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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes

INTRODUCTION

Tonight I want to talk about “Joseph’s Mystery” and next week I’ll talk about the Ministry that God gave to Joseph. I think if people had known more about Joseph, they probably would have called it Joseph’s Law instead of Murphy’s Law. Murphy’s Law basically says, “If anything can go wrong, it will go wrong.”

There are some other revisions to Murphy’s Law:

1. Anything you try to fix will take longer and cost more than you think.
2. You always find a lost item in the very last place you look.
3. The chance of a piece of buttered bread falling with the buttered side down is directly proportionate to the cost of the carpet.
4. The other line always moves faster.
5. Any tool dropped when repairing a car will roll underneath to the exact center.
6. When a broken appliance or automobile is demonstrated for a repairman, it always works properly.
7. No matter how good a bargain you get, you’ll always find it somewhere else cheaper after you have already bought it.
8. A short cut is the longest distance between two points.
9. You will remember you forgot to take out the trash when the garbage truck is two blocks past your house.

There are some people who go through life saying, “Everything that could go wrong is going to go wrong.” In the first few years, it seemed like that was the story of his life. When he was 17 his brothers abused him, sold him into slavery and then concocted a lie to tell Jacob what had happened to him. Jacob grieved for many, many years thinking his most-loved son, Joseph, was dead and the whole time Joseph was down in Egypt. We know Joseph was 17 when he was sold into slavery and we find out a little bit later he is 30 when he becomes Prime Minister of Egypt. So, there is a 13-year period that spans between when he is sold into slavery and when he becomes Prime Minister. We’re going to look at that 13-year period of time tonight as we talk about the mystery. Joseph, who has already suffered enough for any person, is still suffering. The question we are going to answer tonight by way of introduction is this. “Why do faithful servants of God suffer?”

We all have a sense of fairness that is part of our makeup that says, “Mean, bad, despicable people probably deserve to suffer.” A lot of people who are in prison because they have committed terrible crimes probably ought to be in prison. There’s a sense of rightness and fairness that causes us to look at good, loving, faithful servants of God and when they are suffering it really abuses our sense of fairness. So we want to ask that question, “Why do good people suffer?” Some of you need to answer that for yourself today, because some of you are suffering in one way or another and you have not done anything wrong. Some of you need to answer that question today for loved ones. Why do people you care for and love, family members and friends; why are they suffering? They are good folks! And that’s the mystery we are going to examine today. I want to extract two episodes from Joseph’s life during this 13-year period and talk about how although he was faithful, he was still suffering.

I. EPISODE ONE: RESISTING TEMPTATION

I call the first episode “resisting temptation.” Look in Genesis 39:1-4.

“Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.”

We’re going to see this is a characteristic of Joseph. Joseph is so faithful, not only to God, but faithful to those people under whom he has been subjected in terms of human authority. In other words, he is a good follower of God and he is a good worker, servant and employee; because of that he is favored by God and by man, not only by Potiphar, but by the warden of the prison, and by the Pharaoh of Egypt. He was favored by God, yet he still had a troubled time.

If you want to read about it, look at the last part of verse 6. It says, “Now Joseph was well-built and handsome.” You ladies probably have a picture in your mind of what Joseph must have looked like. Us guys probably can’t picture anything like that, because we think that describes all of us. We look in the mirror and yes—that’s us—well-built and handsome. In verse seven the inevitable happens.

Genesis 39:7-10. “And after a while his master’s wife took notice of Joseph and said, ‘Come to bed with me!’ But he refused. ‘With me in charge,’ he told her, ‘my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?’ And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.”

There are some good principles here as you are trying to resist temptation. We are all going to be tempted. Temptation is not sin! Sometimes people come to me and say, “Oh, Pastor, I must be terribly wicked, because I have all kinds of wicked thoughts that sometimes enter my mind!” Well temptation is not sin; even the best of people have thoughts that sometimes flutter around on the edges of their conscientiousness, wicked, evil things. Just don’t entertain those thoughts, put them away. But even the best of people can be tempted to do terrible things. I’ve said it so many times that some of you can quote it with me, but it was Billy Graham who said, “You can’t keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.” You can’t stop thoughts from flashing through your mind, but you can keep them from being lodged there. I know that especially with the opportunity and with the invitation it would have been so easy for Joseph to have said, “Yes, I’ll go to bed with you. I’ll have sex with you. I’ll commit adultery with you.” It would have been so easy. Yet, he realized he would have been sinning against God.

