Joseph: Overcoming Life’s Challenges

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The Harsh Reality of Life

December is the toughest month of the year. Others are July, January, September, April, November, May, March, June, October, August, and February.
—Mark Twain—

In other words, life is tough—all year through.

We can all attest to this reality. Life, as we know it, is filled with problems that affect us on many levels. From the relationships that break our hearts to the examinations that strain our brains, life gets more and more challenging with each step of the way.

But the greatest lessons in life are often the product of our most serious difficulties. Jesus told us: “I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Jesus said in no uncertain terms that we would face difficulties in life, but He also gave us His assurance—He has overcome the world.

But Jesus did not leave us here to face those difficulties on our own. Neither does the Bible leave us without any instructions. We read in James 1:2-4, “Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.”

God doesn’t waste anything. Everything happens in our lives for a reason, and a great part of that reason is to help us grow in our faith. As shown in James, trials of many kinds are to be considered
an opportunity for great joy, for they produce growth. These trials demand that we trust in the loving purposes of a sovereign God. We must trust that He is in control—especially when life seems to be out of control.

Paul defines this action of trusting as the exercising of our faith (2 Corinthians 5:7). It goes against every element of self-preservation that is ingrained in us. We want to take charge, manipulate, and control. But God wants us to trust in the love of a Father who makes no mistakes.

Such was the life of the Old Testament character Joseph. He had to face many difficult trials that included the betrayal of family and friends, enslavement, and even imprisonment for a crime he did not commit. The unjust treatment given this young man would be enough to crush you and me, but God did a good work in his life—and the final outcome was amazing! Joseph grew in godliness in a godless society and is a true success story. His example is one we should seek to follow as we face the difficulties of life.
Overcoming Treachery

Treachery, a word less commonly used in today’s day and age, can be defined as a deep and devastating betrayal of trust or an act of treason. When we hear this word, prominent figures come to mind. For example, we can all think of popular sports personalities and media stars whose extra-marital affairs with various women were revealed to the world by the media. Their folly betrays the trust of those who see them as heroic. Worst of all, their indiscretions betray the trust of their families.

But the most familiar example of treachery is Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus’ twelve apostles, who betrayed our Savior with a kiss in the garden of Gethsemane for a mere 30 pieces of silver.

As we enter the life of Joseph, we see that he stands at the threshold of treachery—a betrayal by his own family. This unthinkable act led to his suffering in Egypt, but, more important, it was an opportunity for God to mold Joseph into the leader he was destined to be.

**LIGHTING THE FUSE**

Jacob, the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, went against the biblical pattern of marriage of one man and one woman as shown in Genesis 2 by taking both Leah and Rachel to be his wives. With these two women and their handmaids, Jacob ended up with a family of 12 sons, who all vied for a position with their father.

This problem was intensified because of Jacob’s obvious preference for Rachel and her firstborn son Joseph. By placing one son above the rest, Jacob created a wedge between Joseph and his elder brothers. And so Joseph became an outcast in his own family.

In addition, Jacob’s less-than-sterling character was being reproduced in his sons. The whole family was looking toward their own self-interest, and as a result strife and deception were prevalent.
What made matters worse was Jacob’s poor parenting skills. This is shown in three consecutive verses in Genesis 37:

1. Jacob used Joseph to spy on his brothers (v.2).
2. Jacob gave Joseph a special robe—a clear display of his favoritism (v.3).
3. Jacob fed the anger of his sons by his biased and foolish behavior (v.4).

By these actions, Jacob indicated outwardly that Joseph was the favored one. He elevated Joseph to the highest status among the brothers even though he was the second youngest. More important, Jacob’s actions evidenced a rejection of his other sons.

What Jacob essentially did was to douse his family in gasoline—and Joseph was about to strike a match!

**BRASHNESS OF YOUTH**

Joseph, like many young men, was tactless! Genesis 37 tells us that Joseph had two very important dreams. In his first dream, he was bundling grain in the fields with his brothers when his bundle of grain stood up and his brothers’ bundles bowed low before his (v.7). In the second dream, the sun, the moon, and 11 stars bowed low before him (v.9).

