

INTRODUCTION

The book of Genesis contains many characters including Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But the story of Joseph takes up more chapters in Genesis than any of them. One fourth of the book is devoted to the life of Joseph. Joseph serves as a perfect model of a person who followed God’s road to success. During this series we’ve learned that the Bible’s definition of success is “finding and following God’s will for your life. In the previous lessons we talked about how God sometimes places some speed bumps on the road to get our attention. You’ve got to be careful, because there may be some dangerous sinkholes on the road to success. Whenever you’re tempted, God has placed plenty of stop signs and emergency escape routes for you. There are usually a few detours along the way demanding our patience and trust. In the last lesson we talked about the danger of road rage, about how it’s better to forgive than to seek revenge.

When we observe the final chapter of Joseph’s life, we see he had arrived at a place where His trust in God was so powerful it was as if his life was set on God’s cruise control. When you’re driving, cruise control is a great option, especially on a long trip; it really helps to be able to set your speed and then simply push the cruise control button.

Of course, cruise control may not always function properly. About ten years ago, my wife Cindy bought a used Cadillac to chauffeur our girls to church, school, dance and other activities. It was one of those long, low Cadillacs. She says it wasn’t quite old enough to be a classic, but close. We called it “the Limo” but probably “The Lemon” was more fitting. Once we were returning to Texas from Alabama in the limo. Cindy was driving on I-20 and I was taking a nap. She had the cruise control set at exactly the speed limit (she’s pretty legalistic about that). As we neared Ruston, Louisiana, she decided to stop for get gas. When she tapped the brake to cancel the cruise control, nothing happened. Then she flicked the switch on the end of the blinker wand, and still no change. To make matters worse, the speed began to increase. That was when she woke me up and said, “Houston, we’ve got a problem.” We were cruising along at almost 80 mph with no way to disengage the cruise control. We didn’t want to turn off the ignition because we’d lose the power steering control. As we considered our options, we found that when she applied the brakes the car would slow down, but the engine would continue to race to try to resume the previously set speed. We were coming up on a Ruston exit, so we decided to try to make it to one of the gas stations before we shut off the car. Like an experienced NASCAR driver, Cindy screeched up the exit, applying the brakes as hard as she could. With the engine racing, she maneuvered the Limo right next to a gas pump while almost standing on the brakes. The engine was racing and the other customers were looking at her like she was crazy. She quickly turned off the ignition and the engine stopped. The silence was wonderful, and we both breathed a prayer of thanksgiving, and the girls cheered. I think Laura Grace said something like, “Wow, that was fun, let’s do it again.” I raised the hood, but didn’t even know where to start looking. But when we started the car again, everything seemed fine. We drove back to Tyler without setting the cruise control. We found out later it was some kind of solenoid problem, and had it fixed.

Fortunately, God’s cruise control is more reliable. When you set the cruise in your car, you are no longer in control. Some people aren’t willing to surrender control of their life to God. But if you want find success in your life, you must be willing to surrender control of your life to God.

Joseph did that, as we read about the conclusion of his life.

Genesis 50:15-21, 24-26. “When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?’ So they sent word to Joseph saying, “Your father left these instructions before he died: ‘This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.’ Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.’ When their message came to him, Joseph wept. His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. ‘We are your slaves,’ they said. But Joseph said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.’ And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them... Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, ‘God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.’ So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.”

As I have studied the life of Joseph over these past few weeks, I’ve learned so much. I want to share with you three summary life lessons we can learn from Joseph.

LIFE LESSON #1: YOU CAN TRUST GOD WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING EVERYTHING

This principle can be seen by what Joseph said in Genesis 50:20: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

To me, the two most important words in that verse are “but God.” Many bad things happened to Joseph, *but God* turned it around for good. I’m sure there were times when Joseph asked God, “Why?” “Why am in this pit?” “Why am I in this prison? I don’t understand!” Joseph never understood why these things happened, instead he later learned what God was doing—bringing about good. Joseph discovered he didn’t have to figure out *why* things were happening, instead he learned to trust God.

Trusting God doesn’t ignore the fact that there are bad people and bad things that happen to us. There are hateful people out there who stalk children or strap bombs to themselves and kill innocent citizens. There are harmful diseases that rob our loved ones of their health. There are tragic accidents happening everyday causing pain and suffering. In the midst of this, we want to ask, “WHY?” Why did my spouse die? Why did I get cancer? Why did I have to bury my child? Why did my mate leave me? Why did my parents split up? Why does everyone else seem to prosper while I suffer? Seldom do we ever get answers to those questions in this life. Instead, these experiences provide the opportunity for us to trust God completely instead of understanding everything.

Our theme verse for 2004 supports this principle. Proverbs 3:5 says, “Trust in the Lord with all

your heart and lean not on your own understanding;” When you face trouble, you have a choice of either trying to understand it, or choosing to trust God. If you spend all your emotional energy trying to figure out WHY this is happening, you can’t fully trust God.

