

Never Waste a Crisis

September 27th, 2015

It's difficult to be a member of the human race in America right now without having a pretty reasonable understanding of our economic standing...

- I mean, we all know that the Dow Jones is down... the **NASDAQ** is down. **Housing values** are down.
- **Venture capital** is down. **Consumer confidence** is down. **Employment** is down. The **auto industry** is down.
- Are you glad you came so far? The **banking system** is down. The **commercial real estate** market is down. **Foreign markets** are down.
- Pretty sad, isn't it?! So, is anything going up?

Well, especially in the context of the church, some things are. The opportunity to **serve people** in need. That is going up.

- The opportunity to **trust God** when trusting isn't easy. That's going up.
- The opportunity to **build a faith that will stand firm** when the storms of life have battered down on us and those around us. That's going up.
- The opportunity to **create a community where we can actually be real** & open & honest with each other and **love** each other, **pray** for each other, **support** each other. That is going up.

We know it is going up because the **power of God** still sustains the universe. Because the **sacrifice of Jesus** is still sufficient to forgive human sin.

- Because the **presence of the Holy Spirit** still guides and comforts people. Because the **Bible** is still the Word of God.
- Because **prayer** still gets answered. Because the **gospel** still changes lives. Because **love** still overcomes bigotry.

Because **faith** still overcomes despair. Because the **tomb** is still empty. Because **the church** is still pressing on. Because **Jesus** is still Lord.

- Because the **promise of heaven** is still the only ultimate hope, and it is closer today than it was yesterday.

- Because the **kingdom of God** is doing very well and does not need a stimulus package to bail it out.

We live in a time when crises come and crises go... and so it has *always been*, and so it will *always be* in this world.

- And yet, one undeniable truth about crisis is that there's nothing we would like to avoid more! But **what if we could?**
- Imagine for a moment that you had a child... and when that child enters the world, **for the first five minutes** of that child's existence, you are given a script of **what will be** that child's entire life.
- And with that script, you're given an eraser. And, with that eraser, you can edit the script, removing anything you'd like from the story of your child's life.

What if the script says, for example, that your **child will have a learning disability** in grade school... that reading, which comes easily for some kids, will be a challenge for yours?

- Then, when your child gets to **high school**, the script says that he will make a great circle of friends, but one of those friends will die of cancer.
- Then, after high school, they will actually **get into a college** that they wanted to attend, but while there, they will be in a **car crash** and face not only a **long recovery** but a **difficult depression**.

A few years later, they will **get a great job**, and yet, they will lose that job in an economic downturn.

- Then, a little while after that, they will get married, but then they'll face the **grief of separation**.
- So you get this script for your child's life, and **you have five minutes** to edit it. **What would you erase?**
- Wouldn't you want to take out all the stuff that would cause him **pain** and **grief** and **hardship**?

I am part of generation of moms and dads that are sometimes called **helicopter parents** because of the way so many of us choose to closely hover over our children...

- Always rushing in to prevent any kind of harm or failure from befalling them... their **educational** lives, **relational**, and their **sports** lives...
- Making sure nobody is mistreating them, nothing is disappointing them... **not ever letting them learn** from their own mistakes or **from the inevitable failures** we all face as we walk through life.
- As parents, their hope is to turn life into a greenhouse where their kids are able to experience **one unobstructed success** after another.

A mom comes knocking on your door one Halloween (this really happened) a few years ago to get trick-or-treat candy for her son.

- She was asked why her son wasn't doing it, and she said, *"Well, the weather is a little bad so I am driving him around so that he doesn't have to walk in it."*
- "Well, where is he now?" She said, *"Well, he fell asleep in the car, so I'm just letting him sleep in the car, and I am actually going to the door to get the candy for him so he doesn't have to wake up."*
- And so, with all love and respect, she was asked, *"Well, why don't you just eat all of his candy, get a stomachache for him, and then he wouldn't have to worry about anything."*

If you could wave a magic wand, if you could **erase every failure**, every **setback**, all the **suffering**, all the **pain**...are you sure it would be a good idea for that child?

- Would it cause them to grow up to be a **better**, **stronger**, more **generous**, more **true-hearted** human being?
- Is it possible that in some ways, people can actually grow from, maybe somehow even need, **adversity**, **setbacks**, **difficulties**, **heartache**, to **reach the fullest level** of humanity, development, and growth?
- Keeping that question close in thought, let me share a wince-inducing statements from the Bible.

