had exemplary character and a willing attitude. He wasn't controlled by fear and bitterness because of his situation. He was trusting the Lord. He was able to overcome the darkness in his circumstances and let his light shine for the Lord. And Potiphar

took notice. He recognized that Joseph's God was blessing Joseph and blessing him because of it.

So even though Joseph was in an extremely difficult situation, it didn't destroy him. He trusted the Lord and was able to overcome and live a life of integrity that was a blessing to everyone around him. That doesn't mean it wasn't ever a struggle for him. It doesn't say, but I'm sure there were sleepless nights and intense times of wrestling. I doubt it was easy for him or that he just shrugged his shoulders as if his predicament was no big deal. The Bible doesn't hide the fact that even the most faithful followers of God go through intense times of struggle. But what seems to happen and what seems to have happened with Joseph, is that by God's grace and faithful presence in Joseph's life, Joseph was able to get to the place where he could trust God no matter what and move forward.

Paul faced all kinds of difficult situations and he wrote this in Philippians 4:11-13: *"I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me."* Paul came to learn that, and Joseph did too, and because of that God was able to bless them even more and use them to be a blessing to others.

Now, as Joseph's story continues, there's a major plot twist that happens next, followed by a repeat of what we just saw, only with different details.

Read Genesis 39:6b-23. (first part not on screen)

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. ⁷ And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me."⁸ But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. ⁹ He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"¹⁰ And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

¹¹ But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, ¹² she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the

house. ¹³ And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, ¹⁴ she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. ¹⁵ And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house." ¹⁶ Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, ¹⁷ and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. ¹⁸ But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house." ¹⁹ As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, "This is the way your servant treated me," his anger was kindled. ²⁰ And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison.

(On screen...)

²¹ But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. ²² And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. ²³ The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.

So if you swap out the scene and the characters, you have exactly the same situation that happened before. Someone sins against Joseph and he ends up in a terrible situation... Not on account of anything Joseph did or deserved – he was upright and obedient to God – and this time it landed him in prison. So now he goes from favored slave to prisoner. But again, it didn't destroy him.

There are a few details I want to point out that demonstrate how God was working. If a slave tried to assault an Egyptian woman, especially the wife of their master, the punishment was death. So Joseph should have been executed. And you know who should have overseen the execution? Potiphar. That was his job. But notice that Joseph wasn't executed – probably not an accident. The very man whom Joseph had supposedly sinned against was also supposed to execute him, but didn't. If anybody else was in charge of executions, Joseph would have been put to death, whether he was actually guilty or not. But because Potiphar was the executioner and likely suspected that Joseph was innocent, he was not. God was in this whole thing. And Joseph continued to trust him.

Instead of being put to death, Joseph found favor with the prison-keeper and he was put in charge of all the prisoners. And everything he did succeeded. God blessed Joseph and used him to be a blessing to others. His response made a huge difference.

Did Joseph have any sleepless nights as he wondered why in the world God was letting him go through this? I'm sure he did. Did he suffer by going from favored slave in Potiphar's house to a falsely accused criminal and prisoner? There's no doubt. But was he overcome with bitterness and resentment and become a skunk or porcupine to all the people around him? No. By God's grace, he had learned to trust in him again, and because of that, God's blessing flowed on him and through him. He was successful and sought after, and he pointed people to God.

You've been through tough times and disappointing circumstances... what has your response been? Certainly we can all expect there will be intense doubts and struggles when tough times come. But in those times do we learn to trust the Lord, or do we harden our hearts and give in to bitterness? God will bless you and use you to be a blessing, even in the midst of difficult situations, but that means we have to learn to have to trust him. And God is so good that he even gives us everything we need to do that. He gives us promises we can count on – that he is sovereign and for our good; he gives us his presence and his spirit to give us strength to endure; and he gives us his blessing, even in the midst of the trial.

As we sing our closing songs I encourage you to take some time – if you realize that you've become bitter and hardened yourself toward God and others, I encourage you to confess that to God. Pour out your heart to him. Ask him to help you see his goodness and experience his presence so that you can trust him again. Ask him to fill you with his Spirit so that you overflow with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control toward others. Trust that he will be able to bless you and use you as a blessing to others.