

UNSHAKABLE FAITH: AGAINST ALL ODDS

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

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TEXT: assorted verses from Genesis 37-50; Psalm 16:8

Alexander was a boy who was about 7 or 8 years old. Alexander had had one of those days when everything went wrong, disasters one right after another. Nothing went right. "It was a Horrible, Terrible, Not Good, Very Bad Day." Remember hearing this story? It's from a children's book written by Judith Viorst.

Alexander was not having a good day. It all started when he woke up in the morning and discovered that he had gone to bed with gum in his mouth, & when he woke up, it was in his hair. When he got out of bed he tripped over his skateboard, & then he dropped his sweater into the sink where the water was running. He said, "I just knew it was going to be a Horrible, Terrible, Not Good, Very Bad Day!"

All sorts of things happen throughout the day – if it was not one thing – it was another. From having a friend reject him at school and then getting in trouble with a teacher; from hearing he has a cavity from the dentist to having to eat lima beans at supper. All odds just seemed against him. His bath was too hot that night and he got soap in his eyes. He bit his tongue and his cat even decided to sleep with his brother that night and not with him. "*All in all*," he said, "*it was a Horrible, Terrible, Not Good, Very Bad Day*"

Now is it any wonder that when Alexander finally came to the end of that day, he heaved a sigh & cried, "I think I'll run away to Australia"?

Have you ever had days like that – when everything just seems to go from bad to worse? Almost all of us have had days when things just seem to be working against us – and we are ready for the day to be over, in hopes that the next one will be better. But then there are those times in life when it feels like those difficult days are unending – and we feel overwhelmed with the pressures of life. Financial woes and relationship struggles – worries about family and failing health – the burden of grief and pain that can weigh heavy upon you. And we all can relate to the never-ending drudgery of a world turned upside down by a pandemic – wondering if it will ever end. Adversity can come in the form of small irritations to major trials in our lives – and any of it can threaten to shake us up and make us crumble. Especially when all our focus is on those difficult circumstances.

But I believe that when we put our focus on our unchanging, faithful God and cling to His promises – we can have unshakeable faith even when all the odds are against us.

If there ever was a story in the Bible about someone who had unshakeable faith against all odds it would be Joseph. Reading his story in the book of Genesis – chapters 37-50 – we discover that God had a plan and a purpose for Joseph. Joseph would one day save his family from starvation when he became second in power to Pharaoh in Egypt. But for all the world it

looked like all the odds were against him ... and so many circumstances threatened to unravel him.

We first meet Joseph in Genesis 37 and discover that he is the favorite child of his father Jacob. This was enough to cause a lot of jealousy in his 11 brothers. His brothers hated him so much that one day they beat Joseph and dumped him into a pit with plans to kill him.

But a decision was made not to kill him – but to sell him to some slave traders. Though his life was spared – all odds still seemed against him – as he left his homeland and was taken to Egypt, where he was purchased by Potiphar, the captain of the guard for Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.

Joseph seemed to do well at the home of Potiphar. But then Potiphar's wife started demanding that he come and sleep with her. Joseph stayed true to his faith and refused to succumb to that temptation because it would be a sin against God. That angered Potiphar's wife so she accused him of trying to rape her – causing Joseph to be thrown into prison. Once again – it just seemed like all the odds once were stacked against Joseph.

Now if you and I would go through such pain and rejection, abandonment and betrayal – it would be so easy to give up in great despair. Joseph could have become bitter, angry and he could have chosen to fall into temptation and wickedness. But it appears Joseph continually kept an unshakeable faith in God and was faithful.

Reading throughout the 39th chapter of Genesis – we hear:

v. 2 – The Lord was with Joseph, so he succeeded in everything he did as he served in the home of his Egyptian master.

v. 3 – Potiphar noticed that the Lord was with Joseph, giving him success in everything he did.

v. 21 – But the Lord was with Joseph in prison and showed him his faithful love. And the Lord made Joseph a favorite with the prison warden.

v. 23 – The warden had no more worries, because Joseph took care of everything. The Lord was with him and caused everything he did to succeed.

The Lord was with Joseph through it all! That knowledge gave Joseph unshakeable faith. And He kept His focus on God – giving him the strength to face hardships and temptations. Truly, I think Joseph could have said, along with our theme Scripture from Psalm 16:8 ~ *"I know the Lord is always with me. I will not be shaken because He is right beside me."*

These words should be words of encouragement to you and me when we find ourselves facing the trials and struggles of life. God is there in the midst of it all! He has not left us! He will never abandon us or forsake us. He is there through it all. And as we move our focus away from our trials and onto the ever-present Lord – He will give us the strength we need and

we won't have to be shaken. He will carry us through even the darkest times and give us the strength to keep going.

Because Joseph remembered God was with him, Joseph was able to endure that time in the prison. He didn't give up and throw in the towel. It would have been easy to get discouraged and depressed, feeling like nothing ever goes right in his life. Even when he does the right thing, he still suffering. He could have become bitter and angry. He could have become a complainer and a whiner. But none of that was the case. In fact, I believe Joseph was open to the work of God within him – so much so that the light of God shown through him in that dark dungeon.

That's another important lesson for us all to remember, especially in times of adversity: Don't give up and don't become bitter. Instead, hang on to the Spirit of God who can work through youwherever you are, to be a witness for Him, a light in the midst of the darkness. Keep hanging on to the God who is hanging on to you.

Well, Joseph was definitely a witness to the prison warden. We read in chapter 40 that he really liked Joseph and soon gave Joseph a leadership role over all the prisoners. This brings us to the next part of Joseph's story. Joseph was particularly helpful to two of the prisoners. Looking at verse 6 you will see that Joseph noticed that they were both upset and asked them why they were so worried. Both were having disturbing dreams and Joseph was able to interpret them for them. I think this is another lesson we can learn from Joseph's time in the dungeon. He did not miss an opportunity to take notice and help someone else. You know, he could have said, "I don't care about anyone else. I'm too angry about what others have done to me in the past." But he didn't. He took the time to notice and express care and concern.

And that is a lesson for us. While you're going through difficult times, don't miss the chance to help others. Focusing just on your pain and problems may cause you to drown in the sea of self-pity and misery. But focusing on God and reaching out to help others will lift your spirits and give you the strength to endure.

Joseph gives us one more lesson and that is when he finally is able to get out of the prison and is meeting face to face with Pharaoh. Look with me briefly at Genesis 41. Pharaoh has a dream and no one is able to interpret it. Finally, two years after he had left the prison, the cupbearer remembers Joseph. He tells Pharaoh about how Joseph correctly interpreted his dream while he was in prison. So Pharaoh sends for Joseph. Joseph gets all cleaned up and stands before Pharaoh.

Now look what happens in verses 15 & 16:

¹⁵ *Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."* ¹⁶ *"I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."*

Notice to whom Joseph gives the glory. He says – I can't do this, but God can. Joseph made sure that He gave credit to God. And this was not the only time Joseph refers to God. In

fact, Joseph mentions God 4 times in his conversation with Pharaoh...always pointing to what God is doing by giving Pharaoh this dream. And notice how Pharaoh responds. Look down at verses 37-40.

³⁷ *Joseph's suggestions were well received by Pharaoh and his officials.* ³⁸ *So Pharaoh asked his officials, "Can we find anyone else like this man so obviously filled with the spirit of God?"*

³⁹ *Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has revealed the meaning of the dreams to you, clearly no one else is as intelligent or wise as you are."*

⁴⁰ *You will be in charge of my court, and all my people will take orders from you. Only I, sitting on my throne, will have a rank higher than yours."*

Wow! That is amazing that Pharaoh saw Joseph as a man filled with the spirit of God! I think that is because of Joseph's continued faithfulness and trust in God – even when he was forgotten in the dungeon for two years!

Our lesson from Joseph is to always give glory to God and let God be seen through you! Do people around you see God in you? Do they feel the spirit of God present in your words and your actions? Do they see God in the way you respond to difficult times – the disappointments and frustrations in life? If you are giving God your complete focus and trust – opening yourself up to be used by Him – you can make that difference, so that others will see Jesus in you.

Finally – we see that Joseph is now in the position of power in Egypt where he can help feed a starving nation - and his family – fulfilling the plan God had for his life. And he never forgot how God had helped him, giving him unshakable faith through all the hardships. When he got married, he had two sons and gave them names to help remind him of God's help and care during when he up against all odds. The older son he named Manasseh, for he said, "God has made me forget all my troubles and everyone in my family." Joseph named his second son Ephraim, for he said, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my grief." (Gen. 41:51 & 52)

Yes – Joseph faced many trials and setbacks -he was up against all odds: family rejection, deportation, slavery, false arrest and imprisonment. And it lasted for 13 years! And yet he came out of it all a triumphant hero of faith...because God continued to work and carry him through it all. Among Joseph's final words to his brothers were: "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good." God didn't let evil have the last word. For you see God is bigger than all that stands against us – and God can bring good out of bad situations!

That's the power of the story of Joseph. As Max Lucado says, *"The story of Joseph is in the Bible for this reason: to teach you to trust God to trump evil. What Satan intends for evil, God, the master Weaver and Master Builder, redeems for good. Joseph would be the first to tell you that life in the pit stinks. Yet for all its rottenness, doesn't the pit do this much? It forces you to look upward. Someone from up there must come down here to give you a hand. God did that for Joseph. At the right time, in the right way, God will do the same for you!"*

Thanks be to God that when you and I are going through those times of trial, we can get through it - because of who God is!

Hang on! Don't give up! Look up and keep your eyes on Him!

PRAYER

INVITATION

RESOURCES

¹Max Lucado, “You’ll Get Through This”, Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2013.