

## INTRODUCTION

This is the second message in a series about Joseph I’ve entitled, “Following God’s Road to Success.” Most people want to be successful, but they don’t have a clue about what real success is. We’ve all heard the adage, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” I read a revision of that, “If at first you don’t succeed...skydiving is not for you!”

In studying for this series, I came across some interesting quotes about success. What is success?

“Success is often the result of taking a misstep in the right direction.” – Al Bernstein

“Success is going from failure to failure without a loss of enthusiasm.” – Winston Churchill

“I don’t know the secret of success; but the secret of failure is trying to please everybody.” – Bill Cosby

The great philosopher, Erma Bombeck, observed, “Don’t confuse fame with success; Madonna is one, Helen Keller is the other.”

Those are all interesting, but when you look for the Bible’s description for success, you’ll find that **SUCCESS IS FINDING AND FOLLOWING GOD’S WILL FOR YOUR LIFE!** Joseph was one of the most successful people in history. He started out as an egoistical, conceited teenager, and ended up as one of the most powerful men in the ancient world. He serves as a great model of success for us.

In this lesson we discover there are sometimes sinkholes on the road to success. On June 28, there was a picture in the Tyler newspaper of a sinkhole that suddenly appeared on Highway 724 near the Tyler Airport. As you are traveling down the road of success, sometimes you’ll find yourself falling into an unexpected sinkhole. A sinkhole can catch you by surprise if you’re not careful.

Remember, Joseph was the favored son with the Technicolor coat. His brothers hated Joseph because he had already given a bad report about them to Jacob. In this passage, Jacob sends Joseph once again to check up on his ten older brothers. Joseph quickly found himself in a sinkhole of despair. We’ll pick up as Joseph approached them in Genesis 37:18:

“But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. ‘Here comes that dreamer!’ they said to each other. ‘Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.’ When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. ‘Let’s not take his life,’ he said. ‘Don’t shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don’t lay a hand on him.’ Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it.”

“As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. Judah said to his brothers, ‘What will we

gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.’ His brothers agreed. So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels [8 ounces] of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt. When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, ‘The boy isn’t there! Where can I turn now?’ Then they got Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, ‘We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son’s robe.’ He recognized it and said, ‘It is my son’s robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.’ Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. ‘No,’ he said, ‘in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son.’ So his father wept for him. Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.”

There are three vital lessons we can learn from this episode. We’ll discuss the first two lessons briefly and devote more attention to the third lesson.

## **1. THE LESSON FROM THE BROTHERS: BE KIND! HATRED IS LIKE A DIRTY BOMB**

Joseph’s brothers were wicked guys. They were jealous of Joseph, and in their anger and hatred they abused him. They considered killing him, but instead sold him as a slave. The bitter memory of what they had done to Joseph would torment them for many years.

We were reminded again by the terrorist bombings in London that we are engaged in a war. It’s not a conventional war against a uniformed army. It’s a global war against terrorism. Experts have warned that the terrorists may try to explode a dirty bomb. A dirty bomb is a conventional explosive that releases radioactive or biological contaminants. In other words, the greatest damage from a dirty bomb is not the initial explosion, but from the lingering effects of it.

Hate is the same way. Joseph’s brothers surrounded him, stripped him naked, and threw him into a hole. I’m sure there was a fight, because Joseph wasn’t the kind of guy to surrender easily. Their act of hatred that day affected them for many years. As you read the events two decades later when they travel of Egypt it’s clear they had suffered the deadly fallout for their actions. Each of them spent many sleepless nights and suffered miserable days for what they did to their brother.

It’s a lesson for us today. Why is it that the people we hurt the most are often in our own families? Maybe you’re living in misery because of something you did in the past—it’s like lingering radioactive fallout in your soul. God can cleanse you of that guilt if you come to Him in repentance and faith. But the main message we learn is that we should show kindness to those around us; especially our family members. That’s why the Bible teaches that we must be kind and tenderhearted toward one another, forgiving each other, even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven us. (Ephesians 4:32)

## **2. THE LESSON FROM JACOB: BE HONEST! THOSE WHO DECEIVE WILL BE DECEIVED**

The brothers dipped Joseph’s coat in the blood of a goat and took it back to show Jacob. There’s a beautiful painting done by the Spanish artist Diego Velasquez (born 1599). It captures the moment when the brothers are lying to their father. Jacob can be seen on the right coming out of his seat as he stares in horror at the bloody coat. Even the little puppy in foreground is upset. Two of the brothers can be seen in the center, one of whom is hiding a chuckle and the other is visibly smirking. They thought it was pretty funny fooling the old man.