James puts it like this, *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the*

testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything."

- Or **Peter** who writes, "**Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal** that has come on you to test you as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed."
- Or these words from the apostle **Paul**. Paul writes, "**For our light and momentary troubles** are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

Now, when you look at these words, remember that *when Paul wrote them*, he was in chains. He was in prison.

- He had been arrested... he was being oppressed by the Roman government, and would shortly be executed.
- And yet he calls his troubles *light & momentary* compared to the eternal weight of glory. That out of even the worst of times, something good might just come... something that will far outweigh all the bad.

You know, adversity, challenge, setback, hardship... are never things that we look forward to, but can God be present in them? Can He help us to learn through them? Can we grow through them?

- I want to keep this in mind as we consider a man in Scripture who went through just about as many crises as anybody I know... a man named Joseph.
- Now, when we first meet Joseph, there hadn't been any crisis yet that we know of. In fact, as far as we can tell, things are going well.
- **Genesis 37** says, "**Joseph, a young man of 17, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And he brought their father a bad report about them.**"
- In other words, he was sort of the kind of kid that didn't have all the much trouble rattling out his brothers when they did something wrong!

Have you ever known a kid like that? Now, we don't know what was

going on. I mean just how bad were his brothers being? We don't know... the story's little ambiguous.

- But then the writer makes this comment. He says, "**But Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons** because he had been born to him in his old age. And he made a richly ornamented robe for him."
- So when we first meet Joseph, he has a problem with some of his brothers. And, apparently, whenever they'd act up, he'd run to his daddy.

Truth is, the writer is telling us about the family dynamics here.

Remember, **Joseph's father, Jacob, had two wives.**

- The first was **Rachel**. From what we read, she was lovely. She was his favorite.
- Then he had another wife named **Leah**, and she was his second favorite of those two.
- Well, Rachel couldn't have children, and so she said to Jacob, "*Since I can't have children, and Leah is having them, you can have some children by my maidservant **Bilhah**.*"

Leah sees that, and, not to be out-done, she thinks, "*Well, that's a good idea!*" So she says to Jacob, "*I'm going to close up shop, and you can have children with my maidservant, **Zilpah**.*"

- These guys make the Kardashians seem like a typical, normal family. I mean what a reality TV show that would make!
- So, **Jacob has sons from Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah**... but none from his favorite wife, Rachel.
- In terms of family dynamics, what that also means is that the sons of **Bilhah** and **Zilpah** receive the lowest level of status in the family.

But **then Joseph comes alone**. And, as the miracle son of Rachel, he **becomes the number one son of his dad's number one wife**.

- Like no other, he's the one who makes his father's eyes light up when he walks into the room. He is his daddy's boy.
- And so, one day, his **dad gives him a very special coat**. The old King James Bible describes it as a coat of many colors.
- Whatever it was, it was beautiful. And... the fact that he got it

just eats away at his brothers

It seems as though Joseph's got the world by its tail. In **Genesis 39:6**, we're told that *"Joseph was well built and a handsome man."* So, he's physically impressive.

- Along with that, we're also going to see just **how gifted he is** as well. The the age of 17, Joseph seems to be **full of ambition** and motivation.
- There was just one little problem. Once they realized how their father loved him more than any of them, his brothers hated him! They couldn't speak a kind word to him.
- And Joseph may have been a little slow to pick up on this dynamic because **we're told one day that Joseph had a dream** and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more.

He said to them in **Genesis 37:5-6**, *"'Listen to this dream,' he said. 'We were out in the field tying up bundles of grain. Suddenly, my bundle stood up, and your bundles all gathered around and bowed low before mine!'"*

Isn't that a cool dream? Do you think his brothers were happy about this dream? You think they were excited for Joseph?

- No! In fact, his brothers said to him, *"Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us? And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said."*
- And you're thinking, if Joseph has any social intelligence at all... *"Joe, if you have any more dreams, for crying out loud, keep them to yourself."*

But then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. *"'Listen,' he said, 'I had another dream. The sun and the moon and 11 stars bowed low before me.'"*

- Isn't that cool? I mean, this time the sun, moon, and stars are bowing down to me. Don't you love these dreams?
- *"When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, 'What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come down and bow down to the ground before you?'"*

- Even Jacob was miffed... but **his brothers became increasingly angry** and jealous of him.

