*Just Thinking* is a teaching resource of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries and exists to engender thoughtful engagement with apologetics, Scripture, and the whole of life.

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ON ROCKS NEAR waterfalls are often lovers’ sentiments scrawled in stone. I’ve yet to see a line from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” but then its theme is not typical lovesick fare.

Rather, T.S. Eliot’s poem reveals how an impersonal modern world can alienate us and cause us to feel powerless. The title character, Prufrock, voices his yearning for love and yet his paralysis to speak to his beloved. “Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?” he asks, believing that any movement will be futile and incur rejection. He characterizes the evening “spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherized upon a table,” yet it is Prufrock who is anesthetized. He repeatedly speaks of coming and going, unaware of his immobility and indetermination. He is stuck.

Similarly, we are often unknowing subjects etherized by our irreligious culture, which inoculates our souls to believe that this world is all there is or that we are powerless to change. As an aside, but relevant, unforgiveness can have the same effect. Unforgiveness can paralyze us and cause us to forget that God is our judge. And, “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25).

Prufrock’s world whispers to him that his emptiness and isolation stem from his separation from his beloved. However, his real tragedy is not only alienation from another human being but also from his Creator. He wonders, “Would it have been worth while/... To say: ‘I am Lazarus, come from the dead.’” But no. He can no more rise above his plight than he can raise himself from the dead.

Yet there is another poem—a grand, epic poem. It is the gospel that runs from Genesis to Revelation, from creation to consummation, from Adam to the Lamb at the center of God’s throne “who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The wonder of the gospel is that “at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). Through Jesus’s death and resurrection, we are redeemed and restored. We are cleansed, forgiven, and made new. Only the radical, life-transforming mercy and love of God can reconcile us to Himself and to our fellow human beings. Only his Spirit can invite us to live in the light of his love and forgiveness. Only He can quicken us to extend these precious gifts to others—even, as Jesus said, to our enemies.

In his sermon “Concerning Deliverance from Sinning,” Charles Spurgeon declared,

The Lord knows right well that you cannot change your own heart, and cannot cleanse your own nature; but He also knows that He can do both.... It would be a very wonderful thing if one could stand at the foot of the Niagara Falls, and could speak a word which should make the river Niagara begin to run up stream, and leap up that great precipice over which it now rolls in stupendous force. Nothing but the power of God could achieve that marvel; but that would be more than a fit parallel to what would take place if the course of your nature were altogether reversed. All things are possible with God. He can reverse the direction of your desires and the current of your life, and instead of going downward from God, He can make your whole being tend upward toward God.

That is, in fact, what the Lord has promised to do.

When God’s Spirit lives in us, we are no longer powerless to change. We have been set free to love, to receive and offer his forgiveness. We are God’s poiema—his workmanship, his poetry in motion. Perhaps someone should scrawl that on a postcard from Niagara!

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As a young man growing up in Scotland, I was exposed to Christianity and the symbol of the cross. It was a point of confusion, a mystery at best, and at worst, an object of scorn and disgust. I did not know what it meant or why religious people thought it important, but I knew I wanted nothing to do with it.

Alister McGrath, Professor of Science and Religion at the University of Oxford, writes,

Just as God has humbled himself in making himself known “in the humility and shame of the cross,” we must humble ourselves if we are to encounter Him. We must humble ourselves by being prepared to be told where to look to find God, rather than trusting in our own insights and speculative abilities. In effect, we are forced to turn our eyes from contemplation of where we would like to see God revealed, and to turn them instead upon a place which is not of our choosing, but which is given to us.¹

In other words, nothing in our history, experience, or knowledge can prepare us for God’s means of drawing us to Him. At the cross, something we are not expecting is revealed, something scandalous unveiled, something we could never have articulated or asked for is given to us: God’s marvelous love and merciful forgiveness. As the Scriptures declare, “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

Philip Yancey, the renowned author, offers more on this:

Here at the cross is the man who loves his enemies, the man whose righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gives his robe to those who take his cloak, who prays for those who deceitfully use him. The cross is not a detour or a hurdle

¹ A Sin-Sick Soul

By Stuart McAllister
on the way to Kingdom, nor is it even the way to the Kingdom; it is the Kingdom come.²

Christian or not, I think many of us have significantly distorted ideas about the purpose and meaning of the cross. We do not seem to understand our true state and our profound need for God's mercy and love. When we think of “sin” or the human condition before God, what comes to mind is perhaps something like the image of a child caught with his hands in the cookie jar. Such a situation might well be understood as disobedience or maybe even naughtiness, but is it really that important? It is certainly not bad enough to justify extreme reactions. Rather, our moral reflections on sin tend to foster incredulity or disgust. The response seems totally out of proportion to the offense.

But let us shift the metaphor. Supposing one day you go for a routine medical examination and that your doctor discovers you have a deadly virus. You did not do anything. You were not necessarily responsible, but you were exposed and infected. You feel the injustice of it all. You are afraid. You are angry. Yet most of all, you are seriously sick. You are dying and you need help.

The cross—the gospel story—is not a slap on the hands for children refusing to heed the rules of the cookie jar. It is not mere advice to get you to clean up your life and morals. It is not a set of mere ideas to inform you about what it takes to be nice. It is restoration and recreation, a physician's mediation; it is about human flourishing and discovering life. The Great Physician has the cure and he tenderly offers it to each of us. As the African-American spiritual “There Is a Balm in Gilead” so beautifully puts it,

How lost was my condition
Till Jesus made me whole!
There is but one Physician
Can cure a sin–sick soul.

The cross may seem an extreme and offensive measure to the problem of sin and death and sickness—but what if it is the very cure that is needed? McGrath describes our options at the cross of Christ. “Either God is not present at all in this situation, or else God is present in a remarkable and paradoxical way. To affirm that God is indeed present in this situation is to close the door to one way of thinking about God and to open the way to another—for the cross marks the end of a particular way of thinking about God.”³

Shockingly, thoroughly, scandalously, the cross depicts a God who throws Himself upon sin and sickness to bring the hope of rescue and forgiveness miraculously near.

Some find it shocking, some overwhelming, some almost too good to be true. It is, however, for all.

