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Series: *Joseph – Living the Dream*

Title: *The Great Bounce-back*

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Scripture: Genesis 41

How many of you are old enough to remember BOZO the clown? For those of you who don't, back in the '60's Bozo had a TV show on Saturday mornings and it was very popular. These were the good ole days when clowns were funny and friendly, not the evil and scary monsters they tend to be in movies today. Bozo was so beloved by kids everywhere that tons of products came out featuring his image; banks, puppets, lunchboxes, and toys like this. I believe it's called a, "*Bounce-Back Bozo.*" You can kick him---whop him with a bat---punch him in the face---and he always bounces back.

I brought Bozo in this morning because as Max Lucado puts it, life is a lot like "*Bounce-Back Bozo*" for many people. He writes, "*Life comes at us with a fury of flying fists---right hook of rejections, sucker punch of loss. Enemies hit below the belt. Calamities cause us to stagger. It's a slugfest out there. Some people once knocked down never get up. They stay on the mat---beaten, bitter, broken. Out for the count. Others, however, have more bounce-back than Bozo.*"

Well, Joseph is a great example of this resilient kind of person. Like a walking pinata, he was hit in life over and over again.

- His jealous brothers knocked him into slavery.
- Mrs. Potiphar wacked him into jail.
- The cupbearer zonked him by failing to remember him which forced him to REMAIN in prison.

But with God's strength---like bounce-back Bozo---Joseph always got back up and stood up stronger than ever. This morning we are going to study his last and greatest bounce-back. Open your Bibles to Genesis 41 and let's look at the events the led up to it. As you can see in verse one, two years after the cupbearer had been restored to his position, the Pharaoh had two troubling dreams. These dreams were so weird and so vivid that he could not get them off his mind. In the first, seven, fat and sleek cows were devoured by seven, ugly, gaunt cows; and even after their cow cannibalistic meal, the seven, skinny cows remained that way. The pharaoh woke up and was eventually able to go back to sleep only to dream a second time. This time seven, plump and healthy ears of corn were swallowed up by seven that were thin and scorched by the east wind and like the skinny cows the seven cannibalistic heads of grain that were thin remained thin even after their healthy whole grain meal.

These similar dreams were very troubling to the Pharaoh so he called in all of his counselors for their interpretation, but try as they might, they could not unravel the meaning of these odd dreams. Now remember, as I told you two weeks ago, dreams were a big deal for the Egyptians and royal dreams were especially so. You see, the pharaoh was seen as the earthly representative of the gods, and dreams were the main way these "gods" communicated with him. So, Pharaoh was understandably frustrated. He had to know what all this meant. Well, at this point, in God's perfect timing, the cupbearer remembered Joseph. He said, "*Pharaoh, I don't know why I didn't think of this sooner, but two years ago when I was in prison, a Hebrew boy named Joseph interpreted a confusing dream for me. It came true exactly as he said it would. Maybe he could help.*"

Pharaoh said something like, "*Well why are you standing there! Go get this Joseph before you forget him again! Bring him to me!*" Now, think how it was for Joseph. On his seven hundred thirtieth day since interpreting the cup bearer and baker's dreams, he's going about his daily prison duties when suddenly there is the noise of hurried footsteps and shouts of his name.

The warden runs up and breathlessly says that Joseph is wanted immediately by none other than the Pharaoh himself. Remember, Joseph had been taken out of a pit only one other time and that was to be sold into slavery by his brothers. This time would be entirely different. This time he would stand in the presence of the most powerful man in the world.

But before heading for the Egyptian version of the oval office, he shaves and changes his clothes. Now, what do you think the Biblical lesson is here? If we were to translate the original Hebrew what underlying truth would we find?

Would we learn that God doesn't like beards and mustaches? I hope not. No, of course not. It just tells us that after two years in the prison, Joseph didn't look his best. Plus, he would have known that Egyptians didn't grow beards, they were clean shaven. He wanted to look presentable before meeting the Pharaoh. Remember, Joseph is known for his people skills.

