

Introduction

About eight years ago, Jim Carrey starred in a movie titled *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. It's about three orphaned siblings who move from one crisis event to another. Maybe the title of that movie accurately describes your life. Things are going poorly for you physically, relationally, professionally, and/or financially. Most of you know Murphy's Law. If anything can go wrong, it will. I came across a theorem called "**O'Toole's Commentary on Murphy's Law.**" It says, "**Murphy was an optimist.**" Maybe that's how you think and feel. Murphy was an optimist. Things are bad for you and getting worse.

If so, you need to hear about one of the most remarkable persons in the Bible – Joseph. Joseph went through a series of unfortunate events but was resilient in each one. And that's what I'm going to preach about today – you and I being resilient in the unfortunate events of life.

The Text

Turn to our text, Genesis 39:1-6 and 19-23, which is part of the larger Joseph narrative in Genesis 37-50. That narrative reveals a series of unfortunate events. Joseph's father, Jacob, favored him over his 11 brothers. Gripped with jealousy as a result, they sold him to slave traders, telling Jacob that wild animals had killed and eaten him. Those traders in turn took him to Egypt where he became a slave in the house of Potiphar. After at least several years, Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of attempting to rape her, whereupon he was put in prison. While there, he helped an inmate who was eventually restored as Pharaoh's butler. That inmate was supposed to arrange his release when he was but didn't. We know from Genesis 37:2 and 41:46 that those events occurred when Joseph was in the prime of his life, from 17 years old to 30. The title of the movie, therefore, certainly describes his experience – a series of unfortunate events.

But notice the quality of character he displayed in each one.

According to 39:2, he “**became a successful man**” in Potiphar’s house. In fact, verse 4 says that Potiphar put him in charge of everything he owned. That same thing happened in prison. According to verses 22 and 23, the chief jailer favored him, putting him in charge of all the prisoners’ affairs. It’s clear. The unfortunate events that Joseph went through didn’t defeat him. On the contrary, he actually grew through them. He became a better and stronger person because of them. He was resilient in other words and that’s precisely what we need to be as well.

Resiliency

There is a field in the social sciences that studies just that, resiliency. In that field, researchers study people who survived traumatic ordeals. Those people have included 3000 POW’s who experienced brainwashing in Korea, 550 men who lived through captivity in Vietnam, the 52 American hostages in Iran, World War II concentration camp prisoners, victims of crippling accidents, and children from a variety of disadvantaged backgrounds.

All the studies have shown that unfortunate events affect people in one of two basic ways. One way is defeat. The bad times they’re going through defeat them. They become lesser weaker people. The other way is growth. They not only survive the bad times but grow through them. They become better stronger people.

Now, this condition of growing better and stronger through hardship, adversity, or pain is called resiliency, and that’s exactly what God wants us to be - resilient. That’s our call and we answer it by doing the same two things Joseph did in chapter 39. Doing those two things made him resilient and they will us as well. So let’s examine both.

Be Constructive not Passive

First, be constructive not passive.

Referring back to the studies I mentioned, what do you suppose the single most stressful aspect of being a prisoner of war or hostage is?

According to many who were, it was the realization that they had lost control over their existence.

Most passively accepted this loss of control. It's what observers of Korean prison camps in the 1950's called "**give-up-itis.**" They resigned themselves to their confined state and did nothing.

That's what almost all of us are tempted to do when things are bad. We start believing that we're helpless victims who can't really do anything about our situations and lives. So we passively accept our fate. We just go through the motions of whatever it is that we have to do without our hearts being in it. That is especially true when life doesn't turn out the way we had planned. Giving up and quitting seems like the most appealing thing to do.

That isn't, however, what Joseph did. Nothing robs human beings of control more than slavery and imprisonment do. He suffered both of those. But read between the lines in our text. You'll find if you do that even in these highly controlled situations, he acted with initiative and autonomy. He chose to be constructive in other words. He identified the opportunities for good in his situations and pursued them.

And so should we.

Let's go back to prisoners of war and hostages again. While most were passive, some were not. They took initiative and controlled what they could. Some developed strenuous exercise regimens, memorized stories, or invented new games. Others ordered their time by carefully identifying and keeping track of the insects in their cells. Still others defied orders and communicated with each other in creative ways. Whatever they did, they believed and lived as if their bodies had been captured but not their spirits. They didn't just give up. They chose to be constructive instead. They identified the opportunities for good in their situations and pursued them.

You and I can and should do the same. No matter how unfortunate our event is or how much control it takes from us, we need to take initiative and control what we can. We need to be constructive – to

identify the opportunities for good in our situation and pursue them.

A 63 year-old Christian lost his almost six figure a year job when his company downsized. Unable to find any kind of comparable work, he took a job as a greeter at Wall-Mart. He didn't whine and complain though about that and bemoan his fate. Instead, he did there what Joseph did in Potiphar's house and in prison. He controlled what he could. He recognized that there were opportunities for good there and pursued them. He quoted Mother Teresa, for instance, "**I will never understand all the good that a simple smile can accomplish.**" Believing that, he purposed to give every customer who came into Wall-mart a day changing smile, and when possible a word of encouragement and joy.

I once conversed with a young Christian husband and father who was diagnosed with cancer and given six months to live. He didn't have any control over whether he died and when. But he did have control over how he died and focused on that. As the Puritans said it, he made his dying a holy work. "**I will die,**" he said, "**In a way that increases the faith of my wife and children in God.**" And he did. He was a model of holy living and dying for everyone who knew him, especially them.

You get the point. No matter how unfortunate the event is, don't give up and be passive. Take initiative and be constructive instead. Identify the opportunities for good in your situation and pursue them.

Be Obedient not Sinful

There's a second thing we need to do that makes us resilient. Be obedient not sinful.

Genesis 39:6-13 reveals what I mean. Joseph was extremely handsome, verse 6, prompting Potiphar's wife to seduce him. It would have been easy for him to justify yielding to that. Few things, if any, are worse than being torn away from parents and sold into slavery, which God allowed. So, "**God hasn't been faithful to me,**" he could have reasoned, "**Why should I, therefore, be faithful to Him?**"

I suspect almost all of us have thought and felt that way at one time

or another. That's because unfortunate events are probably the times of our greatest temptations to sin. Please grasp that. Many of us think we're the most vulnerable to sins, especially those of the flesh, when our physical energy and appetites are at their highest. But just the opposite is true. It's when we're in the valley, when we feel desolate or sad, that we're in the most dangerous place. Temptations we normally wouldn't even consider giving in to can become suddenly irresistible to us.

I knew a middle-aged Christian who lost his job when the Ohio Brass Company in Barberton shut down years ago. This man, who had been faithful to his wife for 30 years, ended up having an affair six months later. He didn't feel guilty about it though. He told me bitterly that if God wasn't faithful to him, why he should be faithful to God.

That's the way it is when things go wrong in our lives. It's easy to rationalize sinning. God hasn't been faithful to us. Why should we be faithful to Him? We then feel free, even justified, in sinning.

Maybe you haven't done that but I have. I remember a time of great crisis in my life, one of the worst events that can happen. I found myself committing sins I didn't normally commit – getting angry with people, gossiping, grumbling, neglecting devotions, and more. I didn't feel guilty about it though. God is allowing this horrible thing, I thought, so why should I worry about obeying and pleasing Him.

But that isn't what Joseph did. On the contrary, he told Potiphar's wife in 39:9, **"How then could I do this great evil against God."** God allowed the worst things that could happen to him to happen. But Joseph remained faithful and obeyed Him through them all.

That's what Joseph did and so should we. He is in fact, after Jesus, our best model for this. When we're going through an unfortunate event or even a series of unfortunate events, we should do what he did - remain faithful to God. We should continue obeying Him; continue doing His will, no matter how bad things get for us.

It's person and life transforming when we do. Listen carefully to

what is one of the most significant insights you'll ever hear. C.S. Lewis reveals it in his book *The Screwtape Letters*. In that book, a leader demon writes a letter to an underling demon and says this: "**Our cause (Satan's) is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, do to our enemy's will (God's will), looks round upon a universe from which every trace of him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.**" That is a million dollar insight. It has impacted my own personal condition and life profoundly.

I'd explain it this way. There are times, usually when unfortunate events happen to us, when we see no reason to obey God and have no desire to. But obeying Him anyway, simply because we will or intend to, is one of the most powerful things spiritually we can do. Nothing glorifies Him and enhances His kingdom more than that does. Nothing defeats Satan and diminishes his kingdom more than that does. Joseph did that and so should we. From this day forward, therefore, let's will or intend to obey God even if we see no reason and have no desire to do so.

Conclusion

Those then are the two things we need to do when unfortunate events occur. Be constructive not passive and be obedient not sinful.

Notice what happens when we do in verses 2, 21, and 23. Those verses state that "**the Lord was with Joseph.**" That's what happens when we're constructive and obedient. Those two activities release God's presence and power in us. The unfortunate event, as a result, makes us stronger not weaker. We become better persons not lesser ones through it - just as Joseph did.

You realize what that means. The decisive factor isn't how fortunate or unfortunate the events in our lives are. It's how faithful or unfaithful we are in them. So, be constructive not passive and obedient not sinful. The Holy Spirit will make you resilient, better and stronger, if you do.