You can sin against another person, and had he gone to bed with Potiphar’s wife, he would have been sinning against Potiphar. The Bible makes it clear, “You can sin against other people.” but the Bible also makes it clear that *every* sin is against God. After King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, he lied, maneuvered, and manipulated to have her husband Uriah, put to death. The prophet Nathan came to him and said, “You’re the man!” and in Psalm 51 he prays that great prayer of repentance and says, “Against you and you only have I sinned!” In truth he had sinned against Bathsheba, the truth is he sinned against Uriah and against all the people who had trusted him, but it was so obvious to David that mainly sin is against God, any sin. So one day every one of us is going to have to give an account to God, so you want to run from temptation, because every sin is against God. Did you notice that Joseph is clever here? The last thing we read in verse 10 is he “refused to be with her.” The Bible says, “Make no provision for the flesh.” In other words, if you are tempted, don’t ever even give yourself the opportunity. “Flee from youthful, wicked lust!” Paul writes to Timothy.

That’s like the story I heard about the father who was going to talk to some men out in the country and there was a farm pond nearby and his son said, “Daddy, can I go with you because I want to go swimming.” He said, “Well, son, you can go, but you can’t go swimming.” The man went over and started talking to some people when he heard splashing. He looked over and his son was swimming in the pond—in his swim trunks. His dad said, “Son, I told you you could not swim in that pond.”

“I know what you said, Daddy.”

“Well, why did you even bring your swim trunks?”

“I brought them just in case I was tempted.”

That’s called “making provisions for the flesh.” You need to make sure you never put yourself in situations where you might be tempted. Run from opportunities and relationships that could cause you to sin, like Joseph did. Even though the very best can resist temptation, sometimes we become a victim and we suffer.

Genesis 39:11-20. “One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants were inside. She caught him by his cloak, and said, ‘Come to bed with me!’ But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, she called to her household servants. ‘Look,’ she said to them, ‘this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.’ She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. Then she told him this story: ‘That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.’ When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, ‘This is how your slave treated me,’ he burned with anger. Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined.”

There was the allegation of sexual impropriety and the people didn’t know who to believe. That sounds like Washington, D.C. these days, doesn’t it? Which story do you believe? Here’s Joseph saying, “I’m innocent! I haven’t done anything!” Potiphar’s wife said, “Oh yes you have! You were here with me and you tried to rape me and I even have your coat. Here’s the evidence!” We

all know from the story that Joseph was totally innocent. Here’s the surprise: A faithful servant of God had to face the time even though he didn’t commit the crime. I don’t know about you, but there is something about that story that says to me, “That’s just not fair! It’s not fair!” Here is a man who ran from temptation yet he is punished just as if he is guilty. Sometimes when you live righteously for God, you are going to suffer unjustly? You are going to be punished as if you are the guilty party. That’s just part of the experience we have to face here on earth. Joseph is a good example of that a righteous, good, faithful man suffering even though he resisted temptation.

II. EPISODE TWO: SERVING OTHERS IN PRISON

Episode number two was serving others in prison. Joseph he gets knocked down and he gets up again and says, “I’m in prison, but I’ll even make the best of being in prison.” He was a slave he said, “I’ll make the best of being a slave and I’m going to make the best of being a prisoner. Look at verse 21.

Genesis 39:20b-23. “But while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there.”

Scripture indicates Joseph was the chosen one to receive all the blessings and the birthright of this patriarch but he is knocked down, kidnapped by his own brothers and sold into slavery. Yet even as a slave he picks himself up and says, “I’m going to make the best of being a slave.” Then even as a slave, he is knocked down and he becomes a prisoner and he says, “Even as a prisoner I’m going to make the best of being a prisoner.”