One of my favorite country comedians was the late Jerry Clower. He used to tell the story about how one summer nobody around Yazoo City was catching any fish—nobody except Marcel Ledbetter that is. Marcel came back each evening with a huge string of fish. Nobody knew how he was doing it, so the game warden asked to go fishing with Marcel to discover his secret. Marcel and the game warden rowed out into the middle of a little pond. Marcel pulled out a stick of dynamite and lit it and tossed it in the water. KABOOM! And in a few seconds dead fish started floating to the surface and Marcel simply used his net to gather them in the boat. The game warden was enraged. He said, “Marcel Ledbetter, you know that’s against the law. I’m not just going to throw you in jail, I’m going to put you under the jail!” While the game warden was issuing his tirade, old Marcel just took out another stick of dynamite and lit it. He handed it to the surprised game warden. SSSSSSS...the fuse was fizzling. Marcel looked at him and calmly said, “Are you gonna’ talk, or are you gonna’ fish?”

I think the same thing is true about trusting God. Whenever pain and adversity comes into our life, it’s as if God says to us, “Are you going to figure it out, or are you going to trust me?” Joseph had learned to trust God.

If you set your life on God’s cruise control, He can bring about good. Genesis 50:20 has been called the Romans 8:28 of the Old Testament. It’s the same truth. “For we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.” One reason we have a hard time accepting this truth is because we don’t understand what “good” is. To me, “good” is what makes me happy. And if we’re not always happy, we think things can’t be good. But to God, “good” is what gives Him glory.

People sometimes struggle with how to maintain a thankful attitude during times of pain. You don’t have to thank God for your cancer, but in the midst of your cancer, you can thank God that He is good. You don’t have to thank God that you lost your job, but you can thank Him that He is good. Bad things happen, but God is good—all the time. The Psalmist says, “Praise the Lord. Oh, give thanks to the Lord for he is good.” (Psalm 106:1) When most of us were children we learned a blessing to pray before we ate. It went, “God is great. / God is good. / Let us thank Him for our food. / By His hands we are fed. / Thank you, God for daily bread.” That’s solid theology. Two foundational characteristics of God are His greatness and His goodness. When you understand how good and how great God really is, you can set your life on God’s cruise control, even when you don’t understand your difficult circumstances.

LIFE LESSON #2: YOU CAN SURVIVE ADVERSITY WITHOUT BITTERNESS

If anyone had a right to be angry and bitter it was Joseph. His brothers were afraid that after their father died, Joseph would hold a grudge against them. But in Genesis 50:21 Joseph said, “Don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.”

Is there anyone here who has been abused and mistreated by a family member? It can either make you bitter or make you better. Joseph was mugged and sold into slavery by his brothers, yet he refused to become bitter about it.

Is there anyone here who has ever been falsely accused? It can make you bitter or it can make you better. Joseph was falsely accused of attempted rape, and even went to prison as an innocent man, yet he refused to allow it to make him bitter.

Is there anyone here who has ever felt ignored and forgotten? It can make you bitter or it can make you better. Joseph was left in jail for years after he had helped Pharaoh’s servant, yet he refused to allow that make him bitter.

There are plenty of bitter, angry people out there. I read about a man in Tampa, Florida who was so bitter about paying alimony to his former wife that he seethed every time he wrote the check. In 1994 when it came time for his final alimony payment, he didn’t just send her a check; he wanted to send her a message. So he drew a large-scale check on the back of a pinstripe shirt. He made out the check on the back of the shirt and on the memo line he wrote, “Here it is—the shirt off my back!” And the bank cashed the check. That’s bitterness.

The Bible warns about the danger of a bitter attitude. It says in Hebrews 12:15 “See to it that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” If bitterness is the root, the fruit is harmful anger toward someone who has hurt you. But bitterness is like an acid in your soul that will only eat away at its own container.

Joseph rightly understood that adversity was God’s way of testing and proving his character. I can remember when there used to be television and radio spots that would begin with a solid tone and then a voice would come on and say, “This is a test. This is only test. This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System...” Whenever a child of God encounters trouble and adversity, you should hear a voice saying, “This is a test. This is only a test.”

The Bible says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” (James 1:2-3) When you have successfully endured adversity, you always discover that it makes you stronger. As someone once said, “That which doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger.”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a great writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970. He was imprisoned in Siberia for eight years after some disparaging comments about Stalin in a letter to a friend. As he reflected on that terrible ordeal years later he wrote: “In the intoxication of youthful successes I felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel...it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually, it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart...so, bless you, prison, for having been in my life.” (The Gulag Archipelago: 1948-1956, p. 615)

That’s the attitude Joseph displayed. He said, “you intended all these things to harm me, but God intended it for good. When your life is under God’s control, you can survive adversity without

bitterness.

LIFE LESSON #3: YOU CAN FACE DEATH WITHOUT FEAR

Genesis 50:24. “Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid...” 49:33 “When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people.”

Joseph and Jacob didn’t have to fear death because they believed there was an existence after death. Have you read the latest statistics on death? One out of one people die. I heard about a man who went to see his doctor for a physical. A couple of days later the doctor called him and said, “I’ve got bad news and worse news, which would you like to hear first?” The guy said, “Give me the bad news.” The doctor said, “Your tests show you have 48 hours to live.” The man was flabbergasted. “That’s the bad news? How can there be worse news than that?” The doctor paused for a moment and said, “Well, I’ve been trying to call you since yesterday!” When it comes to dying, many of us agree with Woody Allen who said, “It’s not that I’m afraid of dying, I just don’t want to be there when it happens!”