Finally, his brothers can't take it anymore. One day they get him off by themselves, they take his coat, and then **sell Joseph to a caravan** heading to Egypt where he'll be sold into slavery.

- Knowing they could never tell their father the truth, they cover Joseph's coat with animal blood convincing him that a wild animal had killed him.
- Literally overnight, Joseph has **lost his status**, lost his **home**, lost his **financial resources**, lost his **parents**, lost his **future occupation**, lost his **culture**, lost his **family**, lost his **friends**... everything.

Before this, if he had a problem, if things in his world got shaky, he could run to his dad who had wealth & power. Now where's his security?

- **Before this**, if you were to ask him who he was, he would have told you, *"I am the number one son of the number one wife. I wear the robe in this family!"* Now, what is his identity?
- **Before this**, if you had asked him about his dreams, he would say, *"I am going to be the greatest achiever in my family. They are all going to bow down...the sun and the moon and the stars are going to be at my feet one day."*

Now, what's his purpose? What's become of his dream? Truth is, to one degree or another, what happened to Joseph will happen to everybody at one point in time.

- You see, for the most part, we live in something that we might think of as the ***"normal" life***... where circumstances are going about as we expect them to go...
- to one degree or another, living life under the **illusion** that we're in control.
- You might **feel secure** because of that bank account and those investments... because you have your health... because you've got marketable talents & gifts.

And with that sense of security, your identity is pretty solid. You've got

the right **job**... the right **education**... the right **resume**', the right **degree**, the right **experience**... the right **relationship**...

- Until that one day when **crisis invades our "normal" lives**... where all those illusions of control and security are revealed for what they are.
- Maybe you **lose your job**. Maybe it is a **divorce**. Somebody you've been married to for a decade says, *"I am walking out the door."*

Maybe you **lose somebody you love**. You go to the doctor's office, and the body that you've just taken for granted all these years has defied you.

- Maybe you've been **betrayed or abandoned**. Maybe your **reputation** is on the line.
- Maybe your **son or your daughter heads down** an entirely different path than you... a road that violates everything you hold dear.
- Suddenly, when the **illusion of control is gone, when all of life's props are removed**, we struggle just to make it through the day.

Almost instinctively we ask, *"Why did this happen to me?"* Truth is, there's almost never a good enough explanation for that... rarely anything that satisfies.

- At some point, Joseph must have asked the question. But clearly, this was his **brothers' fault**: They hated him. They betrayed horribly.
- It is **his own fault**: He reveled in being the favorite. He was talking smack he never should have talked. He was, at best, horribly insensitive.
- It was his **dad's fault**: His dad's the one who set up all this favoritism within the family. That's what created this mess in the first place.

And yet, his dad grew up in a home that also played favorites. In fact, Jacob's father, **Isaac**, had two sons... **Jacob & Esau**.

- You see, **Jacob grew up knowing what it was** like to have a brother who was his dad's favorite.

- But this family dynamic didn't start there either. **Isaac** grew up with a father, **Abraham**, who had two sons... **Ishmael & Isaac**... with whom he played favorites. This has been going on a long time in this family.

But, besides "Why me?", there's another, far less popular question... one we rarely ask ourselves... and that's, "Why *not* me?"

- With all the pain & suffering, all the hardship & grief, why *not* me?
- You look at the world today and through the centuries and you wonder how I could expect anything different.
- Did I just think I was going to get a free pass?
- But then **eventually you come to final question**... What do I do now?
- With that illusion of control revealed... With my **security and identity** so shaken... **what do I have left to stand on?**

Back in 1990, I moved to Pennsylvania to work with a mission agency. But before starting there, I was asked to spend three months at their national office in Pasadena.

- Well, one day while living alone in this tiny house, I heard a sound like the rumbling of a truck, this low rumbling sound, only there was no truck outside.
- Then I felt this kind of shaking, and then I heard this rattling. Anybody want to guess what it was? It was an earthquake.
- Here in NJ we can get some **bad thunderstorms**... even a **mild hurricane** from time to time. But there's something about an earthquake.
- I mean, the earth isn't supposed to move! That is why it is called **terra firma**, not terra shake-a!

You see, when you discover that the one thing you could always count on to not move... moves, you start to wonder if there's anything out there you can really count on... **if there's anything solid enough stand on.**

- I thought I could stand on my **health**, my **body**, my **marriage**, my **abilities**, my **good intentions**, my **job**, my **talent**, my **friends**, my **reputation**...