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1 Alister McGrath, The Mystery of the Cross (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 104.
3 McGrath, 103.
SOMETHING GREATER

By Lowe Finney
Shame and its companions can wreak havoc on any life but especially a young life. Jesus calls us to be people who shape an identity based on hope.

In one of Giacomo Puccini’s shorter but nonetheless lush and beautiful operas, *Suor Angelica* (“Sister Angelica”), we watch the tragic story unfold of a young nun. After having given birth many years prior to a child out of wedlock, she is sent to live in a convent and is removed from her wealthy family and her son. No one in the convent knows the sister’s secret. But she thinks of her son often.

To compound her anxiety, her well-to-do, pretentious aunt enters the picture. She is the trustee of Angelica’s deceased parents’ estate and announces that Angelica’s sister is to be married. She demands that Angelica sign papers transferring her inheritance rights to her betrothed sister. As if throwing a stone at Angelica’s eye, the aunt declares that the marriage will take place and that, just maybe, the stain of shame borne from Angelica’s prior actions will finally be removed from the family.

Angelica is crushed. The aunt then reveals the devastating blow: Angelica’s young son died two years prior.

As the opera builds to a climax, Sister Angelica, tormented not only by the news of her son but also by the overbearing presence of the aunt, is drawn deeper into hopelessness and despair. Fueled by her grief she concocts a fatal remedy. She instantly regrets her decision and prays for forgiveness. In a final vision, Angelica reaches for her son but is almost instantly torn from him as she slips away.

Although the story might be a new take on an unoriginal theme, the music and pathos of the opera singers nevertheless draw you in; you cannot help but feel incredibly sorry for Angelica. Confined to a lifetime removed from all she held dear, shame was a wet coat she could never shake off. Forced into hiding and hammered down by a lack of grace and mercy, her constant companion was sadness. She died an unfulfilled person weighed down by regrets.

As an aside, it is hard to ignore that the setting is a religious institution.

When Jesus was busy teaching at the synagogue, a group of religious men brought a woman caught in adultery with the secondary intention of shaming and possibly stoning her. Their main objective, however, was to trick Jesus into justifying their ill-conceived notions of justice for those who fell short of the community’s expectations. Imagine this: the religious people were using someone’s public shame in order to draw out and frame Jesus as one who was out of line. There would appear to be no winners in this scenario. But Jesus quickly dispatched them all when he simply asked them to undertake some self-examination, a request too heavy to bear apparently. The story does not tell us what happened beyond them dropping their stones, but we can very likely surmise that the woman knew her day ended better than it began.

Or what about the prodigal son who returned after having blown his last dime in rampant self-absorption? Such an action was tantamount to the ultimate disrespect shown a father in ancient Judaism. After hitting rock bottom, the son could not wait to reverse course. Jesus paints a picture of a father who looked past all of this with open arms and a welcome home party even in the face of the bewildered brother who remained.

Separation, removal, and disunity are the common themes in each of these stories. The individuals here were not simply experiencing a case of blushing embarrassment. They were shamed, or in the initial scenario of the prodigal, should have been ashamed simply because of their infraction of communal and familial
standards. Old Testament scholar John Goldingay writes that shame “suggests a deep and generalized inner sense of unacceptability and worthlessness” with strong ties to “internalized community and family convictions.”

There’s the hammer: shame, whose initial flight is lifted by sin, is only propelled higher by the winds of untempered family and community expectations.

Shame and its companions can wreak havoc on any life but especially a young life. Any episode that brings on shame can serve as an anchor to a buoy, that continues bobbing up later in life to remind us of those moments we would rather forget. Researchers recently found that moments of shame do not simply serve as reminders but can have more damaging effects as those episodes serve as “emotional memories.” These memories shape future expectations and morph into “turning points in the life story and as central components of identity.”

This is worth remembering: shame can be so strong as to reinforce your self-image and shape your life story.

So what is the antidote? Put differently, what did our Suor Angelica need? Forgiveness? To the extent she never received it, likely so. But she also needed something even greater: restoration.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that shame “is overcome only […] through the restoration of a fellowship with God and men…. In shame man is reminded of his disunion with God and with other men.”

Peter and Paul—each using a version for the word for peace—both thought enough of the topic as to exhort different church bodies regarding it. “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all,” encouraged Paul (Romans 12:18). “Whoever desires to love life and see good days … let him seek peace and pursue it,” proclaims 1 Peter 3:10-11. The biblical mandate is clear; and we are without excuse when it comes to extending the olive branch, no matter how hard.

Toward the end of Suor Angelica, in one of opera’s great arias, “Senza Momma”—or without mother—we hear Angelica sing to her lost son. Ironically, one line goes, “And you are dead without knowing how loved you were by your mother!”

How tragic that Angelica’s description of her son’s ending would soon mirror her own as she threw herself in violent reaction to the poison she ingested without feeling the restorative love that eluded her.

As the opera drew to a close, I caught myself wondering how things might have turned out differently for Angelica. How would things have ended if, notwithstanding Puccini’s colorful imagination, Jesus had turned to the aunt and said, “Before we go any further, do you mind if we discuss that time that you…?” Or, what if the aunt simply ran over to Angelica and scooped her up to take her home and be part of a wedding celebration? Other than witnessing the world’s shortest opera, one thing would be clear yet again: the presence of Jesus repulses any notion of shame-fueled separation.

This is who Jesus is and who we should be in the lives of others. People who restore. People who shape an identity focused on hope. Witnesses to a life’s story unburdened by the shame of the past and whose future expectations are founded on forgiveness, healing, and welcoming.

Now that’s a show I’d like to see and even take part in.

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1 John 8:1-11.
5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 27.
“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” —Matthew 5:43-45a

IT WAS a picture-perfect evening in downtown Atlanta. I was headed to the city’s famous Fox Theatre to see Les Misérables, the Broadway musical based on Victor Hugo’s masterful novel, accompanied by a friend named Jason. Our conversation was full of laughter and friendly banter, even as we braced ourselves to take in a somber production that we knew would be filled with emotion.

“How did you two meet?” asked a fellow theater patron, a simple question that startled me. “Ummm… it’s a long story,” I awkwardly responded. “We’ve been friends for a while.”