So, after a quick shower and shave and donning a clean tunic, Joseph went into Pharaoh's palace. Now picture this setting: Here's Joseph, 30 years of age, a slave, then a prisoner, brought into all the opulence of the palace and all that power. Gathered around Pharaoh are the intellectuals, the advisors, the generals. I think Potiphar was probably there. Note that Joseph doesn't say, *"Pharaoh, before I interpret your dream, I want to say a word about your cupbearer. He is the most forgetful, ungrateful man I have ever met---and if he had one iota of a brain, I wouldn't have been in jail for the last two years. If you're trusting your life to him, you're trusting in a bum."*

No, there's no indication of bitterness toward the cupbearer whose forgetfulness kept him in the prison all that time. In fact, for the rest of his life, from age 30 to 110, Joseph never spoke a resentful word against anyone:

- Not his brothers who had sold him into slavery,
- Not against Potiphar's wife who had falsely accused him,
- And not against the cupbearer who forgot him.

You know there is one thing you have to watch out for if you're playing with a "Bounce-Back Bozo." If you hit him too hard, he'll bounce right back and hit you. But Joseph didn't do that. I mean, on his bounce back, he didn't hit back at ANY of the people that had hit him. He was an incredibly forgiving person and we'll talk more about that next week. Well, after Pharaoh related his dreams, to the astonishment of everyone present, Joseph gave such a clear, concise interpretation everybody knew it was true. He said, *"The two dreams mean the same thing. There are going to be seven, fat years followed by seven, lean years of famine. Whatever you store up during the seven, good years is going to be absolutely devoured in the seven years of famine that follows."*

But then Joseph went a step further. He not only made an interpretation; he gave a recommendation. He suggested that during the seven years of prosperity, Pharaoh hire a special manager, a "food czar" so to speak, whose job it would be to develop a conservation system so that the nation could survive the lengthy famine. He said that this Food Czar, *"...would require that one-fifth of everybody's harvest during the prosperous years be given to the government. They won't even miss it, it will be so prosperous---and it will be stored up for later so people won't starve during the famine."*

Now, to understand the Pharaoh's response to Joseph's interpretation, we need to understand how important agriculture was to the nation of Egypt. I mean *"famine"* was a foul word in the Egyptian dictionary. It would be like words we hate to use: nuclear holocaust, asteroid about to hit earth, GLOBAL PANDEMIC. I mean, their civilization was built on farms. Crops made Egypt the jewel of the Nile. Agriculture made Pharaoh the most powerful man in the world. The Nile was the bloodstream of Egypt. It made Egypt far less dependent on local rains than neighboring areas because the Nile's headwaters arose deep in Africa, in regions where rain was plentiful. And, each year the river would flood, bringing with it both abundant water and rich alluvial soil. Cows were also a big deal. Egyptians relied on them for milk and cheese, and for Cleopatra's baths.

Just kidding.

My point is the Pharaoh knew that a seven-year famine would be an agricultural apocalypse that would wipe the Egyptian Empire off the map. Now, when Joseph recommended this food czar deal I don't think he was saying, *"I'm the guy! You should give this job."* No, I think the only thing on his mind was the hope that Pharaoh would release him from prison. But Pharaoh did HIRE him---on the spot. Look at verse 37, ***"The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So, Pharaoh asked them, 'Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?'"***

And that brings us to Joseph's greatest bounce-back. Let's read about it. I'm beginning with verse 41 of Genesis 41 and reading to the end of the chapter. Let's stand in respect to God's Word as its read.

41 - Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt."

42 - Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck.

43 - He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people shouted before him, "Make way!" Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

44 - Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt."

45 - Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt.

46 - Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from Pharaoh's presence and traveled throughout Egypt.

47 - During the seven years of abundance the land produced plentifully.

48 - Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it.

49 - Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure.

50 - Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On.

51 - Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household."

52 - The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."

53 - The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end,

54 - and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food.

55 - When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food. Then Pharaoh told all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph and do what he tells you."

56 - When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt.

57 - And all the world came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe everywhere.

Now is that a bounce-back or what! One minute Joseph is a convicted felon serving a life sentence in prison. The next he is basically the Prime Minister of Egypt. At age thirty he's the second most powerful man in the world's most powerful nation. Look back at the symbols of prestige given to Joseph.

