

Unforeseen Pit Stops

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A pastor was talking to a group of young children about being Christians and going to heaven. At the end of his talk, he asked, “Where do you want to go? “

“Heaven! “They all piped up.

Again the pastor asked, And what do you have to be to get there? “

Johnny convinced that he had the right response excitedly raised his hand. The pastor repeated the question, yes Johnny “What do you have to be to get to heaven? “ Dead, Johnny exclaimed confidently. “

We sometimes are like Johnny when we try to understand the bible. I hope that you all are enjoying reading The Story and gaining a new perspective.

This morning I am privileged to talk to you about one of my all time favorite bible stories, Joseph. There is such a richness of inspiration in his life story. There are the highs ultimately in Pharaoh’s palace but there are the lows in the bottom of the pit and in prison. Like Joseph we, too make unforeseen pit stops when we are blindsided by life’s circumstances. Ours are figurative not literal like Joseph’s. Let’s begin with some highlights of chapter 3 of The Story and find our place in it. Randy Frazee who co wrote the book uses the concept of The Upper Story meaning from God’s perspective, God’s divine plan. The Lower Story is from our perspective the daily events of our lives or in this case Joseph’s. Imagine that you are given a jigsaw puzzle with thousands of pieces but without the finished picture of the assembled puzzle. God in The Upper Story has that final picture with the plan and purpose for our life story. We journey through The Lower Story of life of multi faceted jigsaw pieces or experiences enabled by God with our unique gifts and talents to fulfill His plan.

Our chapter opens with Joseph as a seventeen year old teenager. Life is good for Joseph. He is one of twelve brothers but he is clearly dad Jacob’s favorite. A special multi colored robe is given to him by his father. The other brothers are jealous and do not like this unfair treatment.

To add insult to injury, Joseph gives his father a bad report about his brothers. The final straw was Joseph sharing his dream about his brothers and father bowing down to him one day. This went over really well with the family as you can imagine. The brothers hated and resented him so much that they plotted against him. Seizing an opportunity while alone with Joseph, they threw him into a pit. Reuben intervened so that Joseph wouldn't be killed and Judah led the scheme to sell him into slavery. The Lord was with Joseph and protected him.

Max Lucado imagines Joseph's terrifying experience in the pit in the book *God Will Carry You Through* .

“It was an abandoned cistern. Jagged rocks and roots extended from its side. The seventeen year old boy lay at the bottom. At least he looked to be a boy: downy beard, spindly arms and legs. His hands were bound, ankles tied. He laid on his side his knees against his chest, cramped in the small space. His eyes were wide with fear. His voice was hoarse from screaming. It wasn't that his brothers didn't hear him. Twenty two years later, when a famine had tamed their swagger and guilt dampened their pride, they would confess “we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear. (Genesis 42 :21 NKJV)

Joseph didn't see this assault coming. He didn't climb out of bed that morning and think; I'd better dress in padded clothing because this is the day that I get tossed in a hole. The attack caught him off guard. “

During these dark experiences in our lives, we find no easy escape. Our range of emotions varies from depression, fear, anger, bitterness to rage. Some are unable to move beyond these unjust shocking interruptions of their life plans, but Joseph did. As we return to the narrative of Joseph, his brothers sell him into slavery. They cruelly tell Jacob that his beloved Joseph has been killed by a ferocious animal. Joseph is sold to Potiphar an Egyptian captain of the palace guard. Joseph succeeds and is promoted to total responsibility over Potiphar's household and fields.

Repeatedly, it says in Genesis “the Lord was with Joseph “. Joseph unfortunately was put in prison after refusing Potiphar's wife's advances. She lied to her husband saying that Joseph had attacked her. The prison was another unforeseen betrayal and pit experience. While in prison Joseph developed the reputation for being able to interpret dreams.

Joseph is in prison for two years when he is summoned to the palace. When pharaoh has two troubling dreams that no one can interpret, God has equipped and prepared Joseph for this special responsibility. He correctly interprets Pharaoh's dreams and counsels him to prepare for the fulfillment of his dreams.

1 . Dream # 1 Egypt will have 7 years of bountiful harvests

2. Dream # 2 Egypt will have seven years of famine.

Joseph is promoted to deputy Pharaoh and successfully prepares for the coming famine. With deteriorating conditions in Canaan, Jacob sends the brothers to buy food in Egypt. Joseph, now 39, ultimately reunites with his brothers and amazingly forgives their cruel betrayal. He says to them in these beautiful, compassionate verses Genesis 50 ;19 -21 "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. There is also a touching reunion with his father, Jacob.

A few weeks ago, I witnessed a real life inspirational story in the life of Steven McDonald containing many elements of the Joseph story. I was watching the broadcast of the Papal Mass from Madison Square Garden when the cameras showed a man in a wheelchair. The announcer reminded people that Steven was shot in Central Park, July 12 th, 1986 while on duty as a policeman. I researched his life story on the internet to learn how or even if he had rebounded from this tragedy. Shot three times by a fifteen year old assailant, he was left a quadriplegic and remains on a ventilator.

In an interview Steven McDonald shares his journey of forgiveness. I would like to quote from excerpts from the article.

"They did the impossible they saved me, but my wounds were devastating. The bullet that struck my throat had hit my spine, and I couldn't move my legs, or breathe without a ventilator. In less than a second, I had gone from being an active police officer to an incapable crime victim. I was paralyzed from the neck down.

When the surgeon came into my room to tell me this, my wife Patti Ann, was there and he told her that I would need to be institutionalized. We had been married just 8 months and Patti Anne who was 23 at the time was three months pregnant. She collapsed to the floor crying uncontrollably. I cried too though I was locked in my body and unable to

move to reach out to her. Then about 6 months after I was shot, Patti Anne gave birth to a baby boy. We named him Conor. To me Conor's birth was like a message from God that I should live and live differently. And it was clear that I had to respond to that message. I prayed that I would be changed, that the person I was would be replaced by something new.

That prayer was answered with a desire to forgive the young man who shot me. I wanted to free myself of all the negative, destructive emotions that his act of violence had unleashed in me: anger, bitterness, hatred and other feelings. I needed to free myself of all those emotions so that I could love my wife and our son and those around us.

Later in the interview, he responds to the question why did he forgive? In his own words, He answers.

I forgave Shavod Jones because I believe the only thing worse than receiving a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart. Such an attitude would have extended injury to my soul, hurting my wife, son and others even more. It's bad enough that the physical effects are permanent but at least I can choose to prevent spiritual injury.

In another article McDonald shared that he has brought his message of forgiveness to many. He never realized it would carry any importance in other people's lives. The McDonald's through speaking engagements have had a ministry of forgiveness and not responding with violence to acts of violence. Like Joseph, he states that God turned something terrible into something beautiful. He says, I think that God wants to use both our abilities and our disabilities. He needs our arms, our legs, and minds and hearts and all that we have to let others know that he is alive and well and loves us and wants us to love one another. “

No matter what our perspective view is this morning in the depths or in the heights of life circumstances God is with us .The trials we go through test us and cause us to trust God and to see His power in desperate situations. Knowing that God's storyline is unfolding even in bleak and confusing times allows us to live freely, being able to forgive those who sin against us. We can be reassured as in Romans 8: 28 “All things work together for good for those who love God and those who are called according to His purpose. “

Please follow along silently while I read this beautiful Puritan Prayer: