

Session 2



When Life Goes Terribly Wrong

THE POINT

*Even hard interruptions place us
where God can use us.*

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

The birth of a giraffe is shocking to behold! First, the newborn calf drops ten feet to the ground at birth. Then, his mama kicks him. Hard! Somehow, the calf knows what this means and tries to stand. But those stilts-for-legs rarely work on the first try.

Bam! A second kick sends the calf sprawling. This cycle of kick, try, and fall repeats until the infant giraffe finds its wobbly balance. Then, bam! Mama kicks him off his feet! Her baby must learn how to rise and get moving right away or predators will pick him off.¹

I've got some things in common with a baby giraffe.

1. I've been knocked off my feet.
2. I've been kicked while I was down.
3. I've been kicked by the people from whom I expected kindness.

Can you relate?

Joseph certainly can! His life was interrupted by wicked people, stinging injustice, and brutal hardship. Yet, his God-centered response offers a trustworthy roadmap through the fog of shock and the tears of life's hard kicks.

QUESTION 1:

What's your favorite thing to see or experience at the zoo?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

GENESIS 39:21-23

²¹ But the LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness to him. He granted him favor with the prison warden. ²² The warden put all the prisoners who were in the prison under Joseph's authority, and he was responsible for everything that was done there. ²³ The warden did not bother with anything under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him, and the LORD made everything that he did successful.

Meet Joseph. In Genesis 37, he's probably a teenager and his life is a soap opera. But nothing could have prepared him for what was about to happen.

- He was born into a dysfunctional family—perfect for reality TV.
- His half-brothers took turns being brutal, conniving, and openly immoral.
- He was his dad's favorite, and his brothers hated him for it.
- Jacob's gift of the "coat of many colors" conferred firstborn privileges and position to Joseph, deepening the rift with siblings.
- God gave Joseph dreams foretelling his preeminence in his family. Excited and naive, Joseph shared this with his family. You can guess how that went.

So, what happened when daddy's favorite, with firstborn rights and big dreams of future influence, was spotted by his malicious brothers as he walked toward them in a remote area—wearing that infuriating coat? Answer: something vile.

Like a pack of wolves, they pounced on Joseph, ultimately selling him into slavery. They savaged his prized coat to make it look like death by a wild beast, then headed home with a lie to tell their father and a secret to bury deep.

In one afternoon, Joseph went from pampered heir in a wealthy family to pitiful slave bound for Egypt, where he was sold to Potiphar, Pharaoh's captain of the guard. We can imagine what Joseph felt during that terrible road trip: injustice, grief, and anger.

We all carry wounds inflicted by others. It's easy to pitch a tent in Camp Hurt and stay there, replaying how we've been wronged and what it cost us. Questions come unbidden in such times:

- "Where is God in all this?"
- "How could He let this happen to me?"

But Joseph's story offers a different perspective—God has not walked out on you. Quite the opposite: He is with you in the valley.

As Genesis 39 opens, Joseph had a choice to make.

- He could let what others had done to him define his life, becoming a hardened, bitter man.
- He could trust that God the Dream-Giver was present and purposeful in ways he couldn't yet see.

Joseph chose God and that made all the difference. Four times in Genesis 39, we read that “the Lord was with Joseph” (vv. 2,3,21,23). Hebrews 13 tells us what happens when we believe like this: “He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave or abandon you.’ Therefore, we may boldly say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’” (vv. 5-6).

Sounds like Joseph, doesn't it? Confidence in God guarded his heart from poisonous emotions and opened him to God's blessing. Each time God's presence with him is mentioned, we're told his work prospered. It's obvious that Joseph told Potiphar and the prison warden the reason for his attitude or competency (vv. 3,23). They acknowledged that God was the explanation for Joseph's life.

Even when Mrs. Potiphar propositioned him daily (v. 10), Joseph never yielded to temptation. He was living his life according to God's principles—he would not succumb to this “immense evil” and sin against God (v. 9). It was costly obedience. She slandered Joseph's character, and it landed him in prison (vv. 11-18). Joseph did what was right and got burned.

How encouraging it must have been for Joseph when, while imprisoned, the warden gave him favor and complete trust. It makes me think: How many times has God met me with mercy and help in the darkest nights of my life? How often, in those hard places, has He opened doors I would never have seen?

QUESTION 2:

When have you sensed the Lord's kindness especially extended to you?

GENESIS 40:5-8

⁵ The king of Egypt's cupbearer and baker, who were confined in the prison, each had a dream. Both had a dream on the same night, and each dream had its own meaning.

⁶ When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they looked distraught. ⁷ So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were in custody with him in his master's house, “Why do you look so sad today?” ⁸ “We had dreams,” they said to him, “but there is no one to interpret them.” Then Joseph said to them, “Don't interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.”

When we hear of a “God-forsaken place,” we usually picture a location so harsh, desolate, and miserable as to be unfit for human thriving. That prison took a toll on Joseph.

David described Joseph's plight: “They hurt his feet with shackles; his neck was put in an iron collar” (Ps. 105:18). I have never been handcuffed in my life, let alone chained to a wall.²

The trauma of his confinement shrink-wrapped Joseph's life. He felt claustrophobic, his whole existence narrowed to the length of his chains in a cell likely located underground. His limitations would raise questions—the kind that haunt us when circumstances confine us:

- “What are You doing, Lord?”
- “God, what do I do now? I’m stuck.”
- “How can I serve You here? It feels like Your purposes have passed me by.”

Sometimes, we Christians say to one another, “God is good all the time.” We declare this as public praise and mutual encouragement when prayers are answered, or when sickness is healed, or when God opens doors. But here’s an important question: Do we really believe God is good *all the time*?³

We aren’t given the details, but judging from Joseph’s attitude and actions, he was steadied by his faith. He believed God had him there for a reason, which was validated by release from his shackles, his promotion over the prisoners, and his God-enabled success in his work.

So, when Pharaoh’s two attendants told Joseph their confusing dreams, God enabled him to interpret them: the cupbearer would be released and restored to Pharaoh’s service in three days, while the baker would be released and hanged on the same day. Both were fulfilled exactly as Joseph predicted.

There’s a twist in the story that we’re about to see, but right now Joseph is more convinced than ever of what Psalm 23 encourages: “Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.” He served God’s purposes while in prison.

If God can use Joseph in a dungeon, Daniel in a lion’s den, and Paul in prison, he has work for you to do right where you are.

QUESTION 3:

How can we affirm and reflect God’s goodness even in difficult circumstances?

GENESIS 41:10-14

¹⁰ Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and he put me and the chief baker in the custody of the captain of the guards. ¹¹ He and I had dreams on the same night; each dream had its own meaning. ¹² Now a young Hebrew, a slave of the captain of the guards, was with us there. We told him our dreams, he interpreted our dreams for us, and each had its own interpretation. ¹³ It turned out just the way he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was hanged.” ¹⁴ Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and they quickly brought him from the dungeon. He shaved, changed his clothes, and went to Pharaoh.

Engage

GOD STEPPED IN

Life choices often don't turn out OK, unless God intervenes. Circle one of these types of choices in which you can see how God intervened to make everything turn out for your well-being. Then answer the question.

Choice about education

Choice about career

Choice about marriage

Choice about children

Choice about finances

Choice about health

Considering this area of choice, recount how you made the choice and how God worked all things for your good:

Years before, God gave Joseph two dreams (Gen. 37:5-11). Now, while in prison, Joseph heard from two fellow inmates that they both had dreams on the same night. They were distraught. Joseph said to them, “Don’t interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.” (Gen. 40:8). When he heard the dreams of the cupbearer and baker, he provided the interpretation. With the interpretation, Joseph made a heartfelt plea to the cupbearer to mention him to Pharaoh once he was released (Gen. 40:14). I’m sure the cupbearer pledged that he wouldn’t forget, but he did.

Genesis 40:23 delivers the blow: “Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.” Joseph’s whole life seems to be two steps forward, three steps back—a dance step no one wants to learn. Then Genesis 41:1 adds to the pain. Read literally, it says, “At the end of two years . . .” Joseph felt every empty-handed day in prison, each one pounding the truth into him: he was stuck in that miserable waiting room.

QUESTION 4:

How has faithfulness in small situations opened the door for larger opportunities in your life?

Yet, Joseph’s trust in the Lord didn’t waver. His humility and focus on God when he stood before Pharaoh reveals the character-shaping work of his testing. I don’t know what truth about God helped him through this. So many stories in the Bible follow this pattern:

- Someone is in pain.
- All they can see is a dead-end street.
- Suddenly, they recognize that God had been working all along in their suffering.

Joseph couldn’t see the bigger picture, but he trusted God with the unknown. It happened in a flash—the king had two fantastical dreams, and Egypt’s occultic magicians couldn’t make sense of them. The cupbearer’s memories of prison were jogged. He recounted Joseph’s accurate interpretation of his and the baker’s dreams to Pharaoh. One royal command later and Joseph’s unjust imprisonment was over.

Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams, pointing him to God’s wisdom and power as he explained the coming famine and Egypt’s role in global relief. Hearing God’s plans through Joseph, it was clear to the king who should administrate the plan Joseph proposed. And so it was that a Hebrew slave became the prime minister of Egypt.

It had been thirteen brutal years since Joseph was sold into slavery by his hateful brothers—years filled with abuse, injustice, slander, and long, dreary days of sorrow. But Joseph endured faithfully, looking past the wrongs and the losses. Joseph looked to God, who was readying him for astounding purposes.

QUESTION 5:

How has God used our group to help prepare you for life’s challenges and opportunities?

LIVE IT OUT

Even hard interruptions place us where God can use us. Choose one of the following applications.

- **Pray about everything.** Develop the habit of conversing with God about your daily experiences and emotions. Read 1 Peter 5:7 and 1 Thessalonians 5:17, then set reminders to stop and pray throughout the day.
- **Fuel your faith.** God is bigger than your problems, pain, fears, and future. Make a list of your current trials and difficulties. Increase your faith through reading God's Word. This week with your list of troubles in hand, read and reflect on these verses: Job 42:2; Matthew 10:29-31; 19:26; Romans 8:28,32.
- **Reconsider your perspective about suffering.** Life is hard and unfair. People can be thoughtless and cruel. But God is good. Set aside time to meditate on what Joseph said to his brothers in Genesis 50:20. How could that perspective help you? Share with others as you have opportunity.



1. Gary Richmond, "It's a Jungle Out There," Men of Integrity, December 15, 2004.

2. Derek Kidner, Psalm 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 16 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 408–409.

3. Charles Spurgeon, "A Happy Christian," in Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, vol. 13 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1867), 736, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/a-happy-christian/#flipbook>.