

Women's Bible Study – Fall 2008

Overcoming: A Life Well Lived

The Life of Joseph from the book of Genesis

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Overcoming Abandonment – Genesis 39:21-40:23

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It was the summer of 1972. At the Munich Olympics that year the United States men's basketball team had breezed through to the gold medal game, an intense Cold War matchup: the US versus the Soviet Union. I was very young, but I remember watching the final minutes. The US sank 2 free throws to go ahead by 1 point with 3 seconds left. The Soviets inbounded the ball but couldn't score as time ran out and the Americans began celebrating. But one referee said he had whistled for a timeout before the clock started, so the Soviets asked that 3 seconds be put back on the clock. They got another chance. This time a full court pass missed its target, the horn sounded, and the Americans again began celebrating. But wait. At this point the secretary general of the international basketball association demanded that 3 seconds be put on the clock again, saying that the referees had put the ball in play too soon. The Soviets got a third chance. This time they passed successfully to the other end of the court, where Aleksandr Belov drove to the basket, fouling the Americans guarding him, and scored to win the game. I was only 5 years old, but I remember my dad's disgust and my 7-year-old brother's tears. I thought, "That was not fair!" It was my first brush with injustice. After losing an appeal 3-2, with votes divided along Cold War lines, that 1972 men's basketball team boycotted the medals ceremony and refused to accept their silver medals. Many of them have even specified in their wills that none of their descendants is ever to accept the silver medal posthumously. A sense of justice runs deep within the human heart.

The previous summer my little brother was born. I must've had a classic subconscious case of "new sibling insecurity," because I had recurring nightmares that I was being abandoned by my family. In my dream no one wanted me now that we had a cute new baby! In every dream, I was alone on the corner in front of the Red Owl grocery store, where I had been deposited. The dream always ended with me trying frantically to pedal my tricycle up the hill to our house. I never made any progress. The fear of abandonment runs deep within us, too.

Injustice and abandonment. Those themes resonate with all of us, I think. Why is that? How does even an unbeliever know that injustice is a bad thing, and that working for justice is good and right? Why does no one seek to be abandoned? Why do even most pagans disapprove of a parent who abandons his child? Why do we not have "abandonment parties" the way we have, say, housewarming parties? These may seem like silly questions, and the answers may seem self-evident. But it's important to ponder, in a world that has lost the moorings of absolute standards of right and wrong, why we still agree that some things are right and others are wrong. The reason is found in the nature of God. And God is the Ultimate Reality in the universe. God is just; therefore injustice is sin. God is personal, and he is a trinity, so he created us to live in community and we naturally recoil from abandonment. God has created everyone, believers and unbelievers alike, in his image. We have his law written on our hearts. So that is the basis by which we can make judgments about right and wrong. That is why our hearts go out to Joseph. The injustice he faced was far greater than that of any basketball team, and his abandonment was far more real than that of my childhood nightmares.

We're in week 4 of our study on Joseph. When we left him last week, he had been falsely accused of attempting to rape his master Potiphar's wife, an offense for which he was unjustly thrown into prison. Turn in your Bibles to Genesis 39. We're going to read today's passage in full. We'll start in verse 21 of chapter 39. I'm reading from the ESV.

But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.

Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker committed an offense against their lord the king of Egypt. And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard in the prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them. They continued for some time in custody.

And one night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own interpretation. When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?" They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me."

So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his cupbearer. Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit."

When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, "I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head." And Joseph answered and said, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat the flesh from you."

On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

I want us to observe **Joseph's response to both injustice** and abandonment. In his response to injustice, let's look at **what he did do** and **what he didn't do**. First, in response to unjustly being thrown into prison he **discharged his duties effectively**. The first several verses that we read, 21-23, are parallel to the first verses of chapter 39. Just as Joseph rose to great responsibility in Potiphar's house because of his effectiveness as a hard worker and skillful manager, so he rose in responsibility in this prison. We don't know exactly what the conditions were like. Joseph calls it "the pit" in 40:15, but that word might be just a reflection of how he felt about his situation compared to his former position of relative freedom. Verse 3 says it was a house of the captain of the guard—this is the same term used for Potiphar, but we're not sure if Potiphar still held that position since 40:1 indicates that some time had passed. Anyway, his situation was probably something like house arrest for all the people that had wronged the Egyptian rulers. Those in authority over Joseph seem to recognize immediately that he is special; he is so conscientious in exercising his duties that his masters feel confident to hand things over to his wise jurisdiction. Christians should be the best workers at any place of employment. We should be known for our work ethic, our integrity and trustworthiness, as well as for our skill. That is how we glorify God in our work. If your boss were asked to evaluate Christianity solely by the way you dispatch your duties at work, what would he say?

It is a biblical principle that those who are faithful in little things will be given the opportunity to be faithful in big things. Jesus says in Luke 16:10, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much." The path to greater influence and greater responsibility is always through faithfulness in little things. Do you dream of doing great things for God? Begin with the small tasks that God has set before you today. We often don't think of how long Joseph labored in obscurity before he was promoted.

This summer my husband Rich took our 13-year-old son Luke to a conference called "Do Hard Things," hosted by 19-year-old brothers Alex and Brett Harris. These remarkable young men have written a best-selling book and host a hugely popular website. They speak at conferences around the country and have served as interns at a state supreme court. Their battle cry is for teens to shake off the low expectations that our culture has for them and "do hard things" for the glory of God. But they make the point that doing hard things usually means doing little things faithfully. For my son, that means doing his algebra and stacking wood, and tending to his lawn-mowing business and being patient with his little sisters. As much as Luke would like to be used by God as a powerful and vocal witness for Christ on the Twins' pitching staff, he is learning that his job for now is to be a witness to his small circle of influence by being faithful in little things.

What about us? It's easy for me to tell my son what he needs to do. But am I willing to be the obscure servant that Joseph was for so long? Right now I know that God wants me to be my husband's helper and to put his needs before my own. God wants me to offer hospitality to clinic patients. He wants me to prepare for Bible study and make supper for my family. What obscure tasks does God have for you? It's not wrong to dream big dreams of ministry for God, but let's not let those dreams cause us to despise the small and unglamorous jobs that have been clearly placed before us right now.

Second, Joseph **spoke the truth directly**. Egyptians held the belief that sleep puts one into contact with the other world, where the dead and the gods live. Dreams were, therefore, a gift from the gods. Their interpretation, however, was a scientific art, belonging to only a few learned men. In prison, there was no access to these dream interpreters, and so the cupbearer and baker were despondent. Joseph is sensitive enough to notice their sadness, but he doesn't hesitate to challenge

their pagan superstition with the truth: “Do not interpretations belong to God?” He gives credit where it belongs. And then he doesn’t flinch at telling the baker his dream’s interpretation, even though it is not favorable. You can speak the truth even when it is a hard truth when you are confident it is God’s truth. Joseph is like the prophets here, who couldn’t be afraid to deliver bad news.

Third, Joseph **interpreted the dreams accurately**. This was a test for the authenticity of a prophet—whether or not the thing spoken of actually happened. Joseph’s interpretations happened exactly as he had predicted, right down to the gruesome execution of the baker and the hanging of his corpse for the birds to eat.

Fourth, **Joseph made his request politely**. Look at verse 14 of chapter 40. After he interprets the dream, he says, “Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house.” Oh, that every request in **my** house were prefaced with “please do me the kindness!” Polite words reveal a humble attitude.

Now let’s look at what Joseph **didn’t do**. First, he **didn’t succumb to bitterness**. I’m sure Joseph had his down days, but he didn’t continually grouse about his lot in life. I would not have done so well. Think about his life so far. He tells his dreams to his brothers and gets himself sold into slavery after narrowly escaping murder. Then he steadfastly refuses to commit fornication only to be slapped with a rape charge. He’s completely innocent, but when two guys who actually did commit an offense against the king join him in prison, one of them gets to go free! How do you keep from becoming bitter about injustice? On a very basic level, we need to remind ourselves that bitterness is sin. Even if our girlfriends commiserate with us and say, “Well, you have a right to be bitter after the way you’ve been treated!” we have to realize that God says, “Let all bitterness . . . be put away from you” (Eph. 4:31). “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled” (Heb. 12:15). We have to fight bitterness as we fight any other temptation to sin. Fight. Don’t just roll over and give in. Practically, I think one way to fight the sin of bitterness is to remember that even in the worst of circumstances we all get far better than we deserve. Without Christ, we all would be under the wrath of God. When we’re bitter, we are operating on the assumption that we deserve better. But the fact is, we don’t. God has lavished blessing after blessing upon us as he did on Joseph. The text says God made everything succeed that Joseph did. Joseph knew that even though he had been treated unjustly, God was still blessing him.

He also **didn’t plot revenge**. In the novel The Count of Monte Cristo, the main character, Edmund Dantes, is also imprisoned unjustly. He spends all his many years in confinement plotting revenge against the enemy who put him there. After his escape from prison, he spends the rest of his life exacting that revenge. It makes for a great novel, mostly because we learn how the desire for revenge can destroy the soul. I think Joseph was able to avoid this trap because he knew that vengeance did not belong to him. It’s good to remember when we’ve been wronged that God is far more offended by the sin than we can ever be. God’s Son paid with his life for all the sin that ever was or ever would be. He has far more reason to be offended than we do—we, who have so often wronged others ourselves. One day God will settle all the scores, and he will do it far more wisely than we ever could. I Cor. 4 says, “The Lord . . . will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.” Romans 12:19 says, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” Our task is to forgive.

Finally, Joseph **didn't demand his rights**. We don't even have record of him sticking up for himself. Perhaps he did declare his innocence, but, then again, maybe he didn't. After all, if he had succeeded in proving his innocence to Potiphar, what would that have done to Potiphar's marriage? Perhaps Joseph felt no good would come from that. In any case, while Christians aren't forbidden to declare our innocence when falsely accused, we shouldn't be contentious or demanding. Jesus told his followers to expect persecution. When we are shrill or nasty in our protests, we are acting as if we should be immune to hardship and persecution. This is the opposite of what Christ did and the opposite of what Joseph did. Listen to I Peter 2: "Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. . . If when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. . . When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

Let's turn now to Joseph's **response to abandonment**: patient trust. After the cupbearer forgets him, Joseph sits in prison another two whole years (41:1). This had to be about as low as Joseph could get. Imagine thinking when the cupbearer gets out, "Okay. Any day now they should be coming for me! I'll finally get out of here." Only to have the sickening realization slowly sink in—"He's forgotten all about me. Or at least he doesn't want to be bothered with me now that he has his freedom." Joseph isn't the only Bible character who felt abandoned. The psalmist writes: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps. 13:1). Job cried, "I call for help, but there is no justice . . . My relatives have failed me, my close friends have forgotten me" (19: 7, 14).

I have a childhood friend who was happily married to an executive for a successful company. They had 3 little boys and had been active members in their church for many years. She was stunned when one day, virtually out of the blue, her husband told her he didn't want to be married anymore, and wasn't really interested in being part of his kids' lives either. There was no other woman, no easily identifiable problem in their relationship. He just wanted to walk away, and he did. He abandoned his family. I can't fully imagine how she or her children feel or how Joseph felt, and I won't pretend that I know all the best things to say in a situation like that. I don't want to glibly pass out advice today. But the Bible is "living and active," and it will speak to us in the times of our deepest despair. So what do the Scriptures say about how to respond to abandonment? Joseph's patient trust allowed him to do these things.

1. Acknowledge that, if you are a Christian, you are never alone, though you may feel that you are. Listen to these words from Romans 8: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . . For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (35, 38, 39). Listen to Hebrews 13:5, 6: "For he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" Some of you might remember our study of Hagar. She felt abandoned—pregnant and cast out from her home. After God came to her with wonderful promises, she called him "The God who sees." She acknowledged, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me" (Gen. 16). In a few months we'll celebrate Christmas, and I hope you'll remember that the incarnation of God is one of the most powerful antidotes to feelings of abandonment. Jesus was called "Immanuel"—God WITH US. He came to live with us, and then he didn't leave us alone; he sent the Holy Spirit. If you're a Christian he is with you in your house full of crying preschoolers. He is with you in your office cubicle. He is with you in your hospital

bed and in the nursing home. It is impossible for us to be abandoned. Jesus is the only person to have been fully abandoned. When he bore the sins of the world on the cross, he cried out to his Father, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus was abandoned for our sakes. He was abandoned so that we never could be.

2. Realize the time is short, though it may seem long. James says our lives are a “vapor.” I hope you can be comforted to know that suffering exists ONLY in this vapor of a lifetime. No matter how long our suffering in this life, God says that in his eternal perspective it will be gone in the amount of time it takes for your breath to dissolve in the air on a cold day. For the believer, after just one breath of suffering—after just one breath of abandonment or injustice or any other kind of suffering—there will be billions and billions and billions of millennia of pure joy. But of course, God’s perspective is not ours right now, and waiting is one of the hardest things to do.

But Paul was not superhuman, and he was able to say, “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory, beyond all comparison” (II Cor. 4:17). Did you catch that? He calls his afflictions “momentary.” Paul can do that because he was well practiced in seeing God’s perspective. What, exactly, were his afflictions? He writes of “imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.” He says, “Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea, danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (II Cor. 11). And he calls all of that not only “momentary” but “slight!” How can he say that? The key is that he understood what these sufferings were for. They were working, achieving, preparing for him something wonderful. In other words, his sufferings were light *compared to* what they were doing for him—“preparing an eternal weight of glory, beyond all comparison.” And that understanding provides a bridge to my third point.

3. Know that God’s hand is in it all. I have to admit that I do a double take at the phrasing in the opening verses of our passage today: “The Lord . . . showed [Joseph] steadfast love and gave him favor . . . Whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.” Am I the only one here who doesn’t see prison time as success? I look at Joseph’s situation and think, “This is love? This is favor?” I don’t think I want that kind of favor! But any kind of training involves hardship. Think of what athletes do to train their bodies or what students do to prepare for exams. Hardships are God’s training program. They are his discipline system. We often think of *discipline* as a synonym for *punishment*, but *discipline* really connotes the idea of teaching and training. Listen to Hebrews again: “It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? . . . We have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. . . They disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (12:7-11). God’s purposes for us, even in suffering, are completely good and loving. They are not expressions of his wrath; his wrath was absorbed by his Son on the cross. If you are his child, God is *for you, not against you*.

If you’re thinking at this point, “God didn’t do this to Joseph. Satan did it. This all came about because of sin, and God can’t have anything to do with sin,” be careful. If you say Satan did this, are you saying that God stood helplessly by and could not prevent it? Who has the ultimate

authority in the universe? God does. Not Satan. You may be thinking of Job also. You remember that Satan was intensely involved in Job's suffering. But he had to ask God's permission. God is the one who controls Satan's leash. God could have prevented Job's suffering, but he didn't. And Job correctly says, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." And then the Holy Spirit-inspired narrator adds, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (Job 1:20-21). Though Satan indeed played a role, Job bypasses him and acknowledges that a good God was ultimately behind this suffering in his life. In his recent book titled Spectacular Sins and their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ, John Piper asserts that "everything that exists--including evil—is ordained by an infinitely holy and all-wise God to make the glory of Christ shine more brightly" (54). By "ordained" we mean that God either directly *caused* something or *permitted* it for his wise purposes. Proverbs 16:4 says, "The Lord has made everything for its purpose, *even the wicked for the day of trouble.*" It is an inscrutable truth that God ordained everything that happened to Joseph, from his sale into slavery to the injustice and abandonment he faced in these chapters. Even the famine in the coming chapters came from God. Listen to the psalmist describe these events: "When he [God] *summoned* a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread, he had *sent* a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave" (105:16). God summoned the famine. God sent Joseph to Egypt. Joseph himself knows this when he speaks to his brothers at the end of the story: "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God *sent me* before you to preserve life" (45:5). "You meant evil against me, but God *meant it* for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive" (50:20). And not only were many lives saved, but the sufferings of Joseph brought about the fulfillment of ancient prophecy—that the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah; he is called the Lion of Judah, Jesus Christ. This could not have happened if the Israelites had all died in a famine instead of being saved by Joseph in Egypt.

If you are uncomfortable with the idea that God might ordain a sinful act or summon a famine, think about this: Which is more of a comfort to you—believing that God is behind your painful circumstance or believing that God is just as surprised by it as you are? Certainly there is mystery here, and we should be humble enough to admit that we can't fully understand this aspect of God's character. We know from James (and from our study last week) that God does not tempt anyone to sin. But our vision of God has to be big enough to include the truth of James and the truth of Job and countless other examples of a sinless God who has wise purposes for sin. We must not limit God to our ideas of what he should be—a Being that would only involve himself in what we perceive to be "niceness." Dr. Piper summarizes the story of Joseph: "Here is a life-saving, people-saving sin. This will prove to be a powerful foreshadowing of the glory of Christ and how the murderous sin against him will also be a saving sin" (81).

As you go from here today, spend some time and energy considering what you can do for those who are victims of injustice or abandonment. If we are not in this category, then we know someone who is. And then consider what the story of Joseph is ultimately about and let that knowledge overflow in praise! Joseph had so many hardships that it would seem to a casual observer that he was being punished for sin. But that's just the point. He was completely innocent and later vindicated. He suffered so he might be the means of salvation for many. So the story of Joseph is a picture, a foreshadowing of our Savior, who endured much more suffering and was even more innocent and whose death brought about the salvation of all who will trust him.

Questions for: Overcoming Abandonment – Genesis 39:21-40:23

Discussion Questions

1. Joseph was unjustly imprisoned. What does the Bible say about justice and how we are to respond to injustice? Share a time when you were treated unjustly. Did you respond biblically?
2. Compare Joseph, Moses, and Daniel. How are these men similar? How do all three prefigure Christ?
3. Joseph was forgotten and abandoned by Pharaoh's cupbearer—for how long? (41:1) How does one keep his faith in such a circumstance? What biblical counsel would you give to someone who feels abandoned?

Study Questions

1. Read Gen. 39:21-40:23. Compare and contrast the first verse of this passage with the last verse. What does this contrast teach you about the nature of God? About the nature of man? Think of 3 more Scripture passages that reinforce what you see here about man and God. (You might recall another Bible story, or you could use a concordance to look up a key word like "remember," "forget," or "favor.")
2. Briefly summarize the two dreams and their interpretations. Why do you think so much detail is given about these dreams? What happened? What test did God give for determining whether a prophet was legitimate or not? (Jer. 28:9) In what ways is Joseph like the prophets?
3. Compare Joseph, Moses, and Daniel. How are these men similar? How do all three prefigure Christ?
4. What incorrect assumption do the dreamers make in verse 8? How does Joseph correct them? What sorts of things are you tempted to take credit for that are God's doing? How do you know they're God's doing?
5. Joseph is unjustly imprisoned. What does Joseph do and what does he NOT do in this situation? Find at least 3 passages about justice in the Bible. At least one should be about how we are to respond when treated unjustly. Is there a time when you were treated unjustly? Did you respond biblically? If not, what should you have done differently?