

The Upside of Adversity

by Os Hillman

Chapter 1: You Have a Joseph Calling

So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; and they took him and threw him into the pit. Genesis 37:23-24, NASB

A man in a dark suit ushered me into the luxurious sitting room of the penthouse suite. The windows of the room afforded a panoramic view of the buildings and monuments of Washington, D.C. “He’ll be with you in a few moments,” the man told me. Then he left me alone with my thoughts.

“Lord,” I prayed silently, “I’ve come more than 600 miles from Atlanta to spend just a few minutes with the man I’m about to meet. I hardly know anything about him. I made this appointment on the basis of hearing an audiotape of a speech he gave. But Lord, I know You placed that tape in my hands for a purpose. Whatever you want me to learn from this man, please open my ears and enable me to hear it.”

A few minutes later, two men entered. One was tall and stately, with an accent that seemed neither American nor purely European. The other man was somewhat heavy-set and spoke with a Swedish accent. His smile was warm and genuine. He put out his hand to take mine. “Hello,” he said, “I’m Gunnar Olson.”

I recognized his voice from the tape. J. Gunnar Olson – founder and president of the International Christian Chamber of Commerce (ICCC) – was a busy man. He was making final preparations for an international conference of the ICCC that very night. Even so, his manner was relaxed and unhurried. He introduced the other man, James Lockett, a member of the ICCC board.

The three of us sat down. It was late afternoon, and through the windows of the suite I could see that the skies over Washington were deepening toward evening.

“Tell me about yourself, Os,” Gunnar said.

I briefly sketched in my story. For 20 years, I had been a highly successful advertising executive. My list of clients read like a *Who’s Who* of the corporate world: American Express, Steinway Pianos, Parisian Department Stores, ADP Payroll Services,

Peachtree Software, and on and on. I was active in my church, and I led a men's Bible study. People thought I was the model Christian businessman.

But something had happened to change all of that. Two years earlier, beginning in the spring of 1994, I had experienced a series of catastrophic personal and business setbacks that destroyed my marriage and left me financially ruined. The past two years had left me feeling defeated as a Christian.

"To be candid, Mr. Olson," I concluded, "I'm not even sure why the Lord has led me here today. I don't know how you can help me. I only know that I feel like a complete failure. I've failed as a businessman, as a husband, as a father, and as a Christian. I know this sounds terrible to say, but it's true: I feel that God has abandoned me." With that, I fell silent.

Gunnar Olson and James Lockett looked at each other – and *laughed!*

I was prepared for just about any reaction to my story, but this response took me completely off guard. I had poured out all the pain of my shattered life before them – and they found it amusing?

My shock must have shown on my face, because Gunnar quickly turned to me and said, "Os, please don't be offended. We're not laughing at your pain but at the amazing way God works. James and I are simply astounded that the Lord keeps bringing people to us who have stories like yours! I tell you, Os, it's uncanny!"

"You mean, you know of other people who have gone through an experience like mine?" I said. "I've been feeling as if I were the only one!"

"Oh, you're hardly alone, my friend," Gunnar said. "In fact, your story fits a pattern so common that I have a name for it: the Joseph Calling. Os, you're not a failure. God has placed a Joseph Calling upon your life."

"What's a Joseph Calling?"

"Put simply, this is what it means: *Like Joseph, God calls some leaders to experience extraordinary levels of adversity in order to accomplish extraordinary things through them.*

Why? Because He knows that adversity builds character and produces wisdom in the life of a leader. God will use this adversity for good in your life and in the lives of others. That's the principle of the Joseph Calling."

Gunnar then reminded me of the Old Testament story of Joseph, an innocent man who suffered misfortune and mistreatment, betrayal and false imprisonment. Yet it was those very experiences of adversity that prepared him to become one of the greatest leaders of the ancient world. I knew the story well – but it had never occurred to me to apply the lessons of Joseph's life to my own trials.

