

Life in Limbo Land

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[0 : 00] If you're a fan of roller coasters, you know that there's a variety of them. There are family coasters that most in the family can ride. There are mind-trained roller coasters that'll jar you to death.

There are floorless roller coasters where your feet get dangled, just dangle down. There's what they call giga coasters that drop over 300 feet. There's another category called strata coasters that drop over 400 feet.

And there's hyper coasters that are known for speed and quick turns. There's wing coasters where you sit on the outside of the track as if you were on eagle's wings.

There are those with catapult launches and those where you just hang at the top before it finally releases you. There are camelbacks, one heel after another.

Bat wings where they sway you back and forth. Then there are corkscrews and barrel rolls, and they're not near as much fun as they used to be. They have a lasting effect.

[0 : 59] But no matter what happens, they hit that brake run, and then it all comes to a halt just in time, right back at the station. And then if you loved it, you want to do it again.

Again, I'll be honest, my enthusiasm lessened for them years ago because one, roller coasters are hard on big boys. But also the turning point came to me when I was at Carowinds and ate a meatball sub.

And then I got on a Superman ride, and I didn't feel like Superman. And right after that, the group I was with, with a bunch of youth, they wanted to go get in line at Thunder Road.

Thunder Road was an old wood roller coaster where you could either go backwards or forward. And they were on that, and I was listening to the rumble and standing on a ramp and realized I wasn't going to make it if I tried to ride that ride.

And so I took the walk of shame back down the ramp. Excuse me, excuse me. I walked across a pavement that looked like a tarmac.

[2 : 04] It was the longest journey I've ever taken to buy a Coke. I spent \$40 on a 144-ounce Coke and started sipping on that thing, hoping that I'd keep it all together and not embarrass myself.

And because it was all pavement, it makes it that much more obvious. So I just kind of slipped over to the flower bed and just walked up between two bushes, sipping on my Coke, praying to God I wouldn't embarrass myself.

The only thing that kind of broke me was, in the middle of that, I thought, there's a security guy sitting in a booth somewhere laughing at the fat boy in the flower bed with the Coke. So anyway, there's a commonality among all those roller coasters.

It's what I call limbo land. It's that point when you reach the flat part. You might be anticipating a climb or you might be anticipating a drop.

But there's always that limbo land. Your life is like that. Life is full of ups and downs, rises and falls, but then there's also the limbo lands of life.

[3 : 13] And they can be just as tough because they come with a great sense of anticipation in moving out of them. As we come to this portion in Joseph's life, he's somewhat in a limbo land, not necessarily an up and not necessarily a down, although both of them are coming.

I want you to see this this morning. It's in Genesis chapter 39, beginning in verse 1. It says, It says, It says,

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. This is what I call the best of a not so good situation.

I want you to be clear that here Joseph is a slave. He is bought on the market, sold by the Ishmaelites after they had walked him through the desert to get there.

At some point he was sold to Potiphar. Potiphar. Potiphar was the captain of the guard. That means that Potiphar was over homeland security. It means that particularly he was over secret service, but he was also in charge of the prison system.

[5 : 24] A popular Jewish historian has described him as the chief executioner as well. In other words, he's the one that made sure the death penalty was carried out when it was appropriate.

Now that means he had clout. And that means he was ruthless. And that means he was tough. And that means he was reliable. It also means he was able to analyze effectively what a really good leader was.

That means that if he led the inner guard, that he had seen a lot of stout, strong people who were put in places of authority and places of responsibility.

And this seasoned, tough dude was impressed with Joseph. Joseph went from the pit to the journey through the Negev, which is nothing but sand and heat, to the ocean block, to the home of an Egyptian official.

He entered the house as a house slave and quickly rose to be over the house. Not a house of ignorance. Not a house of chaos.

[6 : 44] But a house of a leading figure that had been surrounded by a lot of great candidates. And yet he allowed Joseph to do that. That speaks volumes for Joseph. However, what stood out the most is what makes Joseph so special.

So I want to talk for a few minutes this morning about how was Joseph so special? What kept him going at such a high rate in the midst of what I've called limbo land?

He's a slave. Yet he's a slave in an elite home. I'll tell you one thing that gave him so much success and why he was so special is because he was right with God.

Of all the things that we know about Joseph's dad, Jacob, I tore him up a couple of weeks ago and told you all the things he'd done wrong.

I told you what he had done wrong as a believer and as a husband and as a father. But of all that, he also did some things right. Later in his life, there is a rare and a hard to explain scene where Jacob wrestles with God.