The reason Jacob was the victim of deceit was because he was deceiver himself. His name, Jacob, meant “grabber” and he had spent his life grabbing for all he could get, even if it meant lying to get it. He and his mother had fooled old Isaac in bestowing the blessing on Jacob, even though Isaac thought he was blessing Esau. If you live your life lying, you can be certain you’ll be lied to. The principle is found in Galatians 6:7, “Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.” It was the English poet Sir Walter Scott who wrote “Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.”

I read about a man interviewing for a job in a large New York firm. The interviewer asked him, “If no one ever found out about it, and nobody was ever hurt, would you lie for \$1 million?” The man thought about it and said, “If no one found about it? And nobody was hurt by it? Sure, I guess I would lie for \$1 million.” The interviewer asked, “Would you lie for a dime?” The young man shot back, “Of course not, what kind of man do you think I am?” The interviewer said, “I have already determined that—I was just trying to determine your price.”

Honesty is not the best policy; it’s the *only* policy in the Bible. If you tell the truth, you don’t have to remember what you said.

## **3. THE LESSON FROM JOSEPH: BE STRONG! GOD’S CHILDREN SOMETIMES HIT ROCK BOTTOM**

The main lesson we learn in this text is the road to success is often littered with sinkholes. As a seventeen-year-old buck, Joseph probably thought he was invincible. When I was seventeen I thought I was a lot smarter than I am now! Joseph lived in luxury and was the favorite son of his daddy. The road was smooth. Then in a moment everything changed. Imagine his shock when his brothers surrounded him and ripped off his coat and tossed him into a hole. It was as if he had been on the fast track to success when suddenly he faced an involuntary pit stop—literally!

In my visits to Israel I’ve seen many old cisterns. A cistern was an underground pit used to store water. The sides and bottom had to be hard rock so the stored water wouldn’t leak out. A dry cistern could have been twenty to thirty feet deep—and Joseph was thrown bleeding and naked down into one. He had literally and figuratively hit rock bottom.

Even God’s children sometimes hit rock bottom and suffer. I remember hearing Dr. Howard Hendrix preach here several years ago when he said, “Sometimes life is so tough, you don’t hit

rock bottom, you crash right through the bottom!” You may feel like the title of one of Erma Bombeck’s books. She asked, “If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?”

The truth is, life is filled with painful, troubling circumstances. Hitting rock bottom is not an uncommon experience. The key to success is how you react when you find yourself at rock bottom. The great General George S. Patton had an interesting definition for success. He said, “Success is how high you bounce when you hit rock bottom.”

Like Joseph, you may be in one of life’s sinkholes yourself. It may be a marriage sinkhole, a family sinkhole, or a job sinkhole. You may be struggling in a sinkhole of fear or worry. Or, perhaps you’ve hit rock bottom in terms of your health or finances. Let me share with you three things to remember when you’re at rock bottom:

**1. When you’re in a sinkhole, remember: There’s no panic in heaven, only plans.** If I had been in Joseph’s sandals I would have panicked when they threw me in the pit. I would have screamed something like, “What are you guys doing? I’m your brother! You can’t do this to me!” But there is one good thing about being in a pit. When you’re in a pit, there’s only one way to look: Up!

How do you think God reacted to Joseph’s mugging? Do you think God turned to one of the angels and said, “Oh no! Did you just see what Joseph’s brothers did? I can’t believe it?” Of course not, God knew what was going to happen. He already had a plan for deliverance in place. Joseph just couldn’t see it yet. All he could do was trust God.

My friend, you need to know God never gets in a panic. There are two words God has never uttered: “Uh oh!” When you get in a tight place, remember there’s no panic in heaven, only plans.