What made this situation remarkable wasn’t the splendid weather—unusual for the season—or the fact that we had scored tickets to this sold-out production. It was that nearly thirteen years prior, we considered each other enemies.

•••

NEARLY THIRTEEN years ago, a young man named Jason approached me at a public event—also in downtown Atlanta—visibly angry and perturbed. “Hey, my name is Ruth,” I said, unsure of why he had come up to me. “I know who you are,” he responded abruptly and indignantly. “If only you knew how hated you were in my community, you would fear for your life.”

Jason proceeded to tell me that he and many others in his circles of interaction vehemently disagreed with my beliefs and with actions I had taken in college—and, more significantly, that they held a different worldview. The more Jason talked, the more evident it was to me that he misunderstood not just my actions, but my motives.

By Ruth Malhotra
as well. This encounter was not entirely unusual, sadly, but it did stand out as one of the more antagonistic. I remember feeling rattled and dejected. “This must be what it’s like to have enemies,” I thought to myself.

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YOU SEE, thirteen years ago I was a college student studying at a public university, when I encountered tremendous opposition because my Christian beliefs were considered “intolerant” and “offensive” by some—not just students, but campus administrators and professors as well. From the day I stepped on campus for Freshman Orientation, I realized that I was entering an environment where atheism and secular humanism were not only being promoted by those in authority, but where Christians students like me were often prohibited from sharing our beliefs. While I expected to encounter scholarly debate and have my beliefs challenged in college, I didn’t expect to be repeatedly censored, interrogated, and condemned by those in authority for expressing a point of view not in lockstep with their own worldview. Such censorship hindered the free exchange of ideas on campus and prevented students from debating life’s deepest questions. After years of navigating that unlevel playing field as a Christian student, I felt compelled to speak out and seek justice.

I knew that the more vocal I became on campus, the more likely some would oppose my beliefs. But I never imagined that differences of viewpoint would lead to me being on the receiving end of vastly distorted media coverage, vicious hate mail, and even death threats. It baffled me to see leaders in higher education lash out at a student who expressed different beliefs as if I were a threat to their institution, and I was bewildered by the level of animosity from so many directions.

As a 22-year-old student, I remember the first time it occurred to me that I had enemies. I was no stranger to competition or different ideologies, but I had never experienced such vitriolic anger and rage. This was a foreign experience—one that initially left me frustrated, fearful, saddened, and confused. I wrestled with feelings of resentment and disdain toward these adversaries, grappled with the tension of whether and how to defend myself, and faced the temptation to retaliate when I was attacked. While I never wavered in my commitment to stand firm on principle, I did wonder how to respond to such extreme opposition from people who didn’t even know me personally.

In the midst of attempting to navigate these difficult dynamics, one day I was reading through the book of Matthew in the Bible and came to the Sermon on the Mount. This was a familiar passage to me, but the commands of Jesus resonated with me in a whole new light given my current circumstances.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” I had read and heard these words dozens—maybe hundreds—of times. But this time it was different. Now I knew exactly how it felt to have enemies and to be maligned because of my beliefs—and I knew exactly what I needed to do in response.

“Thank you, Lord, that I have the privilege of carrying out this command in a deeply personal way,” I prayed. My perspective drastically shifted.

Up until this experience, I had thought of enemies in a generic sense—but now they had names. I soon wrote out an “enemies list.” For each day of the month, I listed the name of one individual who had attacked me through words and actions. When I got to #31, I went back to Day 1 and added more names. One of those names was Jason. Every day, I would pray for the designated individuals by name, that God would change their hearts and minds so they would understand and embrace the truth. The more I talked to
God about them, my prayers became less focused on my personal situation and more fervent that these individuals would be drawn to the gospel message. I did this for about two years, and in this process, God changed my own heart and attitude.

Praying for my enemies replaced my anger and fear with lament and compassion. Instead of the natural tendency to “get even” or seek revenge, I began to earnestly desire their flourishing and hope for reconciliation. God transformed my resentment of them into love for them. Forgiveness was not optional for me; it was the only way to freedom and release.

I realized that I might never have the chance to interact with many of my antagonists, but by the act of my will and through the grace of God, I had to forgive them. Forgiveness enabled me to detach myself from their control, to develop empathy and gain insights on their spiritual needs, and to acknowledge that God is the only one who can bring about transformation in their lives and in mine.

Most of all, during this time I was vividly reminded of the forgiveness that I myself—once an enemy of God Himself—had received from God in Christ. If “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” (Romans 5:8b), who was I to withhold forgiveness from anyone—regardless of what they had done and whether they had apologized?

My pastor, Charles Stanley, continually encouraged me during this time and even asked our church to lift me up in prayer. His insights on forgiveness were both profound and practical. “Once we understand the depth of our sin and the distance it placed between God and us—and once we get a glimpse of the sacrifice He made to restore fellowship with us—we should not hesitate to forgive,” he explained. “We must release the offender from the debt we feel is owed to us. This involves mentally bundling all of our hostile feelings and surrendering them to Christ.”

This was a tumultuous season for me, but one that shaped my perspective and priorities as I learned valuable lessons that I hope will stay with me for the rest of my life.

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Fast-forward about a decade.

I received a message online from Jason. He wanted to meet up. Though we had followed each other on social media, I had only seen him in person once—that hostile encounter over a decade earlier when he came up to me and told me how hated I was among his circles.

Jason said he wanted to trade updates on life and work. He told me he was a Christian, that he had struggled in his faith and wanted someone to talk to about it. The gentle tone of his message and the gracious words of affirmation left me stunned. “I just wanted to say thank you for enriching my life and challenging me so much over the years,” he wrote. “I am surrounded by people who think and believe just like me but they don’t enrich my life nearly as much as the people I have to leave my comfort zone and connect with to understand.”

I couldn’t believe what I was reading. We set a time and place to meet, and I began praying for this encounter. On one level, I was excited and grateful for this opportunity. On another, I was apprehensive and unsure of what to expect. Memories from the antagonism I had experienced in college flooded my mind once again. With nervous anticipation, I showed up at the restaurant where we were meeting for dinner and waited for him to arrive.

