

“Surviving the Worst-Case Scenario”

Genesis 37-50

The Story, Chapter 3. Joseph: From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh

The Rev. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

January 25, 2015

Do you ever find yourself riding a runaway train, walking through a minefield, lost in a jungle? If events like these turn up frequently in your life then you need *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. This handy little volume reveals what to do when an annoying disaster pops up to ruin your trip. Within these pages you will learn:

- How to Control a Runaway Camel
- How to Crash-Land a Plane on Water
- How to Escape from a Car Hanging over the Edge of a Cliff
- How to Cross a Piranha-Infested River

My favorite worst-case scenario is How to Foil a UFO Abduction.

1. Do not panic. The extraterrestrial biological entity (EBE) may sense your fear and act rashly.
2. Control your thoughts. The EBE may read your mind. Avoid mental images of abduction (boarding the saucer, probes). Don't give them any ideas.
3. Resist verbally. Firmly tell the EBE to leave you alone.
4. Resist physically only as a last resort. Go for the EBE's eyes (if they have any) you won't know what its other more sensitive areas are.

The authors believe ‘No matter how bad things are, they can always get worse.’¹

That about sums up the life of Joseph in chapter 3 or *The Story*. His biography goes from bad to worse to even worse. Joseph could have benefited from this book many times. One chapter, How to Climb out of a Well, would have changed the entire direction of his life since that's where we find him at the beginning. Bruised and bloodied at the bottom of a well, the seventeen-year-old boy is scared to death. It's bad when aliens try to abduct you. It's a worse scenario when your own flesh and blood throw you in the pit.

Talk about a dysfunctional family. In the circle of Joseph's home there is envy, jealousy, favoritism, resentment, neglect and even abuse. No different than today. And as with most families, the sins of the sons begin with the sins of the father. Consider Joseph's father. He is such a wily and deceptive con artist that he goes by two unflattering names. “Jacob” means “supplanter.” In other words, he sneakily steals someone else's place. His other alias is “Israel” which means “the one who wrestles with God.” Get the picture? This “Bible hero” gives everyone, including God, a run for their money.

¹ Joshua Piven and David Borgenicht, *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook: Travel* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001).

But Jacob also has his share of trials. He fathers at least thirteen children by four different women. A blended family can make you feel, at times, like you are in a blender. Imagine how hard it is for all of them to live under one roof. His family is a perfect example of why God is against polygamy. The usual tension, competition, and sibling rivalry are magnified in this household. To make matters worse Jacob favors his wife Rachel and her child, Joseph. He lets him stay home while the others sweat in the fields and herd the sheep. Joseph often tattles on them. When Rachel dies, Jacob's love and favor for Joseph increase. So does the seething resentment of the brothers. "When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him" (Genesis 37:4). They are furious when Jacob wraps Joseph in a regal, colorful, finely-woven coat. The symbol of this coat is not lost on Jacob's other sons. It is a suit suitable for a prince. They know Jacob is declaring Joseph to be his heir and their master.

So the stage is set for the final stroke to bring down the boy prince. And the last straws are Joseph's dreams which he foolishly tells them.

"Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it." His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." (Genesis 37:6-9)

That's it. When they see the teen approach in his fancy coat, they conspire to murder him. 'Here he comes – the king of dreams! Let's kill him and throw his body in this cistern. We'll say wild animals tore him apart. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.' But Reuben, the oldest, knows this is wrong. "We can't shed his blood. He's our kin. Let's just scare him a little. Throw him in the well. That'll teach him who is boss."

When Joseph finally arrives the wild pack of wolves pick him up, rip off his prince suit, toss him down the hole and roll a stone in place. After a time, the stone is removed. Rough hands reach down and yank him out. Cords are quickly tied around his wrists. The Bedouins who bought him drag him to their caravan. As they lead him away on foot he takes a last backward glance to see his brothers laughing and dividing the few coins they got for selling him into slavery.

There is still one final act: the cover up. The boys learned the art of deception from the old master, their father. Ripping the fancy coat, they spatter it with goat's blood and present it to their father. Jacob, with arthritic hands and tired eyes, examines the gift he gave his beloved son, now shredded and bloodied. And he wails. "Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has been torn to pieces" (Genesis 37:33). Little does he know the ferocious animals now surround him. As they watch their father descend into grief, the magnitude of their sin finally hits home. "What have we done?"