The moment I saw my adversity through the lens of the Joseph Calling, my perspective changed completely. I stopped seeing myself as a failure, abandoned by God. I realized that God had been dealing with me the same way he had dealt with Joseph. My losses, setbacks and trials had all been allowed – and even orchestrated – by a wise and loving God. Yes, Satan was also to blame for a failed marriage because God is never behind a marriage failure. Even so, God was preparing me for a larger role in leadership than I could ever imagine.

My first encounter with Gunnar Olson and the Joseph Calling took place in July 1996. Since then, I have discovered that everything Gunnar told me was true: There are thousands of Christians today who have the Joseph Calling upon their lives. They are entering, enduring or emerging from a time of terrible adversity – and God is preparing them to for the challenge of godly leadership.

Joseph: A Leader Called to Adversity

When Joseph was born, his father, Jacob, was about 90 years old. Joseph was raised in the land of Canaan. As a teenager, Joseph tended Jacob's flocks of sheep.

There was terrible sibling rivalry among the 12 sons of Jacob, 10 of whom were Joseph's half-brothers. Genesis 37:3 tells us that Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because Joseph was born in Jacob's old age. In fact, Jacob once gave Joseph an elaborately embroidered robe. This symbol of Jacob's favoritism made the brothers hate Joseph all the more.

On one occasion, Joseph had two dreams. In the first dream, Joseph and his brothers were binding sheaves of grain when suddenly Joseph's sheaf stood upright and the other sheaves bowed down to it. In the second dream, the sun, moon and 11 stars all bowed down to Joseph. The dreams implied that Joseph would become a great leader who would have authority over his brothers.

When Joseph told these dreams to his brothers, they hated him even more. (Leaders are dreamers who look into the future and see reality before it comes to pass. Visionary dreamers often provoke jealousy in the people around them.) One day, when Joseph's jealous brothers saw him approaching their camp, they plotted to kill him. They said, "Here comes that dreamer! Let's kill him and see if his dreams still come true!" They seized him, stripped the robe from him, and threw him into a pit. At that moment, Joseph discovered the meaning of the word *adversity*.

As Joseph's brothers were sitting beside the pit and eating their meal, a Midianite trading caravan came by, heading for Egypt. One of Joseph's brothers, Judah, said, "I have an idea! Instead of killing Joseph, let's sell him to the slave merchants and make some money!" So they sold Joseph for 20 pieces of silver, and he was taken away to Egypt.

The slave traders sold Joseph to Potiphar, an official of the Pharaoh (king) of Egypt. The Lord gave Joseph success in Potiphar's employ, and Potiphar placed Joseph in charge of his staff of servants.

During this same time, however, Potiphar's wife noticed Joseph and repeatedly tried to seduce him. Joseph, being a godly young man of integrity, said, "My master — your husband — has entrusted me with his entire household. How could I betray that trust and sin against God by going to bed with you?"

Enraged by Joseph's rejection, Potiphar's wife accused him of raping her, telling her husband, "This is how your slave Joseph has treated me!" So Potiphar seized Joseph and put him in prison. Falsely accused and falsely imprisoned, Joseph found himself up to his neck in adversity.

While in prison, Joseph did a favor for one of his cellmates by interpreting a dream for him. That cellmate was the cupbearer of the Pharaoh. The cupbearer promised that if he got out of prison, he would do what he could to help Joseph. A few days later, the cupbearer was released. However, instead of keeping his promise, he forgot all about Joseph.

Two years passed while Joseph languished in prison, forgotten by his friend. Two whole years! But God had not forgotten Joseph. He was preparing him for what was to come.

While Joseph was in prison, Pharaoh had a pair of disturbing dreams. He awoke frightened and troubled, and he demanded that his wise men tell him the meaning of the dreams — but no one could interpret the dream. At that point, Joseph's former cellmate, the cupbearer, remembered Joseph and told Pharaoh that his Hebrew cellmate had correctly interpreted his dream. Pharaoh ordered that Joseph be brought to him.

Before Joseph could meet with Pharaoh, he first had to be bathed, shaved and scrubbed. When he finally came before Pharaoh, he was able to interpret the king's dreams: The land of Egypt would experience seven prosperous years followed by seven years of famine. If the nation would store up some of its abundance in the seven years of plenty, then the seven years of famine would not be so severe.

Pharaoh was so impressed by Joseph's wisdom that he made the 30-year-old Hebrew the second most powerful leader in all of Egypt. Only Pharaoh himself had

greater authority. Pharaoh put his own signet ring on Joseph's finger, dressed him in new robes, and placed a chain of gold around his neck. From then on, Joseph rode in Pharaoh's own chariot.

In the end, the dreams that Joseph dreamed back in the land of Canaan were fulfilled in the land of Egypt. Joseph did, indeed, become a great leader – and he eventually exercised authority over his own brothers. *But Joseph's dreams had to die before they could come true.* Joseph had to pass through betrayal, mistreatment, false accusation and false imprisonment before those dreams could be fulfilled.

That's what the Joseph Calling is all about. We dream a grand dream – and then the dream seems to wither and die in the face of adversity. We go through trials because adversity prepares us for leadership. Finally, when we have absorbed the lessons of adversity, God gives our dreams back to us and places us in a leadership position. Once there, God can use us in a way that He never could have if we had not passed through the pit of adversity. Ultimately, like Joseph, we become a spiritual and physical provider to those we are called to serve.

Why We Are Called to Adversity

When Gunnar Olson first explained the Joseph Calling to me, it was as if the scales fell from my eyes. I saw my life from a completely different perspective. I no longer viewed myself as a failure, rejected by God. I realized that God was still at work in my life, just as he was at work in Joseph's life throughout his trials. Once I realized that God had placed a Joseph Calling upon my life, all of my trials and losses began to make sense.

Adversity builds strength. Consider the butterfly. It begins life as a caterpillar, a wormlike larva that spins a cocoon for itself. For weeks, the larva remains hidden within the cocoon as it undergoes metamorphosis. When it's time for the butterfly to emerge, it must struggle and fight its way out of the cocoon. Watching this struggle, we might be tempted to help by tearing open the cocoon – but that's the worst thing we could do. A butterfly that is not allowed to struggle will emerge in a weakened state, unable to fly. Butterflies need adversity to become what God intended them to be. So do we.

The Book of Job is probably the oldest book of the Bible, written even before Genesis. It's the story of a wealthy and successful community leader named Job. He was the Bill Gates or Donald Trump of his day – a fabulously successful businessman with

huge holdings of livestock and real estate. He was also a deeply righteous and devoted follower of God.

Job 1 tells us that one day Satan came before God and God asked him, "Where have you come from?" Satan replied, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it." In other words, Satan had been wandering the earth, trying to stir up trouble, misery and sin among human beings.

God said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." Notice that *God pointed Job out* to Satan! God practically painted a bull's-eye on Job's chest!

Satan said, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."

And the Lord replied, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

So Satan went out and proceeded to put poor Job through a trial of adversity. Job's herds were stolen, his servants were murdered, and all of Job's children were killed by a sudden tornado. On hearing the news, Job tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on his face before God, saying:

Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.

The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised (Job 1:21).

God didn't directly cause Job's losses. God didn't personally destroy Job's herds or kill Job's children. But God did point Job out to Satan, and He did give Satan permission to bring these losses into Job's life. In the process, Job undergoes a kind of Joseph Calling experience. Through his trial of adversity, he grows in strength, wisdom and faith. His entire perspective on God is transformed by his suffering.

We must get beyond the immature notion that God is only interested in making us healthy, wealthy and happy. God wants so much more for us than that. He wants us to be wise, mature, obedient, bold and committed. He wants us to be like Christ. And the road to becoming like Christ often leads through the wilderness of adversity.

My Own Joseph Journey

I founded my own advertising agency in 1984. The next 10 years were boom years for my company, and I became nearly financially independent by the age of 42. Throughout these years of success, my Christian faith was important to me. I operated my company as a Christian witness, and I maintained a high standard of integrity. Our company was named The Aslan Group, after the lion Aslan, the Christlike-figure in C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*.

At the same time, I was experiencing deep problems in my marriage. Although my then-wife and I told few people about our problems, we were in counseling throughout our married life. We visited a number of counselors, seeking a solution to our problems. Finally, in March 1994, my wife decided that it was time to separate. After three and a half years of separation, the marriage ended in divorce. My only daughter was now a teenager.

We had just bought a thirteen-acre estate and were drawing up plans for our dream home. It was an idyllic setting, complete with a peaceful, meandering stream and a pasture for our horses. The house would sit on a hilltop. Just down the hill from the site of the house, we constructed a four-horse barn with an apartment upstairs. We planned to live in that apartment while the house was being built.

It was just after the barn and apartment were completed that my then-wife gave me the news that she wanted a separation—and that she and my daughter were moving into the apartment in the barn. I was devastated. I knew that we had serious problems, but I figured we'd eventually have a breakthrough in counseling and everything would be okay. Being a strong Christian, the word "divorce" was not in my vocabulary. Somehow, I reasoned, I'd find a way to change her mind.

Soon after the separation, I faced a series of ruinous crises in my business and financial life. First, our biggest client—one that represented 70 percent of our billings—decided to end our seven-year business relationship and fire us. To make matters worse, the client disputed a major campaign that we had just completed and refused to pay the bill—a little matter of \$140,000!

Second, less than a month later, I noticed that I had stopped receiving financial reports from an investment company in which I had about \$100,000 invested, both personal and business funds. It turned out that the company had gone out of business amid a flurry of lawsuits. Our money was gone—embezzled by one of the principals.

Third, a few weeks later, another investment company went under. This time, I lost about \$200,000 of my own money plus a sizable sum that my widowed mother had invested on my advice. The guilt I felt over the loss she suffered was unbearable.

The fourth business calamity I suffered was especially painful because it involved a trusted Christian brother. He was the vice president of my advertising company, the man who managed our second-largest account. I had confided in him and prayed with him during tough times. Then one day, he came to me and said, “Os, I’m leaving to form my own advertising company.” It was a shock—but an even greater shock awaited me. A few days later, I learned that he had taken our second-largest account with him in violation of the non-compete agreement he had signed with me.

All of these personal and business calamities had befallen me within a space of a few months. Only a short time earlier, I had dreams, goals and forward momentum in my life. Now my dreams and my self-image lay shattered at my feet. I wondered why God had forsaken me. I couldn’t go a single day without breaking down and crying. Sometimes, while talking to a friend, I would choke up in mid-sentence and start to weep.

During the first year following the breakup of my marriage, I felt as if I were paddling a rowboat with ten holes while trying bail out the water. As I tried to keep my company from bleeding to death, I struggled to maintain a relationship with my 12-year-old daughter, who was hurting even worse than I was. There was a period of about three weeks where I seemed to lose my relationship with her completely, because her view of me was tainted by the influence of my estranged wife. For a while, I wondered if my relationship with my daughter would ever be restored.

My pain was so great that I questioned the existence of God. Paradoxically, I was also angry with this God whose existence I doubted. The more that went wrong with my life, the angrier I became. I blamed my wife, the investment companies, and my former business partner for these calamities and tragedies. I also blamed God.

I have learned that I have the kind of personality that demands to be in control. A controlling personality is usually driven by two forces: fear and pride. I lived with the fear that if I didn’t control every situation, I would lose control of my life. I hesitated to delegate important tasks and decisions to others because I feared that other people wouldn’t do things as well as I did. Most of all, I feared allowing God to have full control of my life. I realize now that my fear-based addiction to control was corrosive to my marriage.

I also had a problem with pride-based control. I had to maintain a good public image—the image of a successful, competent businessman with a strong Christian

family. I couldn't let anyone know that I was flawed or that I lacked competence in any area. I couldn't bear the thought of people knowing that my marriage was failing, and my business was failing.

I tried desperately to reconcile with my wife, but she wouldn't budge. I tried desperately to recover my lost investments, but that was a lost cause. I tried desperately to save my advertising agency from ruin – I cut the agency staff from 10 people down to one (me), but I still lost money. My life was tumbling out of control. For a control addict, there is no worse fate than that!

I had lost everything that meant anything to me – my marriage, my relationship with my daughter, my business, my wealth, my self-esteem, my dreams and my faith in God. What did I have left to live for? I even considered having a car accident so that my family could collect on my \$500,000 life insurance policy.

My trial of adversity, which I call my “Joseph Pit” experience, began in March 1994 and lasted until March of 2001 – exactly seven years, just like the seven years of famine in Egypt. During my trial, God sent a number of people to walk alongside me and help me understand what God was doing my life. At the end of those seven years, God restored me in all aspects of my life – and He gave me a whole new reason for living.

Your Own Joseph Journey

I'm writing this book because there are thousands of people going through a journey like mine. I'm writing this book because I know how it feels to suffer adversity and feel abandoned by God. You may be in the Pit right now, but realize that God is at work in your life, using your adversity to prepare you for an amazing future.

Over the years, I've found that very few people understand the Joseph Calling. Pastors don't. Business leaders don't. Well-meaning family members don't. I didn't begin to understand it myself until I walked into that Washington, D.C., penthouse and Gunnar explained it to me.

Now I take this message wherever I go. I share these truths through my speaking and workshops. Every time I talk about the Joseph Calling, people come to me and say, “I've never heard this before! I've felt completely alone with my pain! I thought God had turned His back on me!”

God used Gunnar Olson as a lifeline when I needed one. Now I'm privileged to see God using me as a lifeline of hope to others. I could never have had this ministry if I

had not gone through the Pit of adversity. Today, I'm grateful for what I've learned through that experience of pain and loss. What looked like a Pit of despair at the time has become a launching pad for the ministry I have today.

What does your Pit look like? How deep is it? How wide? How dark? How painful? No two Joseph Pit experiences are alike. Yours may entail the loss of a career, financial setbacks, a crisis in your marriage, the loss of loved ones, the loss of your health, or any of a thousand other trials or calamities.

But one thing is consistent in every Joseph Pit experience: Your life is interrupted. You've lost control over your circumstances. You are cast upon a sea of uncertainty with a raft but no oars. For the first time in your life, you are forced to depend entirely upon God and others.

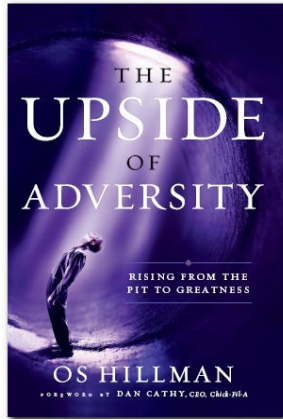
If that is how you feel right now—I want to give you hope for your future. God has selected you to embark on the journey of a lifetime. He has chosen you to join the select company of people like Job and Joseph, Daniel and Paul—people who have undergone adversity and have emerged as people of refined character and enlarged leadership ability. I want to give you the same message that God imparted to me through Gunnar Olson: *You have a Joseph Calling upon your life*. In this time of adversity, God is preparing you. He's getting ready to use you in a mighty way. And He will turn your Valley of Achor (trouble) into a door of hope

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you normally respond when you find yourself in a crisis of adversity? How would you like to respond?
2. What parallels do you see between the journey of Joseph and your own journey in life? What lessons or encouragement can you draw from those parallels?
3. What are your feelings as you reflect on the adversity that you are experiencing right now? Are you angry about the situation that you are in? With whom are you angry? God? Yourself? Your spouse? Other family members? People in your church? People in your business circles? Others?

4. What is the prayer of your heart right now? How would you like other people to be praying for you? Have you asked a trusted Christian friend to be your partner in praying for that need in your life?

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