



Changing Lives, Minds, and
Communities through Jesus Christ

Life of Joseph

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Chapter 1 Dealing with a Tragic Family Background

Read Genesis 37 before you begin.

Ten angry men beat up a teenager who was minding his own business. They threw him into a well and later sold him into slavery. He worked hard at being a good slave in a foreign land, but was falsely accused of rape and thrown into a horrible prison, where he suffered physical pain and terrible loneliness. Sound familiar? That's part of the true story of Joseph in Genesis 37 and 39. Sadly, all this started with a messed up family.

How do our family backgrounds affect our lives and actions? Do crushing personal experiences only impact our lives negatively? Is there any hope of turning tragic experiences into helpful ones?

The life of Joseph provides a perfect example of how God can pour His grace into someone, despite overwhelming family problems. Consider the following:

- Deception ran deep in Joseph's family (see Genesis 29). Joseph's father, Jacob, was a liar and a manipulator, even though God had chosen to bless and expand the nation of Israel through him. Perhaps worse, Jacob openly identified Joseph as his favorite son and failed to notice or respond to the intense jealousy and rivalry he started among his 10 older sons (Genesis 37:3-4).
- Joseph also grew up in a home with his mother and three stepmothers. His own

mother Rachel was a jealous and controlling mother and wife (Genesis 30). And each of the other women protected and favored her own children.

- Joseph's 10 older brothers hated him. This hatred was so strong that they planned to kill him, but instead sold him into slavery. If ever there was someone with reason to blame his family for his problems, it was Joseph.

Exposed Failures

This terrible account of family failure brings up an important question. Why does God record the failures of His saints for the world to read? The answers go to the heart of this study.

God always tells the truth. He cannot lie or tell a half-truth. God shows us Joseph's family in crisis so that we know that He is familiar with such things. You can make God's heart sad, but you cannot shock Him. He knows all about you and your family problems.

God also records the ugly details of these stories as a warning and instruction: "Now these things happened to them by way of example; and they were written for our admonition ..." (1 Corinthians 10:11). We are supposed to learn from *their* mistakes! The apostle Paul continues with a warning in verse 12: "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." God tells us what we need to know, then offers His divine strength to deliver us.

Life-changing Principles

The study of Joseph's dysfunctional family reveals three general principles that apply to our lives today.

- 1. Don't allow the wrongs committed against you to become an excuse for your own poor decisions.**

One of the great curses of secular psychology in our society today is that it emphasizes the external circumstances of life, suggesting that they cause people to do the evil and foolish things that result in so much pain. As a prison chaplain, I have heard many men blame their criminal acts and their subsequent jail time on the pain other people caused in their lives.

Few people wish to examine the choices they made as a result of those hurtful circumstances. Without a doubt, wounds from family cut deeply, perhaps more than any other—after all, they are supposed to love us. But we don't have to let these unhappy events shackle us. Say the following sentence out loud several times: "My past does not determine my destiny!" God's grace can fill you in the midst of your unspeakable problems.

An alcoholic father had two sons. One became an alcoholic, but the other drank only tea. When the first son was asked why he was an alcoholic, he said: "What do you expect? My father was an alcoholic." When the second son was asked why he never drank, he responded: "What do you expect? My father was an alcoholic." Same past. Different choices.

2. Bury your bitterness.

Did your dad leave your mother to struggle alone to raise you and your siblings? Maybe your mother was so overworked that she left you to grow up alone on streets dominated by gangs. Perhaps your sister got hooked on crack and fell into prostitution. Incest and abuse may have traumatized you.

The root of bitterness can grow deep in these settings, but God can tear out that

root, as He did for Joseph. Suffering in a harsh Egyptian prison, Joseph could have watered the bitterness he may have felt toward his brothers. Instead, he spent each painful day trusting God to work it all out. His job was to exercise faith and do his best at the immediate task before him.

If Joseph had blamed his family for all his troubles, nursed revenge against his brothers, and not worked hard at the tasks of a lowly slave, he might never have seen the day when he would save his family and millions of others.

3. Wait for the end of the story.

God has both an earthly and an eternal plan for your life. Sometimes He uses the wickedness of your own family members to accomplish that plan. The physical pain that comes into your life can result in personal salvation and a new spiritual relationship with God. Never underestimate the fact that God can use your life experiences for your good, the good of others, and for His eternal glory. I am always encouraged when men tell me that incarceration was the best thing that ever happened to them, because it led them to Christ or caused them to grow in grace.

Most of us do not examine the purpose of family pain in our lives. God sees these tragic events in the more important context of eternity.

You may be tempted to say, “Well, that may be okay for Joseph, but he never had my troubles.” Read the next chapter and find out how Joseph’s faith continued to sustain him in situations that went from bad to worse.

Prayer: O God, forgive all of my sins and wrong choices. Help me to take full responsibility for my crimes and not to blame others. Let me see You turning my failures into opportunities of growth. Use me to help my family.

Chapter 2 Overcoming Temptation

Read Genesis 39:1-23 before you begin.

Temptation comes in three sizes: large, extra-large, and you’ve got to be kidding! If it were small and easy to avoid, we would not call it temptation. People are tempted in three areas: material, personal, and sensual. Material temptation involves a lust for things like a house, a ring, or a new car. Personal temptation is a lust for fame, power, or reputation. Sensual temptation is usually sexual in nature, but could also involve gluttony or even laziness.

In the first chapter, we learned about Joseph’s messed up family—a father who played favorites, a mother and stepmothers who competed with each other, and 10 older brothers who hated him. Eventually, that hate led to a plot to murder Joseph. But, at the last minute, they opted to sell him into slavery. He was purchased by a powerful Egyptian named Potiphar, who put him in charge of his entire household.

Showing His Colors

Joseph’s brothers may have put him “out of sight, out of mind,” but he was never out of God’s thoughts (verse 2). Faced with betrayal, injustice, slavery, exile, separation from his family, and a potentially hostile work environment, Joseph decided to seek the strength he needed from God. His coat of many colors was gone, but his internal spiritual colors proved his faithfulness, similar to what Jesus affirmed in Matthew 25:21: “You have been faithful over a few things, I will place you over many things.”

God’s promotion policy elevated Joseph to the position of chief servant in Potiphar’s large and prominent household. This position put Joseph over all of Potiphar’s affairs, including his finances. Under Joseph’s leadership, Potiphar’s household flourished.

Notice the spiritual progression here. Joseph faithfully served God in spite of his powerless position as a slave. God blessed Joseph for this faithfulness. This blessing passed on to Potiphar because Joseph worked for him.

Joseph was still a slave, but at least things were finally going his way. This brings us to the first powerful lesson from this passage:

When we are most successful, we are often most vulnerable to temptation

(1 Corinthians 10:12). Joseph was wise not to let his guard down. Success does not equal safety. Success can breed a desire to hold on at any cost, or it can lead to boredom and a desire for more. Either way, the playground of success can easily turn into a battleground of temptation. Professional criminals know how to spot a victim. So does the devil. And he hungers to devour the unsuspecting success story.

Honey Trap

The sensual bait that Satan dangled before Joseph was one of the oldest in the world. The Bible does not record why Mrs. Potiphar tempted Joseph. The incredible part of the story was not that *she* tried to seduce a young, handsome Joseph, but that *he* resisted so effectively. It is significant that Joseph saw the real situation clearly. In Genesis 39:9 he said: “How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” All sin is against God. Sadly we do not see this in our lives. Here comes our second principle:

We must have firm convictions to resist temptation (Titus 2:11-14). God designed us, and He knows what is best for us. Our loving heavenly Father does not give us rules to enslave us or make us unhappy. He wants to liberate us from the shackles of sin and give us inner peace. Don’t be deceived by the persuasion of others! Remember that all sin is against God. Trust in Him.

I have often challenged my students to distinguish the difference between testing and tempting. The devil tempts us to weaken us and try to make us fail. God tests us to strengthen us and help us to succeed. Many times the temptation and the testing are wrapped up in the same event. Satan had Joseph in the crosshairs, but God provided Joseph with a bulletproof vest stronger than Kevlar: strong convictions and clear spiritual vision.

Here is a related principle. **We must continually avoid verbal and visual stimuli that will lead us into failure.** Genesis 39:10 shows Joseph putting this into practice: “And it came to pass, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her, to lie with her.”

We seldom fail in giant steps. We usually fail by the smallness of our concessions. Do not be gentle with your appetites and emotions. Stop the temptation before it has time to overwhelm you. You know the triggers.

Divine Deliverance

I often quote an old proverb to my classes: "I am not responsible for the birds that fly over my head; but I am responsible for the birds that make their nest in my hair." Stop the thought that leads to sinful behavior. Do not reach out and bring it back so that you can enjoy it. Tear it out of your mind. And if you cannot do so, then ask God to tear it out for you. Temptation is a journey. If you don't take the first step toward failure, you will never experience its ultimate sorrow.

I am amused by the next event in Joseph's story. When this frustrated woman set things up so that they were alone in the house and her seduction was most powerful, Joseph turned tail and ran (Genesis 39:13). Joseph was smart enough to know that no man is strong enough in himself to withstand heavy temptation. The Bible says to flee youthful lusts (2 Timothy 2:22), but where can we run? The Scriptures teach that when we run from temptation, we should run into the arms of God. Read Proverbs 18:10: "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it, and are safe." Read it over and over. Read it every day for a month. Memorize it. Quote it when you are tempted. This verse will change your life and become a great help in avoiding temptation.

One final life-changing principle is this: **Overcoming temptations may cost you a great price with those around you, but it will gain a great reward from God (1 Peter 1:7; Romans 8:28).** The Lord has a way of turning our lemons into lemonade. God is weaving a marvelous tapestry of great beauty in your life. Be patient, even if things get worse before they get better. Never be confused by immediate results.

A strange danger in flying illustrates this principle. As a pilot, I've found that even on a relatively warm day, the carburetor can ice up and begin to block the airflow to the engine. The plane will begin to falter and the rpm will drop. When you pull the carburetor heat knob, hot air from the engine begins to melt the ice. But wait! This "fix" only causes the

problem to get worse. Water from the melting ice contaminates the gas, and more rpm is lost. This will really scare the pilot. But he must not get temporarily relief by closing the heat switch to restore some of this additional lost rpm. He must get rid of the ice or he will soon crash. If he is patient with the carburetor heat, the water from the ice will finally be gone, and the engine will run perfectly. When you do the right thing, things will sometimes get worse before they get better.

Joseph's problem was about to get worse. You see, when Joseph rejected the advances of Potiphar's wife, she got even by falsely accusing him of attempted rape. Rodney Dangerfield joked: "If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck at all." And even Joseph's "bad luck" was about to get worse. And, when it did, would he be confused by the immediate results? Would he turn from God? Would he fall into depression? Would he give in to temptation? You'll find out in the next chapter.

Prayer: Lord, help me to recognize temptation and to flee from it. Give me strength to endure, even when things get worse. Help me to realize that Your way is best for me and that You will walk with me through the most difficult temptations. And when I need to run from temptation, help me to never forget that I am running into the safety of Your everlasting arms.

Chapter 3

Sitting in God's Waiting Room

Read Genesis 40:23-41:40 before you begin.

I hate to wait. Long lines bother me. It seems like we are waiting for something most of the time. I guess Americans are impatient by nature. You've probably heard an American prayer for patience. "Lord, give me patience, and I want it NOW!"

Most of the men to whom I minister at Washington Correctional are conditioned to "hurry up and wait." They wait in the chow line. They wait in the medical building. They wait at

center gate. They wait for a call-out. They wait for count to clear. And they wait for the chapel programs (especially when I am running late).

In the previous two parts of this study, we looked at Joseph's chaotic family background, his slavery, and how he resisted temptation. The result of his faithfulness was prison time. Now we turn an eye toward Joseph's attitude about waiting as he lived out the truth: "Tribulation worketh patience" (Romans 5:3).

Cycle of Success and Failure

Unfairly thrown into prison for a sex crime that he did not commit, Joseph continued to experience success. Though the Bible doesn't record exactly why, it does say that the warden was so impressed with Joseph that he made the prisoner a trustee and, essentially, let him run the place. *Ever notice how people usually trust a genuinely spiritual man?* He developed that character by following the Lord during all the confusing times in his life. God always blesses those who follow Him, even though it may not be evident or visible right away. The cycles of success followed by setbacks in Joseph's life may have seemed random and without purpose to him, but God was working His will, even while Joseph endured life in an Egyptian prison.