[7 : 54] Or wrestles with an angelic messenger of God. And in that wrestling match, Jacob would not let the man go until he was blessed.

And he was blessed. And Jacob walked away from that fight with a literal limp. And his name was changed. God changed his name.

From Jacob, which means trickster, to Israel, which means to persist with God. And notice how he left that scene. In Genesis 32, verse 30, it says, After that, Jacob told his family to remove everything in that household that had any reference to foreign gods.

Get rid of all the garments that represent foreign gods. It says the wives in the home took the rings out of their ears that were trinkets of worship to the foreign gods.

And he said, let's take all those things out and let's go back to the altar. Go back to the place where God first called me and make an altar to the Lord.

[9 : 17] And scripture says that they traveled back to Bethel. They went through enemy territory. And scripture says that the Lord made the enemies in whose territory they came through scared of them.

They were in fear of them so they didn't bother them. God was protecting them to get them back where they needed to go. And he went back and built an altar to the Lord and made things right.

He said, like Joshua, as for me in my house, we'll serve the Lord. Now, what kind of impact does that have on Jacob's son who witnessed? Remember, Joseph was the home dweller.

He's the one that stayed home when a lot of others went to the fields. And so he saw a lot more and he saw the change that happened in his daddy's life. No matter how many mistakes he had witnessed before, Jacob's about face was noticed and it influenced his son.

And I'll just tell you, that gives hope to every last one of us. Because we've all messed up. We've all done wrong. We've all failed in the capacities that God has placed us in.

[10 : 25] And our failings have influenced other people. However, when we get right and we walk with God, it's as big if it's not bigger influence on others.

Joseph was right with God. Partially because he had seen the difference that God makes infallible people. And when he was in limbo land, when he didn't know what was up and what was down or what was coming, he walked with God.

Not only that, but his faithfulness was obvious. I want to read a passage I read a few minutes ago again. I want you to notice this. It says in verse 3 and 4, it says, His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands.

So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him. And he made him oversee of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. Now, I want you to keep this in mind, especially you young people.

I want you to keep something in mind. Joseph, at this point in his life, is between the ages of 17 and 20 years old.

[11:40] And it is obvious to pagans around him that he is walking with the Lord. Young folks, don't ever think you're too young to have an influence for the Lord.

The apostle Paul was telling young Timothy to consider his opportunity when he said in 1 Timothy 4.12, Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.

I don't care what age you are here today, you're not too young to stand out for the Lord. God uses young people, and your influence is much more than you think it is.

When I was in high school, we were blessed with a youth minister, and I was in a strong youth ministry, and many of us grew in the Lord. It was in that influence that God called me in the ministry, and I tried my best, especially in my last year of high school, to be a witness to those around me as best I could.

I tried to live for the Lord. I tried to share Christ as I had opportunity, and to no avail. I mean, I tried, but I didn't see any difference in anybody's life.

[12:59] I just prayed for them, told them I was praying for them, and tried to share with them. At the end of the year, we got our annual yearbook, and I think more then than now, everybody, we took a day to sign everybody's yearbook, and everybody signed and put their notes in it and all that stuff.

I did all that, and I graduated from high school, and I went home, and about a week later, I opened up that yearbook, and I started looking at what people had written in that yearbook that I had been friends with and had tried to influence, but I knew it hadn't made a difference.

This is what I read. Daniel, thanks for the help with getting me closer to the Lord. Somebody else. Daniel, it's been real.

I kind of hate to say goodbye, but I have to. Keep in touch, and good luck. P.S. Keep on preaching. This girl said, Daniel, I'm glad I've gotten to know you this year.

You're really a great person, and you really mean a lot to me. Keep up your relationship with the Lord, and you're really going to go far in life. I hope nothing ever brings you down, but I really don't think you'll ever let it. I hope you have a great summer, and I'm sure I'll see you a lot, a lot of you.

[14:17] I've never seen her again, but anyway. What can I say? I'm finally out of here. Wow, it's been great knowing you, and I've even kind of enjoyed listening to you preach.

Stay loose, and may all your dreams come true. Keep in touch. He's the one that smoked pot in PE2, and I tried to influence. Somebody else said, it's been a really great four years.

I really hate to say goodbye, but I wish you the best of luck. Keep in touch, and keep the faith.

There's two guys, and I was in PE2, which was a useless class, but anyway.

My senior year, and they would always tell the PE teacher that they were going to go out and play tennis, and they'd grab two rackets and go out to the tennis courts and smoke pot, and after PE, we'd be changing clothes, and I would smell it on them, and I would talk to them about it, and I would try my best to influence them in some kind of positive way.

I never felt like it made any difference at all, but one of them in there said, you influenced me more than you ever thought you could, and then the other one today is a Baptist preacher. I don't know how much of one he is, but he's a Baptist preacher, but anyway.

[15:32] My point is this. There's nothing great about me. I realize that, but I've tried to honor God as imperfect as it was before I left high school.

I want to remind you, young folks, Jacob was a mess, but before it was too late, he built an altar to the Lord.

He threw out the spiritual distractions in his life, and he walked with God until his death, and that was obvious to his son who learned from his father's mistakes.

Whatever we were doing yesterday, it's in our yesterdays, and God will forgive us, and he'll place under the blood of Christ that was shed on the cross our sin.

We have no excuse to not give God our all right where we are today, and Joseph didn't have to tell Potiphar that he was faithful to God.

[16:40] He didn't have to do that. Potiphar saw it all over him. Dear God, may that be my testimony one day or someone's testimony about me. Potiphar saw it, and Joseph found favor in Potiphar's sight.

In other words, he trusted Joseph. He moved him into greater positions of responsibility and gave him the keys to the kingdom. All Potiphar's concern himself was the food that he put in his own mouth, and that made Joseph special.

I'll tell you what else made him special. The Lord blessed. Not only did the Lord bless Joseph, but Scripture says that the Lord blessed Potiphar's house.

It says he blessed Potiphar's fields. It says that his farming and his livestock prospered, and Potiphar even knew that it was God that was doing it. He knew it was from God.

He knew God was just using Joseph, and he knew God was blessing. He knew that it wasn't luck. Let me just run a little rabbit here for a minute.

[17:45] Christian, I want you to hear me today. Don't ever talk about luck. Luck is of the devil, and the reason why is because it steals the glory away from the Lord.

When we lived through Helene, with trees falling all around us, that wasn't luck. That was the hand of God.

I'm blessed to pastor this church. God's in that. That's not luck. God orchestrated that before the foundation of the earth. That's the blessings of the Lord. Don't you ever rob God of his glory by saying, well, I guess I was lucky, or boy, we got lucky, or tell somebody good luck.

Wash that mess out of your mouth. To God you give the glory, and when you're in doubt, when you're in limbo land, when you're wondering, give God the glory in the midst of it.

I heard about a farmer who lost his horse, and the neighbor came to him and said, I'm sorry about your horse, and he said, the farmer said, who knows whether that's good or bad.

[18:51] Well, the horse came back, and it brought 12 wild horses with him, and the neighbor came back and said, congratulations on your great fortune. And the farmer said, who knows what's good or bad.

The next day, one of those horses threw his son as his son was trying to train that horse, and he broke his son's leg. And the neighbor said, I'm so sorry about your misfortune. And the farmer said, who knows what's good or bad.

The next day, the army came through to draft all able-bodied young men to go fight in a war. His boy couldn't go because his leg was broke. The neighbor came back and said, man, good fortune. Your son was spared. The farmer said, who knows what's good or bad. Folks, listen, we don't have to figure it all out. We don't have to figure it out. We just need to trust the Lord.

We just need to recognize when he blesses. Joseph did not get lucky. He was right with God. It was obvious.

[19:54] And God blessed him. And all of that, and blessed all that was within his reach. Now, was everything great? No, no. And it's about to get ugly.

But even in the midst of whatever comes, Joseph was right with God. And it was obvious. And God blessed him. So what does that say to us today?

For one, it says stay faithful. Life is full of ups and downs. And there are the limbos, those dull spots, those times when we wish things would move along faster than they're moving.

How do we handle it when we're not exactly where we want to be and things are not progressing at the pace in which we wish they would? I'll tell you what we do. We stay faithful. That's what we do.

We stay faithful. Number two, we trust God. We trust God. There's not a circumstance that we go through, not a time that we experience, not an episode that we live through that God is not on top of and aware of and already involved in.

[21:06] I know some valleys that some of you are going through. I know that some of you are in limbo land. I know what some of you are enduring.

I know very little of it, but I know what some of you are enduring. If I know about it, I want you to know I pray for you. But even when I don't know, I know one who does.

And you can trust God. You can trust him. Third thing is this. I want you to remember something. He's already there. Wherever life is taking us, whatever we're to endure, God is already there. He's already in our tomorrows. He's already guiding our path. So you stay faithful. You trust God and know that he's already there. Elgin Staples.

Elgin Staples. He's 19 years old. A sailor in World War II. He was on the USS Astoria when a large gun exploded and it threw him overboard.

[22 : 15] He had shrapnel in his legs and he was in shock. And he barely had the whereabouts to trigger the button on his life belt that saved his life.

Four hours later, a passing destroyer that had already received damage from the same attack picked him up. That boat was unable to dock and so the captain tried to gently beach the destroyer. But his attempt was unsuccessful and Staples was thrown back in the water, still clinging that life belt until the USS Andrew Jackson came and rescued him.

As he lay in his sickbed, he never let go of that life belt. He examined its craftsmanship again and again and he was thankful that it saved him.

And as he looked and examined that life belt, he noticed something that was ironic. That that life belt was made by Firestone in Akron, Ohio.

[23 : 22] Akron, Ohio was Elgin's hometown and it made it that much more special and so he held on to that. And after he stayed in the hospital, he was given an extension to go home to his parents and he described his going home like this.

He said, after a quietly emotional welcome, I sat with my mother in our kitchen telling her about my recent ordeal and hearing what had happened at home since I had gone away.

My mother informed me to do her part. She had gotten a wartime job at Firestone Plant. Surprised, I jumped up and grabbed my life belt from my duffel bag.

I put it on the table in front of me. I said, take a look at this, Mom. It was made right here in Akron. It was made at your plant. She leaned forward.

Taking that rubber belt in her hands, she read the label. She had just heard the story and knew that in the darkness of that terrible night, it was that one piece of rubber that had saved her boy's life.

[24 : 27] And when she looked up at him, her mouth and her eyes were open wide with surprise. And she said this. She said, son, I'm an inspector at Firestone.

This is my inspector number. She said with her voice hardly above a whisper. We stared at each other too stunned to speak.

He said, then I stood up and I walked around the table and pulled her up from her chair. We held each other in a tight embrace saying nothing. He said, my mom is not a demonstrative woman, but the significance of this amazing coincidence overcame her usual reserve.

We hugged each other for a long, long time feeling the bond between us. My mother put her arms halfway around the world to save me. Elgin Staples was not saved by luck.

He was blessed by God. And in limbo land, when you feel like you're just floating on barred time, I want to encourage you today, stay faithful.

[25 : 42] Trust God and remember that whatever tomorrow holds, he's already there. With every head bowed and every eye closed, I ask you today, has there ever been a point in your life when you've surrendered your life to follow the Lord Jesus Christ?

has there ever been a time when you've asked the Lord to forgive you of your sins, when you've acknowledged that you've sinned against him and asked him to cleanse you of those sins, to forgive you, to come into your life and to save you?

I want you to know if that's never happened to you today, that he'll save you where you are today. Today's the day of salvation, scripture tells us. If you feel any pulling toward that at all, it's not you that came up with that, it's God who initiated that.

He put that in your heart. You just need to respond. Maybe you're here and you have done that privately, but you've never acknowledged that publicly. You never have.

And Jesus, by his example and by his commission, tells us to follow that up with baptism. Next week, we're going to have the opportunity to baptize in both of our worship hours as planned.

[26 : 55] If you've never given your heart and life to the Lord Jesus Christ or you've never acknowledged that through baptism, and I encourage you to come. We'd love to line that up or maybe you have questions about your situation.

I'd love to talk to you this week about that. Maybe you're here and God's drawing you to First Baptist Church. God's doing a wonderful work at First Baptist Church and I'm thankful for that and I just encourage you to be obedient to the Lord.

Follow him as he leads. I trust he'll guide you. Maybe you're here this morning and you're in limbo land. You're in the midst of either an up or a down.

You're just standing by. Man, that can be a struggle. Today, why don't you give that over to the Lord? If you'd like me to pray for you, I'll be happy to do that.

Just trust the Lord and in the midst of your circumstances, you be faithful. or make a turn like Jacob did to follow the Lord from this day forward faithfully.

[27 : 59] I don't know what God's telling you but I encourage you to be obedient to him because I don't believe you'll ever be satisfied until you do what God set apart for your very best. Lord Jesus, I love you.

Thank you, Lord, for your love for us and I ask, oh God, right now that you'll move and you'll work in our midst and that you'll help us simply to be obedient to follow you and all that you'd have us to do in Jesus' precious name.

Amen.