- Verse 42 says, **"Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger."**
Now this ring was like Pharaoh's signature. He would use it to stamp in fresh clay as a seal that it belonged to Pharaoh. This was like Pharaoh giving Joseph his platinum American Express card with no debt ceiling. It gave Joseph access to all the riches of Egypt. Using this ring, he could make whatever transaction he desired. Joseph was suddenly a rich man.
- He was also given new clothing. Look back at verse 42, **"He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck."**
Joseph has lost two coats up until this point and now God provides him with a royal garment. Joseph had a chain of shackles around his neck in the dungeon and now he has a gold chain of aristocracy and power. But that's not all!
- Look at verse 45, **"Pharaoh had him ride in a chariot as his second in command and men shouted before him, 'Make way! Make way!'"**
Joseph is given his own "presidential limo." All this shows that he is now a highly visible celebrity. He carried clout. He couldn't say a word anymore without it becoming known by everyone. I'm sure he made the cover of that week's *Egyptian People* magazine. People would ask him for his autograph. He became the target of the Egyptian paparazzi.
- And on top of it all Joseph was given a new name, the Egyptian name of Zaphenath-Paneah, which meant **"Revealer of secrets" or "God speaks through him."**
This is a good thing because Joseph's name had to have been a little bit tarnished by Potiphar's wife. His character had been smeared, so he was given a new name that would symbolize the past is over, the slate is wiped clean. I can't help but think of the fact that when we put our faith in Jesus God gives us a new name, the name of Christian, to symbolize that our past is over, the slate is wiped clean and we have a new future!

What can we learn from Joseph---the bounce-back king?

1.) Give CREDIT where CREDIT is due

Look at verse 16. When asked about interpreting the dreams, Joseph said to Pharaoh, ***“I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”*** I mean, he didn’t say, *“Well, King, I have been known to unravel a few dreams in my day. Lay it on me.”* No, Joseph never promoted himself. He could have. Here was his chance. But, as he has done in the past, Joseph still gave God all the credit. In fact, four times in three verses Joseph pointed the Pharaoh to God as the source of the interpretation. He was humble enough to declare his utter dependence on God and courageous enough to risk declaring his faith in a God unknown to the Egyptians.

When we have our own bounce-backs, we must never forget the Source of our blessings.

We must never get prideful, but must remain humble knowing that as James tells us God is the Giver of ***“every good and perfect gift.”*** As we just read, Joseph and his wife had two sons and even though his wife, Asenath was the daughter of a pagan priest, they gave their sons Hebrew names, which makes me think Asenath embrace a faith in God. They named their firstborn Manasseh and Joseph said why, ***‘It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household.’*** The second son was named Ephraim and said, ***‘It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.’*** So Joseph gave his children names that would give glory to God, so that every time he called them he would remember ***“God has made me forget,” “God has made me fruitful.”*** And every time people asked, ***“What’s the name of your children?”*** He was able to move a marble and give testimony to God.

Here’s a second thing we can learn from Joseph’s big bounce-back.

2.) Believe God is at WORK---even when it looks like He isn’t.

Let me ask all you *“Bounce-Back Bozo”* experts. What keeps him bouncing back? It’s ballast. There’s a three-pound weight in the bottom that serves as a counter-balance against punches and kicks. Well, Joseph had a similar ballast, his was a deep-seated stabilizing belief in God’s sovereignty, a conviction that God was at work for his good even when it didn’t seem that way. But think of all the ways God worked in Joseph during his times of captivity, both in the prison and when he was enslaved by Potiphar.

- He became fluent in Egyptian.
- He honed his skills in administration.
- He became an expert on the Egyptian culture.

