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WHEN EVERYTHING GOES AGAINST YOU

Genesis 42:29-43:14

by

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Genesis Lesson 71

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One of the spoof advertisements Garrison Keillor used to do on his "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show was, "Worst Case Scenario." It's a telephone service where you can call a pessimist named Ralph and he will tell you the worst that can happen to your proposed plans.

In one segment, a guy calls Ralph to ask what the worst case scenario will be if he takes his wife to the movies that night. Ralph replies, "You want the worst case scenario? Your wife will ask you to go out to the snack bar and get her something to drink. On the way back to your seat, you'll trip over someone's feet and spill your drinks on the people in the row in front of you. They'll sue you for all you're worth. You'll lose your house and car and job. Your wife will divorce you and take the kids with her. You'll start drinking and end up on skid row." The caller says, "Hey, thanks! I'd never thought about it that way. I guess I'll stay home tonight."

"Worst Case Scenario" is a practical service designed to help you apply Murphy's Law in specific situations. The general law is, "If anything can go wrong, it will." We laugh at Murphy's Law because we've all had times when it seems like everything is against us. Of course, it's never very funny at the time it's happening, especially if the things against us are of a serious nature.

Instead of Murphy's Law, it should have been called Jacob's Law. Jacob lived before Murphy and he summed up the principle in Genesis 42:36, when he said to his sons: "You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and you would take Benjamin; all these things are against me." But before we scold Jacob, we need to admit that we've all been right where he was at.

1. There are times when things seem to be against you.

To review, Joseph, whom Jacob thinks is dead, has been promoted to the number two spot in Egypt after years in prison. He's in charge of the plan to save up grain in the years of plenty and distribute it during the years of famine. The famine had spread into Canaan, so Jacob sent his ten other sons (minus Benjamin) to Egypt to buy grain. They stood before Joseph and didn't recognize him in his Egyptian appearance after these 22 years, though he recognized them. He treated them harshly, accused them of being spies, and put Simeon in prison until the others could return with their younger brother, Benjamin, to prove their honesty. In all these things, Joseph was testing his brothers to see where their hearts were at, and to lead them to repentance.

On the way home, one of the brothers opened his sack to feed his donkey and discovered that the money he had used to pay for the grain had been returned. The brothers feared that they would be accused of stealing when they went back to get Simeon out of jail and to buy more grain. But, for the first time, they also recognized God's hand in their lives and exclaimed, "What is this that God has done to us?"

They returned home and reported everything to Jacob. As they finished their story and emptied their sacks, they discovered, to their horror, that not just one, but each man's money, had been returned. It's at this point that Jacob wailed his version of Murphy's Law: "All these things are against me." It's as if he called "Worst Case Scenario" and Ralph said, "Yep, Joseph is dead, Simeon is dead, and Benjamin will die, too!"

Reuben steps in at this point and makes an extreme offer: He will be responsible for Benjamin; if he doesn't bring him back, Jacob can kill two of Reuben's sons. It's an absurd offer, but Reuben has been on his dad's bad side for a long time, and he's trying to change that. He committed incest with his

father's concubine. Being the oldest, he had been responsible for Joseph's safety. He had blown that one, and Jacob wasn't about to give him a chance with his favorite Benjamin.

So Jacob digs in his heels and says, "No way! I'll starve first." Okay! The next verse (43:1) says, "Now the famine was severe in the land." But Jacob holds out, thinking, "Maybe this stupid famine will let up." But it doesn't. It only gets worse, and his sons and their families are getting hungry. Finally, he sees that his back is to the wall so he says, "Go back, buy us a little food." Did you catch how he phrased that? Why buy just a *little* food? Jacob's hope was that if they just bought a little bit, the harsh governor in Egypt wouldn't require Benjamin to go down with his brothers. But Judah confronts his father with reality: "The governor said that we would be wasting our time in coming if our younger brother is not with us."

But Jacob still isn't willing to make the hard decision to send Benjamin. So he starts blaming (43:6): "Why did you treat me so badly by telling the man whether you still had another brother?" Isn't that true to human nature? When we're boxed in by circumstances, we want to blame others. "I'm a victim! Why weren't you omniscient? Then this wouldn't be happening to me!" Can't you feel his frustration?