- During the high-tech stock boom of the late 90s and early 2000s, we thought that the NASDAQ would always head upward, to the right.
- And then one day my whole world shakes. **What is left?** That's the question. What's left to stand on?

In this new reality, where he has lost everything, **Joseph gets sold to a man named Potiphar.**

- He wakes up that first morning and wonders; *"Maybe this is one of those dreams."*
- Maybe I will wake up and be in **my own bed** with my **own robe**, in my **old life**. But it's not a dream. He's lost everything.

Nobody here cares that he was his daddy's favorite. Nobody here is asking him about his dreams.

- He's an **alien**... a **stranger**. He's an **abducted**, **penniless**, **powerless** slave.
- What in the world does Joseph have left? Well... from the text, there is One thing... One amazing reality so easy to take for granted.

We're told in Genesis 39, ***"The Lord was with Joseph...and he (Joseph) lived in the house of his Egyptian master."***

- He wakes up...strange **bed**, strange **house**, strange **land**, no **friends**, no **prospects**, no **explanation** why.
- Just this one thing... he finds out he's NOT alone. *"The Lord was with Joseph..."*

What must that have been like in his soul? To wake up and to have lost everything and to discover that in the midst of all you're going through... that God's right there with you.

- And because the Lord is with him, he has no more trouble... right?
- Everything works out great at the Potiphars' house. He gets along wonderfully with Mr. Potiphar and Mrs. Potiphar and lives there happily ever after. Right? Not so much.
- God is with him. He honors God. He resists temptations. And yet, **through all of his obedience to God**, he ends up in prison.

- Then the strangest thing happens... *"But while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him."*
- He falls, and he falls, and he falls, until he eventually realizes that he's fallen into the arms of God.

Over the past few weeks I've gotten a number of calls from one of our Vineyard leaders in Tajikistan... a 28-year-old Tajik man named Firouk.

- A number of years ago, while Joyce and I were living in the northern part of Tajikistan, Firouk stole \$100 from me.
- I spent three months looking for him. And even though I would ask for the money back, that's not why I was after him.
- I knew the life he had... and I wanted to talk to him about Jesus' love.

When we eventually stood face to face... he was literally terrified. It was the first experience of grace in his entire life.

- He lived in abject poverty with a mother who, though she loved him very much, suffered from severe depression.
- One day he and his sister discovered her dousing herself with kerosene. She had just lit the match. They saved her... but not before his sister suffered serious burns on her face.
- Not long after that, she had done the same thing again... but he wasn't there to save her.

Firouk gave his life to Jesus just a week or two later. His father beat him up because of his new faith in Christ...

- Other men in his village called him demeaning names out in public... and ridiculed him.
- One day he walked into my office crying. I sat him down next to me and began reading from Matthew 5... *"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."*
- Because there are so few young women following Jesus... he remains single to this day.

Firouk has suffered a fair bit... there's been a lot of loss. He'll call me from time to time... five or six times last week... when he's feeling a bit

down.

- He knows I won't give him a pep talk... he knows I'm not going to try and just help him "feel better."
- There are no simple answers to the kind of loss he's experienced.

You see, this message is not about how... if something bad happens to you... you just get back to being happy as soon as you can.

- As I said, the problem with the "why me?" question is that there's rarely an answer that could ever satisfy.
- But the Bible says that, in the midst of all the loss and pain... that there really is a redeemer.

And whether you're in an office suite or in prison cell, you really can discover, as Joseph did, that God is there with you.

- And yet, when you're in the midst of a painful seasons, if we begin to wonder, "*why me?*", we'll often ask another question... and that's, "*Does He care?*"
- When the earth shakes, when your world gets shattered, when you don't know what to do... does God care?

You know how you can divide people up into either *thinkers* or *feelers*? Everybody is either a thinker or a feeler?

- In my family, some of us are feelers and others are thinkers. Neither way is right or wrong; it just is what it is.
- **You may be a feeler**...you may have a heart that is compassionate and emotive and empathic, or **you may be a thinker**... a cold, calculating machine.
- It's just the way you were made. It's not your fault. It's just that you were born that way.

Okay, Joseph...17 years old, had everything going for him... till things just turned upside down. Guess which category Joseph might go in... thinker or feeler?