As soon as we were both seated—before the server could even take our order—Jason started speaking. “I’ve been waiting for years to apologize to you,” he said, as tears filled his eyes. He told me about his faith journey, the personal challenges he had experienced, and how deeply he regretted his anger and hatred towards me a decade earlier.
I got emotional too, and in a sweet and unexpected twist, I attempted to comfort him. “We are all on a journey,” I assured him.

Jason continued to apologize, and I finally interrupted him. “I already forgave you, over a decade ago,” I said. “But I, too, need to ask for your forgiveness.”

I apologized that I had sometimes viewed certain individuals as problems to be solved rather than people to be loved. I apologized that I had often spoken in a tone of outrage and frustration rather than one of regret and concern. In my zeal to share my own beliefs, I hadn’t adequately listened to the experiences of others—including his own. I went on to explain how my approach to advocacy and public engagement had shifted since I first met him all those years ago, shared some of the lessons I’d learned along the way, and described my current burdens for the state of our polarized culture with both lament and hope. “Meeting people such as you has been an essential part of my growth process, and I’m thankful,” I told him.

It was an authentic conversation that brought healing and hope to us both. “I remember my first instinct was to hate someone like you, and then I met you and learned how amazingly sweet and kind you were as well as how much we have in common,” Jason later wrote to me. “Who was I to hate someone I had never met? It changed everything.”

In that moment I was reminded in a compelling way that God is the great reconciler, bringing us into a right relationship with Himself and with each other. It’s truly miraculous and beautiful to witness.

THE GIFT OF forgiveness is to be both treasured and shared.

As I reflect on my experience in college, my encounter with Jason, and the ongoing challenge of forgiveness, I’m reminded of these lessons that I imagine will take a lifetime to learn:

Stand for truth and respond in grace.
Whenever we take a stand for what is right and good and true, there will be some who oppose our beliefs and actions, question our motives, and attempt to hinder our effectiveness. As Victor Hugo wrote, “You have enemies? Why, it is the story of every man who has done a great deed or created a new idea.” But having courage to stand for the truth is often only half the battle; we must also learn to handle attack in a godly way. Even as we resist the temptation to seek affirmation from the wrong sources, we must strive to be winsome in our approach toward all—at once clinging to the truth yet demonstrating grace and holding our expectations with an open hand.

Understand that forgiveness is always costly and never easy.
Forgiveness is always challenging and entails an element of suffering. Sometimes it is most difficult when we must choose to forgive unilaterally, without any prospect of the other person’s response. “Unilateral forgiveness occurs when you forgive someone and yet the person has not asked for it, requested it, or even repented of what they did to you,” explains Tony Evans. “Unilaterally means that on your own—without their involvement—you choose to grant them forgiveness.”

Although it may be hard, the cost and consequences of unforgiveness are far too high.

Pray for your enemies and your heart will change towards them.
It is natural to fall into the mindset of seeing our opponents as obstacles, of dismissing those with different worldviews, and of focusing on our own hurts rather than recognizing the pain of others. When we pray for our enemies, God will change our perspective and enable us to see them as He does—precious people in need of a Savior.
My former colleague, the late Nabeel Qureshi, would often admonish, “Before you talk to someone about God, talk to God about them.” When you talk to God about your enemies, He will often prepare you to talk to them about Him.

Pursue reconciliation and be persistent. As believers, we must live in a continual rhythm of asking forgiveness in humility when we’ve wronged others and offering it freely when we ourselves have been wronged. As we pursue reconciliation intentionally, we must do so with an attitude of surrender, trusting that God is at work even when we can’t see the results. “Forgiveness is granted before it is felt. It is a promise to pray for the perpetrator as you remind yourself of God’s grace to you,” says Tim Keller. “Though it is extremely difficult and painful, forgiveness will deepen your character, free you to talk to and help the person, and lead to love and peace rather than bitterness.”

We must not give in to discouragement or give up hope, however daunting the road ahead appears. Next time you’re confronted with enemies, don’t despair. Resist the temptation to respond in anger. With humility, ask God what you can learn and where you can change. With gratitude, give thanks for the forgiveness you’ve experienced in Christ. With confidence, pray for your enemies—specifically, by name, day after day. In obedience, grant them forgiveness. And with anticipation, watch God change your heart toward others—and maybe even your enemy’s heart toward you.

Back to that memorable evening watching Les Misérables with my now friend, Jason. Themes of mercy, forgiveness, freedom, and redemption are evident throughout the acclaimed work, so in light of our journey it was poignant and fitting that we were watching it together.

The closing—and arguably most famous—line of the musical’s epilogue is “To love another person is to see the face of God.”

In one sense, this is right. Perhaps it is even an allusion to 1 John 4:12. “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” Every individual bears the image of God, so we see something of God’s face in another person. And to love is to act like God, so that will inevitably help us to see as He does as well. When we love one another, God’s love in us is perfected in us, and it’s almost as if we can see Him.

Yet in another sense, this line is vastly incomplete. The true image of God is Jesus Christ, and it is only in lovingly gazing at Him that we truly see the face of God—and only with the eyes of our heart for now. We will see Him face to face one day, but that is still to come.

So, with all due respect to Victor Hugo, perhaps we should reverse the logic of his famous line: we first need to see the face of God in Christ to truly love another person.

The only way to demonstrate and experience true forgiveness and love is to see how God has granted and revealed it to us in Jesus. Once we begin to grasp that, it will change the way we view the world and transform how we treat everyone God brings along our path.

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”—Ephesians 4:32

Ruth Malhotra is Public Relations Manager at RZIM.

1 Tony Evans, “Two Types of Forgiveness” (April 13, 2018), www.authenticmanhood.com/.
LESSONS LEARNED IN CAPTIVITY

By John Lennox

How do we make sense of the fact that Joseph was used by God to achieve so much in later life? It may well have been connected with his trust in God during periods of temptation and waiting.
The story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, has a timeless quality that is undiminished in its capacity to probe the depths, the heights, the sorrows, and the joys that form the intricate tapestry of relationships between men and women and their engagement with God.

The account of Joseph’s life occupies the final movement of the book of Genesis. It begins quite abruptly in Genesis 37:2: “These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers.” This phrase, “These are the generations of,” occurs several times in Genesis and is well recognized as a literary marker that the author of the book uses to divide his long narrative into its major movements.

The emphasis at this point on Jacob and not only his son Joseph reminds us that this final section of Genesis is not simply the story of Joseph. It is still to be seen as the story of Jacob. In fact, though the book ends with the death of Joseph, the death of Jacob is recorded in the penultimate chapter. Nor is it simply the story of Joseph and Jacob. It is properly to be seen as the story of Jacob and his sons—the “generations of Jacob.” Joseph’s destiny is inextricably entwined with that of his many brothers.
In broad strokes, this story, familiar to many people from childhood, tracks the complex path of Joseph’s extraordinary life from his early days in a rather dysfunctional family—on the one hand, enjoying his father’s favoritism, as indicated by the famous coat of many colors; and, on the other hand, in consequence of that favoritism, enduring his brothers’ increasingly hurtful taunts and bullying. His strange dreams that cast him in the role of leader in his family inflame his brothers’ hatred to the point where they determine to murder him when they see him coming to visit them as they tend cattle far from home.

At the last moment, fratricide is narrowly avoided when one of the brothers, Judah, suggests that Joseph be sold to a passing caravan of Midianite slave traffickers. The deal done, Joseph is taken to Egypt where he is sold as a domestic slave to Potiphar, a senior official in Pharaoh’s retinue. Joseph proves himself an outstanding house steward and is soon entrusted with running Potiphar’s entire domestic economy. Here, Joseph’s story takes another turn.

The very first temptation happened in the garden in Eden, the garden which the first humans were given the responsibility of tending. This was the workplace of Adam and Eve.

Joseph also experienced temptation in the workplace, Potiphar’s palace. There was a woman in the palace, Potiphar’s wife. One can imagine her as beautiful, rich, and bored. She imagined she could risk having some fun with this handsome steward, for Joseph was good-looking, as his mother had been. Or is that being unfair to Potiphar’s wife? May it not have been that she, given ample opportunity to see Joseph at work, gradually fell in love with him? Not surprisingly, opinions differ, and both scenarios are realistic.

Joseph certainly could not avoid noticing Potiphar’s wife. Indeed, many people today might well have said, “Joseph, indulge yourself. Have your fun, man, if you get the chance! No one is going to see you. What harm is there in it? She is very beautiful, and available, and you are lonely and have nothing to lose.”

Furthermore, in that ancient society, if Joseph had done so, it could well have been a way of taking over from Potiphar and so gaining real power and status. So the stakes were high, as eventually she cajoled him and tried to get him to sleep with her. It was a powerful temptation at the workplace. It faces many men today. How many married men work with an attractive young secretary, twenty years their junior? Before long the older partner is replaced by a younger model, the marriage disintegrates, and the children suffer the most.

Joseph was not married at this time but was a normal young man with normal, healthy, God-given desires, and surely he would have been delighted to have a wife, as he eventually did. How would he handle his natural desires and his awareness of his own desirability?

God is not against sex; after all, he invented it as a wonderful aspect of human life, essential to procreation. But God is against adultery, that destroyer of marriage and families. And Joseph was seeking God’s rule in his life and was not prepared to take someone’s else’s wife. We should listen carefully to what he says to Potiphar’s wife as he resists her advances:

*Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife.*

(Gen. 39:8–9)

Some interpretations of this event do not deal kindly with Joseph. For instance, Maurice Samuel writes:
Does he [Joseph] have to emphasize the fact that he could assuage her need safely if he wanted to? “He knoweth not what is in the house.” Does Joseph have to point out that he is the equal of her husband? . . . In reality it was Joseph who forced the issue, as he had done in his boyhood with his brothers, forced it steadily day by day, until the explosion came. In those days he had played with his brothers’ hatred; now he toyed with a woman’s love. In both instances he was the active agent, and set the pattern; and to make this clear, in both instances he had his coat torn off him—in a kind of unmasking—and was thrown into the pit.\(^2\)

Plausible as this suggestion may appear from a certain perspective, I do not myself find it convincing for the following reason. The narrative at this point concerns a situation in which everything is permitted, with one exception. We have read something very like that before—the story of the original temptation in Genesis 3. The resonances are strong: not now a beautiful garden, but a beautiful palace; not Eve but another woman appealing to aesthetic and basic human drives; not now to eat a forbidden fruit but to taste the forbidden fruit that she herself was. Thomas Mann recognizes this allusion when he has Joseph say to her, “Understand me rightly—I dare not take a bite of the lovely apple you offer me, that we may eat of wrongdoing and ruin everything.”\(^3\)

Yet what a world of difference there was between the situation in the garden and the one in Potiphar’s house. Adam, perfectly created from the hand of God, with his eyes wide open, took his eye off the spiritual and moral dimension and fell for the temptation offered by his wife, thereby bringing disaster to the world. Eating the tree promised the knowledge of good and evil, a knowledge that proved Adam’s undoing. But Joseph, maybe in his early twenties by this time, shows that his knowledge of good and evil is very different from that of Adam. It led him to refuse the evil. “How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” (Gen. 39:9). Joseph’s reply to her shows that his ethics were not of the situational variety that characterizes much relativistic thinking: “If it feels right, it must be right.” For Joseph there were absolute values; there was such a thing as sin.

He regarded the particular sin tempting him not only to be against Potiphar but ultimately against God, who had defined marriage as an exclusive bond between a man and a woman until one of them dies. She was Potiphar’s wife, and Joseph saw that giving in to her desires would be an offense not only against Potiphar but also against God. The sad irony here is that Joseph valued Potiphar’s trust; his wife did not.

How different Joseph was from his half-brother Judah, to whose sexual behavior Genesis drew our attention a short while ago.

There is a clear message here for our contemporary world. Where early sexual activity, including pornography, is encouraged, in the words of a former British chief rabbi Immanuel Jakobovitz, it leads to a “moral wasteland.” The cost, he says, to society of marital infidelity is incalculable, above all in terms of the millions of children being raised in a moral wasteland, without the shelter of a loving home. Is it any wonder that from their number countless embittered, selfish, lonely and sometimes violent citizens, are recruited to swell the ranks of the anti-social?

The only way of dealing with this kind of powerful temptation of lust is to make God the center and focal point of our morality, not our desires, or feeling that it is so right.