For a Christian, death means many things, but let me give you three words that tell you *why* a Christian can face death without fear. These words all start with the letter “R.” First, death is reunion. We’ll be gathered to be with our loved ones and other people who followed Jesus Christ. When Jacob died, the Bible says, “he was gathered to his people.” The identical statement is used to describe Abraham and Isaac’s death. People often me, “Will we know our loved ones in heaven?” Absolutely. The Bible doesn’t say Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were gathered to a bunch of strangers. They were gathered to their own people.

Second, death for a Christian means renewal. This old body we live in is like a tent. This old tent gets shabby and tattered with age. Our bodies grow old and achy. But when we die, our soul and spirit vacate this tent and we receive a spiritual body. When the Apostle Paul was considering his own death he wrote, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain...I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” (Philippians 1:21-24) The word “depart” was used of soldiers who would strike camp and take down his tent to move to another assignment. Won’t it be wonderful to live in a body and in a place where there is no pain, no sorrow, and no death? Death is a time of renewal.

Third, death for a Christian means reality—face to face. The Bible says now we walk by faith and not by sight. When we get to heaven, our faith will turn to sight—that’s reality. The Bible says now our vision of Jesus is like looking into a poor reflection in a mirror, like when you get out of the shower and the mirror is fogged up, and you can’t see your face clearly. That’s the only vision we have of Jesus now, but when we die, we will see Him face to face—that’s reality!

Fanny Crosby was a prolific hymn writer. She wrote such classic songs as “Blessed Assurance” and “To God Be the Glory.” Fanny Crosby was blind, so she possessed a keen anticipation of being able to see once she died. In one of her songs she wrote: When my life work is ended, and I cross the swelling tide, When the bright and glorious morning I shall see; I shall know my

Redeemer when I reach the other side, And His smile will be the first to welcome me. Isn’t it great to realize the smile of Jesus will welcome us into heaven?

If you aren’t a follower of Jesus Christ, you SHOULD fear death. Because if you die without having Jesus as your Savior, you are destined to spend an agonizing eternity separated from God’s love and forgiveness. But right now, His grace and mercy is available to anyone who will turn from their sins and place their faith in Jesus. Is your life under God’s control? Then you can trust God without understanding your circumstances. You can survive adversity without becoming bitter. And you can face death without fear.

CONCLUSION

Imagine for a moment you’re driving down a highway and you’re going to set the cruise control. You watch the speedometer until you reach the desired speed. Then you push the button and you can actually feel the sensation as the care takes over the speed control. When you engage the cruise control in your car, it requires a voluntary decision and action on your part. And when you set the cruise control, you can actually feel the car taking over the speed control. Have you ever come to a place in your life when you surrendered control of your life to the God of the Universe? It requires a conscious decision on your part.

I believe there is an experience in life similar to that. It’s when you fully and completely surrender control of your life to God. I can actually remember the first time I did. I trusted Jesus as my Savior when I was child, but I didn’t fully understand what it was to make Him my Lord until I was a teenager. I was working as a lifeguard at a Christian camp during the summer before my senior year in High School. I was struggling with what to do with my life. One night after a youth service, I walked up onto a mountain near the camp and stared up at the star-filled sky. I can remember getting on my knees and saying, “God, whatever you want me to be or do, I will follow you.” That was the initial point of surrender in my life. I literally felt a load lifted off my shoulders. I didn’t know that night what I was to do, but I knew it was no longer under my control. The feeling as close to that is when I’m driving and set the cruise control.

Has there ever been a time in your life when you consciously surrendered control of your life to God? After studying the life of Joseph, I’ve learned it isn’t about Joseph; it’s about what God did for Joseph. It’s not about you and it’s not about me, it’s about what God can do in and through us. God is so great He can do anything. God is so good He loves you perfectly! Sometimes preachers conclude messages by telling sad stories that bring tears, or scary stories that bring fears. I want to end this message with us celebrating God’s greatness together. I want us to forget that we are dignified adults, and I want us to sing this song like the little children sing it. Jesus said that unless we become like little children we’ll never enter the kingdom. Let’s stand and sing it and do all the motions: My God is so big; so strong and so mighty; There’s nothing my God cannot do! My God is so big, so strong and so mighty; There’s nothing my God cannot do! The mountains are His; the valleys are His; the stars are His handiwork, too! My God is so big, so strong and so mighty; there’s nothing my God cannot do—for you!” My friend, God is so big, so strong, and so mighty, that you can turn your life over to Him! Set your life on God’s cruise control.

OUTLINE

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“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” *Proverbs 3:5*

2. YOU CAN SURVIVE ADVERSITY WITHOUT BITTERNESS

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” *James 1:2-3*

3. YOU CAN FACE DEATH WITHOUT FEAR

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain...I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”
Philippians 1:21-24



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes