

## Spiraling Upward When Everything Seems to be Spiraling Downward

I'm Allen Snapp, pastor of Grace Community Church. If this is your first time joining us, we're so glad to have you with us and it's our hope that you are built up and encouraged in your faith in Jesus.

Did you know that some people are more buoyant than others? Some people float easier than others. I have a brother in law who says if he ever fell off a boat and was lost at sea, he'd have to die of exposure or get eaten by sharks, cause he'd never drown. He can tread water forever. Not me, I tread water for a minute I'm exhausted. 10 minutes and I'm trying to get the sharks attention: come on,, let's get this over with already. Some people are just more buoyant than others.

Some people are just more buoyant in how they live their lives too. The more life presses down on them, the higher they seem to rise. Bad things happen, but they end up in a good place. Life is spiraling downward...and they're spiraling upward!

In the Bible Joseph was that kind of person. Most of his life between 17 and 30 years old was one seriously downward spiral after another...and at the same time one upward spiral after another. Joseph had bouyancy.

How'd he get that? Where'd that come from? Can we have that quality in our lives too? That's the question I want us to look at for the next several weeks in a series I'm calling Spiraling Upward: *Life Lessons from the Story of Joseph*.

Now listen, before we jump in, I know that some of you have seriously hard things going on in your life and the last thing I want to do is give you are positive thinking, put on a happy face, motivational poster sermons. Life is way too hard and way too complicated for that.

We live in a fallen, broken world. Sin breaks everything it touches. On top of that, we have an enemy that Jesus says lives to rob, kill, and destroy us. Put that on a motivation poster.

Life punches hard. But Paul says in Romans 8 that no matter how hard life punches *in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. In all these things* – in the middle of all the blows life can throw at us, we come out on top. We win. We are more than conquerors through Christ who loves us. That is what God has for us and what God can do in us.

So if everything in your life seems to be going wrong, this message is for you. I've called today's message ***Spiraling Upward When Everything Seems to be Spiraling Downward***. Let's start Joseph's story in Gen. 37 beginning in verse 2. For the sake of time I'm not going to read every verse, but I encourage you to read through the entire story on your own.

*Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. <sup>3</sup> Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>4</sup> But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him. <sup>5</sup> Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: <sup>7</sup> Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." <sup>8</sup> His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.*

*<sup>9</sup> Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." <sup>10</sup> But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" <sup>11</sup> And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. Gen. 37:2-11*

This is just the beginning of a serious downward spiral for Joseph and not surprisingly it begins with the relationships in his life. His brothers hate him. Their hatred begins when they see that their father Jacob openly loves Joseph more than any of them. That makes me cringe. As a father, I would never want any of my children to feel less loved than another. I love all my children with all my heart and want them to know that. Jacob messed up by openly loving Joseph more and showing it.

Then Joseph made things worse when he tells them that he had two dreams where he is ruling over them. That's like gasoline on the fire! Verse 11 tells us his brothers were jealous of him. Let's continue reading in verse 12

*<sup>12</sup> Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup> And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." ...<sup>17</sup> So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.*

*<sup>18</sup> They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. <sup>19</sup> They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup> Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams." ...*

*<sup>25</sup> Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup> Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. <sup>28</sup> Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels<sup>[6]</sup> of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.*

If the story stopped right here, it would be more painful than anything most of us will ever experience. But this isn't the end of the story, this is just the beginning of the downward spiral. Betrayal, rejection, injustice, imprisonment. Downward, downward, downward.

How is it that Joseph always manages to rise above his circumstances? How does he keep an excellent spirit when things are going so bad? How is it that the more life spirals downward, Joseph spirals upward?

To find the answer to that we have to go to the end of the story, 13 years later when he's reunited with his brothers and they're fearful that Joseph is going to pay them back for what they did. Joseph tells them not be afraid, and then in Gen. 50:20 he gives us the key to his buoyancy:

*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. Gen. 50:20*

Joseph saw that two directions were going on in his life at the same time: his brothers meant evil, God meant good. Their intentions were to destroy, God's intention was to save. They wanted his life to spiral

downward, God planned his life to spiral upward.

## **Spiraling Upward Lessons**

### **1. Believe that God is at work even in the hardest situations and relationships**

Gen. 50:20 reveals to us that Joseph had an amazing ability to see God's hand at work even in the worst of situations. Let's not minimize the horror of what happened to Joseph: he was hated, rejected, and betrayed by his brothers. I can't even imagine the pain and bitterness this 17 year old must have struggled with.

But God put this confidence in his heart that there were two spirals going on: evil spiraling down, God's good plan spiraling up. We can have that same confidence in our lives no matter how hard things get. Take that hard situation and look for what God is doing in it. Take that relational conflict and believe that God is working.

Think about the strength of Joseph's statement: *you meant it for evil*. Not "you made a mistake" or "you misunderstood" or "you messed up" – *you meant it for evil*. The outcome you intended was dark, wicked, Satanic. But God meant it for good. The same set of circumstances, but Joseph chose to keep his eyes on what God was doing and that gave his spirit buoyancy and that caused him to rise to the top in every situation.

Now listen, I think getting to this place of believing God is at work in hard situations can often be a process. Probably was for Joseph. I know it often is for me. Even little setbacks can discourage me, and for a time send me spiraling downward. But at some point something begins to rise in my heart – a confidence that God will bring good out of it. I know it's the Lord who helps me to get to that point, but I usually don't start there. It's a process.

If you're in that place where you're struggling to believe, park your heart over promises like Rom. 8:28

**And we know that all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28)**

How do we know that? Because God has promised it, and we believe His promises. You meant it for evil, God meant it for good. God means good for you, and means to do good through you. Believe it!

### **2. See your losses as learning opportunities**

We all have losses in our lives. When I say losses I mean setbacks, disappointments, missed opportunities, mistakes, broken or damaged relationships. We all have them. The big question is what do we do with them? Do we interpret losses to mean we are losers? Or do we see losses as learning opportunities?

Joseph saw his losses as opportunities to learn. Learn forgiveness. Learn patience. Learn to lead with integrity, learn to resist temptation, learn to administrate a small responsibility with excellence. What seemed to be losses were actually lessons preparing Joseph to step into the bigger responsibility God had for him. Losses = opportunities to learn, and that helped him spiral upward when everything around him was spiraling downward.

But Joseph isn't the only one spiraling upward in this story. After planning Joseph's murder and then selling him into slavery, his brothers began to slowly spiral upward. They couldn't undo what they had done, they couldn't repair the damage they inflicted, but they could learn. And they did. By the time they met Joseph again they had learned compassion. They had learned humility. They had learned to care for each other and their father. Their mistakes taught them, their losses became life lessons.

This second spiraling lesson goes well with the first because too often I think people interpret believing God is working means they just pray and stay where they are. Pray and stay. And that leaves them stuck where they are, especially with relationships. Experience doesn't make us wiser, learning from our experiences makes us wiser.

I've met people who have a trail of broken relationships behind them, but don't seem to put two and two together that maybe God wants to teach them something to change that. If we're not learning, we're stuck. For me that has been an overconfidence in my perspective. Especially in a conflict, I knew they were wrong and I was right. If I were wrong I'd admit it, but I'm not wrong, I'm right. Actually what I was stuck. Stuck in my perspective. Stuck in my pride. Stuck in a lack of receptivity to what the other person is saying. Stuck.

To get unstuck we need to learn what God wants to teach us. Humility. Receptivity to other perspectives and even criticism. Teachability. Honesty. Consideration. Love.

Are you dealing with a loss in your life right now? Pray for God to work in it, but also pray for God to work in you through it, to teach you. See your losses as learning opportunities.

### **3. Always keep your eyes on Jesus**

I've saved this for last cause it's the most important point. If you're a Christian then God has given you an upward spiral that won't stop until you're in heaven. Think of that: you are going to spend eternity with God in heaven. That is your future and no one and nothing can destroy that or take it from you. It's yours and it's mine through Jesus so let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as we run this race (as Heb. 12 says).

Now I can hear someone say, that's good, biblical advice, but where are you getting that from Joseph's story? The answer is "everywhere".

The most important lesson we learn from the story of Joseph isn't about us, it's about Jesus. Joseph gives us one of the clearest and most beautiful pictures of Jesus Christ in the OT. Joseph was loved by his father and sent by his father to his brothers, but they rejected him, and through that rejection God positioned Joseph to save many people.

It's a picture of Jesus: Jesus was sent by His Father to His people Israel. But His people rejected him and crucified him, mocking him as he hung on the cross. The Bible says it was the evil of lawless men that hung Jesus on the cross. But it also says that it was God's foreordained plan that His Son die. God's good plan ran parallel with the murderous plans of wicked men. They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good – to save not only Israel, but the world. The good news is that all who believe in Jesus will be saved.

And we begin to see that we aren't Josephs, we're the brothers. Left to ourselves we would have rejected Christ and cried out "crucify him!" We see that we aren't accepted by God because we're good

and faithful and righteous. We're accepted by God because we're forgiven. The cross speaks mercy over us – and if God has forgiven and accepted us, if God, along with His Son, will give us all good things, then there's nothing and there's no one who can destroy our lives or our hope. Our salvation is secure, our calling relentlessly upward, and God's commitment to complete the good work He began in us irrevocable.

Three Spiraling Upward Lessons:

- Believe that God is working even in the hardest situations and relationships
- See your losses as learning opportunities
- Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus all the way!