Potiphar’s wife did not relent. Joseph must have had an increasingly difficult
time resisting as she kept the pressure up day after day. Many a man has resisted once but given in when the pressure persists. Joseph did not, dealing with it by avoiding her. Finally, at a time when the house was empty, in desperation, she seized his cloak and pulled him to her. His only means of escape was to run, which meant leaving his robe in her hands. His first robe had been forcibly taken off him by his hate-inspired brothers; his second, by a lust-driven woman. Joseph lost his robe but retained his integrity.

Centuries later Paul would give similar advice to young Christians: “Flee youthful passions” (2 Tim. 2:22). There are some pressures you can escape only by literally running out of the situation. Joseph’s doing so represents a crucial stage in the ongoing biblical storyline, for this is a book in which, in the interests of the Seed Project, a great deal of attention is given to the question of who marries whom. Joseph will not sleep with another man’s wife.

Her thwarted passion led to boundless fury, “a woman scorned.” First, she denounced Joseph to the other servants, playing the race card:

As soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, she called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house.” (Gen. 39:13–15)

This accusation opens a window into her character, for she blames her husband to the servants, a very serious and unwise breach of etiquette in that culture, to say the least.

Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, and she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house” (39:16–18).

To Potiphar she says that Joseph came in to mock her, adding, no doubt with relish: “This is the way your servant treated me” (v. 19). It is possible, though, that her reference to mocking has the sense of “play,” including sexual play. She instantly changes from the aggressor to the victim, loud in her protest against the “outrage.” What she does is increasingly relevant to developments in the very different culture of contemporary Western society.

According to Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, this is the rise of the so-called “culture of victimhood in which individuals and groups display high sensitivity to slight, have a tendency to handle conflicts through complaints to third parties, and seek to cultivate an image of being victims who deserve assistance.”

Bradley and Manning contrast contemporary victim culture with earlier honor and dignity cultures, the categories of which are far more likely to describe the Egypt of Joseph’s time, which is why Potiphar’s wife’s behavior is so striking. Of course, there are situations in which people are real victims and need to experience justice, but that is not the case here.

Potiphar, we are told, responded angrily, though perhaps the text carefully avoids saying with whom he was angry. He ordered Joseph to be incarcerated in the special prison reserved for the king’s prisoners. So far as we know, there were very few prisons in the ancient world, but, as we saw in connection with the evidence for slavery in the Middle Kingdom, there are records of prisons in Egypt.

The fact that Potiphar did not have Joseph executed, the usual punishment for adultery, may indicate that he had suspicions about the veracity of his wife’s story and wished to give Joseph, who had
been a huge asset to him, some benefit of the doubt. Potiphar probably had no option but to keep such suspicions to himself in order to avoid his own status being threatened by scandal. After all, there were no other witnesses; the house was empty.

This fact has led some commentators to put part of the blame on Joseph for acting unwisely in going into an empty building with a woman who had been constantly pestering him. Of course, he may not have known it was empty. It probably was a large house, and she may well have chosen her moment carefully. Whatever happened, there is an obvious warning for us today: people should avoid finding themselves alone with people of the opposite sex in situations where they could easily compromise in unforeseen ways. This is now the third time in the story of Joseph that clothes have been used as false evidence. First was the use of Joseph’s blood-stained cloak to deceive Jacob into thinking Joseph was dead; next was Tamar’s clothing herself as a prostitute in order to deceive her father-in-law, Judah; and once more in a sexual context, Potiphar’s wife uses Joseph’s cloak to frame her husband. Joseph’s first cloak was a garment of distinction, and so presumably was this second one, as befitted a chief steward in the home of one of the elite.

Joseph had done the right thing. Potiphar’s wife had committed the crime, but Joseph was suffering for it. The apostle Peter warns in 1 Peter 2:20-23 that this kind of suffering is likely to happen to Christian believers:

If when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

The supreme example of someone who suffered for doing right and good is the Lord Jesus himself. The remarkable thing is that Joseph, who knew nothing of Jesus, behaved like him.

To be accused of something you did not do is a terrible experience, especially if, as was the case with Joseph, in the area of sexual misdemeanor or child abuse. Yet such accusations are on the increase in our society. This has given rise to a new category of person, the falsely accused. In many countries there are Christians today sitting in prisons falsely accused of crimes they never committed.

There is no indication in the text that Joseph was given any opportunity to explain his side of the story, which is often the case in such situations. When we are wrongly and deceitfully accused, the immediate temptation is to protest and lash out, which is why Peter draws the example of Jesus to our attention. When Jesus was falsely accused and abominably treated, he did not lash out, he did not return the insults, he did not threaten. What he did do is of paramount importance. He kept quiet and entrusted himself to God the righteous judge.

Similarly Paul advises his fellow believers: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Rom. 12:19). This is not easy advice to take. When we are falsely accused, or even when we are cheated of something that we think should rightfully have been ours (think of the problems arising from legacies even in your own wider family circle), it can be a hard struggle to get to the stage where we are prepared to let it go and entrust it to God in the confidence that he will deal with it fairly and justly in the end.

Also increasingly problematic in contemporary society, particularly in our colleges and universities, is the occurrence of microaggression that we referred to earlier. What frequently happens here is that
what used to be thought of as a minor grievance—e.g., a verbal insult or a politically incorrect statement—that could be resolved between those immediately involved, is instead blown out of all proportion by means of an official complaint to some institutional authority and/or is spread far and wide on social media. In each case a third party is called in. In addition, the complainant seeks for further small incidents and adds them together to make a case that the matter in hand is much more serious than perhaps a single issue would indicate.

Campbell and Manning write:

Other strategies for swaying third parties have the same core logic: they increase intervention by magnifying the actual or apparent severity of the conflict. While some aggrieved individuals increase the apparent severity by documenting a larger pattern of offense, in other cases the manipulation of information is more extreme: Not content merely to publicize the offensive behavior of their adversaries, the aggrieved might exaggerate its extent or even make it up whole cloth. In interpersonal disputes someone might make a false accusation against an adversary, as when a woman who is spurned by a man falsely accuses him of rape or when someone falsely accuses an ex-spouse of child abuse.5

They might well be describing Potiphar’s wife.