But in spite of Jacob's irrational blame, Judah stays calm and reasons with his father. The plural (43:7) indicates that the other brothers joined the discussion at this point. They said, "The man questioned particularly about us and our relatives, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?' So we answered his questions. Could we possibly know that he would say, 'Bring your brother down?'"

Now Judah makes a more rational proposal than Reuben's earlier extreme idea. First, he appeals to the severity of their situation: "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, we as well as you and our little

ones" (43:8). Then he proposes to become surety for Benjamin, so that if anything happens to him, Judah will bear the blame before his father forever. This may have been a willingness to be cut out of his inheritance. He then points out the result of Jacob's obstinacy: "For if we had not delayed, surely by now we could have returned twice" (43:10). It's a nice way of saying, "We wouldn't be in this mess if you weren't so stubborn."

Jacob's back is to the wall, so he reluctantly agrees to let Benjamin go. (By the way, Benjamin is not a toddler; he's about 23 by now.) But Jacob's still got one last scheme up his sleeve: Put together a gift for the man down in Egypt. It had worked with Esau (even though it was unnecessary); maybe it would work again. In the end, he sends Benjamin with the hope that God Almighty ("El Shaddai") would grant him compassion and that Simeon would be released. But finally, he resigns himself to the ultimate worst case scenario: "If I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved." If the man kills them all, that's the way it goes! Everything seemed to be against Jacob.

You've been there, haven't you! Maybe, like this "harsh" man down in Egypt, some difficult person was against you--a difficult person at work or difficult family members who seemed to be against you--husband, wife, parents, children, or in-laws. Perhaps it's your past which you think is against you. Jacob thought that his past was against him: Joseph was dead, Simeon too, he complained. He didn't know that; in fact both statements were false. But it's easy to read the trials in your past so that you think that circumstances always have been against you.

It's also easy to think the worst about the future. Jacob is certain that if Benjamin goes to Egypt, he will never see him again (42:38). All his sons might perish (43:14). I'm not being too hard on Jacob, because when he finally stands before Pharaoh, he sums up his life: "Few and unpleasant have been

the years of my life, nor have they attained to the years that my fathers lived" (47:9). In other words, "My past has been against me and the future, too, because my fathers outlived me." How does he know that? He doesn't know how long he's going to live! And why would he want to live longer than his fathers if life is that unpleasant? Poor Jacob saw himself as a victim of cruel fate.

You can even take good things that happen to you and run them through a negative grid and they come out against you. When his ten sons returned with plenty of grain and all their original money returned, you would think Jacob would have rejoiced. These were tough times. Look how God had provided! But Jacob complained that it only meant that he's going to lose Benjamin: "All these things are against me" (42:36).

What should you do when it seems that everything is against you? The answer is, you should do the opposite of what Jacob did. When things seem to be against you,

2. Trust in the God who is for you.

As we've seen all through this story, God's hand was always behind the scenes. It was God who sent Joseph into Egypt. It was God who put him in Potiphar's house, then into the prison. It was God who sent the baker and the cupbearer to prison with Joseph and gave them their dreams which he interpreted. It was God who gave Pharaoh his dreams and who gave Joseph the interpretation so that he was raised to the second spot in Egypt. It was God who was behind all these things confronting Jacob. Even though he couldn't understand why God was doing all these things, Jacob needed to trust in the sovereign, loving hand of the God who had promised to bless him.

But Jacob wasn't trusting God. Here I differ with many commentators who admit that Jacob wavered momentarily, but paint him as a great man of faith. I'm not trying to pick on

Jacob, in that we're all much like him. But I argue that if you want to trust God, you should look at Jacob here as an example of how *not* to do it. Ten things in Jacob's life here tell you when you're not trusting in the Lord. Let's take it as a quiz. I'll tell you in advance that the correct answer each time should be "no."