Joseph didn’t waste his imprisonment, he saw how God was using even these agonizing years for his good and he soaked up every lesson he could. He knew about the promise embedded in the dreams he had as a teen, he knew God was still in control, still working toward the fulfillment of those dreams. So, the difficult years helped his faith to grow, as Vince Flynn puts it, *“The forgetfulness of man forced Joseph to rely on the memory of God.”*

This week I refreshed my memory of another great man of faith, John Bunyan. On November 12, 1660 he was thrown into jail because King Charles II made anything but the state church illegal and banned anyone from preaching who was not officially ordained by the state church. I have to say, this is a great illustration of what can happen when state and church mix. Anyway, Bunyan was not ordained. He was a tinker, he made his living by selling pots and pans. Plus, he had little education, but God had called him to preach so he did. God gave him a hunger for Scripture and gifted him in public speaking. People would come from all over to hear this un-ordained, uneducated tinker preach. So, the king threw him in jail for over 12 years. But in that time of imprisonment Bunyan honed his skills in writing and turned out more than 60 books, including the book that made his name a household word: *Pilgrim’s Progress*. For centuries it was second only to the Bible as the world’s best-selling book. It’s been translated into more than 200 languages and greatly used by God to help generations understand the gospel. For Bunyan, prison proved to be more than a place of punishment, it was the launching pad for a bounce-back that still blesses us today more than 350 years later.

Here’s a third lesson.

3.) Be wary of SUCCESS.

The British essayist, Thomas Carlyle, once said, *“Adversity is hard on a man, but for every one man who can stand prosperity there are one hundred who can stand adversity.”* I think Carlyle was right. Prosperity ruins more people than difficulty ever does. The Bible is full of examples of people who began with a close walk with God but they drifted away when they became successful. King Saul was so humbled when he first was crowned as king that he hid among the people, but after reigning as king for a while, he became so arrogant he tried to kill his successor. King David was so pure in the beginning that God called him a man after his own heart, but after he had power for a while, David became an adulterer and became impure.

Solomon began his political career humbly asking God for wisdom that he could rule such a great people, but after Solomon reigned for a while, he became foolish and indulgent. Every one of us could name people who could take adversity but they couldn't take prosperity: Richard Nixon, Jimmy Baker, Elvis Presley, baseball player Pete Rose. This is what Moses was warning the Hebrews about when he said, ***“Take care lest you forget the Lord your God. Be ware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’”*** (Deuteronomy 8:11, 17)

If we are not very careful, prosperity erodes our character and values. It makes us forget God.

As C. S. Lewis said, *“Prosperity is good campaigning weather for the Devil.”* But there are those who can withstand the temptations of prosperity. I've been blessed to know several of them---several who, like Joseph walked close enough to God that the things of this world did not tempt them. Look at how Joseph handled his sudden wealth. As I said, he was given a wife, but we read nothing of him making the mistake of people like David and Solomon by adding wives or concubines. He was faithful to the wife of his youth.

Plus, we read nothing about Joseph building a huge palace for himself, which leads to the final bounce-back lesson we can learn from Joseph.

4.) Don't FORGET others.

Joseph didn't just sit around enjoying his new status. No, he got to work doing what he had advised the Pharaoh to do, which was make sure this famine didn't lead to millions of people starving. It sounds like he got in his new chariot and left immediately to take up his new responsibilities. Verse 46 says, ***“Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from Pharaoh's presence and traveled throughout Egypt. During the seven years of abundance the land produced plentifully. Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it. Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain.”***

I'm thinking when the boys were born he traded in his two-passenger chariot for a mini-van sized chariot so he could take his family with him. I don't know, but notice how focused Joseph was on doing his job. Notice the action words: he went out, he traveled, he collected, he stored up, and he kept records. Joseph wasn't just looking for leisure time. He got involved and he was thorough. He kept at it his job of preparing to feed the world for seven years of abundance. Then you read later that when there are seven years of famine he's still right there involved. He was a “hands on” administrator. There was nothing cosmetic about his approach.

He wasn't just a PR person. Joseph knew how to delegate, but he also knew how to keep track of what was going on. He kept in touch. He made sure when the famine hit, that there would be plenty of food. I love stories of people whom God has blessed, who don't forget WHY they were blessed. They were blessed to be a blessing to others.

I've known people like this---right here in our own church. They don't just GET, they give. I wish I could tell you about their gifts, but those people don't like to be in the spotlight. They don't give to be noticed. They give in obedience to God.

LET US PRAY