I mention this issue because Christians have to be aware of such dangers and be careful not to precipitate accusations of microaggression. They also need to be careful to avoid being infected by our culture, since the concept of dealing with every little complaint by appealing to third parties and proclaiming your victimhood is not the way taught by Jesus and his apostles. Rather, if we have a complaint against someone, we should try to sort it out privately, and only if that fails should we get another person involved, and only if that fails should we go to the church (not the world) and seek help. The basic principle is containment, the exact opposite of the public broadcasting of accusations of microaggression.

On the other hand, as we are only too keenly aware in the current “Me Too” climate in some countries, there are many real victims of sexual assault for which the principle of containment does not apply, and the authorities need to be alerted in order to prosecute the perpetrators and prevent them destroying further lives.

We cannot leave this episode in Joseph’s life without thinking about the question of what happens if we fail to do what Joseph did, and we fall into temptation, which realism and experience tell us can happen. The Bible does not comment on this here in Genesis but has a great deal to say about it elsewhere. What comes to mind at once is the behavior of Israel’s greatest king, David, who saw from his palace roof a beautiful woman and summoned her to the palace, where he slept with her. But Bathsheba was another man’s wife, and when she became pregnant, David eventually arranged for her husband, Uriah, to be killed in battle.

Guilty of adultery, deceit, and murder, David was the polar opposite of Joseph. Yet God did not destroy David but sent the prophet Nathan to confront him with the devastating consequences of what he had done:

Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the Lord, “Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in
the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.” (2 Sam. 12:10–12)

Faced with this, David at once confessed his guilt: “David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord’” (12:13a). And Nathan said to David, “The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you shall die” (12:13b–14).

There are two major lessons to be learned from this. The first is that God is rich in forgiveness for those who repent. David might have written Psalm 32 to express his experience of God’s mercy at the time:

_Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit._ (vv. 1–2)

God forgave David, but (and this is the second lesson) sin has consequences. In David’s case those consequences were irreversible and wrought havoc on his family for many years.

It is a serious mistake to think that forgiveness removes the consequences of sin. If I get drunk behind the wheel of a car and knock you down and injure your spine, leaving you paraplegic, maybe after some time, with God’s grace and my repentance, you might be prepared to forgive me. You will, however, still be paraplegic. The Christian who sins is called upon to repent with the promise, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). The consequences are another matter. They have to be lived with. Forgiveness does not cancel them. It is important that we realize this.

The topic of forgiveness will figure prominently in the Joseph narrative later.

It will, however, not be a question of Joseph seeking forgiveness but of Joseph doing the forgiving.

In the meantime, we should get back to where we left him in his prison cell in Egypt.

**JOSEPH IN PRISON**

The first thing we read about Joseph in the prison is this:

_The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph’s charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed._ (Gen. 39:21–23)

Joseph had proved a trustworthy administrator in Potiphar’s house. He now proves himself to be an equally trustworthy administrator in the prison. We are told that the Lord was with him, and we see at once that we may not interpret the Lord’s being with him as a guarantee that life would go swimmingly. Joseph was in prison, and the Lord was with him. That did not mean immediate or even rapid release. What it did mean was that God had not forgotten him and was still involved in his life. Joseph was part of a much bigger story than he could possibly have imagined or appreciated at this stage. His prison experience was a necessary part of his training to fulfill a central role in God’s purposes for his people and for the world at large.

Joseph’s administrative skills were soon noticed inside the prison. Whatever his reaction to his unfair imprisonment, it did not prevent him from actively making the best of his situation. He did this with such success that he was eventually placed in charge of running the prison, a surprising
position for an inmate to be given. One cannot help wondering if the prison governor may have begun to suspect that Joseph had been imprisoned on a false charge.

The next significant thing to happen in the drama was the arrival in the prison of two special prisoners from Pharaoh’s entourage: the cupbearer and the baker. They had offended their master. Responsible for the king’s food and drink, such men were often suspects in plots to poison the king. Whatever the charge against them, they were placed in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard assigned Joseph to attend them personally, probably with instructions to observe them carefully and find out exactly what they were guilty of so this could be reported to Pharaoh.

One day Joseph noticed that the cupbearer and the baker seemed dejected and out of sorts and he asked them why.

“We have had dreams,” they answered, “and there is no one to interpret them.”

Then Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me” (Gen. 40:8).

So the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream:

_In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh’s cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand._ (40:9–11)

Joseph replied:

_This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh’s cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his cupbearer. Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit._ (40:12–15).

Before we look at the details, it is worth noting that the imagery bears a hallmark of authenticity. The cupbearer is said to squeeze grapes into Pharaoh’s cup. This refers to the fact that one of the cupbearer’s responsibilities was to ensure that the king did not disgrace himself by drinking too much alcohol on important occasions. The cupbearer would do this by surreptitiously diluting the wine with grape juice.

Joseph noticed that they were sad. That says something impressive about his state of mind. One can easily imagine that many of us, if we had been as badly treated as Joseph, might well have given in to the destructive emotions of self-pity, bitterness, and anger because of our own situation, and we would never have noticed something as marginal as the sad faces of a couple of prisoners. Do we notice the emotional state of those around us? One of our basic human needs is to be noticed, and people know if we are really interested in them or if our interaction with them is superficial and perfunctory.

Joseph had, apparently, managed to rise so far above his own circumstances that he was aware—indeed, compassionately aware—of what was going on in the lives of those around him. This represents a challenge to us who may well enjoy much more favorable circumstances than he did at that time. He noticed, and he asked what was wrong, and they told him about their dreams and their desire to have them interpreted.

Years before, Joseph himself had dreamed, and so far his dreams had come to nothing. He might well have told the cupbearer and the baker to forget their dreams, that there was no more substance in them than in his own dreams. Yet he
didn’t. On the contrary, he said: “Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.”