*(1) Are you governed by irrational fears? Jacob was governed by the fear of losing Benjamin. So he was overprotective, even though Benjamin was 23 years old! He didn't send him down to Egypt with his brothers the first time because he thought, "I am afraid that harm may befall him" (42:4).*

Jacob's fears weren't irrational in the sense that they were far-fetched. Benjamin could have died on the trip. His fears were irrational because he was trying to protect his son from circumstances which were beyond his control and his fears forced him into ridiculous behavior. Benjamin could have died of some disease or accident at home. Life is risky. But when it comes down to sending Benjamin or starving, he opts for starving the whole extended family. Even if Simeon rots in prison, Benjamin isn't going to Egypt!

Taking needless risks just for the thrill of it is not good stewardship of our lives. Christians should not be daredevils. But we've got to entrust our kids and loved ones to the Lord's keeping. Irrational fears indicate that you're not trusting in the Lord.

*(2) Do you have a negative, pessimistic attitude? As we've seen, Jacob was pessimistic about his past (42:36) and about his future (42:38). He was convinced he would go to his grave in sorrow if Benjamin went to Egypt with his brothers, when in fact, letting him go was the way Jacob would experience the greatest joy of his life, his reunion with Joseph.*

I'm not advocating Norman Vincent Peale's "Positive Thinking," which is man-centered and not biblical. But how

can you focus on the Lord and the blessings He has promised to those in Christ and be negative and pessimistic about life? The Bible is realistic about our enemies, the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is realistic in showing the trials that God's people often endure. A biblically positive attitude doesn't deny or gloss over these problems. But it does affirm that God is good and that life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ is full of great joy.

(3) *Are you self-centered?* The Hebrew of 42:36 reveals Jacob's self-focus: "*Me* you have bereaved; ... against *me* are all these things." You see the same thing in 43:6, when he tips his hand that he's more concerned for himself than even for Benjamin. Jacob sees the threat against Benjamin primarily in terms of how it will affect his own happiness.

A self-centered parent plays favorites and uses his favorite child for the parent's fulfillment. Jacob loses Joseph, so he picks Benjamin, his other son from his favorite wife, Rachel. Jacob cares more about his own happiness through Benjamin than he does about his son Simeon in prison in Egypt. He tells the other nine, "... his brother is dead, and he alone is left" (42:38). How would that make you feel? You're not trusting God when you use your children to fulfill your own needs.

(4) *Are you blaming others for your problems?* Jacob blames his sons for depriving him of Joseph and Simeon and, next, Benjamin (42:36). He wasn't sure what role the brothers had in Joseph's disappearance, but he suspected, based on their track record, that they had done something. But Simeon and Benjamin weren't their fault. It wasn't their fault that they answered the man's direct questions about their family (43:6). Jacob was blaming his sons, but he was really blaming God, who was using all these events to deal with this family. If you're blaming others, complaining about the unfair treatment everyone gives you, you are not trusting the sovereign hand of God.

*(5) Are you stubbornly refusing to admit you were wrong?* Here's where pride gets in the way. Jacob makes a foolish, adamant decision: Benjamin isn't going to Egypt! Perhaps he felt good about his strong leadership. But then the famine got worse and the grain ran out. Then what? "I gave you my answer, Benjamin isn't going, even if we all starve!" Jacob was being foolish, not strong, in his leadership. He was really wrestling against God, stubbornly refusing to admit his error until the last moment.

If, when his sons had returned, he had said, "Men, we've got to seek the Lord for His wisdom about these things. Let's commit Benjamin to His keeping and pray that Simeon will be freed," he would have seen Joseph months sooner and he would have spared his family the crisis they now faced. Stubbornness isn't strength in leadership, nor is it trust in the Lord.

*(6) Are you reluctantly yielding because you have to?* Jacob finally says, "If it must be so, then ..." (43:11). He's grudgingly yielding to what has to be, but his heart's not in it. He's saying, "There's a gun to my head; what else can I do?" That's not faith. Faith should flow from a willing spirit of submission to our loving Heavenly Father.

*(7) Are you excluding God from the events of your life?* When Jacob sends off his sons, he instructs them to take back the money that had been returned, explaining, "perhaps it was a mistake" (43:12). Just one of those freak things that "happens"! Even Jacob's worldly sons saw it as the hand of God when they exclaimed, "What is this that God has done to us?" (42:28). But to Jacob, it's just a mistake. What does God have to do with it?