- There are a number of passages about him that can clue us into this.
- **Genesis 42, when he sees his brothers** for the first time in 20 years, we're told, "*Joseph turned away from them and began to*

- weep, but then turned back and spoke..."*
- And then a chapter later, **at another encounter**, we're told that Joseph is so overwhelmed that he *"hurried out and looks for a place to weep. He went to his private room and wept there."*

Two chapters later, **another really big moment**, *"And Joseph wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him and Pharaoh's household heard about it."*

- Then, again later, **when he is being reconciled** with his brothers, *"Joseph threw his arms around Benjamin and wept. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over all of them."*
- Then, later on **when he sees his father** for the first time, *"As soon as Joseph appeared before his father, he threw his arms around him and wept a long time."*
- Then, again, the very last chapter in Genesis, **his father is on his deathbed**, *"Joseph threw himself upon his father and wept over him."*

What do you think Joseph is...a thinker or a feeler? He is the biggest crybaby in the Bible. More tears than any other character in the Scriptures.

- There are a lot of tears in the Bible from the beginning to the end, and a lot of them belong to Joseph.
- I was thinking about this... when Joseph got to the end of his life... having shed all those tears... if you could have asked him...
- *"Joseph, when did you grow the most as a human being? When did you begin to kind of get over yourself? When did you find God nearest to you?"*

What do you think Joseph would have said? I think he would have said, **"It was when I was a slave."**

- I think he would've said, *"It was **when I was in prison**, down at the bottom... it was there, **when I lost everything**, that I discovered God."*
- But what if Jacob was given a script of Joseph's life and chose to erase all of those moments of pain from his son's life...
- so that Joseph could have experienced nothing but **sunshine** and

- prosperity** and **applause** and **all his dreams** coming true...
- I think that **Joseph would never have met God the way he did.**

Does God care? It is an amazing thing about Jesus... does anyone here know what the shortest verse in the Bible is? "*Jesus wept.*"

- His friend Lazarus dies. His friends all grieve. In Jesus, we have a God who cries... who cares!
- We've all had those moments where we've been in the company of someone who's in such pain that the tears are just flowing from them.
- It's an intimate moment to share with someone. Though, **if its someone you're very near to** who's crying there with you, you might just wipe their tears from their face.
- It's not something you'd do for anyone **but those you're closest to** in life... I mean, it's a **very intimate thing to wipe the tears** off somebody's face.

Well, at the end of the Book of Revelation, we're reminded that "*The day is coming when God's dwelling place will now be among his people, and He will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*"

That's our promise for then. But what about now? For now, David writes in **Psalm 56:8**, "*You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.*"

Some of you are facing some real challenges in your life right now. **Dreams shattered. Heart broken.**

- Now imagine coming to God... with all of your **concerns** and **struggles** and **disappointments**... with all the hurt in your heart...
- Imagine the God of all power and gentleness reaching His hands up to you... wiping the tears from your eyes. That is your God... our God!
- He's the God whom we're told in **Isaiah 53** who not only bears

our sin on the Cross... but who bore our suffering as well.

Guys... I believe that right now, God is reminding us... that whatever it is you may be going through...

- Whatever **setback**, whatever **difficulty**, whatever **worry**, whatever **fear**, whatever you may have **lost** or you are **afraid of losing**... **you are not alone.**
- **Jobless** one, **hurt** one, **betrayed** one, **divorced** one, **abandoned** one... **scared** one... **you are not alone!**

I don't think we are ever supposed to waste a crisis. We may not know why we're experiencing what we are... but, **if we take the time to look...**

- In the midst of all we may be facing... it's there that we'll discover God in a fresh new ways.
- I think God would say to you right now, *"I know, I know. There is not a tear that has come from your eye from your first day to this day that I don't know, that I don't care. And one day, the last tear will fall, and I will wipe them all away. I will set everything right."*

Heavenly Father, there are people who need Your healing touch so much right now. Sadness, discouragement, fear about tomorrow, uncertainty over the future. Jesus, would You come alongside everybody right now and say, *"Just as I was with Joseph when he was a slave, just as I was with Joseph when he was in prison... I am with you right now. I am with you. I am with you. I am with you. You will not be alone."* Thank you, God, thank you that in Jesus we have such a hope. Would you make it burn very strongly in us and through us. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

** Thanks to a message by John Ortberg entitled "What's Left."*