Joseph is different than a lot of us, because at the first dark cloud that rains, many of us sit down and have a pity party. “I don’t deserve this! God, what are you doing?” And we get all down and we sometimes give up. Then you let strike two happen, “Oh, this is just terrible! God, not only did you do this but you did this!” And we end up wallowing in our own self pity. Joseph could have done that. When Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers he could have developed a bitter attitude and if he had, we would have never read about him in the word of God. How are you reacting to the bad things that happen in your life? How are you responding to suffering and trouble when it comes your way? Do you want to rebel and say, “I don’t deserve this!” No, you don’t deserve it but do you make the best of it? If your life is on the rocks, do you become a lighthouse? That’s what Joseph did. While he’s in prison he starts serving others. He serves the warden and he meets two important government officials there. One is the chief cupbearer and the other is the chief baker. The cupbearer and the baker develop a relationship with Joseph and they both have dreams, which Joseph interprets for them. He says to the cupbearer, “Your dream means that in a few days the pharaoh is going to come and set you free and you are going to be restored to your place of prominence.” Then he says to the chief baker, “Your dream means that in a few days the pharaoh is going to come and you are going to be killed.”

Genesis 40:21-23. “He [the pharaoh] restored the chief cupbearer to his position, so that he once again put the cup into Pharaoh’s hand, but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had said to them in his interpretation. The chief cupbearer, however, did not

remember Joseph; he forgot him.”

Verse 23 is the saddest in the whole chapter. He forgot him! Now here’s the surprise: He was forgotten even when he was faithful. You talk about getting knocked down again! Already kidnapped, sold into slavery, falsely accused, imprisoned, yet he does his best to help and serve other people. You’d think these people whom he helped would remember him, but he’s forgotten. Joseph languishes in prison totally forgotten for two more years, suffering but you and I know the end of the story—God is going to use Joseph in a mighty way (but that’s next week’s message).

How do you respond to suffering that comes into your life? I’ll never forget the first time I was taught a lesson about rejoicing and suffering as a pastor. It was in our first church. A deacon gave us our first dog. We didn’t really want a dog but he gave us a dog. We named him Barney after Barney Fife. The deacon and his family lived around the corner from us. At the time when we were in our early twenties. I thought they were kind of old. They had sons in elementary and middle school so they were younger than we are now. Jeannette was a lovely Christian lady who never once went to church because she had rheumatoid arthritis worse than any person I have ever seen in my life. Every joint in her body was swollen. I don’t even know if she is still alive to this day. I guess she must have been probably in her mid- to late thirties. I can remember Ray taking me in the den where he had placed her so she would be as comfortable as she could be. I just remember the radiant smile that came to Jeannette’s face as she said, “Oh, Brother David. We have been praying that God would send a pastor like you to our church.” She just ministered to me and she just prayed for me. I left that room feeling like I should have ministered to her but she ministered to me. Every time I went back to see Jeannette Davis it was the same experience. She was so full of joy and the ministry of encouragement to other people that I always left feeling encouraged. I always walked out of there thinking, “God, this just isn’t fair. Here is this lovely, lovely Christian lady who is suffering and hurting every moment of her life.” I didn’t understand it. I still don’t but I know this. Jeannette Davis had figured it out somehow that it would do absolutely no good for her to complain and be bitter and angry at God. Instead she turned her “blister” into a blessing, her misery into a ministry.

We can learn some lessons about suffering here.

1. God uses suffering to test us

I really think he was testing Joseph to see if Joseph was ready for bigger and better things. I did not say God *causes* suffering, because it’s obvious from the word of God that sometimes God allows Satan to cause suffering. Who’s the one that comes to your mind? Job obviously. I think God is not so capricious that he goes around twisting your nerves and trying to make you hurt. We live in a fallen world. There is pain and there is suffering. I call it “the fallout from the fall.” When Adam and Eve sinned they opened the door for misery that has spread throughout this world for generations. The reason there is leukemia and cancer and pain and agony is because we live in a fallen world. I don’t think God is picking on you or anybody else or Jeannette Davis or Joseph. In a world that causes suffering God *uses* suffering to test us. James wrote in the first chapter, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you fall into different kinds of trials.” knowing this is the testing of your faith.