Joseph foolishly flaunted these dreams before his brothers, and “they hated him more than ever” (v.5). In so doing, he made three critical errors in judgment:

1. He was indiscriminate—he didn’t recognize the troubled situation in his family.
2. He was insensitive—he didn’t consider the impact of his actions.

3. He was immature—he didn’t consider how he was hurting his family.

In short, Joseph lacked discernment.

Though it was true that Joseph would rule over his brothers one day, his actions were proof that he wasn’t ready yet. To borrow a quote from the movie Spider-Man, “With great power, comes great responsibility.”

Joseph was clearly not ready for a position of power and responsibility. And so, God had a plan. The next few years for this young man were not going to be easy. His leadership role needed to be honed through his role as a servant. God would train him to become a man who displayed servant leadership—a leader with discernment, sensitivity, and maturity.

When we, like Joseph, are given a leadership opportunity, we need to ask ourselves: “Am I using my position, or am I allowing God to use me in it?”

At some point, all of us need to ask ourselves that question, regardless of our role in ministry. From Sunday school teachers to cell-group leaders to the elders or pastors of the church, discernment and the heart of a servant are definite requirements.

The “Leader’s Prayer” says it well:

*Lord, when I’m wrong, make me willing to change. When I’m right, make me easy to live with. So strengthen me that the power of my example will far exceed the authority of my rank.*

Joseph was about to learn the lessons he needed for leadership, but to do so he had to experience what it meant to be a servant.
LOOKING OUT FOR NUMBERS ONE THROUGH TEN

In Genesis 37:12-27, Jacob sent Joseph once again to check on his brothers. Joseph’s brothers already loathed him for being “Daddy’s favorite.” When the brothers saw him approach, any remnant of love they still had for Joseph was replaced by anger, even to the point of murder (v.18). Appropriate speech had turned into sarcasm (v.19).

The looming negative outcome of this type of situation is aptly described by Yoda in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*: “Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.”

Joseph’s brothers may not have been motivated by fear, but their anger definitely led to hate and the “dark side.” And their hate would lead to Joseph’s suffering and perhaps some of their own internal suffering.

Reuben was the only one of Joseph’s brothers who tried to convince the rest not to go ahead with their murderous plan (vv.21-22). Their attack took place in several stages:

- They took his coat (v.23), the symbol of their resentment.
- They cast him into a pit (v.24) to remove him from their sight.
- With hardened hearts, they sat down to enjoy a meal while their young brother languished alone in the dark pit (v.25).
- They sold him into slavery (vv.25-28).

Their actions were the fruit of unresolved family tensions. The root of bitterness is hate; the symptom of bitterness is sarcasm; and the result of bitterness is manipulation.

THE ROOT OF BITTERNESS AND ITS TRAGIC FRUIT

Referring back to Yoda’s quote, hate did indeed bring about suffering. There was the immediate pain felt by Reuben, who had wanted to save Joseph. When he saw that Joseph was no longer in the cistern, he tore his clothes and mourned. And although the brothers lied to their father,
they did not escape from their own personal guilt (Genesis 42:22).

Jacob the deceiver had become the deceived. Just as he had used a goat to fool his father, Isaac, so also his sons fooled him with the blood of another goat. Jacob had reaped what he sowed.

As the whole family faced the crisis at hand, it seemed that the only one not distressed was Joseph. Even though he was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery for 20 pieces of silver, there is no indication that he was troubled in any way. He was right where God wanted him to be so that he could learn the lessons necessary to make him the great leader he was meant to be.

Psalm 76:10 says, “Human defiance only enhances Your glory, for You use it as a weapon.” Our faithful God was about to take the evil actions of the men in Joseph’s life and use it for His good and His glory.
Life is inevitably filled with trials, and these trials often come on the heels of our greatest successes.

It’s probably true that how we handle success says as much if not more about us as how we handle failure. We see this in Joseph’s life. He was going to be tested through the temptations that arose from his success. The way he responded demonstrated that God was working in his young heart.