The family of Jacob is a tragic lot. Though they may be more extreme, they are not so different from us. Some of us are Jacobs: preferring one child over others. Kids can tell who is the favorite. Granted it's impossible to treat every child the same. Yet there is no justification for lifting one above the others. Perhaps the answer here is to get to know each child better. Jacob is passive and distant in this story. He sends Joseph out to face the brothers alone. Rarely is he involved in his older sons' lives. Our children need us to be emotionally involved in their lives. Each one is different. Discover what guidance, discipline, and praise each needs. Even if your children are grown, it's not too late to correct the unfairness of favoritism. Don't make them wait to fight it out over your will. Some of us may be Josephs: boasting and building ourselves up at the expense of others. Showing off his coat and bragging about his dreams only led him to the bottom of a pit. Such self-promotion usually comes out of a low self-image. Instead of drawing others to us, it usually drives them away. Some of us may be like the brothers: simmering and smoldering with anger. Resentment brought to a full boil can drive us to acts we later regret. Buried anger is still explosive. The one you hurt most is usually you.

Let's face it: family betrayal is a bomb that's hard to diffuse. Randy Frazee, the pastor who appears on the Story videos, tells about a young woman in his church named Jennifer. She worked hard, earned good grades and was admitted to nursing school. She would be the first in her family to graduate from college...if she could afford it. Her single mom could not offer any help. So Jennifer deferred her dream, lived at home, and saved every penny of her paycheck in a special box hidden in her room. Jennifer's 14 year old brother lived there as well. Unfortunately he was headed down a different path. There were some run-ins with the law, trouble in school and drug use.

But Jennifer loved her brother and prayed for him every day. When others accused and judged him, she always stuck up for him and encouraged him to stay on the right path. Despite the turmoil in her family, Jennifer pressed on toward her dream, getting one step closer with every paycheck.

One week, she went to deposit her money into her savings box. When she opened it, she discovered that all but \$20 was missing. She was crushed by the realization that her own brother had stolen from her to support his drug habit. Her dream now seemed further away than ever, all because of her brother's betrayal.²

Joseph probably feels great bitterness for the way his brothers betrayed him. But there is one more character in this drama we must not forget. This is God's Story. He is the One who gives the dreams and His dreams cannot be sold, slain or stopped. For Joseph, however, it feels more like one nightmare after another. Just when he thinks he's finally hit the worst-case scenario it gets worse. After his brothers sell him into slavery, Joseph is falsely accused of rape, unjustly imprisoned, forgotten and left to rot. Yet God does not forget him. In each worst-case scenario Joseph has one mighty fact on his side: "The Lord was with Joseph" (Genesis 39:2). Joseph manages to rise up from the pit to the highest pinnacle of power, second only to Pharaoh. Then, after twenty-two years, comes

² Randy Frazee, *The Heart of the Story: God's Masterful Design to Restore His People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011) 42.

a rather disturbing reunion. Joseph's brothers show up among the mass of hungry nomads seeking grain and bow to the ground before him.

And Joseph remembers! The dreams! All their sheaves bowing to his. All the stars kneeling before him. It's them! The faces are wrinkled but unmistakable. The last time Joseph looked into these eyes they were filled with rage and evil as the caravan dragged him into slavery. What should he do? What would you do? It's a golden opportunity. They don't recognize his shaved head and regal garments. Should he reveal himself and forgive them, humiliate them, or execute them? He decides to play a little game of deception. Is it right? No. Even Joseph is troubled by this act. But we cannot judge Joseph for using this moment to see if they have changed. Like a psychologist behind a two way glass, Joseph intends to observe their true reactions under pressure.

First he accuses them of spying, next he throws them all into jail for three days. Finally, he holds his brother Simeon hostage and requires them to bring Benjamin, the youngest, as the ransom for his freedom. Reuben turns to his brothers with a classic "I told you so." "Didn't I tell you not to sin against (Joseph)? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must (pay) for his blood" (Genesis 42:22). Jacob, however, will not part with Benjamin. Having lost Joseph, he cannot bear to have Rachel's last son taken. But soon the grain is depleted and a decision must be made or they will all die. Reuben and Judah guarantee Benjamin's safety with their lives. Loading them down with gifts and silver, Jacob tearfully sends off all his sons.

Arriving in Egypt, the brothers are immediately escorted to the palace. The Prime Minister welcomes and blesses Benjamin and then the meal is served. On the morrow, with sacks full of grain, they set out for Canaan. As the towers and pyramids of Egypt disappear behind them, the brothers breathe a collective sigh of relief. All are safe. Yet a backward glance reveals a cloud of dust on the horizon. Fast-riding Egyptian horsemen overtake and surround the slow donkeys. The Prime Minister's steward asks the bewildered men. "Why have you repaid good with evil? You have stolen my master's silver cup." They deny the charge and swear an oath, "If any of your servants is found to have it, he will die; and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves" (44:9). A second later, they all regret this vow. The soldiers find the silver cup in the very last sack – Benjamin's. Heartbroken, they are herded back to Egypt like lambs to the slaughter.