As you have to accomplish things in life, you take tests not only in school, but you take a driver’s test and if you are going to get any kind of a license to do something, you are going to have to study and you are going to have to take a test. There is something different about the tests we take in school and the tests we take in life that is different from the tests of God. In school and in life you learn and *then* you take the test. With God, he gives you the test and you learn during the test itself. You cannot study for the tests of God, other than just to bathe yourself in the scriptures. Instead, while you are being tested, that’s when you learn the lessons of God. Everybody is good with hindsight. “I should have done that!” “I should have said that” “Oh yeah! Now I see what God was doing!” Most of us have 20/20 hindsight and most of us are pretty good on foresight. We generally know what’s going to happen in the future. We know that when we die, we are going to go to heaven and we will be with Jesus. But what most of us need right now is insight, the wisdom to understand what God is trying to teach us while he is testing us.

One of my favorite examples is in the book of Exodus when the children of Israel are coming out of Egypt. They come to the Red Sea and the water parts; they go to the other side, and the water crashes down and drowns all of their enemies. They start celebrating singing praises to God and Moses. They say, “Man, this is going to be a snap! There’s nothing to it. We’re going to be in the Promised Land before you know it, with miracles on the left side and miracles on the right side. God, you are great!” Later in that same chapter they go out into the desert and run out of water. Then they start complaining and griping. Then they find some water in a place called Marah, but the water is bitter, poisonous. The Bible says then they start grumbling against Moses and against God. In Exodus 15:25b it says, “There he tested them.” God does not test us at the high points in our lives. He does not test us at the miraculous Red Sea crossing. He doesn’t test us during Commitment Day of Discover the Joy, because if you can’t praise God then, you don’t ever want to praise God. Nobody can. He tests you and me at the times in our lives when there is bitterness and pain and suffering. That’s when God tests us. When you’re feeling good and all your bills are paid and everybody loves you and treating you great, it’s easy to say, “Praise God!” He’s not testing you during those times. He’s testing you when things are tough.

2. Suffering can shape our character

Here’s the second life lesson. Suffering can shape our character. Romans 5:3 say, “We rejoice in our sufferings because suffering produces perseverance and perseverance character and character hope and we shall not be disappointed with hope.” The Bible says there is a chain reaction that takes place with suffering. If you understand the product of suffering, you can rejoice in the midst of suffering. Suffering teaches us to hang in there—persevere—and hanging in there produces character and the more character you have the more hope you have. Romans 5:5 says, “and God has poured out his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” Hope. Love. That’s how you can rejoice. On the end of the chain reaction is hope and love, and on the other end, suffering. But if you understand the process, you can understand what God is doing.

Do you remember Paul’s “thorn in the flesh?” Paul said, “I have a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me. I prayed for the Lord not once, not twice, but three times to take it away.” Do you know what that thorn in the flesh was? There are about as many theories as there are

theologians. I’ve read everything from women problems to eye problems to foot problems to back problems to epilepsy. All these scholars come up with different theories. But I think God didn’t want us to know specifically what his thorn in the flesh was, because if we knew specifically what it was, let’s say it was an eye problem you could say, “Well, I don’t have eye problems. That does not apply to me!” Because it’s general in nature, it’s kind of like men’s socks: One size fits all. Whatever your thorn is, this applies. Paul says, “I prayed once, ‘God, take it away!’ I prayed twice, ‘God, take it away’ I prayed three times, ‘God, take it away.’” God must have said, “No.” “No.” “No.” Instead he said, “My grace is sufficient for you.” Paul said, “That’s enough for me, so I’m going to glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest on me.” Suffering produces humility. It’s impossible to be arrogant when you are suffering and God loves a humble and a contrite heart.