In Genesis 39, Joseph was taken to Egypt and was purchased by Potiphar, an officer for Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. It was there in Potiphar’s household that Joseph would learn what it meant to be a servant leader, along with the ups and downs that came with the responsibility.

THE POWER OF TESTIMONY

Potiphar was “captain of the guard” (39:1). There are many speculations as to what this title indicates. Some say that he could have been a warden, a captain of the palace guards, or maybe even the captain of the executioners. Nonetheless, Potiphar was a powerful and rich man who had many servants and slaves (vv.11,14).

Joseph worked hard and distinguished himself as a young man of skill and ability. His capabilities were noticed and were not left unrewarded. Potiphar put Joseph in charge of overseeing the affairs of his entire household (vv.4-6). What was the key to his success? “The Lord was with Joseph, so he succeeded in everything he did as he served in the home of his Egyptian master” (v.2).

It must have been extremely difficult for this young man, even at a peak of success, to forget how he had reached that point. Being betrayed and sold into slavery by his very own family could have easily led to bitterness and hate and perhaps even to thoughts of revenge—but it didn’t.
Instead, the presence of God in Joseph’s life was stronger than ever. This is the theme of Genesis 39 (see vv.2-3,21,23).

In fact, Potiphar recognized the presence of God in Joseph’s life (v.3). If a pagan-worshiping Egyptian could see God’s presence in Joseph’s life and attribute it to God, surely Joseph’s life must have been a powerful testimony.

The clear implication of the text is that Joseph was neither bitter toward his brothers nor enslaved by his circumstances. He was content in the presence of the Lord. He didn’t complain but rather became useful where he was. And God used that heart of faithfulness and contentment.

Joseph’s main task was as the overseer of the entire household (vv.4-6). This meant that he supervised all the other servants, handled public relations, oversaw finances, and was responsible for the provisions for the household (a valuable lesson that would aid him in the future).

Everything Joseph seemed to do or touch was blessed, and for the first time in probably 10 years since being sold into slavery, Joseph was at the top of his world. But that made him more vulnerable to the temptations that success would bring.

THE POWER OF TEMPTATION

Notice the closing words of Genesis 39:6, “Joseph was a very handsome and well-built young man.” At this point Potiphar’s wife is introduced into the story.

Mrs. Potiphar “began to look as him lustfully.” She was so attracted to Joseph that she willingly offered herself to him.

But Joseph refused. “Look,” he told her, “my master trusts me with everything in his entire household. No one here has more authority
than I do. He has held back nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How could I do such a wicked thing? It would be a great sin against God” (vv.8-9).

This conviction was obviously not learned from his father or hate-filled brothers or in the pagan courts of Egypt. This was only possible through God’s presence in his life.

Despite his refusals, Mrs. Potiphar continued to pursue him.

**He Had the Right Concerns (vv.8-9)**

Joseph was concerned *ethically* that his actions not hurt others, in this case Potiphar. His master had entrusted him with much, and Joseph refused to violate that trust for a moment of pleasure.

Joseph clearly understood his position as a servant to his master, and he knew the right conduct by which he should live. He recognized the consequences that such a sin would have on his relationship with God.

Joseph also was concerned *spiritually*, because he understood that all sin is against God.

Moreover, his past experiences of betrayal had probably taught him not to betray the trust of others. The price tag on sensual pleasure was simply not worth it.

**He Had the Right Strategy and Escape Route (vv.10-12)**

“She kept putting pressure on Joseph day after day, but he refused to sleep with her, and he kept out of her way as much as possible” (Genesis 39:10). Joseph realized that he had to be aware of the lure of sin and avoid its opportunities. Thus he avoided contact with Potiphar’s wife.

But as the story goes, one day Joseph was caught alone at home with Mrs. Potiphar. She took advantage of the situation. Grabbing
Joseph’s cloak, she once again demanded that he sleep with her. Joseph tore himself away and ran from the house, leaving his cloak behind.

