

The School of Hard Knocks - Psalm 142; Genesis 39

Introduction: Read Psalm 142. David prayed this prayer while he was being pursued by King Saul.

Now get the picture; here's a great soldier who had led many men to do battle and who had won many victories, and had been used mightily of God, being chased around the country by the King like a criminal or a fugitive. He was scared, embarrassed, and no doubt angry and upset over his situation. He was going through some hard knocks in life. Things were not panning out quite the way he planned.

Another man who had a similar experience was Joseph. Joseph too suffered some hard knocks in his life. His story is found in Genesis 37-47.

He was the next to the youngest in his family of 11 brothers and 1 sister. He was his father's favorite and because of that, his brothers hated him and made his life miserable. Now he did his part to contribute to their jealousy, but nonetheless, he had it rough at home. At one point he was even thrown in a pit and left for dead by his conniving brothers. However, one brother had a little mercy and convinced the others to sell him into slavery so at least they could get a little profit out of him. Then they went home and told their father that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

As time passed, Joseph's brothers forgot about him, but God didn't. He knew where he was all the time. In fact, God was plotting a course for Joseph's life that would lead to an unexpected result.

Joseph wound up in Egypt where he was sold to one of Pharaoh's officials, Potiphar. The Bible says that "*the Lord was with Joseph and he prospered*" (39:2) - to the point that he was placed in charge of Potiphar's household. But then, another hard knock came upon Joseph. He was literally set up for a fall by Potiphar's wife who tried to seduce him. Joseph eventually wound up in prison, wrongfully accused and convicted. During that time, Joseph was again almost forgotten. No doubt, Joseph prayed the same prayer David did as he lay in that cold and isolated prison. He too was scared, upset, confused, and even angry over his situation. Things were just not working out like he had planned.

So what do we do when the school of hard knocks has beat us down, and there seems to be no way out? What do we do when things haven't worked out like we had planned? What do we do when our dreams have

been shattered and our hope has faded into a distant memory? What do we do when it seems God is a million miles away and doesn't care?

Well, there's two ways we can react: Either lay down and give up, or stand up and go on. Either we can throw in the towel or start sending up the prayers. Either we can resign ourselves to being losers, or we can resolve ourselves to being winners.

Obviously, I'm not going to advocate giving up, throwing in the towel, or resigning ourselves to being losers this morning. I wouldn't have anything else to say to you if that were the case. I'm going to preach the truth of the Lord this morning and tell you that in God's army, there are no losers. There is no room for quitters, and there is no time to lay down. There is only a call for God's soldiers to be winners.

Paul told Timothy to "*be strong*" and to "*endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus*" (2 Tim. 2:1,3), and the Ephesians to "*be strong in the Lord*" and "*after you have done everything, to stand*" (Eph 6:10,13). So this morning, I am telling you church, by the authority of the word of God to stand tall in the school of hard knocks. I am telling you that God calls us to be winners, not losers.

Now let me say up front that the odds are already stacked against us being winners. All the signs of society point to the fact that the odds are stacked against us. Let me share with you some of the prevalent trends of today:

- Drug use among 4th-6th graders has doubled.
- 58% of CHURCH youth feel violence is acceptable.
- 1 of 5 H.S. youth say sexual intercourse is OK.
- 46% say it's OK if you're in love with that person.
- 44% say it's OK if you're going to get married anyway.
- 26% say it's OK if you use contraception.
- 22% say it's OK if your parents don't care.
- 11% say it's OK if your friends say it's OK.

For our youth, the odds are stacked against you coming out of your teenage years unscathed. Odds are, you

are going to get involved with either drugs, alcohol, violence or sex or all the above. Odds are you are going to be labeled a loser.

The odds are stacked against adults as well. We are the first generation in which we as Christians are the minority in the US.

- 65% of the Builder generation (pre -1946 births) are Christian.
- 35% of Boomer generation (1946-1964 births) are Christian.
- 15% of Buster generation (1965-1976 births) are Christian.
- Only 4% of this generation of youth (the Bridger generation) are being won to Christ.

Folks, we've heard for years that we are only one generation away from losing the church. Well, it's happening with this generation. In many churches, they are trying to win folks to Christ in 2009, with 1959 methods, and it's not getting done. The odds are stacked against us being winners, because the stats show, we're losing the battle.

But this morning, I want to give you some principles for being a winner instead of being a loser. First:

1. Winning is Accomplished One Step at a Time

If Evander Holyfield showed that you don't have to win with a quick knockout to be a champion. His fights were usually slow and methodical. Every blow was deliberate and calculated to wear down the opponent.

That is the way to stand tall and win in life. By making good choices every day, we are building a foundation for the future. Someone once said that the right choice today will equal your lifestyle tomorrow. That is so true. Joseph was a man who purposed in his heart early in his life to follow God, and it helped him to stand tall throughout his life of hard knocks.

That is why it is so important for us to reach these kids now. The stats say that 82% of people are saved before the age of 20. Now is the prime time to reach them, and now is the prime time to train them in making good choices.

But you may be saying, how do I know I'm making the right choice? There are so many choices, how can I tell if it is right or wrong? Let me give you 4 steps for making right choices. It comes from Josh McDowell's

seminar on “Right from Wrong.”

A. Consider the Choice. How many of you have ever worked a maze problem? You know those little puzzles that make you have to decide which way to go? In those kinds of puzzles, every move you make leads to somewhere. It may be a dead end, in which case you have to start over, or to an opening or opportunity to go further. In other words, we are forced to consider the choice. Will this turn help me or hinder me? Will this choice lead to opportunity or an obstacle?

Let’s apply this to life. Do you realize that the choices we make in life are either leading us to opportunities or obstacles? Every day we are faced with millions of choices. Some are major and some are minor, but all help contribute to our decision-making process. I submit to you that even the minor decisions (i.e. which blouse to wear, which food to eat in the cafeteria, which word to say, you don’t even think about them as choices) can contribute to our overall process of making choices. Because you don’t think of them as choices, they become a part of you. You don’t think of them as right or wrong choices. But people, we need to start thinking about our choices as either right or wrong. Think about some of the other choices you make every day. Think about the places you go, the movies you watch, the conversations you have, the things you watch on TV. We make choices about those things, and after awhile, they become non-choices, because we don’t even think about them anymore.

The first step in making right choices is considering whether the choice is right or wrong. We need to recognize each choice as a decision for right or wrong.

B. Compare It to God. The second step in making right choices is to compare the choice to God. As we consider the choice, we still may not be sure whether it is the right one or not. How can we tell?

God is the original. He is the source of all truth. Moses called him his Rock. He is solid, unchanging, and always true and faithful. The more we learn of God, the more we learn about absolute truth and about what is right and wrong.

Joseph, knew that climbing in bed with Potophar’s wife was wrong because he had an understanding of the nature and character of God. He knew it would be a violation of the nature and purpose of the marriage

covenant which God ordained. And he knew the consequences would have been disastrous.

If we are going to make right decisions, we need to understand who God is. It will allow us to see the big picture and how our choices affect our lives, the lives of others, and God.

C. Commit Ourselves to God's Way. Genesis 39:10 (NIV) *“And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.”* Implied in this verse is the fact that Joseph planned to commit to God's way by planning his decision. You see, it's not enough to consider the choice about whether it's right or wrong. It's not enough to compare the decision to God. We need to commit ourselves to God's way or else we may continue on in a bad choice. It would be like us having to decide what road to take not knowing which way would lead us to our destination, stopping and asking for directions, and then not following them. Ultimately we have to choose where the directions lead us and commit to that way, trusting in the one who gave us the direction.

God's ways are always right because they will never violate His nature. He knows the beginning from the end and has our best interest at heart in leading us in His ways.

ILL: - Maze in Daytona - God sees from the top.

D. Count on God's Protection and Provision. Now this is the tough one. It's tough because often we make decisions based on all the above and then things still don't work out. We figure it must not have been the right one because I still am suffering. Things are still bad. God must not be pleased with me.

Wait, hold on there. Look at Old Joseph. Here he is in prison because he is wrongfully accused and convicted of messing around with Potiphar's wife. He's serving an unjust sentence in spite of the fact that he made a right choice. It seems that his decision was all for nought. He did right, but is still suffering. Look what happened though. Over a period of time, as Joseph continued to display integrity, trustworthiness, godly wisdom and devotion, he gained favor with the prison guard. This guard helped secure the release of a fellow prisoner whom Joseph had helped. This former prisoner went to work for the pharaoh. The pharaoh started having terrible nightmares that hounded him. The pharaoh summoned his court to inquire of them what these dreams meant. This former prisoner remembered old Joseph ability to interpret dreams. The pharaoh called for

Joseph to help him. He did, and was eventually released and given the second most important office in the land. God, through Joseph was able to save an entire nation from the ravages of a severe famine because of the wisdom of Joseph. Eventually Joseph was reunited with his own family.

What does this mean? It means that short term setbacks are not good indicators of right choices. Sometimes the bad consequences will still come. Sometimes the pain will still be there. Sometimes it may seem that it's all for nothing, but God is able to see the big picture. All he asks of us is to remain faithful and strong. Leave the results to Him. If we keep the faith, He'll take care of the soul. If we stick with the truth, He'll make sure the truth wins out. That's the kind of God we serve. Let me give you the other two principles:

2. Do the Best You Can With What You Got, Where You Are

As we're taking the steps toward winning and standing in our difficulties, we need to realize that our situation is either one of our own making, one that has been set in motion by consequences or circumstance, or is God's will. Either way we will need to start doing the best we can from where we are with what we've got.

You see, we are called to be God's light wherever we are and in whatever circumstance we're in. Everywhere we are there is darkness. In our schools, workplaces, our homes, and even in the church. God is counting on us to reflect His light where we are.

Who will carry the torch of honesty, integrity, and holy living, and be the example of real Christianity in your dark place?

You might say, but who am I? What can I do? I don't have a lot to work with. Let me tell you something. As a Believer, you are God's child. As a Christian, you are God soldier. As one who has given their life to Christ, you have everything necessary to stand up and shine. You and God make a majority. He has not thrown you into the darkest of battles without arming you with the best equipment.

With nothing but a stick Moses led an entire nation out of Egyptian bondage and into the Promised Land. With nothing but a jawbone of a donkey, Samson whipped an entire army. With an arsenal of pitchers and lamps, Gideon tore down the walls of a city.

With a little sling, David killed the giant. And armed with only a pen, Paul set the course of the church for

centuries to come.

What do you have? Where are you right now? What are you doing with what you have? Finally, the third principle I want to leave with you has to do with starting and finishing.

3. Don't Give Up on Your Dream

Winners accomplish their goals by starting with a dream and following their dream. They plan ahead, work hard, sweat a lot, endure hardships, discipline themselves, keep their eyes on the goal, and never give up. In the end, the winner is standing tall despite all the hard knocks.

What dream has God given you? Joseph's dreams led to a saving a nation and preserving God's people. He had to endure a lot of hard knocks along the way, but he stayed true. He never gave up even through his circumstances. He never gave in to those temptations. He never gave up through the tragic events in his life. He kept his eyes on God, the author and finisher of his faith. He took one step at a time, and he did the very best he could with what he had where he was.

Conclusion: During the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, one name and one dramatic event stands out in my mind. The event wasn't even a medal race – the event was the 400 meter race qualifier before the big race. And the racer's name is Derrick Redmond.

Redmond was one of the favorites to win. He had to withdraw only 10 minutes before the same race in 1988 because of an injury, and had endured 5 surgeries just to get back in shape for this Olympics. He thought to himself, *"This is my time, my moment, and my stage to show the world who I am."*

But only 175 meters from the finish line, with Redmond in the lead and a virtual shoo-in to make the field for the big race the next day, Redmond felt a pop in right hamstring, he hops a few steps, and then falls to the ground writhing in pain. As the medical personnel arrive, he is in tears because he realizes his Olympic dream is gone. But amazingly, he hops to his feet and continues hopping down the track toward the finish line.

About that time, his father jumps onto the track, comes to the aid of his son, and together they make their way toward the finish line. It's a heartwarming, yet tragic story of a shattered dream.

The rest of Redmond's story is that today, he is a very successful motivational speaker who challenges his

listeners in the areas of Team Building, Goal Setting, Overcoming Obstacles and Performance.

You may not have ever have such an experience on a large stage as the Olympics, but I know that every one of you have had your share of similar trials. When you run into troubles, you need to know that God, your Father will be there to help you finish the race. That is that same feeling of comfort and love multiplied a million times over that Derrick felt when his father came down to help him.

I close with **Genesis 50:20 (NIV)** *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*