

August 23, 2020
“Strike Three!” What Now?
Genesis 37 & 39

“The outlook wasn’t brilliant for the Mudville nine that day ...” begins the famous poem *Casey at the Bat*. In the ninth inning, down two runs, with *“Johnnie safe at second, and Flynn a-hugging third, Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat ...”* Casey is supposed to hit a three-run homer and win the game. He is the golden boy. But Casey, of course, strikes out. He strikes out!?!? No!!! It isn’t supposed to end that way! But it does.

Life sometimes throws **us** nasty curveballs. Like Covid-19. We had everything planned and arranged – then this mess. Or maybe other things happen: the retirement we had planned on is thrown upside down by health problems. The career we had built is shattered by downsizing. The relationships we value become complicated and messy. We are standing at the plate of life, ready to hit the homerun ball – but like Casey we’re left wondering what just happened. What comes next after “Strike Three!”? If that’s where you’re at this morning, let me introduce you to Joseph. Joseph is standing at the plate, expecting to be the chosen, golden boy of life ... but he’s shell-shocked, wondering what slider just sent his life into a tailspin. What next?

Or maybe you’re not Joseph. Maybe you’re doing OK. True, you may not be hitting home runs, but you’re managing to make it around the bases of life OK. True, you may not have everything you want, but life is no disaster either. Thankfully that’s where many of us – perhaps most of us – are. Thank God for that! But I want you to meet Joseph, too. You may not be a Joseph. But you probably know a Joseph or two. You know someone who is going through hard times, who sees little hope, who is not sure what their future might be. You know someone who – likely through no fault of her own – is barely holding on. I want you to meet Joseph and ask yourself, “How can I be a friend to Joseph? How can I encourage Joseph? How can I help Joseph?”

Casey, in a uniform of many colours

Casey had it all – good looks, talent, a great swing, a wonderful personality, the admiration of all of Mudville ... Joseph had it all – youth, good looks, intelligence, insight ... and the good favour of wealthy and powerful father, Jacob (a.k.a. Israel). In fact Jacob loves Joseph so much he gave him a *“richly ornamented robe”*(37:3). Parenting 101 tells us that singling out one child over the others is not a smart move. But Jacob is not particularly a wise person much of the time – he makes several not-so-bright decisions over the years. He should know better – he came from a family where parents played favourites – with terrible consequences. This particular not-so-bright choice – to favour Joseph – had predictable results: Joseph’s brothers *“hated him and could not speak a kind word to him”*(37:4).

Joseph doesn’t help himself by making good choices, either. He has two dreams which suggest he will end up ruling over his brothers. And he gets sadistic delight retelling the dreams to his older siblings. Common sense suggests you keep these kinds of dreams to

yourself. But Joseph just cannot resist strutting his own self-importance before his brothers. The net result of Jacob's blatant favouritism and Joseph's lack of discretion is that the boy is left wondering, as he is carried off into slavery, what fastball just blew by him.

Our purpose today is not to pass judgment on these brothers for what they did or the lies they told – though we could. We are not going to critique Jacob's terrible parenting – though we could. We are not going to spend time on Joseph's lack of wisdom – though we could. We want to meet Joseph and "*walk a mile in his sandals.*" Here is a young man who had it all: the favour and blessing of a wealthy, powerful father, a secure and promising future, even a fantastic, stylish wardrobe. And suddenly it's over.

The WHY question - why Joseph is where he is - doesn't really matter. The fact is he's in a pickle. He's being carried off as a slave. The WHAT NEXT question is one that matters. How is he going to deal with it? We are where we are, too. The WHY question doesn't really matter. How are we going to deal with it? It's that WHAT NEXT question that matter most.

What do you do when you can't go golfing?

When a ball player's season ends, rumour has it players go golfing. Casey had the front nine to look forward to. When Joseph struck out, golfing was not an option. I don't imagine these Ishmaelites, travelling with a caravan of spices, balm and myrrh to Egypt, were about to let Joseph play the front nine at the Sinai Golf & Country Club. His would be a brutal trek across the desert with little food, zero prospects, and inhumane conditions.

Joseph is sold as a slave to Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard. Joseph could have been a sullen, sulky, non-cooperative slave. Instead, he chooses to seize the opportunity that is before him. It is certainly not what he expected or wanted. But Joseph chooses to be the best slave he can be. He is so diligent and hard working that Potiphar "*put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned*" (39:4). Life may not have been what Joseph would have anticipated at home, but, with God's help, it's OK.

Everything, however, is not smooth sailing. Potiphar's wife makes a play for Joseph. She is a beautiful, powerful woman. Joseph's life could go from good to great. But he chooses to scramble away from her clutches. He chooses integrity. He chooses what is right. Running from this temptation is the right thing to do. It's right for Potiphar, who has been good to Joseph. It's the right thing for Potiphar's wife. It is the right thing for Joseph, for his conscience anyway. But it costs him everything; he is thrown in prison. He will be in prison for somewhere between 10-12 years, from when he is 18 till he is 30 – prime years of his life.

How is Joseph coping with all of this? We don't know much about Joseph's state of mind in these tough times. But his situation reminds me a lot of the experiences of another biblical character, Job. Job was another fellow who had a wonderful life, fine prospects, very comfortable standard of living, security ... and in an instant – POOF! – everything was gone: his wealth, security, possessions, family, health. Everything gone! Done. Finished. Kaputt.

We do know lots about Job's state of mind. He cried out to God, again and again –

"Why!?!?!?" To use a biblical word, he laments. There is long biblical tradition of lament (read the psalms). There are times – like much of 2020 – when lament seems like the logical response to our circumstances. That's OK. In fact, it's good. It's necessary. It's helpful.

Our lives may more often be like Joseph's than the ball player who can just go to the golf course for the off season. When life throws us a curve ball we don't have the option of a leisurely sabbatical of putting practice, knowing a new season is about to begin. When our lives crash, we need to do something – now. Covid is – now. Bills are due – now. My relationships are crumbling – now. Life hurts – now. The future is bleak – now.

What we learn from both Joseph and Job is that God is with us in our distress, in our lament. In fact, when Joseph is sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard, twice Scripture comments, *"the Lord was with Joseph"* (39:2, 3). Later, as Joseph is thrown into prison, twice Genesis records, *"the Lord was with Joseph in the prison and showed him his faithful love"* (39:21, 21). Joseph finds strength, knowing God is with him. In Job's case, God is always there, listening, and ultimately caring for and providing for Job.

Do we need to hear that truth? The Lord is with us. The Lord will show us His faithful love to us. Nothing and no one can ever separate us from His love (Romans 8:31-39).

Knowing that, when we are facing difficult times, do we choose what is right, even though it may cost us? Are we people of integrity? People of (godly) principle? That means accepting the situation as it is – no going into denial (Covid is just a conspiracy theory), not rationalizing things (it's just another flu). It means dealing with the realities of life.

Can we choose to seize the opportunity – limited and unattractive though it might seem – rather than get sullen and sulky? It may certainly not be what we expected or hoped for. But can we put the best spin on it possible and make the most of it? An old Chinese proverb says, *"You cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head. You can prevent them from building a nest in your hair."*

More than just swatting away the birds, can I see opportunities to try new – unexpected – things? Charles Swindoll commented, *"We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% of how I react to it."* Can I find hope, even in the midst of Covid-19?

What do you do if your one of the fans?

Maybe you're not Casey. You're not Joseph. You're not Job. But you've just seen Casey strike out. You see him forlorn and forgotten. Your heart goes out to him. You've seen a Joseph – a person with all the possibilities in the world – whose world has fallen apart. You know a Casey. You know a Joseph. You know a Job. You know a person out of work. You know a person with serious health problems. You know a person going through a crisis. You know someone who lost their job after years of faithful service.

What do you do? What do you say? How can you help? Sometimes we are so overwhelmed we don't do or say anything, because we are afraid we might do or say something wrong ... Think about it. What does Joseph need?

- He doesn't need someone to quote him Romans 8:28: "*We know that in all things God works together for the good of those who love Him ...*" That verse is 100% true; I believe it with all my heart; I have seen it come true in my life. Joseph will discover that he can believe it and it will prove itself true in his life – eventually. But Joseph doesn't need that right now. When your life has just crashed and you're being led who-know-where in chains, pious words don't help very much.
- He doesn't need someone to say, "*I know what you're going through*" (unless you really DO know he's going through).
- He doesn't need friends and family who are uncomfortable around him and avoid him.

What does Joseph need? What Joseph really needs is a friend. You do not need to give advice (in fact, best not to). You don't have to try to give a theological explanation for everything (in fact, best not to). He doesn't need you to pretend you have been through the same experience. You don't need to try to "fix" the problem. Joseph needs you simply to be there. To lament with him. He simply needs presence. Just being there. Just walking alongside.

Socially distant, simply sit with them. Call. Send a little note now and then. Listen. Say absolutely nothing at all. Just, through your presence and care, provides a depth of love and concern that expresses the love of God in a powerful, powerful way.

Who are the Josephs in your world? Who is discouraged? Who is giving up? Who has given up? Who is sitting at home wondering if anyone cares? Are there Josephs to whom you can reach out? Is there someone who just needs a friend this week?

Casey at the Bat ends,

*Oh, somewhere in this favoured land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville – mighty Casey has struck out.*

Let's rewrite it:

*Oh, Lethbridge is the favoured land, the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing in Lethbridge, and Lethbridge hearts are light,
In Lethbridge folks are laughing and Lethbridge children shout,
For there is great joy in Lethbridge – the church is reaching out.*

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