Divine Intervention

After Joseph's introduction to prison life, two high-ranking officers (the chief butler and the chief baker) of Pharaoh's palace were incarcerated on suspicion of some sort of rebellion against the king. Adding to their misery, they both received troubling dreams from God. Joseph had had the gift of dream interpretation since he was young, and he explained to these officials what was going to happen. Joseph comforted the butler, who was innocent, and assured him that he would soon be released and restored to his position of prominence. He also asked the butler to plead his own case with the king. He could not appeal to the other inmate since his dream foretold the baker's execution.

Joseph could well have thought that God sent the butler into prison so that they could meet, and he would be delivered. His new friend was now indebted to him. Surely, this man would provide the perfect legal appeal that would set Joseph free, since this chief butler spoke directly to Pharaoh every day.

Look at the last thing Joseph said to the butler in verse 14: “Don’t forget me.” I have to laugh at this, because it rings so true to life. Have you ever noticed how even the smallest details of Scripture are true? Many men here complain to me about friends who were released and who promised to correspond and send them some money for their account. But those friends seem to forget them. I suppose that the pressure of getting a new job and finding a place to live is so great that the newly released men fail to write or otherwise remember their friends in prison.

Alone and Forgotten

Joseph likely was not amused when he realized the butler had indeed forgotten all about him (Genesis 40:23). How could this former inmate forget the man who had comforted him in his darkest hour by revealing the meaning of a supernatural dream from God? Have you been forgotten? Do you feel alone? If so, then here is a powerful principle from God’s Word: **Man forgets, but God remembers.** “His mercies fail not, they are new morning by morning. Great is Thy faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:21-23). These verses formed the basis of “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” a great song that many sing in church services. If you believe this and want to worship God right now, simply bow your head and say these words: “Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, **unto me.**”

I remember well a certain man who came to all the chapel services here at Washington CI. He was active, joyful, and growing in grace. Then a legal appeal was denied, and he became very bitter. He stopped attending all the programs and the church services. He stopped reading his Bible and witnessing. He was angry with God for the failure of his appeal. It is so easy to do, but it is not what Joseph did.

Just because Joseph could interpret others’ dreams did not mean he could see his own future. The butler’s forgetfulness prolonged Joseph’s incarceration two more years—but God always has a purpose for delays.

Consider the following: 1) Pharaoh was not ready to receive Joseph. He had no problem that Joseph could solve, so Joseph would have been just an anonymous pardon. 2) Joseph’s family was not ready for true reconciliation. 3) In some sense, Joseph was not ready for the great challenges about to unfold.

All this could simply mean that God was organizing events and people according to His will and timetable, not Joseph’s. His plan required not only Joseph’s patience, but also the patience of his estranged family, whom God was also preparing for reconciliation. Had Joseph not waited and attempted to break out of prison, or won his appeal, God still would have accomplished His will, but Joseph might have missed the reward God was preparing for him, his family, and the two nations—Egypt and Israel. God not only has a plan for your life; He also has perfect timing.

Joseph was about to enter the most exciting time of personal fulfillment in his life. He was on the verge of tremendous accomplishments beyond his wildest dreams. The wait would be worth it. *It always is when you follow God.* Consider these powerful principles and how they apply to your life:

- **Waiting allows God to speak to me (1 Samuel 3:3-11).** Try to block out all the noise of the dorm and the confusion of the rec yard. Find a quiet place in your heart and allow God to speak to you. Read His Word and pray. Nothing can take the place of personal daily devotions. The Lord seldom speaks to us through radio static or a poker game.
- **Waiting reduces my confidence in the flesh and strengthens my confidence in God (Isaiah 40:31).** God is the great refiner. He purges the impurities so that our gold will shine for His glory. It is like the mouse and the elephant crossing the wooden bridge. The mouse said, “We really shook that bridge, didn’t we?” Of course, man is the mouse, and God is the elephant. It is His plan that we must follow if we are ever to experience spiritual success.
- **Waiting allows time for my character to be developed (Galatians 6:9-10).** I often tell the men in the chapel that when God wishes to make an oak tree, He takes 25 years. He makes a squash in three months. What do you want to be, an oak tree or a squash? Joseph is now strong. Nothing can shake his faith in God. He is ready for the difficult challenges that come next. Joseph is going to be God’s point man to feed a world in danger of mass starvation. The logistics of such a job are overwhelming. He would never have been up to the task without first learning to depend on the Lord.

