

Influencers - Joseph

Part 1

I want to take you back to the summer of 2010. I am sure that many of you, like me, found yourselves drawn into one of the biggest stories of the year, as we awaited news of the fate of thirty three men in Chile. These 33 men all worked for the San Jose copper-gold mine and, on 5 August 2010, they were all trapped 2300 ft below the ground when the mine that they were working in caved in. Amazingly all 33 men survived the collapse but had no way of contacting those on the surface and had little in the way of food and water. They all recognised how bad their situation was and that they faced the very real possibility of not surviving their entrapment in an environment that was very hot and with little oxygen.

They would have been able to empathise with the focus of our bible readings today. In the passage that we just read, Joseph also finds himself in a dark place below ground uncertain of his fate or even his survival but unlike the Chilean miners, it is no accident that he finds himself trapped here. Instead, Joseph had been thrown into the cistern, which was designed for collecting water when it rained, by his own flesh and blood, by his brothers. What could make these men do this to their own flesh and blood? Joseph was one of 12 sons of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, but he was Jacob's favourite son and Jacob was not afraid to show it. Jacob had children by 4 different women, but Joseph's mother Rachel was the woman that he loved, so as a result he doted on Joseph at the expense of his brothers and at least one sister, gifting him with an ornate robe which would have served as a huge neon sign to his siblings showing this is my favourite child. Because of this we read earlier in Genesis 37 that Joseph's brothers "hated him and could not speak a kind word to him". This hatred is inflamed when Joseph tells his family about the dreams that he had had which indicated that his family would bow down before him. It is in this context that our first reading takes place, with the brothers scheming, firstly to let their brother die in the cistern and then deciding instead to make some money from their evil act and sell him to some passing merchants.

When Joseph woke up that morning, he didn't know that he was going to find himself trapped in such a horrific situation, similarly the Chilean miners went to work on the morning of the 5th August fully expecting that they would be returning home that night as normal. Their fall into a dark, seemingly hopeless place caught them off guard. That is the same for many of us. Both the miners' and Joseph's dark places were literal pits but in our case it might come in the form of a bereavement, a traumatic injury, the loss of a job or a relationship, addiction or being a victim of crime. There are many different ways that we can find ourselves in the pit alongside Joseph and like Joseph there might not be an easy way for us to get ourselves out of the pit and even if we do there may be people like his brothers ready to push us back in or use us for their own benefit. When Satan conspires to put us in places he doesn't discriminate, it can happen to men and women, young or old, rich or poor, remember Joseph came from a household where he was well loved by his father and had good things like his elegant robe, but that didn't stop him from having all the earthly comforts of his life stripped away. This should be a warning to any of us who think that bad things happen to others not to us.

So when we find ourselves in a dark pit like Joseph, what can we do? It can be very tempting just to give up. As the minister and author Max Lucado writes in his book "You'll Get Through This", which gave me the idea for today's theme, "Some people never recover. Life is reduced to one quest: get out and never be hurt again. Not simply done. Pits have no easy exits" If you read on in Joseph's story you see that his troubles continue once he is taken to Egypt – he is abused and mistreated, ending up in prison for a crime that he did not commit and ignored by those that he helps.

But throughout this we see no indication that Joseph gives up and in particular we see that his faith in God's plan for him, which he had been shown in his dreams, never diminishes. Through some of the toughest times in Joseph's life, the bible emphasises that the Lord was with him. When we feel that we are alone in the darkness and no one can help us, when the things that we hold dearest have been taken from us, God is there with us and has plans for us.

José Henriquez was one of the 33 trapped miners. A devout Christian, he organised daily prayer circles where the men would gather and turn to God, asking him to help save them. Even in this most hopeless of situations, José remained strong in his faith, confident, like Joseph, that God had a plan for him and the other trapped miners.

So even when life seems so dark that we can see no way out of the pit that we are in, Joseph and José both show us that we should not give up on God and remain steadfast in our faith. It won't necessarily be easy and like Joseph we may well face further struggles as we do so but as we will see, God does have a plan for us as he did for José and as he did for Joseph.

Part 2

So when we left the Chilean Miners they were trapped in a collapsed mine. When we left Joseph he had been sold into slavery. Both in very dark pits. Yet in our second reading, we find Joseph as one of the most powerful people in the world, Pharaoh's second in command in Egypt, the equivalent of a Prime Minister, in charge of the whole country. How has this man who was at such a low point before reached such highs as this?