Rightly done, Joseph fled with the courage of his convictions and his integrity intact. He exemplified what Samson, David, and Solomon did not. He followed what Paul later wrote in 2 Timothy 2:22, “Run from anything that stimulates youthful lusts.” He did not flirt with temptation but ran as fast as he could to get away from it.

Joseph resisted lust in spite of the evil environment, the woman’s persistence, and his limited personal spiritual training. How could he do this?

- He recognized that he belonged to God.
- He recognized sin’s effect on others.
- He recognized sin as defiance against God.

In a perfect situation, this might have been a happily-ever-after story, but it was not so for this young man. In this fallen world, real life rarely rewards right living.

**THE POWER OF REVENGE**

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” and aptly so when we look at Mrs. Potiphar. Joseph’s running away was the last straw. She would have her revenge on this poor chap.

Holding Joseph’s cloak in her hands, she summoned all the men of the house and said, “My husband has brought this Hebrew slave here to make fools of us! He came into my room to rape me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream, he ran outside and got away, but he left his cloak behind with me” (vv.14-15).

This was the second time a cloak had been used in a lie about Joseph. And then, when Potiphar got home, she lied to him about the rape (vv.16-18). In ancient Egypt, the penalty for adultery was 1,000 lashes, but the penalty for rape was death. It is
possible that Potiphar knew his wife was lying about Joseph. After all, Potiphar saw God’s presence in Joseph’s life. But unfortunately, to save face and keep his wife’s honor intact, he had to imprison Joseph.

Often we see how life can be unfair. Sometimes, no matter how much good you have done, someone may stab you in the back to take you down. But our responsibility as Christians is to do what is right and to leave the consequences to God.

**The Presence of God**

Once again, Joseph found comfort in the presence of the Lord (v.21). He could have been disillusioned, wondering why he bothered to do what was right when he still landed in prison. But instead he rested in God’s presence, and God blessed him despite his circumstances (vv.21-23).

If there were a lesson that Joseph would take away in his current plight, it would be that of overcoming adversity. He had to learn to overcome pain, problems, danger, and tests of life. Through these, Joseph was being molded and shaped. All these things come into focus only when we view them through the lens of God’s sovereign purposes. Then we can trust His will and know His mercy.

Genesis 39 comes to an end with Joseph remaining in bondage. Through it all, it was Joseph’s solid faith in God’s control that helped him overcome.
Overcoming Disappointment

Have you ever felt like no one cared about you or that friends simply walked away when you needed them? It’s easy for anyone in that position to simply give up. Many people even start to think about ending it all.

Joseph was imprisoned and was treated harshly for a crime he did not commit. Psalm 105:18 says, “They bruised [Joseph’s] feet with fetters and placed his neck in an iron collar.” He suffered for the crime of honoring his master and maintaining his sexual purity.

But God’s presence was with him even in prison, and Joseph rose to a position of leadership while in chains. God gave him favor with the jailer (Genesis 39:21), and the jailer entrusted everything under his authority to Joseph’s care. “The LORD was with him and caused everything he did to succeed” (v.23).

It was while in prison that the Lord taught Joseph an important quality of leadership—patience. Joseph did not wallow in self-pity but rather made himself useful. He faithfully served and patiently waited because he was learning that he was not in jail by chance. God had put him there for a reason. He had not forgotten Joseph; rather, He was preparing Joseph for what lay ahead.

**The God Who Never Forgets**

Joseph was in prison for a divine appointment. Genesis 40 introduces two new characters—Pharaoh’s cupbearer and his baker. These two men were thrown into prison with Joseph because they had offended Pharaoh. In those days of political assassinations and palace intrigue, absolute loyalty was imperative. Somehow these
two men had done something to displease Pharaoh. In this way, they came under the charge of Joseph, the head steward, and they were entrusted into his care by none other than the captain of the guard, Potiphar.

It was not a coincidence that Joseph was raised up to his position of chief steward and that the cupbearer and baker came under his care. It’s important to note that nothing is by chance. God is in control. One of the great joys—and challenges—of life is to look expectantly for the hand of God in all of life’s circumstances. Joseph and these two fallen royal officials converged in prison right on schedule to fulfill the perfect plan of God—though they certainly wouldn’t have chosen those circumstances for themselves.

**LEST WE FORGET**

Despite his own difficulties, Joseph was learning to look at the needs of others, a quality that he initially lacked. In Genesis 40:6, we read, “When Joseph saw them the next morning, he noticed that they both looked upset.” He could have simply looked to his own needs and ignored their sadness, but he didn’t. Joseph’s response to the disappointment of unjust imprisonment was twofold:

- Vertical—he didn’t allow his circumstances to disrupt his relationship with God
- Horizontal—he didn’t allow his hurt to prevent him from caring about the hurts of others

Joseph had the grace to set aside his personal adversity and to help others who were hurting. Like Joseph, we can be overcomers by refusing to be self-absorbed and self-centered. It is much more worthwhile to invest our time in others rather than to wallow in self-pity.

The sad truth is that as sinful and selfish beings, we reflexively look out for our own interests. Sensitivity to the needs of others can be deadened by a preoccupation with our own personal
disappointment. But that was not true of Joseph. He not only noticed and cared, he got involved.

**FORGET ME NOT**

“Interpreting dreams is God’s business,” Joseph said to the baker and the cupbearer as he interpreted their dreams. Such was the evident growth in Joseph’s life that he credited everything to God and God alone. This stood in stark contrast to his behavior in chapter 37 when he flaunted his dreams over his brothers.

The two dreams were representative of what was to happen to the baker and the cupbearer. The cupbearer would be restored to his position, while the baker would be impaled on a pole.

What did Joseph ask in return? He simply asked that the cupbearer not forget him (vv.14-15). Three days later, both dreams were fulfilled—exactly as Joseph had interpreted them (vv.20-22).

However, the simple request from Joseph was forgotten. His care for the cupbearer was rewarded with insensitivity. He was forgotten for two whole years! (Genesis 41:1).

Joseph was abandoned—this time by a friend. Regardless, Joseph put his trust in the Lord and did not dive into disappointment or disillusionment. Even though the cupbearer had forgotten him, God had not. It was during times like this that Joseph grew in patient trust. Just as James 1:2-4 reminds us, without patience, there will be no maturity; and without trials, delays, and disappointments, there will be no patience.

As it has been said, a man is not a hero because he is braver than anyone else but because he is brave longer.

Joseph was no longer just a dreamer. Through the trials of treachery, temptation, and disappointment, he had become an overcomer. Joseph was finally ready be used by God in a special way.
Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States of America, is a classic example of an “overnight success.”

Lincoln had two failed businesses and one nervous breakdown, endured the death of a sweetheart, and was defeated for public office no less than 10 times over the space of almost 30 years. Then, incredibly, he was elected President of the United States. Years of failure had equipped him to deal with the heady air of the heights of power.

Those repeated reversals, apparent failures, and personal tragedies did not defeat Lincoln. They strengthened his character and commitment. So it was with Joseph.

After 13 years of reversals, failure, and tragedy, the light of day finally entered his cell. Because the cupbearer had forgotten him, he had endured 2 years of continued pain, suffering, and solitude, but it was also 2 years of preparation and character development.

In God’s perfect timing, Genesis 41 records what happened as the servant and the task converged in a moment in time.

**DREAMS YOU WOULD LIKE TO FORGET**

The stage was set with Pharaoh’s two dreams of cows and grain (vv.1-8). Both dreams signified that calamity was going to strike the nation, but their exact message was unclear.

After his disturbing dreams, Pharaoh summoned the magicians and
wise men of Egypt to interpret them for him. It was clear that Pharaoh was concerned about spiritual things. This exposes a significant principle in our spiritual living. However, there is great danger in searching after spiritual guidance in the wrong areas.

This is not a new phenomenon in human beings hungering after spiritual things. False teachings, cults, and false leaders are prevalent in today’s society. Many false doctrines have also infiltrated some churches. This is what Paul highlighted in 2 Timothy 4:3, “For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear.”

The answers we search after must be sought from God’s revealed truth, His Scripture. The empty answers of false teachers are void of the necessary powers to address true spiritual needs or answer the burning spiritual questions of the human heart. Until we are willing to accept the authority of God’s truth in our lives, we will not have the answers we need for the things that trouble our hearts and minds.

A DREAM REMEMBERED

In that frantic court of Pharaoh, no magician or wise man could be found who could interpret his dreams. Tensions must have been running high. A disturbed Pharaoh was probably the last person an Egyptian would want to be with at that moment. But in the midst of that court stood the cupbearer, who finally remembered someone who could interpret dreams—Joseph.

The cupbearer recounted to Pharaoh about the Hebrew who had been in jail with him two years earlier. Now Joseph would come into contact with the third installment of the “dream pair trilogy.”

1. Dreams of dominion over his brothers
2. Dreams of the cupbearer and the baker

Until we are willing to accept the authority of God’s truth in our lives, we will not have the answers we need for the things that trouble our hearts and minds.
3. Dreams of the grain and cows

It’s amazing how the dreams actually link. The second pair of dreams put Joseph in contact with the third pair so that the first pair of dreams would be finally fulfilled.

It took 13 years for God’s wondrous plan to finally come full circle. Though some might complain that God’s plan was 13 years late, in God’s intended purpose, it came right on schedule.

A DREAM COME TRUE

Pharaoh decided as a last resort to summon Joseph. We see a vital principle—godly character is not affected by harsh circumstances. Through it all, Joseph remained undiminished. He evidenced three godly qualities.

**Dignity**—“He shaved” (Egyptians were clean-shaven) and “changed his clothes” (Genesis 41:14). Joseph maintained his sense of propriety and decorum that years in prison could not erase.

**Humility**—“It is beyond my power to do this” (v.16). Joseph did not use this situation to bask in self-glorification. He put his trust in the Lord and not in himself. As Scottish theologian James Denney (1856–1917) said, “No man can at the same time prove that he is clever and that Jesus Christ is mighty to save.”

**Faith**—“But God can tell you what it means and set you at ease” (v.16). This is a phrase similar to one later used in Daniel 2:27-30 and Acts 26. Joseph expressed his faith and gave all glory to God alone.

Joseph’s first words to Pharaoh (v.16) were testimony to God’s work in Joseph’s life.

A DREAMWEAVER AT WORK

The failure of Pharaoh’s wisest men set the stage for God’s glory to be revealed through a common slave. What was beyond human reason was not beyond an all-knowing God.
So, what was the answer to Pharaoh’s dreams? Joseph responded, “Both of Pharaoh’s dreams mean the same thing. God is telling Pharaoh in advance what He is about to do” (Genesis 41:25).

The double dream shows God’s sovereignty in carrying out His plans. And if there was one thing Joseph did learn while in jail it was that God is in control.

Joseph challenged Pharaoh to see the purposes of God and to plan accordingly (vv.33-36) for what lay ahead. He told Pharaoh to plan for the lean years ahead by being frugal during plentiful times.

THE DREAM ANSWERED

Pharaoh made a decision that would change the ancient world. He appointed Joseph to oversee the food supplies of all of Egypt. Joseph was elevated to second in command of the whole nation, answering only to Pharaoh. Why had this Hebrew risen so quickly to power? Pharaoh had seen in Joseph the single most important characteristic of a true leader. He saw a “man so obviously filled with the spirit of God” (v.38).

This gives us another important lesson to consider: The qualifications of a true leader are not merely physical; they are spiritual. It is not just about talent or skill, but also about character and relationship with God. The key character qualities of a great leader are internal, not external. They deal with knowing God, not with being great.

God’s timing was perfect. Two years earlier, Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams would have been a novelty because there was no need for it. Now it was significant.

Joseph had been raised to the position God had promised many years back. He was exalted over all of Pharaoh’s household, and he was ready to face and overcome great tests:

The qualifications of a true leader are not merely physical; they are spiritual. It is not just about talent or skill, but also about character and relationship with God.
• **Perseverance**: It would not be easy for a Hebrew to rule Egypt. The pressure was intense, especially as the famine wore on.

• **Performance**: The skills Joseph had learned in small duties would now be applied to a major task.

• **Pride**: J. Oswald Sanders wrote, “Not every man can carry a full cup. Sudden elevation frequently leads to pride and a fall. The most exacting test of all is to survive prosperity.”

Joseph was ready because God had prepared him for this task. As Samuel Rutherford said, “Praise God for the hammer, the file, and the furnace. The hammer molds us, the file sharpens us, and the fire tempers us.” Joseph experienced it all and was ready to be used by God.
VI

Overcoming Bitterness

At the Nuremberg War Crimes trials following World War II, one of the defendants, upon hearing the charges against him, responded to the prosecutor, “It is your word against mine.” The prosecutor’s answer was profound, “No, it’s your word against the victim’s. He survived and is prepared to testify against you.”

It’s certainly hard to visualize Joseph as a victim at this point, isn’t it? He was now the second most powerful man on earth, and he had absolute control over the destinies of millions of people—including the brothers who had sold him into slavery so many years earlier.

Much had happened since Joseph rose to power. The 7 years of plenty predicted by Pharaoh’s dreams had come and gone—and Joseph’s plan had worked to perfection. The grain was stored, and now, in the midst of the 7 years of famine, the world was coming to Pharaoh’s (and to Joseph’s) doorstep for food. In Genesis 42, Joseph’s brothers came seeking food, and he provided it for them.

In the course of that meeting, Joseph questioned them and discovered that their father and younger brother were still alive. He then began to set the wheels in motion for a reunion.

Joseph had sensed that his brothers had changed, but for the sake of Benjamin, he had to make sure. In the ensuing events, he forced them to return with Benjamin. Then he prepared for the final test. At the banquet referred to in chapter 43, he gave Benjamin five times more than the other brothers. This time his brothers did not resent the kind of favoritism they had despised so viciously in Jacob’s
treatment of Joseph. Then Joseph put Benjamin in harm’s way to test them. Would they protect Benjamin, or abandon him as they had abandoned Joseph 20 years earlier? Only God can look at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7), so Joseph put in motion the test that would expose them and reveal how genuine their apparent change really was.

**A Plan for the Test (44:1-13)**

After they had eaten, Joseph commanded his servant to do several things:

1. Fill his brothers’ sacks with rice.
2. Return their money.
3. Place Joseph’s silver cup in Benjamin’s bag.

Joseph wanted to test his brothers to see how they would choose between rescuing Benjamin at great personal risk or abandoning him to slavery.

As soon as the brothers had left Joseph and headed home to Canaan, Joseph acted out his plan. He called on his servants to chase after the brothers and confront them about the missing cup.

When approached about the theft, the brothers were shocked and confused. They claimed innocence based on the fact that they had earlier returned the money in their sacks from the first trip. They backed this claim up with a bold offer: “If one of us has the cup, kill him and enslave the rest of us!” (v.9).

The brothers had intended to use their extreme offer to prove their innocence. They would have certainly not made this deal if they had known one of them had the cup. The servant then told them that only the one who had the cup would be enslaved. Yet they must have felt the tension as each bag was searched from the bag of the oldest to that of the youngest.

As orchestrated, the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. The brothers tore their clothes in grief. This act of sorrow was what Jacob had done when he saw Joseph’s bloody tunic.
Now the agreement was that only the guilty would be enslaved and the rest could go home. The easy thing to do would be to leave Benjamin and go home. But they didn’t. Envy and resentment no longer governed their thoughts and deeds. They returned with Benjamin, determined that whatever was to be faced, they would face it together. The evidence was there. They really were changed man.

A Plea for Mercy (44:14-34)

When the brothers appeared once again before Joseph, he saw firsthand how they had changed. Notice the difference in their attitudes from years before:

- “Joseph was still in his palace when Judah and his brothers arrived, and they fell to the ground before him” (v.14). This fulfilled the promise of Joseph’s first set of dreams.
- “Judah answered, ‘Oh, my lord, what can we say to you? How can we explain this? How can we prove our innocence? God is punishing us for our sins’” (v.16). There were no excuses or rationalizations. There was no attempt to cover up. They admitted, through Judah, their guilt and submitted to slavery as a group. It was “we,” not “he.” Joseph tested them further with an offer of release, and they passed with flying colors.
- “So please, my lord, let me stay here as a slave instead of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers” (v.33). What a response! The same Judah who led the plan to sell Joseph offered to be Benjamin’s substitute as a slave in Egypt. Why? Out of concern for their father (vv.19-34). He openly acknowledged that the young man was now Jacob’s favorite. But instead of resenting his brother’s favorite-son status, he longed to preserve it by giving himself.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:20, “Just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions,” and evidently, the change in Judah was sincere and genuine. We have been examining God’s work in the life of Joseph, but God had also been working in Judah and his brothers.
A Passionate Reunion (45:1-15)

For Joseph, the years of pain dissolved in a moment of joy, and he wept uncontrollably in the presence of his brothers. They were tears of joy because his brothers had truly changed, and tears of love because at last they were as brothers should be.

Joseph’s reaction must have been unsettling and confusing for the brothers. But then Joseph uttered the words he had been longing to say, “I am Joseph!” The brothers were dumbfounded. The dream had come true. Joseph had the power of life and death over them. What would he do?

The Bible records for us Joseph’s tender approach toward his terrified brothers:

- “Then he broke down and wept. He wept so loudly the Egyptians could hear him, and word of it quickly carried to Pharaoh’s palace” (v.2). Joseph openly expressed his emotions.
- “Please, come closer” (v.4). They had been apart far too long.
- “Don’t be upset, and don’t be angry with yourselves” (v.5). This was a time of joy.
- “It was God who sent me” (vv.5-8). They were to trust that God was in control.
- “Bring my father here quickly” (vv.9,13). It was time to share the joy.

Forgiveness resolved the issue of guilt. Merrill Unger wrote, “Joseph displayed his deep faith in the omnipotence of God—overriding Satan, demonic powers, and wicked men to work out His sovereign will and unfrustratable plan. Faith lifted the whole sordid crime out of the pit of misery and self-recrimination and placed it on the mountain peak of divine sovereignty where God’s forgiving grace not only heals but wipes away the past and the pain” (Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament, Moody Press, 1981, p.94).

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Joseph had overcome all these things—particularly the potential bitterness that would have seemed so normal. He exemplified grace, giving full forgiveness and not revenge. He exemplified love, discarding the wrongs of the past for the compassion of the present. He exemplified faith, trusting that God would preserve him from the bitterness that leads to self-destruction.

A vivid contemporary example of this is seen in the actions of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Bristol of Dearborn, Michigan. This couple traveled to San Diego on their vacation for the purpose of sharing Christ with a man in prison. The thing that made this act so amazing was that this criminal was in jail for raping and murdering their precious daughter. That is a spirit of mercy born out of grace. It is full love that was not born out of ease or comfort or convenience, but out of suffering and hardship.

That’s the only way to overcome bitterness. When we trust God and rest in Him, we can love others. Why? Because we believe in a God who is big enough to work in all things for our good.
The Trust That Overcomes

In Genesis 50:20, we read Joseph’s final words to his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.” This amazing perspective reflected a life that had embraced the living God and trusted Him completely.

As you face the pains and heartaches and mistreatments of life, it is only by complete confidence in the goodness and plan of God that you can overcome. The things that could destroy you can become building blocks on the journey of faith as you look for the hand of God in all the circumstances of life.

“For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith” (1 John 5:4).

If you have never confessed your sin and trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, life can be a jumbled ball of confusion. But the One who died for your sins and gave Himself for your failures can bring rightness with God, forgiveness of sin, and a new sense of wholeness and purpose into your weary soul. Christ came into the world because of His love for you, and that love can bring an end to the emptiness or bitterness or sinfulness that wracks your life.

Accept by faith the gift of eternal life and personal forgiveness He offers, for the only way to really overcome forever is to accept the victory of Calvary that He accomplished for you.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Now that is real victory—and real overcoming.