There are three different views of adversity in these chapters about Joseph. Joseph views adversity as coming from the loving hand of his sovereign God (45:5-9). Joseph's brothers

view it as punishment from an angry God who is getting even with them for their sin (42:21-22, 28). But Jacob views adversity as due to the fickle hand of fate, or to the stupidity of his sons (42:36-38; 43:6, 14). Only Joseph's view is correct. Jacob needed to see the hand of the loving, sovereign God in his adversity. You'll be able to submit in faith to God in your trials only when you see His loving hand in the common problems that happen each day.

*(8) Do you rely on human schemes rather than the grace of God?* Even though things are against him, Jacob rallies to try to manipulate things for his own advantage with a gift. He did it with Esau, who brushed it aside. He does it here and Joseph ignores it. G. Campbell Morgan observes, "He always seemed to think that the great end was to gain something, and evidently he believed that this was the motive of the Egyptian governor, and that, therefore, he might be bribed into complacency. How often we but reveal ourselves in our estimates of others!" (*The Analyzed Bible, Genesis* [Baker], 244.)

There is a deep-seated human tendency to pay our own way. We have trouble accepting grace, undeserved favor. If somebody gives us something, we feel we need to give them something in return. And so we often try to add to God's grace all sorts of human schemes to get what we want. But God only works through grace.

*(9) Do you resort to God last, as a hope, but not in prayer?* This is Jacob's high point, but even here he falls short. After he's done everything else, Jacob sends off his sons with the hope, "May God Almighty grant you compassion in the sight of the man" (43:14). I say "hope" rather than "prayer" because in prayer you talk directly to God. In prayer you say, "O God, based on Your promises to me, do such and such." And it shouldn't be the last thing you think of, but the first.

*(10) Are you stoically resigning yourself to fate?* Jacob finally sighs, "And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am

bereaved" (43:14). Again, many commentators see this as a fine example of faith. But I see it more as a resignation to fate. Jacob is saying, "What will be will be. You can't fight it, so you may as well give in to it." But that kind of stoicism isn't faith in the living God, who sovereignly orders the affairs of this world for His glory.

Paul expressed the kind of active faith in God we should have when he wrote, concerning trials, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.... If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:28, 31-32).

How can everything be against us when God says that He is for us? The best Jacob could hope for in his troubles was that Simeon would be released and Benjamin spared. Little did he know that God would do far more than he could ask or even think (Eph. 3:20)! He's promised to do that for us, as well! So the bottom line is,

When things seem to be against you  
trust in the God who is for you.

#### CONCLUSION

Three things have helped me do that:

(1) *Put God into the equation.* You have to stop and ask yourself, "Is God in this or not? He is! Then, "Is God for me or against me?" He's for me! "Am I going to believe, then, that God is and that He is the rewarder of those who seek Him?" (Heb. 11:6) You have to make the deliberate choice to trust in the unseen God.

(2) *Put your situation into historical perspective.* View your situation in light of God's dealings with His people in the Bible and in church history. That helps me to see that "I am not the last of God's

prophets left, and they're seeking my life." Others have suffered and endured in the cause of Christ before me. Reading biographies of Martin Luther, Adoniram Judson, Hudson Taylor, and others who have overcome severe hardships helps me to trust God in my puny trials.

*(3) Put down selfish, unbelieving thoughts.* You can't allow yourself the luxury of a pity party. You can't surround yourself with reasons why everything is against you so that you have excuses for not believing God. You *can* trust God! You can take unbelieving thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ! When things seem to be against you, you *can* trust in the God who is for you!

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can we know whether a trial is from the Lord or if the devil is against us?
2. How can we realistically look at all the problems in the world and yet be genuinely positive?
3. It would be fairly easy to trust God if you knew His specific will in advance. Since we don't, how do we trust Him? Is, "If it be Your will," a cop out?
4. Some would say that Jacob's gift was a prudent measure in line with prevailing customs. How can we know when prudent plans cross the line into wrongful scheming?

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