Joseph goes on to give the answer himself later in the story. In Genesis 50:20 Joseph tells his brothers "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." The word translated as intended is a Hebrew verb whose meaning stems from weave. The brothers intended to weave a pattern of evil against their brother but once their actions had run their course God had ensured that the final picture that emerged was one of good. Through Joseph God showed Pharaoh the meaning of the visions that he had seen forewarning of a famine to hit Egypt and as a result Pharaoh placed Joseph in charge of the country to ensure that they were ready for the famine when it came.

Not just the actions of the brothers – all the challenges that Joseph had experienced in Egypt had been used by God to bring about salvation not just for Joseph but for the people of Egypt. No matter what people on Earth intend, God will bring about his plan for the world. When we look further on in the Bible we see that the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, will come from Joseph's family and ultimately at the start of the New Testament, when Matthew starts his gospel with Jesus' family tree, we see Jacob and his sons there. You can see why Satan wanted to destroy Joseph and his family but as much as he tried to weave a story of evil, God takes all the resulting strands and uses them to create a picture of salvation for Joseph, for Egypt and ultimately for all of us through Christ.

When Joseph woke up on that morning, he didn't know that he was going to find himself before Pharaoh and that ultimately he would end the day as one of the most powerful people in the country. This is the same for us. We can not know when God's plans for us will come to fruition, much as we might want to. But the example of Joseph highlights to us that when we are in the pit, when we are suffering and in darkness, God does not abandon us, God does not forget about us in the dark pit. We might be there for a short time or a long time – between the two readings that we have heard today 13 years have elapsed, but all that has happened, all the hardship that Joseph has endured has been used by God to bring him to this point.

When we are in a dark place is our first instinct to blame God, or to turn away from him. Throughout the story of Joseph, despite the dark places that he finds himself, there is no indication that he did either of these. Instead, throughout his slavery and imprisonment he remained faithful, knowing that God was with him and not just believing that but living it out in the way that he is with others.

In chapter 8 of his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul writes “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”(Rom 8:28). Again, Paul was a man who had experienced many hardships including imprisonment on his journey with Christ but he recognises that everything that has happened, God has been at work to further his kingdom. Even when things are at their worst we should take hope from the knowledge that God is in control and that he has great plans for all of us whether in this world or in his heavenly kingdom.

If we return to the Chilean miners. If you were following the story back in 2010 you will know that after more than 2 months underground, all 33 miners were rescued and freed from the mine – despite the trauma of their experience all but two were able to return home within 48 hours of their rescue. Interestingly, at the start of the rescue, the Chilean President Sebastian Pinera was quoted as saying “When the first miner emerges safe and sound, I hope all the bells of all the churches of Chile ring out forcefully, with joy and hope. Faith has moved mountains.”. Even the President recognised that God was at work. One of the miners, a nineteen year old named Jimmy Sanchez, wrote in a letter before his rescue “There are actually 34 of us, because God has never left us down here”. José Henriquez, the miner who organised prayer circles in the mine, went on to become a Christian missionary, visiting many countries including the UK to share his testimony.

I don't know what your situation is right now, you might be like Joseph in our first reading, in the dark pit uncertain what is to come or if you will be able to survive it or like Joseph in our second reading, riding high and literally seeing his dreams come true or somewhere inbetween. Wherever you are at, the story of Joseph shows that God walks with us through the good times and the bad and uses all of these experiences to further his plans for us and for the world. It is unlikely we will end up as Prime Minister or played on stage by Jason Donovan and in fact we don't know what God's ultimate plan for us is. But we should hold firm to the knowledge that God has a plan and walks alongside us everyday. I am not trying to diminish the difficulty of the trials Joseph faced or that we face today, they are never easy and cause a huge amount of pain. But we see in Joseph's story that God uses everything that happens to us, including when we are in the deepest pits, to bring us to the destination that he has planned for us. When we accept God into our lives, the same that thing that was said about Joseph is true about us “The Lord was with him”. We don't face the trials of life alone. We are not alone in the deep pits. Every step that we take is along a path that has been decided for us by God and he will be there with us through every step that we take.