One thing I’ve discovered about trouble is that God often allows difficulties to come into our lives to test us. There are many references in the Bible that refer to the “testing of our faith.” Nobody enjoys taking a big test. I heard about one boy who had been studying hard for a test in school. Before he went to bed, his parents overheard his bedtime prayer. He prayed: “Now I lay me down to rest; And hope to pass tomorrow’s test; If I should die before I wake; That’s one less test I’ll have to take!”

When you die, you won’t have to take a test to get into heaven. God is testing us *now*, in this life. It’s part of His teaching plan. There is one huge difference between a test in school and a testing of your faith. In school, you learn the lessons, and then you take the test. With God, He gives you the test first, and then He teaches the lesson.

Do you remember taking True/False tests in school? There would be a statement and you had to either write T or F beside it. God’s testing of our faith is usually a True/False test. There’s only one statement: During the toughest times of life, you can totally trust God. True or false? That’s the test.

The great English pastor Charles Spurgeon once said, “God is too good to be unkind, and He is

too wise to be confused. If I cannot trace His hand, I can always trust His heart.”

**2. When you’re in a sinkhole, remember: “Coincidence” is not in God’s vocabulary.** Keep this in mind: We know from later passages of scripture it was God’s plan for Joseph to end up living *la dolce vita* in Egypt. So, while Joseph was in the pit, it just so happened that a caravan of traders came by—what a coincidence! And it just so happened that they were headed to Egypt—another coincidence. And, by a third coincidence, at that very moment Judah came up with the idea of selling Joseph instead of killing him. Wow! Wasn’t Joseph lucky? No, he was *blessed*.

Some people think when good things come together to happen it’s just coincidence or worse, just blind luck. As I’ve said before, the only LUCK I believe in is Living Under Christ’s Knowledge. And coincidence is not part of God’s vocabulary. I don’t believe in coincidence, I believe in the Sovereignty of God—that just means that God rules.

Many months before, the God of the Universe had placed in the mind of a trader in Midian to make a business trip to Egypt. It wasn’t a coincidence; it was a divine rendezvous that the traders showed up at the perfect time to transport Joseph to Egypt.

Was God responsible for Joseph ending up in the cistern? Not really, that was the result of the wicked behavior of the brothers. God was responsible for the caravan showing up at just the right time.

I know a little about jigsaw puzzles because my wife and daughters used to work on them. But I confess I’ve never completed a jigsaw puzzle in my life. I could blame it on the fact that I’m colorblind and can’t match the pieces by color, but it’s probably truer that I don’t have enough patience! When most people start a puzzle, they open the box and dump out all the pieces, and then they fit the pieces together to match the picture on the box. The picture on the box is the guide. It’s hard enough, but what if you were trying to complete a puzzle and didn’t have the picture to go by? What if there were only a bunch of pieces? It would be a frustrating experience. Sometimes life gets frustrating for the same reason. It can seem our life is a series of events that are like pieces of a puzzle and we don’t have an image of what the final picture should be.

But when it comes to the puzzle of your life, God has the final picture in His mind. He already has the idea of what He wants us to be. The Bible says God’s purpose for your life is for you to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus. (Romans 8:29) That means He wants you to have the same personality characteristics of Jesus: Love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, meekness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22) God wants us to be like Jesus in our character. But He’s not creating a bunch of clones. Each of us is vastly different. Our life is comprised of all these pieces—and taken one at a time they may seem unrelated. What’s happening in your life is not by chance or by coincidence. Luck has nothing to do with it. God has a plan for your life. Success is finding and following God’s will.

**3. When you’re in a sinkhole, remember: Your deliverance may show up disguised as more trouble.**

Let’s rejoin Joseph the sinkhole. He’s suffering in the rock bottom of the dark cistern when he

feels a rope hit him on the shoulder. One of his brothers shouts, “Grab hold of the rope, we’re pullin’ you out.” Joseph must have thought, “Yes! I’m finally getting out! They’ve come to their senses. They’ll probably beg my forgiveness, give me my coat back, and send me home. “

Instead, when he got out of the cistern, he discovered he had been sold as a slave. His hands were bound, and he was tied to a lead rope to one of the pack camels. As the caravan walks into the sunset, the brothers finish their meal laughing at their brilliance. But Joseph wasn’t laughing. His shoulders drooped as he struggled to keep up with the camel. I can imagine him looking back toward his home wondering if he would ever see it again. If you had asked him at that moment if he felt free, he might have spit in the sand and said, “Free? I’m a slave! I’ve just traded one kind of trouble for another.”