My mother came to live with us for a few years before she died of cancer. It was probably the most stressful time of my family’s life since I have been married. It was really tough on Cindy, because I would go off to church and do all the things that pastors do and Cindy would have to spend a lot of time with my mother. Sometimes I would get a call and Cindy would say, “Come home quick. She has fallen and I can’t get her up.” I lost a lot of weight when I wasn’t trying to lose weight. Then, when I tried to make sure I didn’t lose weight, I lost more weight. I even went to the doctor thinking I might be sick. Yet I look back on that time and I can even look at pictures taken of me during that time and I want you to know I have the most humble countenance and demeanor. In a lot of ways it was a terrible time for us. Any of you who have lived with someone dying of cancer you know how terrible it is. But in other ways it was the sweetest time, because I got to know my mother in a way I never had gotten to know her before. I was her pastor and I was the one who drove her to the hospital for her chemotherapy treatments. Just that time driving to Birmingham in the car with her before and after those chemotherapy treatments we had more conversations as a son and mother than we had ever had in the 25 years before that. When you are suffering, you cannot be arrogant! Suffering causes you to be humble.

3. Character development takes time

Here’s the third lesson: Character development takes time. We want microwave character! We want instant perseverance! We want God to shape us and change us and fix us right now! God is not in a hurry. So if you are suffering or you know someone who is suffering, you ought to be doing what Jeannette Davis did, what Joseph did, what the apostle, Paul, did and what Job did. You ought to make the best out of it and say, “I will not let this make me bitter. I will let it make me *better*.” And you’ll let God take his time with you.

CONCLUSION

One of my favorite stories was something Ben Hayden, a Presbyterian preacher, wrote in one of his sermonettes.

“A man and his wife were both collectors of antique pottery and china. They entered a little china shop outside of London, England and their eyes singled out a tiny, beautiful teacup on the top shelf. “May I see that?” he said. “I’ve never seen a teacup that

beautiful.”

Suddenly, the teacup began to speak! The teacup said, “You don’t understand. I haven’t always been a teacup. There was a time when I was just red, soft clay but my master took me and he rolled me, and he patted me over and over and over and I yelled out, “Leave me alone!” but he only smiled and he said, “Not yet.”

I was placed on a spinning wheel and suddenly I was spun around and around and around and around. “Stop it!” I said. “I’m getting dizzy,” I screamed. The master only nodded and said, “Not yet.”

Then he put me into an oven. I’ve never felt such heat! I wondered why he wanted to burn me to death and I yelled and I knocked on the door. I could see him through the opening and I could read his lips as he just shook his head and said, “Not yet.”

Finally, the door did open! Phew! He put me on the shelf and I began to cool. I said, “There, that’s better. Things will be fine now.” Then suddenly he took me down and he painted me all over. The fumes were horrible and I thought I would gag. “Stop it! Stop it!” I cried. He only nodded and said, “Not yet.”

Then he put me back into the oven. Not the first oven–this oven was twice as hot. I knew I would die! I begged! I pleaded! I screamed! I cried! All the time I could see him through the opening nodding his head and saying, “Not yet.”

Then I knew that there was no hope and I would never make it. I was ready to give up! But the door opened and he took me out and he placed me on a shelf. One hour later he handed me a mirror and said, “Now, look at yourself.” and I did and I said, “That’s not me! It couldn’t be me! Why I’m beautiful!” “I want you to remember,” he said. “I know it hurt to be rolled and patted, but if I had left you, you would have dried up. I know it made you dizzy to spin you on that wheel, but if I had stopped, you would have crumbled. I know it hurt and it was hot and disagreeable in the oven, but if I hadn’t put you there, you would have cracked. I know the fumes were bad when I brushed you and painted you all over, but, you see if I had not done that, you never would have hardened. There would have been no color to your life and if I hadn’t put you back into the second oven, you would not have survived for very long and the hardness would not have held. Now, you are a finished product. You are what I had in mind when I first started working with you.”

The Bible says he who began a good work in you will keep on completing it until the day of Jesus Christ. If you are going through a time of suffering, or know someone who is, God is probably just saying, “Not yet.”

OUTLINE

I. EPISODE ONE: RESISTING TEMPTATION

II. EPISODE TWO: SERVING OTHERS IN PRISON

Life Lessons:

1. God uses suffering to test us
2. Suffering can shape our character

Suffering → Perseverance → Character → Hope

3. Character development takes time