Once more in the Prime Minister's palace, they throw themselves on the ground before him. "How could you do such a wicked thing after the kindness I showed you?" he demands. Finally Judah speaks. "God has uncovered our guilt. We are now your slaves." "No," replies the Prime Minister, "only the one who stole the cup shall be my slave. The rest are free to go to your father." Now comes the final test. Will they take this chance and run? Will they cast aside another son of Rachel to save their own necks? Will they deceive and grieve their father again?

Summoning all his courage, Judah rises and tells a story about Benjamin's full brother who was lost many years ago. The grief over his death nearly killed their father. "If we do not bring our youngest brother home, our father will surely die of grief. I

vowed to protect him with my very life. And so,” Judah concludes, “I offer my life for his. I will take his place and be your slave. I could not bear to see the misery that would come upon my father.” This is Judah: the one who plotted to kill Joseph. Judah: the one who suggested they sell the boy into slavery. Now this same Judah lays down his life. At this brave sacrifice, the Prime Minister shouts to his staff, “Everyone leave us!” When the room is cleared, the lord over all Egypt turns to these rag-tag shepherds and says in Hebrew, “I am Joseph!”

“Oh!” and “Oh-no!” Stunned and silent, the full weight of this revelation sweeps over the brothers. And they are terrified. They thought he was dead. At most they figured he’d be a lowly slave working on a pyramid. Never in their wildest dreams did they picture him at the top of the pyramid. Dreams! Those wild dreams of sheaves and stars once drove them almost to murder. In trying to kill the dreams, they actually caused them to come true. Here they are, bowing down to their kid brother, the ruler over all Egypt. Now they are at his mercy. And given the way they treated him, they expect no mercy. “Come close to me,” Joseph commands. They inch forward. “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!” Oh no, he hasn’t forgotten. Here it comes.

But then Joseph does a most extraordinary thing: he wails so loud that all the servants hear it. He raises up all his brothers and embraces them. Regaining his composure Joseph says, “Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because God sent me ahead of you to save your lives. God sent me ahead of you to preserve and save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.

Do you feel the power of that truth? Three times Joseph drives home three words, “God sent me.” Did God throw Joseph in the pit? Did He sell the boy into slavery? Did He arrange for him to be tempted and then locked in prison? No! But in all these dark moments, God was working silently to accomplish His will. Sometimes He worked through the actors in this drama, sometimes alongside them, and sometimes against them. But always, the Lord’s will was to bring good out of evil. Paul writes, “We know that God works in all things for the good of those who love Him. If God is for us, who can be against us? In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (selected verses from Romans 8:28-39).

Do you know that? Do you know that God is working for your good? Do you feel like more than a conqueror through Him who loves you?

- In the pit of depression
- In the fires of temptation
- In the face of injustice
- In the heat of family conflict
- In the grip of addiction
- In the shadow of disease and death

Are you convinced down to the marrow of your bones that nothing can separate you from His love in Christ Jesus? Joseph was convinced. His brothers meant to do him evil. But God brought good out of their evil and, by it, saved even their lives. He did it for us as well. On the terrifying twisted Cross, God brought the greatest good out of all the darkest evil we do. And by it, He saved our lives. No matter what your situation, I invite you, like Joseph, to seek where God is working, to trust that God is working, to work where God is working and to give thanks that God is working.

Remember Jennifer? On the Sunday that Randy Frazee preached about forgiveness, Jennifer made an incredible sacrifice. She handwrote a note that she forgave her brother, signed it simply “Jennifer” and placed it in the offering plate with the \$20. For her, it was a sign of her trust that God would accomplish his good purpose despite her circumstances. On Monday the note landed on Randy’s desk. He did not know Jennifer’s identity. So the next Sunday he read the letter anonymously at the early service.

Afterward a family came to the front of the church to see me. With tears in their eyes, they asked if they could talk to the woman in the letter. This family, along with two others, wanted to pay Jennifer’s college tuition. Not just the first year, but all four!

When I read the letter in the second service, I added, “If the person who wrote this letter is here today, please come to see me.” A young woman timidly approached me immediately after the service. It was Jennifer. When I told her about the families’ generous offer, she wept uncontrollably – tears of disbelief and joy.

Jennifer finished college and nursing school in the top tier of her class. Today she is an oncology nurse, a loving wife, and devoted mom. Her Lower Story was all about betrayal, anger, and disappointment, but when she came to a place where she could trust God in spite of her circumstances, she discovered that he is indeed trustworthy and has not forgotten or abandoned her.³

Trust God and see how He will bring good out of your worst-case scenario.

³ Ibid., 48.