Life is like that. You’ve heard the expressions: Sometimes you do go from the frying pan to the fire. When it rains, it pours. Troubles come in threes. So don’t be surprised, my friend, if you feel like you have gotten out of one sinkhole only to find yourself in another one. Just remember God’s deliverance is sometimes disguised as more trouble.

Since we’ve read Genesis 50, we know how wonderfully Joseph succeeds. If he hadn’t been sold into slavery, He never would have reached Egypt. If he hadn’t been sold to an official of Pharaoh, he never would have ended up in Pharaoh’s prison. If he hadn’t been in Pharaoh’s prison, he never would have been summoned to the palace to interpret a dream...and you know the rest.

It was only later Joseph understood God’s hand was involved in these events. Twenty-two years later, when he was the Prime Minister of Egypt, he said to his brothers, “Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.” (Genesis 45:5) WHO sent Joseph to Egypt? Twenty-two years earlier, Joseph thought his brothers sent him, or maybe the caravan sent him to Egypt. But now, he knew God’s hand had been involved in the whole process. So when you find yourself at rock bottom, don’t give up. Don’t panic. Don’t freak out. God may be providing your deliverance in disguise!

## CONCLUSION

The glorious truth about Joseph’s life is that God was with him all the way. God was with him when He was a cocky teenager, full of pride. God was with him when he was sulking in the pit of despair. God was with Him when he was unjustly thrown in prison. And God was with him when he ruled as Prime Minister in the Palace.

If you have surrendered your life to Jesus Christ, you can be sure God will never leave you nor forsake you. He is there with you when you find yourself in a sinkhole. There’s a line from an old song that says, “When you come to the place where He’s all you’ve got; You’ll find He’s all you need!”

Frederick Nolan is the new name of a Christian who lived in North Africa during a time of persecution. Over the past decade, the Muslims have murdered hundreds of thousands of Christians. Frederick was pursued by soldiers who were hunting him to kill him. He had been

running and hiding for days, and one night he realized he was surrounded by the soldiers. He saw a small cave in the side of a hill, and he crawled into it. It was only a shallow depression about six feet deep, so it was not a good hiding place. He could hear the soldiers hunting for him, so he couldn’t risk running out. He feared he would be found and killed, so all he could do was pray.

Frederick watched as a large spider began to weave a spider web over the opening. Within an hour, the arachnid had woven a beautiful lacework across the mouth of the cave. Soon after the soldiers arrived looking for him. As they looked toward the shallow cave, Frederick feared for his life. But when the commander of the soldiers saw the spider’s web he said that it would be impossible for their prey to have entered the cave without breaking the spider’s web. So, the soldiers left and Nolan escaped. Later, as he reflected on this event, Frederick Nolan wrote in his journal: “Where God is, a spider’s web is like a wall. Where God is not, a wall is but a spider’s web.” (Frederick Nolan)

Does it feel like you’re in a pit? A man fell into a pit. An optimist came along and said, “Things could be worse!” A pessimist came along and said, “Things will get worse.” A subjective person came along and said, “I feel your pain in the pit.” An objective person came along and said, “It’s logical that pits are there to fall into.” A Pharisee came along and said, “Only bad people fall into pits.” An IRS guy came by and said, “Are you paying taxes on your pit?” A name-it-and-claim-it preacher came by and said, “Just confess that you aren’t in a pit!” An engineer came along and measured the depth of the pit. A news reporter came along and asked, “How do you feel in that pit?” Finally Jesus came along and climbed down into the pit and helped the man out. And my friend, if you’re it seems like you’ve hit rock bottom, Jesus is here to help you up and to help you out.

## OUTLINE

SUCCESS IS FINDING AND FOLLOWING GOD’S WILL FOR YOUR LIFE

1. BE KIND! HATRED IS LIKE A DIRTY BOMB
2. BE HONEST! THOSE WHO DECEIVE WILL BE DECEIVED
3. BE STRONG! GOD’S CHILDREN SOMETIMES HIT ROCK BOTTOM

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1. There’s no panic in heaven, only plans
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“Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. *Genesis 45:5*”



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes