

THE LIFE OF

J O
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God's Sovereignty in our Suffering

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL



God's Sovereignty in our Suffering

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
BY THE PEOPLE OF
EASTBROOK CHURCH



The Story of Joseph: God's Sovereignty in our Suffering

As a pastor, I have the privilege of walking through some of the highest and lowest points of life with people. In the highest points, people rarely ask questions about why they are experiencing such goodness or grace in their lives. However, it is in the challenging times, particularly the times of suffering, that we begin to ask questions, such as 'why is this happening to me?' or 'how am I going to make it?' In times like that we need a theology of suffering.

A theology of suffering helps us understand why difficult things happen in general and to us specifically, while also providing a framework for understanding and approaching God in the midst of suffering. The life of Joseph is one of the best places in the Bible to develop a theology of suffering. In Joseph's life, as told in Genesis 37-50, we not only see someone enduring the ups and downs of life, but also develop a life with God in the midst of it. At times Joseph seems to bring suffering down upon himself, while at other times he endures unjust suffering. Throughout his story, he interacts with characters who are for him and others who are against him. In all of that, God is at work, sometimes readily visible and other times apparently hidden. Near the end of his life, Joseph responds to some of those who brought suffering upon him with words of great depth: *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives"* (Genesis 50:20)¹. How do we become people who can speak like that?

We must go on a journey to become people like Joseph. It will not happen overnight. And so, as we enter into a forty-day journey during the season of Lent, we are inviting God to shape within us both a theology of suffering and the character of Christ in the midst of suffering. The devotional booklet you hold in your hands is a forty-day guide written by people within the Eastbrook family to help us draw near to Jesus Christ in the ups and downs of life.

In this forty day journey, we are preparing ourselves for the joys of Easter by having a deeper experience of Jesus. This year, we are doing that by journeying through the life of Joseph, intermingled with other portions of Scripture, including Jesus' own journey to the cross. Joseph gives us a glimpse of the reality that Jesus talked about as He prepared for the Cross and resurrection: *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33).

Traditionally, this journey is called Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday and carrying forward to Easter Sunday. Lent is shaped as a forty-day journey, echoing the forty-year journey of Israel to the Promised Land and Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness. Lent aims to lead us into deeper engagement with God through prayerful reflection and reading of Scripture.

Each day in this devotional, you will find a Scripture reading, a short devotional, and a series of questions for reflection. These can be used individually, but are also intended for discussion in groups. In the back, you will find a set of weekly readings, questions, and activities geared toward families who have younger children.

May God grow all of us as we embark on this journey together.

Matt Erickson
Senior Pastor, Eastbrook Church

How to use this Devotional

1. Plan a 15-minute window each day when you can thoughtfully do the daily reading. Set a time, create a pattern, and stick to it for the Lenten season.
2. Decide whether you want to invite your friends, family, Life Group, or other small group to join you.
3. Begin each day by reading the Scripture passage printed at the top of each page.
4. Read the devotional and reflect on it. Use the “Dig Deeper” questions to talk about it with someone else or to journal on your own.
5. The “Family Talk” section of the devotional (p. 60-66) is written for, and addressed to, elementary-age kids. Each page introduces the week’s theme in a kid-friendly way. After you complete each week’s readings from Genesis, you can discuss the “Family Talk” questions together. The “Just for Fun” idea at the bottom of each page is an extra activity to reinforce each week’s theme throughout this Lenten study. If your kids are younger than 1st grade, you may opt to simply read the Joseph story from a Bible Storybook once a week. Continually point to God’s good plan and His care for Joseph. Or, try drawing a simple mural showing “the pit” or “the prison” or “Pharaoh’s court.” Let your child use an action figure to be “Joseph” and track his movements as you read the story.
6. Use the online version of the devotional readings to reach out to friends online and around the world. Invite them to follow along with you during Lent this year. Find the online version with sharable graphics at eastbrook.org/josephdevotional. Use Eastbrook’s Facebook page (facebook.com/eastbrookchurch) and other social media outlets such as Twitter and Instagram ([@eastbrookchurch](https://twitter.com/eastbrookchurch)) to share ideas. Post your comments, thoughts, and questions in the online version. Read others’ comments. This is a great way to learn from the perspectives of others.

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JOSEPH, A
YOUNG
MAN OF
SEVEN-
TEEN, WAS
TENDING
THE
FLOCKS
WITH HIS
BROTHERS

Introduction

Let the Story Begin

READ GENESIS 37:2-7

"This is the account of Jacob's family line. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers..." (Genesis 37: 2)

Today we begin a journey with Joseph. Every story has a beginning and Joseph's story is no different. He is a young man of seventeen. He is watching the flocks with his brothers. We learn that Joseph is his father's favorite son. Not only that, but we learn that occasionally he offers negative reports on his brothers to his father. It feels like the beginnings of a soap opera based on favoritism, sibling rivalries, and so much more. Yet in these ordinary situations, God is telling a story. He is working out His desires and plans in the midst of ordinary lives.

This is good news because our lives are a lot like Joseph's story. We find ourselves embroiled in tension with others, whether family members, friends, or co-workers. We encounter moments where we are on the inside as the favored one, and other moments where we are on the outside in the presence of the favored one. Life is messy and we live in the midst of that mess. Still, the wonder of this is that God is at work writing His story in the ordinary, messy places of our lives.

Joseph's story in Genesis echoes the story of Jesus. Jesus is born in a messy stable to earthly parents mired in controversy. He grows up and lives in the midst of political tensions between His own people and an occupying military empire. He teaches God's truth and brings healing into the everyday suffering and joys of regular people. And in all of that, God is writing a story through Jesus that will bring *"good news that will cause great joy for all the people"* (Luke 2:10). Jesus' journey to the Cross takes Joseph's messy story and our messy stories and makes it the soil in which God's abundant life will spring up.

So let me invite you to offer your messy story to God. Join the journey within this devotional as a way to hold your life up to God daily in order that abundant life might spring up out of the ordinary places in us.

DIG DEEPER

- What does it mean to you that God is writing a story in *your* life?
- How might you express to God right now that you long to surrender your life to Him through this forty-day devotional journey?

God's Master Plan

READ HEBREWS 11:22; 12:1-3

God says in Isaiah, *"my ways are not your ways"* (Isaiah 55:8-9). We all know that, right? And we want to rest in it because we trust God's Word. But it's not always easy to rest when life is beating us down.

As we examine Joseph's life and relate it to our suffering Savior, there is something about it all that confounds our human minds. It seems like God set Joseph up just to knock him down, and repeatedly. Likewise, Christ, the only perfect human, joyfully accepted a mission He knew was going to be lonely and painful. To the natural mind, it doesn't make sense.

After a life of trials, Joseph delighted in remembering God's faithfulness. With His objective set as in stone, Jesus determined to live in God's plan for His earthly life. As only God could, Jesus was faithful to the Father's will, even to death on the Cross.

As we journey to the Cross, consider God's ways, and pray that the Holy Spirit and Scripture would fortify your deep belief and trust in God's Master Plan for you. When your mind tells you God has it wrong and things don't need to be like they are (difficult, painful, confusing), remember the Saints who have gone before you who are witnesses to God's goodness, grace, and love. Let God's faithfulness encourage your heart, and consider all He has done in our lives and through His Son.

DIG DEEPER

- What "natural" assumptions about your circumstances should you prayerfully reconsider in the light of God's Word in order to gain better understanding of His Master Plan for your life?

Fortunes Changed

READ PSALM 105:17-22

I grew up in a chaotic home. Both of my parents were married three times, and their various spouses were married multiple times. It was easy to get lost in the shuffle and to wonder where I fit, even as I felt I never belonged. I recently learned through Ancestry.com that my father wasn't my father. I am so glad that this realization came when I was secure in my heavenly Father's love.

Psalm 105 gives an overview of the story of Israel—a snapshot of how God works behind the scenes of human history. Joseph plays a big part in this story. He grew up in a polygamous household that was marked by jealousy, favoritism, competition and manipulation. His brothers hated him, and that hatred put Joseph literally on the outside. He must have felt forgotten by God and by anyone who ever loved him. But God saw and knew, and was working in hidden ways.

With God, we are not outsiders. We belong. We fit. We learn that there is a purpose to our lives that goes far beyond any apparent mistake in our genealogy.

God took Joseph through many transitions. From bad to worse, to better and exalted. From being left to die, to slavery, to ruling the kingdom of Egypt. Joseph learned that God was able to take the darkest of times in his life and weave them into a story of belonging that would impact the world for ages to come. God was in control of the circumstances of his life even at their most desperate.

I have learned and continue to learn that God's purposes and ways are beyond my understanding. As I trust Him, He confirms that I am His daughter, and part of His forever family and plan.

DIG DEEPER

- Take some time to reflect on your personal family history. Bring out the skeletons in the closet and the unexplained losses and injustices that you have experienced. Make a list of these and present them to God, trusting Him to weave them into a good story. A story that He has written specifically for you.

WHEN
JOSEPH
CAME TO HIS
BROTHERS,
THEY
STRIPPED
HIM OF HIS
ORNATE
ROBE AND
THREW HIM
INTO A
CISTERN.

Descending

Purpose in Pain

READ MATTHEW 10:16-23

Joseph endured great suffering for the preservation of God's chosen people. The disciples, along with the early church, were persecuted and scattered so that the Gospel could prevail and be spread across the world. From our perspective we can see that God had very specific purposes for the suffering of both Joseph and the early church believers. I have always had a great appreciation for these stories. I loved how I could see the end of their stories and see how God had His hand in the details of their lives. Their stories were inspiring and exciting and for me have been a source of hope in the midst of difficulty. But how do you think these individuals saw their circumstances in the moment?

I started attending Calvary Baptist School as a freshman and was placed in a class of about 14 kids. Previously, I had been home schooled and I was completely content and comfortable with that situation. As silly as it sounds at this point in my life, learning to interact with my fellow students was one of the scariest things I had ever done. I honestly felt like a sheep being sent to the wolves.

To be fair, I was an easy target. Most of the kids in my class had gone to school together for years, and I'm pretty sure that I walked around with an attitude that said, "I'm a better Christian than you are!" Also, it was impossible for me to conceal my feelings for whichever boy I happened to be crushing on at the time. Still, it was never easy to discover that I had become the butt of someone's running joke for the week. I prayed and prayed for God to show me why I was going through that "persecution" but He never gave me a clear or specific reason.

What I failed to understand in high school is that it can take a really long time to see how the events of our lives relate to God's bigger story. It is usually through reflecting on where we were and where God has brought us that we learn what He was actually trying to teach us.

DIG DEEPER

- How have you seen God's work through past suffering in your life? Did you know at the time what He was teaching you?
- What suffering are you facing now? What do you think He is teaching you now?

Not Me

READ MATTHEW 26:14-16, 20-25, 31-35

To betray someone is to expose them to danger by your actions, or to treacherously give information to that person's enemy. It could be the act of being unfaithful or of not fulfilling an obligation. I shudder as I view the disciples and see myself in them, especially when my first reaction, if someone would ask me, "Would you betray Christ?" my answer would be, "No! Not me!"

In verses 14-16, Jesus was about to face the Cross where He would be sacrificed for our sins. From our perspective, surely, it wouldn't be the people closest to Him that would help pave the way!

"Not me. I wouldn't do that!"

I'm sure, at the beginning of his journey with Christ, Judas didn't think he would find himself in that place, betraying the Savior of the world. But there he was, stuffing his pockets with 'blood money.'

The scene moves on to Jesus, having dinner with His 'brothers,' who intimately spent 3 years with Him, swearing their loyalty (vss. 20-25). Surely, we will not betray You. Jesus replies, *"the one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me."* But they all had dipped, and they all would disown Him.

Peter claims that his loyalty to Christ is unto death (vss. 31-35). Not me! No matter what, I will not betray you!

"Not me. I wouldn't do that!"

But I find myself betraying Him daily when I miss spending time with Him, or I skip an opportunity to share my faith with someone else. Any simple disobedience to my God *is* betrayal.

It is because of Christ knowing *all things*, that we even have the hope of living a fulfilled and abundant life. In verse 32, Jesus says He *"will go ahead of"* them. He will prepare the way. Now, I can say, "Yes, me," to loyalty, because I have a Savior who loves, forgives, and empowers.

DIG DEEPER

- How do you betray Christ (...no daily time in prayer, no daily time in the Word, not giving of tithes and offerings, hiding your faith...)? Ask forgiveness for these betrayals and the strength to live courageously for Christ.

Living in Unjust Narratives

READ GENESIS 37:1-4

It can be really easy to make Joseph's brothers the "bad guys" in this story. Yes, they slander their brother (vs. 4), and yes, they will certainly do some horrific things to him in the future. But when I read this passage, I also see their humanity. Here are brothers who, just like their father before them (Genesis 27), find themselves in an unjust narrative that is beyond their control. They are betrayed by their father's unequal love for Joseph. They didn't ask to be born into their broken family. They didn't ask to be a part of this unjust narrative.

The reality is that we all find ourselves in narratives that are beyond our control. I didn't ask to be diagnosed with ulcerative colitis when I was 16. I didn't ask for the pain, bleeding, and embarrassing lifestyle changes. I didn't ask to be required to take pills every day to stay in remission or face the side effects that have plagued my body for years. For over a decade, the two tiny pills I took each morning represented embarrassment, a hidden secret that I felt like God had burdened me with unfairly. I didn't want to be different from my peers, I didn't want to have to deal with my illness, and I was angry. But as God has been maturing me, He has given me a different perspective on this chronic illness. Now, my broken body daily confronts me with the reality that while I can't change my circumstances, I can change my response to them. Instead of seeing this diagnosis as a burden, I can see it as a part of the cross that God asks me to bear daily. It unites me with the suffering of Christ. It unites me with a community of people, like my sister, who share this illness.

I don't know what unjust narrative you find yourself in. Maybe it is the injustice of systemic racism, relational brokenness, unfair disadvantages, mental illness, or a broken body like mine. But what I think we can learn from both Joseph and his brothers is that we are not defined by the narratives we find ourselves in. We are defined by our response to them. We don't have to give in to triggers (vs. 4), and we don't have to perpetuate the sins of injustice. Instead, we can surrender to the authority of a just God, and trust that He will indeed *"work righteousness and justice for all the oppressed"* (Psalm 103:6).

DIG DEEPER

- What injustice exists in your life, particularly something that is beyond your control?
- How do you need to change your response and attitude when it comes to the unjust narratives you find yourself within?

Speaking Truth at a Cost

READ GENESIS 37:5-11

Think about a time when you were with someone who was more intelligent, more gifted, or more accepted than you. Did you become resentful towards that person because you lacked what they had? Joseph's brothers felt a similar way towards their younger brother. Their "perfect" brother not only received special treatment and attention from their father, but also shared two prophetic dreams illustrating that he would rule over them. Upon hearing Joseph's first dream, his brothers assumed Joseph would receive the blessing from their father, signifying his authority over them (vs. 7). In Joseph's second dream, he went further by stating that *"the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me,"* symbolizing Joseph's future role as a leader, not only over his brothers, but also over his parents (vs. 9). Thus, in response to Joseph's dreams, his brothers *"hated him all the more"* and *"were jealous of him"* (vss. 8, 11).

When I first read this passage I wondered why Joseph would tell his dreams to his brothers? Didn't he have any idea how his brothers might respond, given their volatile relationship? But looking from Joseph's perspective, I believe he spoke out of a pure motive and perceived his dreams as visions from God that needed to be shared. As he spoke the harsh truth, he became vulnerable to his brothers eventual betrayal of him. Ultimately, if Joseph hadn't spoken the truth, while it might have alleviated some strife with his brothers, he would not have been able to accomplish the plans God set before him.

Even though the consequences I face for sharing God's truth are not as harsh as what Joseph endured, I often find it hard to be bold in sharing the truth when others can so easily reject me. I realize that far too often I am looking to please those around me, rather than acting in obedience in following God. Just as Joseph did, we too need to speak the truth of God's Word regardless of the outcome.

DIG DEEPER

- Just as Joseph shared what God spoke to him, how can you act on what God has spoken to you? Take some time to reflect on how Jesus came into this broken world to testify to the truth even though that meant rejection and ultimately sacrificing his life (John 18:37).

Uncontrolled

READ GENESIS 37:12-20

How do you go about your day or week, or for that matter planning your life? Most of us have schedules to keep, people to see, and ambitions to chase. We work, we play, and we plan for retirement. In some ways we think we can control our lives. There is also a sense that if we do the “right things” then the “right life” will be our reward.

Our story in the life of Joseph sets up as any usual day. Jacob was interested in how his sons and flocks were fairing in the land of Shechem so he sent his son Joseph to find out and bring back a report. Little did Joseph realize that this would be the last time he would speak to his father for many years. Joseph’s trip to Shechem was about to change his life. If you live long enough, most folks will experience a life change that is not planned and likely not invited.

Last year (2017) marked the 50th anniversary of Joni Eareckson Tada’s tragic diving accident in which she became quadriplegic. Her life was forever changed that carefree day as a teenager. Joni was asked if she could turn the clock back, whether she would change the events of that day when she became quadriplegic. Her answer was amazing. She said if she had not become a quadriplegic that day, she would not have been able to know Jesus like she does today.

The Bible says that Jesus is our peace. Jesus said for all who are weary He would give rest and that we can learn from Him (Matthew 11:28-30). Jesus invites us to come. Jesus waits for us to come.

DIG DEEPER

- What is your first response when life seems out of control?
- What does it look like in your life to put your trust in Jesus no matter what?

I'll take a Reuben

READ GENESIS 37:21-28

We may feel betrayed when our selfish or childish dreams (even those dreams that are meant to encourage others) are dashed, but we shouldn't be surprised. They aren't the dreams to pursue. But when we have earnestly sought after God and He places those dreams in us and they are shattered, we are surprised and the betrayal can make us angry, sad, and disappointed.

Is this how Joseph felt? We aren't told. Perhaps instead he trusted that the dreams he had were rooted in his relationship with God and he trusted that God would correct any wrongs and that His plan would prevail. Focusing on God is how we can begin to leave the emotional baggage of betrayal behind. Is this what Joseph did?

More important than the betrayal we feel is the way we can choose to be like Reuben and come forward to encourage others as they follow after Jesus, even when we don't understand their dreams. We can choose to intervene in the schemes of angry brothers and preserve life. We can choose not to enter the bitterness and hatred that betrayal or jealousy bring and instead fix our eyes on kingdom truths and plans. Who wouldn't want a Reuben in the midst of betrayal?

Even when, like Reuben, our plan to return someone to the Father doesn't work like we think it should, we can trust that God will use our efforts. We can trust God to use all circumstances for His good, just as He did when He used the betrayal of His Son to save the world.

DIG DEEPER

- Who has been a "Reuben" in your life? How?
- How can you be a "Reuben" for someone now?

A Violation of Trust

READ GENESIS 37:29-36

"When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes and returned to his brothers and said, 'The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?'" (Genesis 37:29-30 ESV)

Me, my, I... the elevation of self.

This story is sad beyond words. Betrayal is selfishness at its worst or should I say, at its best. It's an issue of the heart that dethrones God. Whenever my primary interest rests on my need, my preference, my desire, or the implications to me, I'm at risk of falling into the pit of betrayal. This egocentric focus, instead of God-driven purpose makes it a struggle to discern, care, pray, listen, study, serve, give, or forgive. Everything becomes distorted and falsely redefined.

Only those who have received our trust can betray us.

Years ago, two senior managers accused me of not adequately choosing the vendor for our latest quality training materials. Working as a quality manager myself, I had followed all of the protocols. I was devastated. I'm so thankful I wasn't given to anger. I took some time away from the office, found a quiet place to sit with the Lord to reflect, ponder, pray and decide how to respond.

When I arrived at work the next day, my boss quickly came to my office to make sure I was okay. I shared the challenge, my plan to address the situation and got to work. In the end, I was vindicated and made peace with my accusers. The following week my boss came to my office to give me an article he had read, it addressed how to handle workplace conflict and listed corresponding steps that I had taken. He was so proud! Everyone knew I was a believer, the issue was bigger than me, and God had received His Glory!

Joseph's steadfast resolve to follow God, despite his circumstances, can be ours too as we place our fullness of trust, belief and strength in our sovereign God who makes all things right in His time. Betrayers want to devastate but our God wars on our behalf to annihilate our enemy! Let us take solace in this truth.

DIG DEEPER

- Think of a time when you've been betrayed. How has God used these circumstances to build your character, grow your faith and adjust your perspective more toward His Eternal Kingdom?

WHEN
POTIPHAR
HEARD
THE STORY
HIS WIFE
TOLD HIM
ABOUT
JOSEPH,
HE BURNED
WITH
ANGER.

Caught

Enduring

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 10:11-13

As a teacher, I often give warnings like, “My morning class complained and played during the lesson, so they did all thirty practice problems instead of playing the game.” Then, I look directly at the student with the audacity to still have a side conversation or play with a fidget spinner under a desk, and I give him my raised-eyebrows warning look, like: don’t mess it up.

I do this to let my students know that the rules I make in class are important. In the earlier class, I said, “Okay, we don’t have to play the game now. We can do practice problems instead.” I love them and want the best for them, and that includes the discipline to stay focused on learning a math lesson, even when you “don’t get it” yet.

When God says He has some great promise or plan, we’re not supposed to get all hopeless and grumbly. When the Hebrews complained on the way to the Promised Land, God was like, “Okay, we don’t have to do the fun things now. We can pull over for forty years instead.” He loves us and wants the very best for us, and that includes trusting in Him, even when it’s a really long journey and we don’t see the destination yet.

My students are tempted to misbehave because it’s easier than learning something new. I’m standing here with all the tools to equip their little brains for 6th grade, and yet they’re tempted, just as I am, to focus on distractions or put their heads down on their desks and despair. Learning and teaching are both hard. I’m constantly grumbling. God is standing here with the tools I need and I’d rather put my head down on my desk and despair.

DIG DEEPER

- What hard things has God invited you to be a part of that you have you been tempted to give up on recently?
- What do you need to ask God to help you endure?

Rescue from Muddy Places

READ HEBREWS 4:14-16

"...that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebrews 4:16b)

Some of my fondest memories of our years living in West Africa revolve around the arrival of the annual rains. Following nine months of cloudless skies, June brought violent thunderstorms mitigating the heat and breaking the dry season's oppressive grasp on Mali's land and people. What a joy to see the first green shoots of grass and millet! However, I also have less fond recollections of getting stuck in the mud in Mali. More than once, we found our 4-wheel Landcruiser pickup hopelessly mired in the morass of the mud-clogged routes. Once bogged down, we did not have the capacity to extricate ourselves. Just impossible.

Hebrews 4 reminds us today that our Savior stepped into our world and was able to identify with our impossible situation because He, too, experienced the threat of temptation's miry morass—yet, without sin. The Greek word, *sumpathein* (from which we get our word "sympathize") conveys the idea of Jesus not only sympathizing with our suffering but also suffering when we suffer.

Based on His initiating work as High Priest, we are exhorted to come to God's throne of grace to find His delivering grace and receive His mercy when we find ourselves in the morass of personal temptation that threatens to engulf and paralyze us. In fact, we are reminded to be confident (vs. 16) in His willingness and capacity to supply deliverance in our need.

Once mired in the Malian mud, we could only wait for the next passing truck. We knew the Muslim truck driver would readily halt his journey to get down into the muck of the knee-deep mud, attach a chain to our pickup, and save us from our impossible situation. We knew his willing help was based on his own personal experience facing the challenge of mud!

Jesus stands ready to deliver us from our spiritual morass. So, let us boldly approach His throne and find saving mercy and delivering grace.

DIG DEEPER

- Are you facing a temptation presently that feels like a hopeless morass of past failure? What can you do today to help you confidently approach God with that temptation and find grace and strength to face that temptation?

The Calm Before the Storm

READ GENESIS 39:1-6a

Have you ever had something taken away from you that was so important to you? I remember when I was ten years old, I was at my neighbor's house and we were watching a movie. Their older brother always used to joke that my bike was stolen, and would make me come outside so he could say "just kidding!" So on this particular day, I expected him to do the same joke as always, except this time, I was determined not to fall for his joke again! He came in, telling me my bike was stolen and I left the room, to just get the joke over with. Except when I came outside my bike was actually gone. *Gone! Stolen!* This bike had taken me on so many adventures and I was heartbroken. The worst part was that you could see where the thief had jetted off with my bike across the lawn.

Maybe you are thinking about a time when something special was taken from you. Think of the heartbreak, the anger, the frustration. That is probably what Joseph felt in our story.

So far in the story, we know that Joseph has been gifted with dreams. His brothers felt threatened by his talent, so they throw him into a pit and sell him. Joseph, probably feeling betrayed, sad, and angry is now living a life of hardship. But even though Joseph endured this hardship, God still looked upon Joseph with blessing and favor, as we see in verses 2-6. Even though Joseph's own family got rid of him, the God of the universe still gave Joseph favor and blessing in the trial. As we move forward in the story of Joseph we will see more trials, but God is constantly there, never forgetting Joseph.

DIG DEEPER

- How have you seen God's favor in your life?
- What is a recent trial you have endured where you have seen God's favor throughout the trial?

Weeding Out Temptation

READ GENESIS 39:6b-10

Few activities satisfy me as much as gardening. Last year our yard looked the best it has under our care. The lone exception was a plot in our vegetable garden, due to a family miscommunication about who was tending it. It was neglected until, at the end of the season, it was an eyesore. Dense weeds ran knee-high, sapping nutrients from the soil. At the end of the season, I pulled out thorny plants that pricked my fingers. Small trees had deep roots that needed to be dug out. Vines crept into the herb garden, looking to strangle the basil, stealing water and nutrients.

In my battles with temptation, pulling out small seedlings takes much less force, energy, and time than completely clearing an overgrown plot. The battle is won much faster when I immediately surrender to the Spirit and refuse to let the thought take root. If I linger beyond an initial thought, leaving my weeding to a monthly task instead of a daily one, a much greater strength is needed to “clear” the land.

In Joseph’s response in today’s reading, we see that he does not allow temptation to take root. He swiftly rebuffs Potiphar’s wife. Whether Potiphar’s wife is desirable or lovely doesn’t matter. She is not a temptation because nothing that Potiphar’s wife could offer him would be worth sinning against his God.

Joseph does not give into temptation, as Adam and Eve did, for wanting to have the knowledge of God. He does not give into temptation, as Samson later would, being worn down by the pleas of Delilah. Joseph firmly states his position, and then flees as best he can.

DIG DEEPER

- What regular habits or activities could you start that would help keep your mind free from temptations?
- What habits or activities should you avoid to help you be more successful in avoiding or fighting temptation?

The Struggle to Do Right

READ GENESIS 39:11-20a

I found myself caught in a web of my own ambition and desire. Much of my life had been focused on another career, which required an unhealthy spotlight on self. My wife and late mother-in-law helped me look at the world from a different lens. Their help came in the form of simply witnessing their kindness, grace, and continuous forgiveness. They had experienced more pain and sorrow than I could ever imagine, yet they were able to exude more joy and humility than I ever had. These two women provided an example by simply being. I could feel God reaching out to soften my own rusted heart.

Temptation takes many forms. The new path for me (which included becoming a special education teacher) seemed fraught with heartache and lonely tragedy. I have often been tempted to walk away in order to escape the agonizing drudgery the world desires to hand out. However, God always seems to whisper in my ear each time I find my soul drowning. It never becomes easier. But, the Holy Spirit holds us up and invites us to the table. Friends disappear into the shadows, yet God is always beside me, keeping me company.

The world often clutches our “cloak” in an attempt to ensnare our weakness. Our weakness is simply a frail garment. In contrast, God’s strength is everlasting and will shelter us through any storm. I have seen a bigoted world burn “with anger” at my wife’s continued faith in God. I have felt gnashing of teeth from those I once viewed as brothers and sisters. Joseph’s story helps us recognize that doing what is right can come with worldly consequences. Though verse 20 ends with *“Joseph was there in the prison,”* I take comfort knowing *“the Lord was with him,”* as He is with us.

DIG DEEPER

- Temptation can wear many masks. How can you recognize when the world is “offering opportunities” that inevitably lead to a path of destruction?
- How does God reveal Himself to you throughout the days filled with peace and throughout the days of struggle?
- How do you hear God’s “whispers of encouragement” during those times of trial?

His Unstoppable Plan

READ GENESIS 39:20b-23

The Lord was with Joseph, Joshua and Daniel and is with us. It's hard to think of more comforting words with which to stand and fight temptation. In this case, the temptation to say, "woe is me."

Almost four years ago to the day, I went to work on what I thought was just another day, only to learn that I was being shown the door—after nearly 10 years of service. It all happened so fast—it felt like the proverbial "rug being pulled out from under me" scenario. I don't remember my first thought, but it was probably something like feeling "caught." Caught as if I had been exposed. The comfort zone bubble I so coveted just burst. Now what?! The temptation to move towards an un-trusting pity party of one immediately set in but, looking back, I knew that the Lord was with me and was saying "trust Me."

In these last 4 years since that cold (in more ways than one) day in January, I was married and have been welcomed into a new family, traveled globally more than all my other years combined, have entered an entirely new career field and, most certainly and even recently, have waded through some dark days and nights. I don't pretend to know how it all fits together but I do know the One who does. Never in my wildest imagination did I ever think that 3 months after my job loss I would be on a plane to eastern Congo, or later to China to meet new in-laws, but I think that's the point. He knew.

We must fight that temptation to wallow, complain and question, and stay focused on Him because His plan is unstoppable. You never know what is around the next bend—stay on board. I can almost hear Joseph saying to us when we get caught in a bad spot..."just wait, the next part is pretty incredible."

DIG DEEPER

- Take some time to think back to a pivotal moment in your life. Reflect on the path and the journey since that time. Do you see His hand guiding you?
- What can you do to grow in your trust that God is in control?

Constant Invitation

READ JAMES 1:12-15

"Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light...In confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and closed isolation of the heart. Sin must be brought into the light. What is unspoken is said openly and confessed. All that is secret and hidden comes to light."

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*²

As I was preparing this devotional, I kept coming back to this quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, *Life Together*. While this passage in James is about temptation, we can see how temptation directly leads to sin and death. Temptation is a part of the broken world we live in, and thus we cannot control when the evil one will come upon us with temptation. What we can control, however, is our reaction to being tempted.

Just like what Bonhoeffer said about sin being brought into the light, temptation can be defeated by bringing it into the light. Constant prayer and devotion with Jesus Christ shuns darkness from our lives. As Christians, we can go through life knowing that God will never leave us or forsake us, but it is still up to us to invite Him into our present circumstances at all times. Perseverance in this practice will draw us closer to God, and further away from temptation and sin.

Go back and read all of James 1. Notice how James speaks heavily on perseverance immediately before this passage. Having perseverance in our prayer lives draws us closer to God and further from the temptations in our lives.

DIG DEEPER

- What are some ways you can "bring into light" the areas of your life that you need God to transform?
- Consider joining a small group or becoming accountability partners with someone close in your life as a way to "bring into light" the hidden areas that need to be defeated.

THE CUP-
BEARER
DID NOT
REMEMBER
JOSEPH.
HE
FORGOT
HIM. TWO
YEARS
PASSED.

Lost and Found

Faith that Perseveres in Prayer

READ LUKE 18:1-8

But I did persevere in prayer. I did continually knock on the windows of heaven. I did repeatedly beg God to heal me. I even went to special healing services and would go forward for special intercession.

Eczema. Not a pretty condition. People stare at you with pity and sometimes disgust. Some feel you're dirty. Others think you're contagious. Children don't want to touch you or stand next to you. People avoid you.

Unsilently. Uncomfortable. Unpleasant. I felt repulsive, revolting, hideous and gross. Eczema caused many of my tears. It complicated my world and relationships. It was the source of much heartache and stress. I lived in a lonely reality which few could share. And God was seemingly deaf to my cries.

How must Joseph have felt? He must have asked God to deliver him from his brothers ... from the pit ... from the traders ... from Egypt ... from Potiphar's house ... from prison. And heaven was silent. Certainly, he had more cause for despair than I. He was cruelly and unjustly treated and persecuted, while I merely suffer from a chronic disease.

But God hears. There is no denying that. The question is will we allow our faith to be shaken or do we keep bringing our requests before God. For if we always get what we want when we want, of what use is faith? It is during our times of need that God has the chance to prove Himself faithful. And it is in our times of waiting that we have the chance to exercise faith.

DIG DEEPER

- Think back on some of the hardest times of your life. Did you pray often to God? If you did, did His healing/deliverance/help come immediately? What did you learn during the waiting process?
- Think of the widow in this passage. Her persistence lay in her great need. Do you realize how much you need God? Unlike the judge in this passage, God is compassionate and full of grace. What can help you persist in faith when you feel your prayers are unanswered?

Making Sacrifices

READ MATTHEW 19:28-30

After reading today's passage, two things really stood out to me: God will renew all things and there will be sacrifices that need to be made in order to follow Jesus. I've learned that to be renewed you have to make the sacrifices.

I've made a lot of mistakes, mistakes that left me feeling guilty, ashamed and unable to receive His forgiveness. I was lost in a prison of my own making. I knew the promise of renewal but I wasn't making the sacrifices to truly follow Him.

Rick Warren says, "If not to God, you will surrender to the opinions or expectations of others, to money, to resentment, to fear, or to your own pride, lusts, or ego. You were designed to worship God, and if you fail to worship Him, you will create other things [idols] to give your life to."³

That was me. I needed to change my priorities, throw some stuff out, or I would lose my family. I needed to stop chasing the things of this world, to stop walking in shame and guilt and thinking that I wasn't worthy of the forgiveness offered because of what I had done.

So with the help of believing men, I was able to forgive myself and receive His forgiveness for all my sins. Then I reviewed all my priorities through God's eyes. Who am I serving: myself or God?

Now I spend time daily with God, getting to know Him and who He wants me to be. This has given me hope in the knowledge that I will someday sit before Him at the renewal of all things. He knows what I've done, has forgiven my sins and loves me in spite of it. He is my Savior.

DIG DEEPER

- Jesus says we will have to leave things behind for His sake. What is occupying your time and attention that is keeping you from a closer relationship with Jesus?

Ready and Awaiting Commission

READ GENESIS 40:1-8

(Well, things were looking bleak for Joseph, to say the least. He had already been sold into Egyptian slavery by his own brothers, falsely accused and convicted of assaulting Potiphar's wife, and thrown into prison. He'd been separated from his home and his family, and was now placed lower than a slave—a criminal, in jail. He was lowest of the low, especially in such a power-driven society as ancient Egypt's. This was where Joseph was at the time when the Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker were thrown into prison alongside him.)

Have you ever been confronted with an opportunity, large or small, to bring glory to God, and turned it down because you were too busy? Or not in the right mood? Perhaps it didn't seem worth the trouble, or you weren't qualified enough, or you assumed the job could be offered to someone else. Whatever the reasons, it's easy to become so caught up in ourselves, our lives, and our schedules that we don't listen to God and His callings. God can call anywhere and anytime to anyone—but when we feel sure of what to do, or have our hearts set on something, God's call can seem more of a muffled suggestion than a divine command. We can become so obsessed with our objectives that we may miss the chance to glorify God through it.

Take Joseph—sentenced to imprisonment for a crime he didn't commit, he seems to have had more of a right to be angry than any of us ever would in our petty, day-to-day struggles. Yet even in that prison, he found the strength to let the Lord use him—even when he didn't know what the outcome would be. There were the two newest inmates, the baker and cupbearer, distressed after a restless night. They probably expected no compassion from anyone else, being in a prison, yet Joseph asked them why they were sad. They responded by saying they had dreamt strange things, but no one could tell them their meanings. Joseph then explained that only God could truly interpret dreams, and glorified God when he did explain their dreams to them. Of course, the rest is history but the lesson lingers still. We as believers should always be ready to let God use us in ways we could never imagine, whether on the living room couch, in a cubicle, or even on the cold floor of a prison cell.

DIG DEEPER

- When was a time you missed God's opportunities because of self-imposed hindrances? Is there anything God may be calling you to do now?
- How do you credit God for your gifts and talents?

Joseph's Plea

READ GENESIS 40:9-23

We've all been confined by circumstances from which we long to be free. Sometimes circumstances are a consequence of bad decisions; sometimes they're the result of living in a broken world; sometimes they're just bad luck. Regardless of how they come about, I generally fixate on only one thing: getting free. I yearn for that blessed release, that lightness of the weight lifting, that joy of surviving.

When freedom comes, I'm generally flooded with gratitude, which (when I'm not being self-absorbed) throws me at God's feet. I thank Him for sticking with me and for supporting me as I struggled to get through. Then I turn the page, close the book, and move on.

Maybe this is why Joseph's plea to the cupbearer stuck out to me. Joseph made a small request: *"...keep me in mind as it goes well with you."*

Perhaps moving on (even when done with a spirit of thankfulness) isn't quite right? After all, Jesus, who endured much suffering, didn't just thank God for helping Him through and move on. His love compelled Him to return to those who were still suffering. He comforted them; He encouraged them; He even let Thomas explore His wounds.

Maybe the knowledge I gain from working through difficult circumstances isn't just for my own benefit; maybe it can be used to support someone who is still confined by what I have escaped. Maybe I've been freed not so I can walk away, but so I can understand others' pain and stand with them in their struggles. Maybe one of God's rewards to me for surviving my own battles is the opportunity to help others survive theirs.

I pray that we all will hear Joseph's plea and follow Jesus' example of returning to and standing with those who still suffer.

DIG DEEPER

- What difficult circumstances have you overcome that may give you an insight into the suffering of others?
- Are you willing to revisit your pain as a way of connecting with, supporting, and loving others who are currently suffering?

Finding Answers

READ GENESIS 41:1-16

"Analyze these."

At work and at school, I remember receiving assignments with data, numbers, and other information, and being charged with the task of interpreting and analyzing them. I had to check variables, parameters, and the study methodology. Was there a bias not readily seen? How should I interpret the results?

Nowadays, information is certainly not scarce; far from it. We are inundated with news and information constantly. Neither is there a scarcity of voices offering their analyses and interpretation of all that information. A great many voices proclaim they know truth or have answers, each clamoring for our attention.

It is not wrong to consider opinions of trusted experts; after all, we need others' voices to see what we cannot see. We also cannot ignore our conscience and gut instincts. But we cannot solely rely on those to inform us and our view of the world.

Pharaoh certainly had the smartest people he could find to help him interpret his dreams, but none of the best in his court could answer his questions. Just like Pharaoh, we won't find all that we need by seeking the world's smartest sources, either.

Where can we turn for interpretation and understanding with the complex, deep, difficult questions and situations we encounter in life? Joseph offers an answer in verse 16: *"It is not in me. God will give."*

"God will give." The answers will come by asking God. He will provide the perspective and answers we seek. Our situation may not necessarily change, but God's perspective is the one that will lead to truth, greater understanding, and a changed heart. We may not ever know all the answers on earth, but we are transformed and find an abiding peace by seeking God and what He gives.

DIG DEEPER

- What is a situation in your life which you haven't prayed over and sought God's perspective?
- How have you found God's wisdom in past circumstances?

God Maneuvers; Joseph Perseveres

READ GENESIS 41:17-40

Amazing! An insensitive, proud shepherd's son, 13 years enslaved and unjustly jailed—a “lost soul” by our standards—was so “found” that he rose to rule in a powerful nation. God impressively maneuvers His person to the right position at the right time. The phrase “*for such a time as this*” comes to mind (Esther 4:14). God, through Joseph, saves countless families and nationalities, including Israel, from death by famine. Abraham's descendant is already a blessing to the nations of the earth. God guides and blesses in His guiding. Here are two brief personal stories illustrating this principle.

Once, while hiking near the Garden of the Gods in Colorado I was meandering up a path in the mountains. There were other hikers including children. I was navigating a path next to a drop-off of 30 to 40 feet when a young girl fell off the rock face she was climbing with her brother. I was in exactly the right place at the right time to catch her while she was airborne before she fell off the edge. A half-second more or less and I could not have caught her. God's maneuvering was perfect! Another time, taking a different route home from college I saw two young children in a snow drift, sitting shoeless and alone. Lost, their Heavenly Father found them using one of His children to bring them safely home.

How did Joseph persevere? Joseph had God with him while a slave and in jail. He also had God's promise of exaltation from his two dreams. God gifted Joseph with administrative and interpretive abilities that Joseph used to serve his overlords. Rather than bitterly suppressing his talents, he blessed others joyfully while glorifying God. Likewise, I daily endeavor to obediently study God's Word and hear Him in prayer. I daily exercise gifts like teaching, discernment, and hospitality as the needs arise. Like Joseph, we may not know the end from the beginning, but God does and He knows and loves us. He joins us on our journey and guides us in our going.

DIG DEEPER

- When has God maneuvered you to the right place at the right time?
- How do you draw near to God? What special talents do you have and how are you (or can you) use them for God's glory?

Prepared

READ GENESIS 41:41-57

Every day I dress in a suit and tie and go to work. It becomes a uniform that makes me presentable to those I'm serving. Unlike Joseph, I have never been "robed" by another who grants me total authority, especially not coming out of incarceration and humiliation.

Joseph's literal transition from rags to robes and poverty to prosperity was instantaneous. How many times had he lost everything only to have found even more the next time? It was the result of taking each day and each cycle with humility, obedience and patience. The cycle of losing everything and then being restored was preparing him for God's purposes in God's timing. This cycle must have been wearing on Joseph.

I know I need more patience even in the small things in life. Results and answers don't come fast enough for me, but lasting answers and lasting preparedness, only come in the long, methodical journey with God, especially in the times I feel alone. Joseph knew he was special through his boyhood dreams, but he still had to learn how to become the man God would use through a circuitous path that would mold him for those special responsibilities.

I haven't had Joseph's drama, but cycles are still there and it reminds me that I need patience in my life to consider God's way, not my way, and to learn how to journey with God. Joseph had been through times of plenty and times of want in his young life, but the lesson of waiting on the Lord never failed him or failed to further God's purposes for His people.

In my daily walk, I need to be prepared to wait on the Lord and strengthen my walk with Him by coming to His word and to Him in prayer. It is the only way to be prepared for the cycles we go through.

DIG DEEPER

- How are you preparing to be ready for the next time hardship comes?
- Will others be drawn to Jesus by what they see in you because of your daily preparation?

ALTHOUGH
JOSEPH
RECOG-
NIZED HIS
BROTH-
ERS, THEY
DID NOT
RECOG-
NIZE HIM.

Open Wounds

Who Does Christ See?

READ LUKE 6:27-36; 23:34

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you." (Luke 6:27-28)

Jesus' words here are as powerful as they are challenging. They challenged the disciples at the time they were spoken, and they challenge us today as well. If I'm honest, when I find myself in a situation where I am "hated, cursed, or hurt," or even one in which I am doing the "hating, cursing, or hurting," I find myself playing the victim. I tell myself I'm not to blame; that I didn't do anything wrong. I automatically point out the faults of the individual who has wronged me and ride a pride-filled train.

This past year has been a journey of growth and struggle for me. Wise and godly people have reminded me along the way that I am an image-bearer of Christ; that I am made in God's image (*imago Dei*). It's one thing to know that I am an image-bearer of Christ and claim that as truth, but it's another thing to live it out.

Jesus' words in this passage call us to do more than just blame others or play the victim. He calls His disciples to go above and beyond; to turn the other cheek (vs. 29), to give generously (vs. 30), to be merciful as He is merciful (vs. 36). What He's calling us to do is to live into the reality that every human being is an image-bearer of Christ and that we are all created in the image of God.

Can we stop and unpack that for a second? There are certainly events, people of power, and injustices that are evil and wrong. But God still sees those people as His creation, His priesthood. How am I reflecting Christ with prideful words, opinions, and maybe hatred towards a son or daughter of the King? I'm not. What if we dare greatly to see each individual as Christ's image-bearer deserving of *agape* love?

DIG DEEPER

- Who is someone in your life who is hard to love? Time today to pray for that individual.
- Invite God to reveal the brokenness in that situation. Name the brokenness and seek love that only Christ can give you for that individual.

A Melody of Kindness

READ EPHESIANS 4:20-32

Recently I had some great surprises as I visited Florida. The most exciting one was a reunion with my Sunday School teacher from when my family lived in Lebanon. As we met, we had a lot of good conversations about life, but my favorite moment was reminiscing about how he would teach us Bible verses by making up melodies for our memory verses each week.

The verse I remember very well from that time is the one that talks about kindness from Ephesians 4:32. It says, *“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”* I don’t think I will ever forget that verse or the melody of it. It is in my memory as if it is a part of me.

Reflecting on that verse makes me realize how I often know what I should do, but I fail to live it out. Being called to kindness, compassionate, and forgiveness isn’t the easiest thing to do. It is a high standard requiring that we act and react in order to build one another up as we discipline ourselves to keep the unity of the church. This is a clear invitation to put off our old self and follow in the path of Jesus.

It is very important for us to remember that as we follow Christ we have hope in Him, that through His power working in us we can be changed daily, renewed in the attitude of our minds, and put on a new self that looks just like Christ.

Paul wrote these words to the church of Ephesus describing the fullness and richness of life in Christ. The letter to the Ephesians practically explains how to be the church, the body of Christ. These verses in Ephesians are not just words. They are a melody that we must sing each day, a challenging way of living that will not just change us but will change our city and the world.

DIG DEEPER

- Think about the different relationships in your life. Identify one or two where you could better live out vs. 32, showing compassion and kindness, or forgiveness, just as Christ has shown it to you?

Speaking to the Darkness

READ GENESIS 42:1-17

Hello darkness, my old friend.

I've come to talk with you again.

Simon and Garfunkel's opening line in the song "The Sound of Silence" points to our struggle to connect with others. Darkness becomes our familiar companion. How easily, when wanting comfort, we return to places of hurt, fear, or even anger.

In today's reading, Jacob sends his sons off to Egypt to buy grain so that they all may live. However, he refuses to send Benjamin, for fear he would be harmed or lost, just as Joseph was lost so many years before. Joseph is confronted with "old friends" when his brothers arrive in Egypt. He remembers his dreams about his brothers, pretends to be a stranger, and speaks to them harshly. The brothers bow down to Joseph, the one who has the power to sell them the needed grain. As Joseph accuses the brothers of being spies they insist that they are honest men. Are they? Or do they lie to cover what they have done (Joseph's robe dipped in blood)? Have they told the lie of Joseph's death so often that they now believe it? Joseph must choose to take a risk or remain silent.

I, too, have welcomed many an "old friend" into my life, my mind, or my relationships. I can easily recall words and feelings from an argument decades ago, or replay recordings that say I am not good enough or that I don't fit in. I can quietly side with fear and anxiety, even as Jesus tells me otherwise (John 14:1), because trust and peace require too much work.

DIG DEEPER

- Identify which lingering hurts and open wounds that you return to like an old companion. What are the triggers that set you on this path?
- How can you release these burdens to Christ?

Mixed Bag

READ GENESIS 42:18-38

Shortly before I turned 11 years old, my parents sent me to live with a family in a different city so that I could attend a very good school. It was a huge blessing that I had a place to stay. My first few months went well, but things soon changed. The relationship went sour and I had a rough time until I left. Recently, I reconnected with one of the older children and he asked me for forgiveness. It has been a mixed bag of emotions; sometimes I feel sad because of the events, at other times I am glad for the opportunities.

Joseph appears to experience a similar mixed-bag of emotions in the passage we read. It has been about 13 years since he was sold to slavery. He is probably hurt by his brothers' poor actions but he sees how the dreams were fulfilled by them. He feels pain, but he praises God for sending him ahead to preserve his family during this deadly famine. He puts them in prison for three days, yet still turns around to weep upon hearing their discussion.

We should never take for granted the effect of negative experiences, especially hurt, pain or grief caused by someone. We need to take steps towards healing and forgiveness. Although the path to forgiveness and peace may be different for each person, the Holy Spirit is there to guide us.

Joseph's path, though an interesting ploy, appears to include seeing and knowing that his little brother was alive and well especially after such a traumatic experience with his brothers.

DIG DEEPER

- Which tough times in your past has God used to bring about His purposes in your life?
- How can you better experience God's peace as you think back on the "hurts" and wounds of your past?

Trusting God in the Dark

READ GENESIS 43:1-14

Earlier this week (chapter 42), Joseph lit a fuse and then sat back and watched the fun...or maybe watched them sweat! Today we find ourselves between the brothers' two trips to Egypt to buy groceries, and there is a big family discussion going on between father and sons. In spite of the uncertainty about the period of time between these two shopping sprees, we know (vs.10) that it was long enough for son number four, Judah, to complain to his dad that it was all taking too long for Jacob to decide the next step, and we see enough of the discussion to empathize with Jacob.

We know that the Living God intends that the entire story of Joseph teach us numerous important lessons, but what of this small portion of the account? Both of the players (Jacob and sons) have acknowledged their trust in the Living God — the brothers in 42:28 and now Jacob in 43:14. And yet, there is a struggle going on, particularly for Jacob, since he is the family decision-maker. Jacob did not know what his sons had done to their brother, or that Joseph was still alive. The future (and the past!) were very dark for him. Eventually, however, Jacob does choose to trust "God Almighty."

To me the lesson is this: all too often in the midst of struggles, our own trust in the Living God can get set aside while we try to figure things out in our own strength. The order we all need to learn and put into practice is to go to God first and let Him work in us to "figure things out."

DIG DEEPER

- Think about times in your life in which you were "in the dark." What did you do? What did it take, or what might it take now, for you to trust God in your struggle?

Living in Kairos Moments

READ GENESIS 43:15-34

There is so much anticipation and pent-up emotion unfolding in this portion of Joseph's story. It's fascinating as you consider the depth and immensity of what is playing out. These sons of Israel have come back so troubled, so steeped in guilt, so shaken by fear, trying to cover their tracks and bowing so low to the ground it's probably embarrassing for Joseph. They fear for their lives so greatly because everything is on the line. They brought their youngest brother at the risk of their father's life. Now this ruler who was harsh to them in the past has taken him into the privacy of his house to do whatever he pleases. Their future is totally in his hands. They are weak, broken, vulnerable.

There is an opportunity for this story to have a much different outcome. Yet Joseph does not seek retribution, and instead is so moved by the sight of his little brother for the first time in at least a dozen years that he cannot contain himself. So much has happened since Joseph was sold into slavery and Benji looks so different. His love for his brother and his compassion for his family is as strong as ever, despite what was done to him. At the same time, these brothers are bowing to Joseph just as his own crazy dreams—the ones that got him in so much trouble—clearly displayed. It's a *Kairos* Moment where chronological time stands still. The hand of God Almighty has done all this—for a bigger purpose.

DIG DEEPER

- Think about a time when either you were showed forgiveness and compassion you didn't deserve, or you expressed compassion and forgiveness when you could have gotten revenge.
- As you ponder the sacrifice of the Son, how are you allowing the Holy Spirit to build patience and self-restraint into your character such that problems, discomforts, and painful situations—that once overwhelmed you with anxiety—can now be laid out before God as an offering for Him to use for His bigger story and for His glory?

Choices Have Power

READ GENESIS 44:1-34

"Our choices...have power to affect others in ways we did not intend."

In what is arguably one of the greatest arcs in the story of Joseph, many hearts are exposed. Most clearly, Judah had a change of heart after seeing the grief that marked the rest of his father's life after the "loss" of Joseph. Judah knew he was the source of his father's grief.

Many times, our choices affect those around us in ways that we did not anticipate. I was 16, and while I was seen as a "good girl" almost all of my life, I switched to a different school that year and started to make some bad choices when it came to boys. I was dating a young man who was not a believer and my mother and I argued regularly about it. One day she pulled me aside and said to me, "Don't you know how this affects me?!" I could almost feel my immature heels digging so far into the ground in that moment that I could have touched the earth's core. As my stubbornness grew, so did the relational canyon between us.

Although I had not intentionally made my choices to hurt her, I failed to realize that my selfish choices (like Judah's) could ultimately mar my mother's heart in the process. I wish my mom's grief would have affected me more than it did. I was not mature enough to see the grief behind the anger. I regret it to this day.

Our choices, whether large or small, affect those around us, from my poor attitude at home affecting the whole family to my much larger choices in life. The bottom line is our choices never affect only ourselves. They have power to affect others in ways we did not intend and often those closest to us are affected the most.

DIG DEEPER

- Reflecting on your own life, what choices have you made that impacted those around you and how did it change your relationship with them?
- What choices are you making right now that affect others around you that you know you need a change of heart in? Slow down now to reflect, repent and ask God to change your heart.

AS SOON
AS JOSEPH
APPEARED,
HE THREW
HIS ARMS
AROUND
HIS FATHER
AND WEPT
FOR A
LONG
TIME.

Reconciliation

Costly Reconciliation

READ ROMANS 12:9-21

"Let love be genuine," Paul writes, challenging the church in Rome to a high standard of unity and forgiveness towards one another. Learning to love others better is a journey that God calls us on, lasting our whole lives. It's easy to love others when you're laughing with them at a joke, or enjoying each other in community, but it's much harder when they've hurt you deeply. How do we love these people in spite of what they've done?

Reconciliation can be so difficult that sometimes we'd rather just walk away from the relationship instead of trying to mend the brokenness. This passage in Romans challenges us to a higher standard than we would often like to live up to. The type of love mentioned in verse 9 is *agape*, used by the Greeks to describe unconditional love; to love others despite their faults.

Choosing to respond with love towards others despite our own pain begins to change us. This process isn't easy, and comes with a lot of sacrifice. It challenges us to not just love when it's convenient, but also when it seems easier to simply walk away from the relationship because the cost of true reconciliation seems too great to handle.

Looking at Joseph's story of costly reconciliation, we can reflect on our own choice of forgiving others. When he chose to look past the pain that his brothers caused, it brought healing to his entire family. When we feel like the pain is too great to forgive those who have hurt us, the only thing that we can do is look to the cross and see the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. Because of His great love for us, we stand reconciled with God and able to show that same kind of reconciliation towards others.

DIG DEEPER

- Take a moment to reflect on your community. Where does reconciliation need to happen?
- Think about a time when someone forgave you when you didn't deserve it. How did it change that relationship or impact your life?

Reconciliation in Community

READ MATTHEW 18:15-20

I grew up with three younger brothers. Younger me thought they were the worst! They would mess with my stuff, make annoying noises, and even look at me weird! The nerve, seriously. There were plenty of times we fought with words and, of course, fists. And there were many times we came to a seemingly impassable situation. The only solution was to run screaming, “MOMMMMMMMM,” because no amount of logic would convince my brother he was wrong. I needed back-up!

We all know this scene too well: kid A looks at kid B, kid B reacts, kid A attacks. This scene never stops playing out in our lives, and often times, escalates to a full blown fight where hurtful words and actions stop a relationship in its tracks. Jesus steps in with a simple formula for when two people wrong each other: go chat with them.

Wait. That’s not right? Is it? If someone sins I am supposed to talk to them about it? Just go right up and have a conversation about it? Yep, check verse 15 one more time. Matthew is relating the words of Christ to us in today’s passage with the understanding that people mess up. Jesus says: talk to your brother, sister, friend, family, church. Start here.

But we are all stubborn people, and often, just talking isn’t going to help. Jesus reframes the idea of reconciliation to include community. He tells us to start with a one-on-one conversation and, if it works, then you have gained a family member! Still, Jesus knows that it might not work, so Jesus says we should bring a friend, because reconciliation isn’t something we tend to do well in isolation. Many times we need the strength of the community to achieve reconciliation and forgiveness in broken relationships. He goes on to say that there might be some further hurtful consequences to sin, but our passage ends with hope. Jesus finishes this conversation with the oft misquoted verse 20. Jesus includes this because He knows the Holy Spirit is in the business of healing and restoration, and Jesus knows that if two or three are gathered with the intent of following Christ, forgiveness and reconciliation will flow freely.

DIG DEEPER

- What are times when you confronted someone about sin or broken relationship? How did it go? Were your goals reconciliation and forgiveness, or something less noble?
- When someone approaches you to speak truth into your life how do you respond?

Preparing the Way

READ GENESIS 45:1-7

It often takes the passage of time to appreciate unpleasant seasons in our lives. When are things going to improve? Why is this happening? Is the change worth the cost? Will I ever be the same again?

In our reading today, Joseph shared with his brothers that he understood the purpose behind his struggles: to be in the position to save the very people who had condemned him to his suffering. His path prepared the way for reconciliation with his brothers and the saving of all Israel.

But let's back up a minute and be honest. It took Joseph a serious amount of time and even a little trickery to convince himself that his brothers had changed enough to deserve his help. Even with the transformation he had gone through, it seemed that there might be a little of the old Joseph in there. The one that seemed content to have a fine cloak, be his father's favorite and power trip over his brothers. In the end though, the change in his heart was greater than his bitterness, and there was healing and forgiveness. His path to this place wasn't an easy or welcome one. My point is this: it seems doubtful Joseph would have willingly gone down the road that was set before him given its innate struggles. After all, could he have dealt with the foreknowledge of what he would have to go through even given the hopeful outcome? In the spirit of honesty, let me confess that I don't think I would sign up for that either.

However, and thankfully, Jesus did sign up for that. He knew His path. He knew we could never prove ourselves worthy, so He endured the cross though He had done nothing to deserve it. He laid down His privilege for us. US! We who have done nothing to deserve Him. He just loves us. He prepares a way for us to be changed, and we are never the same.

DIG DEEPER

- Are you on a difficult path that is bringing about change in your heart? Are there areas in the struggle that need surrendering to God?
- What outcome are you hoping for in your strivings? How can your prayer life help you be accepting of what God's intentions are?

"... but God ..."

READ GENESIS 45:8-15

"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God..." (Genesis 45:8)

God once again turns "common sense" on its head. Joseph's reply to his brothers, when they came expecting the worst, is "but God" (vs. 8). He goes on to explain the unexpected way God used his brothers' mistreatment of him to bring good, something that was beyond his imagination. Joseph was able to see how God used those hardships to bring an unforeseen benefit and blessing to and through a shepherd boy, Joseph. Joseph gives us a pattern for reconciling with those who have wronged us.

How many times have you had a "but God" experience?

My childhood family was filled with dysfunction, "but God" used that hurt to bring me to Himself. He healed the hurt and showed me how He meant for family to function. He brought me into a new spiritual family, His "forever family."

I have been let down by leaders, "but God" used those experiences to show me more of Himself, grow me in unexpected ways and open new doors of opportunity.

Some of my plans and dreams have not turned out the way I expected or hoped, "but God" has given me new hopes and dreams.

Joseph grasped the truth that God's hand is never shortened; He can use the seemingly worst for His Kingdom's and our best. He is not limited by, any circumstance. We look at what God brought through a carpenter's son, who was born in a hovel and hung on a Cross. "But God" sent Him as the Savior of the world, who came to bring new life and hope to the hurts and hardships in our lives.

DIG DEEPER

- Think about the "but God" experiences in your life.
- How have you seen Him turn things on their head? How can you better trust Him to redeem an unresolved situation?

Are We There Yet?

READ GENESIS 45:16-28

Many years ago two relatives of ours (a pastor and his wife) suddenly and without comment stopped having anything to do with us. During one stretch of time they lived perhaps 35 miles from us and would visit friends of theirs who lived just two blocks from our apartment, but they said not a word about being in the neighborhood.

Years passed, families relocated, kids grew up and married—and still no contact. Then three years ago I was able to find a current address for them (yes, there are some good things to be said for the internet!) and I wrote them a letter. Months went by before we received a reply: “Apologies; your letter was thrown into a box during our move to a new place and we just rediscovered it.” There was no explanation of the breach, no attempt at justification, and no expression of regret. A little family news. Nothing more.

In the months and years since, there have been occasional phone conversations, annual birthday cards and Christmas greetings mostly via email. But there’s been nothing to suggest deep, profound reconciliation.

The Joseph story, as you know by now, is a parallel to the Savior’s earthly experience several thousand years later. Clearly my story of estrangement and reconciliation is no parallel at all. It’s a contrast instead. But the contrast does make me wonder: what must it have been like in Heaven when the One who had willingly become sin and was completely abandoned by his Father returned Home—no longer estranged but beautifully, wonderfully reconciled? When we reach heaven, will it be the scene of boisterous happy reunions of people who were estranged on earth?

If Joseph’s and his brothers’ reconciliation offers us any clue, I expect so. And I long for it.

DIG DEEPER

- Is there anyone (anyones?) from whom you’re presently “estranged”? Do you find yourself yearning to be reconciled to them? Whether your answer is Yes or No, does the Joseph story give you any ideas for next steps?

Stop and Remember

READ GENESIS 46:1-27

We can only imagine the emotions bubbling inside of Jacob as he sets off to Egypt to be reunited with Joseph. Was he experiencing joy, anticipation, anxiousness, fear, or doubt? Perhaps all of the above? On his way, Jacob stops in Beersheba, a place both Isaac and Abraham had received a promise from God. In the midst of this emotionally-loaded journey, Jacob intentionally stops to seek God and God reminds Jacob of the promise He has made. Despite all Jacob has suffered, God's promises remain.

Suffering can lead us into the journey towards healing and reconciliation. It begins with reminding ourselves of the promises of God. During a dark season of my life, God gently reminded me of a truth I had forgotten. I was sitting outside and fidgeting with half of a black walnut shell when I realized how intricate the inside of this shell was. If I was so enthralled with God's creation of this broken shell, how much more intricate and valuable was I to God? King David knew that God's creation was good and that because he was part of God's creation that applied to him as well (Psalm 139:14). It applies to me, too. This truth was the beginning of my path of healing.

When you've known suffering, it's relieving to recognize that you are finally on the path of healing or reconciliation. It's easy for emotions to blind us. Jacob was finally on the path towards his son! Yet he stops to seek God and is reminded of God's promises and receives guidance on his path. Let's remind ourselves of the promises God has made to us as believers through Jesus Christ—no matter what stage of the journey we are on.

DIG DEEPER

- What has been a promise or truth of God that has helped you during a difficult time in your life?
- How can you intentionally stop to seek God and His promises while on the path of healing and reconciliation?

Empty Arms Filled

READ GENESIS 46:28-34

What's better than a reunion, especially one long-awaited, or one that seems even too much to hope for. Reading this passage you see the depth of Joseph's emotions—the pain of so many years of separation now washed in tears. You see it also from Jacob's (Israel's) experience. Here was his long-lost son, the one he was convinced was dead, and now he is alive and in his arms, arms that had ached for years to hold his dear son once more.

It made me think about our youngest son who ran away from home when he was sixteen. With a few dollars in their pockets, he and his best buddy left together. We scoured Milwaukee trying to find them but were unsuccessful. There was no way to contact him. Today he would have had a cell phone, but not then. All we could do was wait and weep and pray and weep and wait some more. There is no grief like that of losing a child. We hunkered down in our grief, expecting to hear the worst, just like Jacob. Days grew into weeks and the weeks added up, and still no word, until one day we received a message from a teen hotline telling us our son was okay. They would tell us nothing more than that, respecting the privacy of the teen runaways. But that was enough to lift our spirits and we clung to the hope of seeing him again.

When he finally returned to Milwaukee he went straight to his father who, to our son's astonishment, wrapped his arms around him and wept in forgiveness, in love, and in the joy of reconciliation. To this day our son, who is now 52-years-old, marvels at the welcome he received from a father who could love him so much. He now has a son of his own and realizes in the depths of his heart how painful such a separation would be for a parent.

Forgiveness and a desire to reconcile are two gifts that we can freely give. And what can compare to the joy we experience when these gifts are mutually expressed and mutually received.

DIG DEEPER

- What is a lost relationship you pray God would restore in your life? How would doing so bring you (or them) closer to Christ?

JACOB
BLESSED
JOSEPH
AND SAID,
"MAY THE
GOD WHO
HAS DELIV-
ERED ME
FROM ALL
HARM BLESS
YOU."

Blessing

Wait... What?!

READ JAMES 1:12-18; 2 CORINTHIANS 9:8-11

When my husband and I were a young married couple with two small children we loved attending Eastbrook Church and lived just a few blocks away, but always felt we were on the outside looking in. We were in the market for a new house and didn't feel tied to Eastbrook, so before we knew it, we had contracted to build a house in Port Washington. As it happens, the contract stalled due to an inexplicable obstacle, so we left that negotiation frustrated and disappointed. We wondered what the Lord could be doing.

Around the same time, we decided to be more intentional about our role at Eastbrook; to step up, rather than wait in the wings. This made all the difference. Soon we heard God's call to use our home for His purposes, not our desires. We knew what we were hearing from Him was true, but we could not see how this was to become a reality in our current situation. We started the search over, made an offer on a new house, and sold our old house; all within one week's time! It was as if we just woke up one morning in a different house. It wasn't really the house of our dreams nor did anyone else seem to particularly want it, but it was now our home and we would dedicate it to the Lord.

I can tell you, that this house has been a physical challenge. But that is inconsequential compared to the spiritual blessing that it has been; we have hosted a Life Group (10 years and counting), mentored engaged couples, fed countless internationals, prayed over struggling marriages, studied God's Word, given guitar lessons...the blessings go on and on. Our house is not beautiful, but we have let God use it, and us, according to His will. It is our prayer that this house will continue to be an outpouring of God's generosity and that all of it will result in thanksgiving to Him.

DIG DEEPER

- How has God blessed you in a way that gave you pause?
- When have you heard God calling you to something you wouldn't have chosen or expected?

Restoration His Presence

READ GENESIS 47:1-26

I lay on the bed, bleeding profusely, my heart aching over the loss of my fourth baby ("it's a girl," a lady in my Bible study had prophesied), and my spirit mourning the broken relationships in my family of origin. The day before this, my dad had sent me a letter stating that he disowned me due to boundaries I had set up to protect my children from multiple abusive relatives. I had cried all day, a deep cry, from the pit of my stomach. The next day I lost the baby. After two surgeries to remove all the tissue from the baby girl, the engulfing darkness surrounded me. In the midst of the blood, and the physical and emotional pain, I cried emphatically to the Lord, "I trust you, despite every awful feeling." Light surrounded my soul and the presence of Jesus was palpable. I had no answers or even relief from the pain, but I had His presence.

We are out of control of when the restoration happens. It may not happen how I want it, the way I want it or in the timing that I want it, but my promise in suffering is this: *"Your promise preserves my life"* (Psalm 119:50).

In my pain from a family that refuses to acknowledge any wrongdoings, I am transfixed by Jesus, crucified naked on the Cross. Separated from His father in heaven, He experienced rejection from many. Jesus suffered so that in our suffering we can experience His presence and light. *"After He suffered, He will see the light of life and be satisfied; by His knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities"* (Isaiah 58:11).

DIG DEEPER

- How can you cling, heart, soul, and mind, to Jesus in the midst of an unknown season?
- How are you actively waiting, recording and thanking Jesus for any restoration you might see?

Hope Beyond Lost

READ GENESIS 47:27-48:11

God began to restore Joseph's life. The future nation of Israel was saved from death due to starvation. His relationship with his brothers was restored by forgiveness, and his relationship with his father was restored.

But there was one relationship that could not be restored. Joseph's mother Rachel had died some years before. From a human perspective, this relationship was lost beyond hope. Death is a subject that makes us uncomfortable, but we all know that death is a part of life that cannot be ignored. (Ecclesiastes 3:2, Hebrews 9:27).

This was made agonizingly clear to me when my wife of forty years died. The devastation that I felt was indescribable. The depths of sorrow consumed my very being.

My only hope was to hang on to Jesus with the little strength that I had left. He reminded me that He understood how I felt, and that He had a solution to my pain. During His incarnation (God became a man) Jesus was fully human. He experienced the pain of sorrow because of the death of a loved one.

His relative John the Baptist was killed (Mark 6:26-28), and his friend Lazarus died (John 11:14). Jesus grieved the death of His friend. (John 11:35). But because He is also fully God, He destroyed death by His perfect life, death, burial, and resurrection.

Jesus asked the grieving sisters of Lazarus a question that I had to honestly ask myself: *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"* (John 11:25-26).

I do believe that Jesus has destroyed death and that my relationship with my wife will be restored. That is the hope in which I rejoice.

DIG DEEPER

- When you encounter circumstances in your life that causes you emotional pain or disappointment, where do you seek comfort or guidance?
- What, if anything, does the resurrection of Jesus Christ mean to you, and how does it affect your life?

Going Home

READ GENESIS 48:12-23

In today's verses, Jacob tells Joseph that God will take him *"back to the land of his fathers."* In other words, God will take Joseph home. Sometimes, like Joseph, people are forced to leave their homes and hope they will someday return or recover something of what they lost. Missionaries, however, leave their homes voluntarily, like the speaker in this poem:

The view out our girlhood windows grew dimmer / and the snug warm kitchen / the hum of voices we loved / made it hard to say how it happened / that all the small pleasures faded / and the trees at the edge of the yard marked a border / we knew we needed to cross / the poets write odes but words have yet to express / the discontent like an unweaned child / tugging at his mother's breast / we heard it at night when the house was quiet / between the dog's small involuntary sobs / the Spirit Himself groaning / for all the lost suffering children of God / from a distance we glimpsed them and ran / beyond the trees our fathers tenderly pruned / discovering our strength and courage / extending our hearts and hands / if we thought too much of the families we'd leave / or the ones we'd yet to lose / we would have remained / or returned to our comforts too soon / one day the tears will be gone from our eyes / we'll meet our parents again / we'll gather our daughters and sons / and together we'll all go Home / by faith we believe what we cannot see / His will be done / listen / the Spirit is calling / we who have heard it say come /

DIG DEEPER

- What do you think about leaving your home, your family, or your comforts behind to tell other people about God's fatherly love for them?
- The speaker of this poem believes that one day she'll enjoy an eternal home with God. What do you think about eternity? How do we get home to God? What is your responsibility in helping others get there, too?

Blessings or Curses

READ GENESIS 49:1-33

There's something about Jacob and blessings! First, he stole his brother's blessing (Genesis 27). Next, he wrestles with the angel, demanding to be blessed (Chapter 32). In Chapter 47 he blesses the heathen Pharaoh and then Joseph's children, adopting them as his own (Genesis 48). Now, in Chapter 49 he summons his 12 sons to "bless" them. So, what does he do? Well, if these are blessings, I'd hate to see his curses! He "scatters" Simeon and Levi, calls Issachar a donkey, Dan a serpent, and Joseph a "foal of a wild donkey." Judah, at least, is a lion.

But these are blessings, at least according to verse 28. What, exactly, is a blessing? We probably think of a blessing as something said that makes us feel good or appreciated. Or, we may say something is a blessing in our life if it has enriched us or revealed something of God to us.

If verses 1-28 in Chapter 49 are any indication, a blessing may also include some sort of prophetic message. Yes, Jacob uses similes to describe each son, but then, like an oracle, he heralds the destiny of each of the 12 tribes. From the first, directed to Reuben, the teaching is clear that one's behavior can affect the destiny of his descendants. This is scary stuff. I don't wonder but it pained Jacob to give these "blessings"; as he utters these words is he remembering his own deceitful past and that he may be the cause of his sons' future distress?

Genesis 49 contains valuable lessons for us as believers. Our histories, like those of Jacob's sons, as children and heirs of God are always flawed. We may be a "donkey" or "lion", but we are forgiven and, like Jacob's sons, members of the Family of God.

DIG DEEPER

- Most of the "blessings" in Chapter 49 include animal similes. What animal would you use to describe yourself and why?
- We have a chance, today, to make choices to effect a change that could alter the course of our and/or our family's future destiny. What choices will you make?

Three Burials

READ GENESIS 50:1-26

Genesis 50 is a tale of three burials.

We see the parallel deaths of Jacob and Joseph. Both of them gathered their family to themselves in the last days of their lives. Both were embalmed and mourned. Both would be taken back to Canaan; Jacob, immediately, Joseph waiting for the exodus and carried into the promised land by the Israelites (Joshua 24:32). Even these journeys, taking an out-of-the-way northeasterly route, mirror one another.

But in the middle of these two accounts, there is a resurrection. Not a happy, life-affirming resurrection, but a resurrection of doubt and fear. The older generation had passed, and the brothers' raw emotions are revealed: *Now, will Joseph take his revenge since our father is no longer here to keep the peace?* This troubled the brothers so much that they manufactured a message "from Jacob," pleading with Joseph for forgiveness. In response, Joseph repeats the truth: *What people intended for evil, God would use for good.* With this re-statement of forgiveness, he began to bury their fear.

The death of a loved one often reveals fear—the fear of *what next?* The fear that says, *"The world as I knew it is gone."* The fear that says, *"If God allowed that, what more will He allow?"* And, like the burials in this chapter, this one requires a journey.

Fear isn't just wished away. Even when your mind knows better, your emotions lag behind; they're not always rational. But we know that *"perfect love drives out fear"* (1 John 4:18). God is patient with our fears and raw emotions; He doesn't condemn us for them. He just continues to love us and is gentle with us.

Joseph reflects God's patient love. He didn't become frustrated or angry with his brothers; instead he "assured them and spoke kindly to them." Eventually Joseph's love buried their fear. Eventually, they trusted, and were able to love again, too.

DIG DEEPER

- Do you know someone who has experienced a recent loss? How can you be like Joseph—reassuring and kind—as they work through a season of grieving?

He was Despised and Rejected

READ ISAIAH 53:3-9

"He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem." (Isaiah 53:3)

When I was a freshman in college I spent every Wednesday night serving at the Olive Branch Homeless Shelter in Chicago. It was an eye-opening experience for me. I remember sitting at a table over dinner one night with some men as one of them told the story of how he became homeless. As I listened and nodded, the man became frustrated and told me to stop nodding my head because I had no clue what his life was like. It stopped me in my tracks because, well, what he said was true. It started me on a different journey of growing in understanding of others that, by God's grace, I hope continues until the end of my days.

Jesus is not like I was in that situation. He is not clueless about what our life is like. He understands what each and every one of us faces in every way. *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin"* (Hebrews 4:15). Not only that, but the prophet Isaiah tells us that Jesus' journey to the Cross took Him into the worst suffering that life can send our way in the form of pain, rejection, and shame. Jesus did not inadvertently stumble into this way, but chose it as His pathway so that He might save us from the effects of sin and evil in our world and lives.

Because of all this, Good Friday can be called "good." Because in Jesus' suffering at the Cross we see the quality and extent of God's love for the world, the Cross becomes a place of joy. God Himself endures suffering in the form of pain, rejection, and shame so that we can experience life to the fullest!

DIG DEEPER

- What hope do you find in the fact that Jesus understands the struggles, frustrations, and fears you face in your life? How can this help you persevere?

Cast Upon the LORD

READ PSALM 22:1-18

I was born two months premature, and spent my early days in a Madison hospital. Literally *"from birth I was cast upon [the LORD]"* (vs. 10). And I have been cast upon Him since then, whether I acknowledge that or not. Isn't it interesting that it often takes challenging circumstances to remind us that it is *"in Him that we live and move and have our being"* (Acts 17:28)?

Today is Holy Saturday. Do you know what holy means? Set apart. I don't know about you, but I often kind of skirt over this day, trying to move on from the darkness of Good Friday to the anticipation of the joy and light of Resurrection Sunday. But the disciples sure couldn't bypass it. They had just experienced crushing death in many senses of the word. Everything they hoped for perhaps now seemed lost. John recorded that the disciples were *"together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews"* before they knew Jesus had risen (John 20:19). Two disciples were walking to Emmaus after Jesus' death, and actually informed Jesus (before they knew it was Him), that they *"had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel"* (Luke 24:21, emphasis mine).

The disciples felt fearful and hopeless, despite the fact that Jesus had even spelled out the plan for them numerous times (Mark 10:32-34). This encourages me so much! Over the past year, it seems that I misunderstood the plan in different areas of my life. Maybe you have experienced this, as well. At such times, as the disciples, I am reminded that I am truly cast upon my Father for everything. I cannot rely on my own understanding. I must put my faith in the One who suffered in my place! Furthermore, Jesus' resurrection did not depend on the disciples' understanding or action. It was ALL HIM. We truly can have strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow, because HE LIVES!

DIG DEEPER

- Who do you have in your life that prays for you, "casting you upon the Lord"?

He is the First

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-22

"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

Whenever I read a good book or watch a good movie, there comes a certain point when a character or group of characters encounter a situation that defines the story and who they are. In the best stories, this tension draws us in, and we long to see the characters resolve the tension well.

As we have journeyed through Joseph's life in Genesis 37-50, we have seen this same tension play out. Joseph has endured much suffering, facing decisions along the way that have shaped his life story but also his character. His encounter with unjust suffering at his brothers' hands, temptation within Potiphar's house, imprisonment due to false accusation, and his family's need for food, all thrust Joseph into defining moments with God. In the end, we see much of the tension in his life resolve as God brings good out of the midst of the suffering.

Our lives are like that, as well. Each one of us faces many situations that define not only the direction of our lives, but also the people we become with God. While we long for tensions to resolve well, there are many times when we waver on the knife's edge of things resolving well or poorly. So much hangs in the balance of our response to situations, including the way we encounter God in those situations.

While we may wonder what the next chapter of our lives holds, Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection tells us some very important truths. First, God is not absent from our lives, but present in every defining moment. Along with that, we begin to realize that even though we cannot see into the future, we can trust that God, in His grace, holds us and guides us both now and unto eternity. Joseph learned to trust God's providence in his suffering and success. May we, who have experienced the victory won in Christ, also trust God with our lives, growing with Him and relying upon His power in every defining moment of our lives.

DIG DEEPER

- How have you experienced the presence of God in the trying times of your life?
- What does your confidence in God's power and plan empower you to do in your life?

ISRAEL
LOVED
JOSEPH
MORE
THAN ANY
OF HIS
OTHER
SONS AND
HE MADE
HIM A
FANCY
COAT.

Family Talk

WEEK ONE

Descending

At some time or another, we all disappoint one another. We break promises, we forget about others, we selfishly take the best for ourselves and give others the leftovers.

But sometimes, people REALLY hurt us—in big ways. Just when we are counting on them to be there for us, they ditch us—they're nowhere to be found! In this week's Bible reading, we see the same thing happen to Joseph. His own brothers abandon him, hoping to never see him again! And, in the New Testament, we see Jesus sadly predict how His friends would run away—just when He would seem to need them most.

This is called betrayal—when the people we most trust turn their backs on us. As we continue to read Joseph's story, watch to see how Joseph responds. Does he take revenge? Does he give up? Does he wait for God?

FAMILY TALK

- Share about a time when others turned their back on you. How did it feel? What did you do about it?
- Imagine Joseph talking to himself while making the journey to Egypt. What does he remind himself about God?
- Read John 14:18. What can we remember about God, when we feel let down by others?
- This week, what can you do to remember that God is with you, no matter what?

JUST FOR FUN: CRAYON BATIK DRAWING

[white copy paper, crayons, watercolors]

1. Draw a design or picture with crayons on white copy paper. Press hard, so that the crayon colors really stand out.
2. Next crumple your picture into a ball. (Yep, you read that right!)
3. Then, uncrumple your paper and spread it out. Use one color of watercolor paint and brush over the whole picture. The crayon lines will come through, and the wrinkles of the paper will hold a little more paint.
4. Think: All the colors of your picture can remind you of Joseph's coat. But even more important, the "damage" of crumpling up your picture actually just makes it more beautiful in the end. That's what God can do—turn the "damage" of our lives into something great!

WEEK TWO

Caught

Have you ever been blamed for something you didn't do? Someone else gets in trouble, and to get out of it, they end up pointing the finger at you? Who will believe you? How can you prove your innocence?

Joseph experiences this same thing in this week's reading—Genesis 39. He is working hard at Potiphar's house and put in charge of everyone else. But while he's trying to mind his own business, he is blamed for something he didn't do. Without a single chance to explain his side of the story, he is punished! This isn't fair! Where is God in all of this?

Just when things were really looking up for Joseph, he's shot down again! By the end of the chapter, you'll see how Joseph responds to this new challenge. Does he stomp his feet and throw a tantrum? Does he just roll over and take the punishment, giving in to despair? Or, does he come to accept this new place as somewhere that God could really use him?

FAMILY TALK

- Have each family member think of a time when they were blamed for something they didn't do. How did it make them feel? How was the situation resolved?
- Why do you think God allows things that just aren't fair?
- Is it wrong to prove your innocence? How can you respond in a respectful way if you are unfairly blamed?
- If you've read the whole chapter, how does Joseph respond to his new situation in prison? What does this show us about Joseph's attitude toward God?

JUST FOR FUN: GROW A PAPERWHITE

[paperwhite bulbs, a shallow dish, pebbles/gravel, water]

1. Place an even layer of pebbles in the bottom of the dish. Nestle the paperwhite bulbs, root-side down, in the pebbles. (If you don't see roots on your bulb, plant them with the wider end down.) Pour a little water in the dish, just enough to cover the bottoms of the bulbs. Set the dish in a sunny location. In about 30-40 days—by Easter—you should see the white flowers bloom!
2. Think: How did paperwhites bloom in a dish of pebbles, with just a little water and sun? Everything they need to bloom is inside the bulb! Just like the bulb settled among stones, Joseph was forced into a hard place, too. But, he allowed himself to be used by God—even in prison! Joseph "bloomed" there, and was put in charge of all the other prisoners. He knew that God was with him, and this time in prison, was all a part of the big picture of God's plan.

WEEK THREE

Lost and Found

Some good things just take a long time in coming:

- Waiting for chocolate chip cookies to finish baking in the oven
- Waiting for first warm day of the year after months of cold, snow, and rain
- Waiting for your report card after working hard all semester

Last week, we learned that Joseph was taken to prison, even though he hadn't committed a crime. He didn't know how long he would be there, or if he would ever be freed! Joseph kept trusting God, though, and he let God use him—right there in jail.

But even after all of that . . . Joseph still had to wait! In this week's reading, you'll learn that throughout all of this, Joseph kept a close relationship with God. He had been given a really cool gift by God—the ability to interpret dreams. Joseph trusted that God would tell him what other people's dreams meant. This gift allows Joseph to be freed from prison—but not just freed and let out on the streets! Freed, to take his dream-interpreting gift right to the top of Egyptian power!

FAMILY TALK

- What do you think kept Joseph going, even after the disappointment of being forgotten by the cupbearer?
- Why is waiting so hard? What kinds of temptations do we face during times of waiting?
- What are some things that Joseph understood about God?
- What would you tell a friend who feels like giving up on God?

JUST FOR FUN: GO ON A PENNY HUNT

[approximately 25 pennies]

1. Parents, hide about 25 pennies in one area of your home, (just one room, the basement, even outdoors, weather permitting.) Tell your kids to clean the area really well, and as they do, they can collect the pennies they find. When all 25 pennies are found, they can keep them as a reward, or turn them in for another reward. Make sure all 25 are found; this should take some time and effort. Afterward, let the kids hide them for each other or you to find.
2. Talk about it: How long did it take to find all the pennies? Did you feel like giving up? In this game, you knew it would be over when all the pennies were finally found. Joseph had no idea when his prison time would be over—no matter how hard he worked. He didn't get discouraged though. He kept on doing whatever was put before him, and he trusted God for the rest. This is called perseverance. Pray for God to help you persevere, even during tough times.

WEEK FOUR

Open Wounds

Picture this: a friend from your class has a birthday party and invites everyone but you. Afterward, you hear what a great time everyone had—swimming, games, pizza and cake. But you were left at home. Now it's your birthday, and this year, you get to have a party too. Will you invite the kid that left you out?

Jesus tells us to treat others the way we would like to be treated. Yep, even when they haven't done the same for us. (See Luke 6:27-31.) This is tough. It requires us to forgive the hurt we felt when we were left out, and to show kindness anyway. This is God's way, and we need God's power to help us do it.

This is what Joseph faced when his brothers show up. After years of separation, they arrive in Egypt, and now, the tables are turned. They are the ones in need, and Joseph is in the position of being able to help them...or not.

This week's Joseph reading is a little long, and a little confusing--there's a lot of traveling back and forth for Joseph's brothers! While they still don't recognize him, Joseph is sorting out his feelings towards them. Do you think they begin to realize who he is? Watch to see how the oldest brother—Judah—steps in to rescue his youngest brother.

FAMILY TALK

- Why do you think Joseph is waiting so long before telling his brothers who he really is?
- Why was it so important for Joseph to see his youngest brother?
- How does Judah treat Benjamin differently than he treated Joseph back in Genesis 39?
- How can you tell that Joseph really loved his father and brothers?

JUST FOR FUN: SECRET IDENTITY GAME

1. Choose one of the statements below, and have each family member print out their answer on separate index cards.
 - If I could play any Olympic sport it would be _____.
 - I'd love to have an hour to interview _____ (name of a person you admire)
2. Toss all the cards together, and have one person read all the answers aloud. Try to match each answer with the family member who wrote it. Repeat with the other fill-in-the-blank statements, or make some up.
3. Think: Were there things about your family members that you didn't know? Joseph's brothers didn't recognize him because they hadn't seen him in years. Joseph didn't reveal his true identity right away either; this gave him time to work through his feelings toward them. Sometimes, forgiveness doesn't come right away, we need to wait and pray for God to work in our hearts. We have to be willing for God to help us forgive.

WEEK FIVE

Reconciliation

Did you ever watch someone struggle with a game or a puzzle that you've played a million times? As you watch, you feel like you're just bursting to tell them the one secret clue that would help them solve the whole thing?

How good are you at keeping secrets? Last week, we saw that Joseph was a pretty good secret-keeper! He put his brothers through a series of tests, and that gave him time to struggle with how he felt toward them, remembering all that they had done to him in the past. God works in his heart, and gives him the power to forgive. Finally, Joseph is ready for the big reveal!

As you read this week's chapters, think: What truths did Joseph know that helped him to forgive?

FAMILY TALK

- How do you think Joseph's brothers felt as Joseph reveals his true identity?
- What reason does Joseph see in why God allowed all the hard things of the past? Why was it good that he ended up in a high position in Egypt?
- How does their father Jacob react to the news that Joseph is alive and well in Egypt? (See Genesis 45:26-27.)
- What was Joseph's reunion with his father like? (See Genesis 46:39-40).

JUST FOR FUN: MAKE A TAPE-RESIST PICTURE

[masking tape, construction paper, paint/markers]

1. Use pieces of masking tape to make a design on construction paper or cardstock. Think of a design that reminds you of forgiveness, like a cross, a heart, a bridge, or even just abstract lines. After the tape is secure, paint or color over the whole paper; use as many bright colors as you like. (Tip: Wet colored chalk on black paper looks really cool!)
2. If you used paint or wet chalk, wait until it is completely dry. Then, gently lift the pieces of tape from the paper. Your design should be clearly seen against all the colors you used.
3. Think: When you lifted up the pieces of tape, you should have been left with perfectly clean spaces underneath. This is like forgiveness. When we forgive someone, we "lift off" the mess of the wrong they have done and the hurt we feel. We are giving that person a new, "clean" start to be our friend again.

WEEK SIX

Blessing

Have you ever worked on one of those jigsaw puzzles—the kind with hundreds of pieces that takes days to finish? You look at some of the individual pieces and think to yourself: What is this supposed to be? The individual pieces don't make sense by themselves, but as each piece is added to the puzzle, a beautiful picture evolves.

Now, at the end of Joseph's story, we see the beautiful picture of his life come together. He's back with his brothers and his father. They move to Egypt to be near Joseph, but also to have fertile land for their flocks and herds. And, once again, God gives Joseph a great idea to help the people survive a famine. As you read Genesis 47-50 this week, think about what is happening that makes for a "happily ever after" ending. Would Joseph and his brothers have gotten to this point any other way?

FAMILY TALK

- How does Joseph care for his family after they move to Egypt?
- There was a big problem in Egypt when Jacob and the brothers arrived—what was it? How does Joseph help all the people of Egypt?
- Jacob took time to give a blessing—a prediction—for each of his sons, plus two of Joseph's sons. These 12 become the tribes of Israel—the foundation of the Jewish people. Which of the blessings would you choose, if you could? (See Genesis 48.)

JUST FOR FUN: COOKIE BAKING

[ingredients for your favorite cookie recipe!]

1. This week, bake cookies together as a family—maybe even some special Easter cut-out cookies. Serve them to your family or friends as you gather to celebrate Jesus' resurrection.
2. Think: Would you ever take a big bite out of a stick of butter? How about swallowing a raw egg, or a spoonful of baking soda? No way! By themselves, each separate ingredient would taste awful! But, when they're mixed together in just the right way, they make something awesome! Joseph had a lot of awful things happen in his life: being thrown in a pit, sold as a slave, sentenced to jail for something he didn't do, being forgotten. But all together, those things become a part of a beautiful story. People meant to harm Joseph, but God used these things to bring Joseph to a position of power at just the right time. He saved his own family, and many others in Egypt.
3. Joseph is just one story in the BIG story of God's plan to redeem and restore all of us. Like Joseph, Jesus suffered unfairly. It was part of God's plan all along, a plan for Him to pay for our sins by dying on the Cross. Like Joseph, He came to the Cross at just the right time to save all who come to Him.

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WORKS CITED:

1. All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted. *The Holy Bible*, New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan House, 2011.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, (New York: HarperOne, 1954), 112.
3. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 82.

In the highest points of life, people rarely ask questions about why they are experiencing such goodness or grace in their lives. However, it is in the challenging times, particularly the times of suffering, that we begin to ask questions like, 'why is this happening to me?' or 'how am I going to make it?' In times like these, we need a theology of suffering.

The life of Joseph is one of the best places in the Bible to develop a theology of suffering. In Joseph's life, as told in Genesis 37-50, we not only see someone endure the ups and downs of life, but also develop a life with God in the midst of it.

We must go on a journey to become people like Joseph. It will not happen overnight. And so, as we enter into a forty-day journey during the season of Lent, we are inviting God to shape within us both a theology of suffering and the character of Christ in the midst of suffering.