- **Waiting allows opportunities for advancement that might not come any other way (1 Peter 5:6).** Whenever you are discouraged by your circumstances, read this verse. When you become impatient, read this verse. Be faithful in the chapel services. Get involved in good Bible studies. Take the time to repair any injury with your family. In the next chapter, we’ll look at Joseph’s sudden promotion and learn some of the answers to his seemingly random misfortunes.

Don’t *endure* your incarceration. *Own* it and *use* it for God’s glory and your joy. Any dead fish can float down stream; it takes a live fish to swim against the current.

Many men tell me the time spent behind the wire has been life-changing for them. It was difficult, but also worth it. Now they are prepared to experience new rewards for their faithfulness. What about you?

Prayer: Lord, help me to be patient during my time of incarceration. Make this experience my friend. Help me grow wise and strong while I am waiting, so that I am prepared to enter life outside the wire. Make me an instrument in Your hands. Enable me to use the lessons I have learned to keep someone else from following the wrong steps that lead to personal pain and imprisonment. Thank You, Lord. I look forward to seeing Your plan for my life unfold in Your perfect timing.

Chapter 4 Revenge: The Ultimate Test

Read Genesis 42-45 before you begin.

Have you ever been wronged by someone who never admitted that he or she hurt you? That pain can dig deeper than a tick into your soul, making bitterness or revenge more likely than forgiveness and healing.

Up to now, we’ve studied Joseph’s terrible family background: his brothers plot to sell him into slavery, his rise to power as overseer

of his master's businesses and household, his escape from sexual temptation, his false imprisonment, and his abandonment by the butler who promised he would remember him before Pharaoh. But then, one day, Pharaoh had some troubling dreams that none of his spiritual advisors could interpret. Apparently, some rocks jiggled loose and the butler finally remembered Joseph. Pharaoh wasted no time and sent for him immediately.

Recently a man in our chapel fellowship spoke to me of his end of sentence date: "I have 10 days and a wake-up." He will receive \$100 and a bus ticket to the city of his choice.

Talk about a bolt out of the blue! Joseph barely had time to shave and become presentable after his "wake up." Old Joe was a country boy and fresh out of 13 years in slavery and prison. Now he had been called before Pharaoh himself in his opulent palace. For most of us, that would be real intimidation.

But God had made this appointment and prepared Joseph for it since his birth. All of his pain—family betrayal, slavery, false sex crime conviction, prison, years of being forgotten—was part of the Almighty's divine training. Joseph needed this preparation for the huge job about to be placed on him.

Unexpected Promotion and Power

Joseph correctly interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and showed unusual wisdom by offering a perfect solution to the coming famine. Pharaoh recognized that Joseph was filled with the grace of God and promoted him to second-in-command under him alone. From prison to power—that's whiplash!

No doubt, the great king had done some serious research on Joseph by interviewing Potiphar, the prison warden, and the butler who first recommended the Hebrew slave. He had the book on Joseph, and it read well. Ask yourself this question: "What would someone discover if he or she interviewed those who know me here in prison?"

Joseph's unexpected promotion shows us an important principle: **God uses all of our experiences to create strength and wisdom within us.** Those experiences build our character and reputation. At Washington CI we give special certificates of graduation to those who successfully finish certain courses.

But these are more than attractive diplomas to send home or tape to the locker. They represent an accomplishment that can change lives.

An attorney contacted me to verify the attendance and completions of several courses for a man recently released from prison. I was happy to certify that he had finished the courses on the list and had faithfully attended chapel services. I asked some new men in the orientation class why this attorney needed the information. They said that it usually helps with an appeal, or to secure a job. But this request was different. The attorney had filed a motion for the former inmate to gain custody of his children, who were in a difficult home environment and needed him to love and care for them. While this man was attending these programs, he never dreamed that God would use them to help him rescue his small children from danger.

Joseph was now second only to Pharaoh in power and respect over all Egypt. His job performance in preparing for the worldwide famine impressed everyone. In the process, God gave him a wife and two sons as special comfort for the many years of distress (Genesis 41:51, 52). His problems were finally over. Not so fast! Someone wisely said, "The only person who has all his problems behind him is the school bus driver."

Revenge or Reconciliation?

Visualize the following scene. After Joseph stored up millions of tons of excess crops for seven years, a terrible draught hit the entire region. People began to cry out for food. Joseph was charged with distributing the food stores to those who came before him.

Imagine his shock one day, when the next people in line were his brothers. One of the most dramatic encounters in all of Scripture was about to take place. Joseph recognized his older brothers, but they did not know him. Not only had his appearance changed from age (from 17 to 37), but also his royal Egyptian clothing disguised him. His brothers were completely unprepared to see him in this setting, if at all. In fact, they thought that they would never see him again. They really had no clue!

A flashback came to Joseph. His youthful dreams that made his brothers so angry and jealous were being fulfilled before his eyes

(Genesis 37:5-10). As his brothers bowed down to him, God's plan became crystal clear. This was the last piece of the puzzle. Joseph was to be the agent of God to save the lives of not only millions of Egyptians, and others from the nations outside of Egypt, but also his very own family.

Urgent Questions

But he was filled with questions about and for them. What were their attitudes toward him now? Had they been cruel or disrespectful to their aged father? Was he even alive? Was Joseph's full brother, young Benjamin, in any danger from them? Were they sensitive to God? Was there any hope of true reconciliation? Would they cause him any trouble or embarrassment here in Egypt?

So Joseph formulated a brilliant plan. He would not reveal himself to them just yet. To confront them *before* he knew the true situation might lock them all into a course of action that could make matters worse. Also, his powerful position might force them to "apologize" without his ever really knowing if they were genuine. His rough response and all of the subsequent set-ups were designed to cause his brothers to reveal themselves. He would be able to see if they were sorry for their actions and if he could trust them. When you read this powerful story, you will see Joseph trying to hide his weeping several times. His heart was tender. He was not seeking to get even with them. God had delivered him from the poison of revenge.

I could write many things about the dangers of bitterness and revenge. However, most of us know that a root of bitterness will grow up to strangle our spiritual lives. How was it that Joseph was not angry with his brothers? Here was a perfect opportunity to get even, but Joseph had learned a wonderful secret. Lean close and I will whisper it to you. Are you ready? **God has a purpose for everything that happens in my life.** Please say this over and over again. You are a relay station. Your life is meant to transfer the power of God to those around you. But God cannot use someone who is filled with vengeance.

God Works Both Sides of the Fence

After a series of tests (these are very interesting to read), Joseph was convinced that his brothers had changed. They did not know that he could understand Hebrew, so they

weren't aware that he was listening to their conversations among themselves. He discovered that God had been at work, not only in his own life, but also in the lives of his brothers. *God is not just working on you. He has a plan for your family, your friends, and even your victims.* I often encourage my men that they will one day have great credibility when they are released from prison. God will use them to keep some young person in their family or neighborhood from traveling down the same road of sin toward prison.

Finally, after a dramatic confrontation (read Genesis 44), and the final confirmation that they were truly repentant, Joseph could no longer hold himself back. He cried out for all others to leave the room. The nervous, guilt-stricken brothers were on edge. They looked at this powerful prime minister with apprehension. He looked at them and said in Hebrew: "I am Joseph" (45:3). The brothers wept, hugged, and talked about all that had happened over 20 years. Their reconciliation had begun, but there is more to the story, which I'll look at in the final part of this series.

Lessons Learned

Without a spirit of forgiveness you will never move toward healing, just toward endless cycles of bitterness and hate. Remember the Lord's Prayer? "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Read Colossians 3:13: "Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another...even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do." Joseph had 20 years' worth of reasons to hate and lower the boom on his brothers—but he let it go for something better.

Forgiveness is step one, restoring a relationship is part two. This does not always happen. Some of you have created such a terrible mess that restoration is legally impossible and may well be 20 or 30 years away. Although Joseph wasn't responsible for trouble in his life, it still took many years for reconciliation to take place. You can't always experience healthy relationships in a short time. Forgive anyway. Seek forgiveness, and hope for restoration; if not in this world, then in heaven some day.

Chapter 5

Final Forgiveness

Read Genesis 45:25-50:26 before you begin.

After 40 years, I will soon be attending my first class reunion. I fear those four decades are prominently displayed in my gray hair and aged face. The inmate clerks who work with me delight to remind me of these facts. Lately I have been dieting and exercising in the vain hope that I will not look too old and out of shape when I meet my former classmates—people I hardly know.

Imagine now the grand reunion Joseph experienced when he saw his father Jacob for the first time in over 22 years. The Bible says he wept a long time when he saw his father and his many nieces and nephews, a large extended family that had grown into a small nation.

In this final chapter, we get to see the end to this dramatic true story. We've tracked Joseph from his boyhood dysfunctional family origins to slavery, to success as a servant, to false sex charges, to prison, to promotion to second-in-command of Egypt—the superpower nation at the time.

Joseph had tested his brothers in a dramatic reconciliation moment and told them to fetch the whole family and bring them to Egypt, where they could ride out the worldwide famine in comfort under Joseph's personal care. Now consider the emotions of old Jacob, who was about to see his favorite son who he believed was dead these many years. Joseph had been a young teenager when his brothers sold him to slave traders and ripped him away from his family. With only a blood-stained coat of many colors, Joseph's dad never knew for certain what had really happened, and in 22 years he had never stopped mourning for his lost son.

How shocking, yet wonderful, to learn that Joseph was not only alive, but also powerful, successful, and wealthy beyond measure. This special son, borne by the only woman that Jacob ever loved, was now a grown man with a family of his own. Jacob would also get to see two grandsons for the first time. On his trip to Egypt, he also received new promises

from God (Genesis 46:1-4). Best of all, Joseph loved his father and family *more* than he did before his slavery and prison traumas, and stood ready to save them all from a terrible famine.

Look back on your life. If you put on spiritual glasses, you might see that God has been leading you and working in your life, even when you were breaking laws and living outside His will. Joseph and Jacob both realized this tremendous truth.

But Joseph's family business was not yet settled. There was no happy ending yet. Joseph's brothers had still not experienced true forgiveness. After many years in Egypt, their father Jacob died, and without Jacob's protection, the brothers were suddenly concerned that Joseph would now get even with them for selling him into slavery.

Do you have difficulty receiving forgiveness and letting go of guilt and shame? Many do. If so, then you know firsthand how difficult it is to live with your guilt.

The Problem of Projection

Guilt has a dreadful ability to linger, even after forgiveness and genuine attempts at reconciliation. This ability comes from a problem known as projection. When someone says, "No man can forgive such a terrible thing," he really means that he could never forgive such ill treatment. We project our thoughts, motives, and feelings onto others. Often this is understandable because people are vindictive and often aren't able to completely forgive certain acts of betrayal, broken trust, or loss. Joseph's brothers had proven their vindictive hearts already, and they firmly believed that with dear old dad gone, Joseph would lower the boom. Since Joseph held all the cards, they were very concerned that he might deal them a death hand. Talk about having your sin find you out, these brothers had suffered in at least four different ways:

1. They had grieved the father they truly loved. How do you think they felt when they saw how deeply they had hurt their father?
2. They had experienced 23 years of guilt and shame. They had ignored Joseph's cries for help after they threw him in the pit (Genesis 42:21). They guilt probably led to serious squabbles among them through the years. Sin has a way of coming back to haunt us.

3. They experienced a terrible scare while Joseph was testing them, before he revealed his true identity to them.
4. Now, after rediscovering Joseph and getting forgiveness from him, they were still suffering from this guilt. They couldn't get rid of it. They were still looking over their shoulders, waiting for some retribution.

So they thought up a strategy. First they came up with a message from their father, given to them before he died (Genesis 50:16). Whether this was a real message, or one they made up, it showed that they were terribly afraid of what Joseph might do to them. "And they sent a message unto Joseph (saying) 'Thy father did command before he died, saying ... Forgive, I pray thee now, the transgression of thy brethren'" (Genesis 50:16). This was pretty smart, since Joseph would never go against the commandment of his father.

Next, they made sure Joseph could see they were humble: "And his brethren also went and fell down before his face and they said: 'We are thy servants'" (Genesis 50:18).

When someone forgives us, but we do not receive that forgiveness as final, the corrosive effects of guilt, fear, and self-loathing continue. Joseph's earlier forgiveness may have only increased their sense of guilt. Many people are caught in their sin, but are not hearing the powerful, authoritative statement from God when Jesus died at the cross—your sins have been paid in full. It is finished. There is no longer any need for sacrifice for sin.

As it turns out, all of this planning by the brothers was unnecessary—an amazing compliment to the grace of God in Joseph, who still held absolute power over their lives. Notice how Joseph responded with tears when they came to him. He had sorrow for their continued burden of guilt. I believe there are four reasons that Joseph responded with grace, not retaliation:

1. He had learned to handle bitterness by believing that God was in control of all things and was working out His perfect will. Learning this will change your life. The next time you go through a serious problem, stop and think to yourself: *God is working in my life right now!*

2. He knew that what we believe about God affects our attitudes and actions. Say this out loud to yourself. Better yet, go find someone on the compound and say to the person: *I am incarcerated because of what I believed about God.* You might not even believe in God, or the God of the Bible. But it is still true that what a person believes about God will affect all of his decisions during his entire life. If you do not believe in God, you will do foolish things and suffer terrible consequences. If you do believe in God, but reject His will, you may also do some crazy things and end up in prison. But, if you believe in God and do His will, then any bad thing you suffer (your fault or not) God will use to move you along the path to victory in life, just as He did with Joseph.

3. Joseph never tried to do God's job. In Genesis 50:19, Joseph asked: "Am I God?" It is God's prerogative to vindicate. Only God can forgive sin. (You can't forgive yourself, but you can receive God's unmerited favor.) It is God who punishes. And only God can condemn. Joseph is not in line to apply for God's job. He wants only to be God's servant.

4. Joseph had a perspective that we seldom see: God was preparing him for some future ministry, even if he did not know what that work would be. He had trusted God in the darkness of prison and slavery. He had trusted God in the confusion of lies and false accusations. Now he was ready to trust God in the clear light of understanding and opportunity (Genesis 45:7-8).

Intended for Good

One last principle is found in this passage: *Sometimes forgiveness can occur only after a clear statement of the wrongdoing.* If we sugarcoat the offense against us and say that it was no big thing, we might be hindering the process of forgiveness. Joseph understood that his brothers needed to hear him acknowledge their wrong. They *had* done a terrible thing. They had *hurt* their father. They had *hated* him. They had *intended* evil. So he gave to them, and the world, one of the great verses of all time: "But as for you, you meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good ... to save many people alive" (Genesis 50:20).

I don't think I could be a prison chaplain without the knowledge that God overrules. He can take a life that is besotted with sin and failure and turn it around. When the pathway of your life reaches a dead end, He can open up a whole new future. He can patch up a broken marriage. He can restore a messed up family. He can heal a battered body. And He does these wonderful things in the quiet times after our worst experiences. He works unobserved all night long.

Many years ago, I was speaking at a church in a farming community in the thumb area of Michigan. I often took one of my children with me when I went on various engagements, and tried to make it a fun time. Our hosts gave us a room for the night in a bedroom upstairs in the old farmhouse. When I turned out the light to go to sleep, it was so dark, I literally could not see my hand in front of my face.

At the time I was struggling with a serious problem in my life, and so when I could not sleep, I slipped out of the bed quietly, trying not to disturb my son, and got on my knees to pray to God. Somehow my son, who was falling asleep, needed the comfort of my presence in the strange surroundings, and I heard his little hand pat the mattress as he reached out for me. Then there was another *pat*. Then, a *pat, pat*. Then, a *pat, pat, pat*, followed by a frantic cry: "Daddy, Daddy!" I quickly said to him: "I'm right here, son! Daddy was here all the time." Of course, it struck me immediately that in my lonely darkness, God was right there. And He was there all the time.

I once saw a sign that read: "Humpty Dumpty was pushed!" Well, the devil has pushed you into a life of sin and failure, and you cooperated with him. Although God designed an important life for you, you have messed it up big time. But the loving Lord of the universe can put all the broken pieces together again. And He stands by you with the promise never to leave or forsake you.

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