I wonder what they thought he meant by “God.” In the narrative, Joseph tells the two men that he had been “stolen out of the land of the Hebrews” (40:15), so at some stage in the conversation, he may well have explained to them about the God of the Hebrews. Whatever the answer to that question, one thing is clear: Joseph had not given up on his own dreams. His mention of God in connection with dreams surely indicates that he still had a deep confidence that God was behind the dreams he had had and would eventually bring them to fulfillment. One can imagine that he understood his dreams as promises from God on which he could rely, however little he understood them. What is striking is that although Joseph does not appear to have understood his own dreams, he still is confident that he can interpret the dreams of the two prisoners. Joseph did not have the Bible. So far as we know from Genesis, he did not even have the experience his forefathers did of God speaking directly. But he did know that God had spoken in his dream, and that fact gave him an inward stability and an outward-looking attitude, so he could notice when those around him were in trouble.

We do have the Bible, yet it is possible that our enthusiasm for believing its promises to us has diminished over the years. Some of us, when we first trusted the Lord years ago, were filled with a sense of joy while reading Scripture, as we heard the Lord speak through it. And now? If our interest in the Word of God were judged by the amount of time we spend reading it, what would it look like? We’ve stopped believing, have we? It is even possible for those of us involved in Christian ministry to spend proportionately little time listening to God speaking through his Word.

Joseph interpreted the dreams of the two prisoners. He explained to them that the number three that appears in each of their dreams represented a time interval. Specifically, he told the chief cupbearer that the three branches he had seen meant that he would be restored to his position within three days, and Joseph asked him to mention to Pharaoh the unjust treatment Joseph had experienced. Joseph told the chief baker that the three baskets of cakes in his dream portended his execution within three days.

Three days later both dreams were fulfilled on Pharaoh’s birthday. The baker was executed, and the cupbearer got his job back. But he forgot Joseph.

Joseph certainly did not forget him. His hopes of release must have been high when he asked the cupbearer to mention him favorably to Pharaoh. But when nothing happened the next day or the next week or month or year, he must have become increasingly disappointed. How could the cupbearer have forgotten Joseph’s role in giving him hope? Was Joseph wrong in thinking that God was providentially behind his meeting with the cupbearer under such circumstances? Or, as some think, was Joseph wrong in trying to do something in his own defense, to get himself a hearing, rather than simply remaining quiet and allowing God to act? I think that is too harsh of a judgment. Joseph may understandably have thought that the cupbearer could be a conduit to a fair hearing and freedom.

All that had happened to him was unfair and unjust. He had done nothing to deserve being in Egypt, let alone being in an Egyptian prison. Potiphar should have sensed that Joseph had protected rather than insulted him. The silence of God became intense for Joseph. It must have been increasingly hard to take. The question asked in the Psalms must have been his constant companion: “How long, O Lord?” Maybe, though, he clung to the fact that since the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker had come true, so also would his own.
ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke. And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh. (Gen. 41:1–8)

Among those who heard about Pharaoh’s concern about his dreams was the chief cupbearer, whose memory was prompted. He reminded Pharaoh of his brief spell in prison, described the dreams he had had, and told Pharaoh about the “young Hebrew” (41:12) who had been able to interpret them accurately.

Pharaoh lost no time in summoning Joseph, who had a shave, changed his clothes, and went in to the king. Joseph’s life is about to change dramatically. However, we should not move on before we have thought of the significance, not of Pharaoh’s dreams but of when they occurred. For, as will soon be made clear by Joseph, the dreams were sent by God, who was therefore responsible for their timing.

That means that God was directly responsible for the two long years that Joseph had to wait from the time the cupbearer was reinstated. Furthermore, it is clear that God could have prompted the cupbearer much earlier to put in a word for Joseph with Pharaoh. That might have brought Joseph’s freedom, but it certainly would not have taken him to a position of great influence. Joseph’s capacity to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams would play the central role. But the thought recurs: God could have sent Pharaoh the dreams earlier. He did not. Why?

**TURNING POINT: PHARAOH’S DREAMS**

Two long years went by with no change in Joseph’s situation. Then one night Pharaoh dreamed a double dream that disturbed him deeply. From the time of the Middle Kingdom (2000 BC onward) there was a great deal of Egyptian literature concerning dreams. John Currid tells us that kings often claimed to receive commands from deities in dreams, and, in general, dreams were regarded as important vehicles for conveying the will of the gods. According to Currid:

The most important collection of dream omens is the Chester Beatty Papyrus III which comes from Dynasty 19. Alan Gardiner maintains that the style and language of the document may be dated as early as Dynasty 12 (ca. 1991–1783 BC). . . . The manuscript is divided into dreams experienced by the Sons of Seth and the Sons of Horus. Over columns listing various dreams are written the words,

“If a man sees himself in a dream: Seeing a large cat—Good: it means a large harvest will come to him. Seeing his face in a mirror—Bad: it means another wife.”*

Another example from the same period is that if a man saw himself submerged in the Nile, that was a good omen, symbolizing that he had been purified of all evil. But seeing a dwarf in a dream portended the tragedy of having his life cut in half.7

Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows, attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. And behold, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. And the
Perhaps the answer lies in the terse reference to Joseph in Psalm 105:19: “The word of the Lord tested him.” Joseph’s integrity had certainly been tested in the encounter with Potiphar’s wife.

Could it be that he was being tested in a different way by having to wait? Admittedly, waiting is a totally alien idea to a generation taught to expect instant gratification. Yet waiting on the Lord is a thoroughly biblical notion:

*They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.*

(Isa. 40:31)

It is a thought that we meet in the Psalms:

*I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.*

(Ps. 40:1)

*Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!*  

(Ps. 27:14)

Waiting is hardest when you are suffering, and many of the psalms express that in prayer: “How long, O Lord?” Many of the major characters in Scripture had to wait, sometimes an inordinately long time, to see the fulfillment of the promises that God had made to them. Apart from Joseph, Abraham, Moses, and David spring immediately to mind.

What is clear from experience is that waiting builds character. Those people who had to save hard in earlier life and wait to afford to get married, have a home, get labor-saving devices such as washing machines, purchase new clothes, and eat at restaurants—tend to have a different sense of appreciation for what they have compared with those who got everything they wanted instantly.

In 2013 the *Huffington Post* reported:

In a world of instant gratification, it can seem like the concept of “waiting” is on the verge of extinction. But learning to wait builds character and could even improve decision-making skills, a new study suggests. Researchers from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business found that the act of waiting increases patience, and that patience seems to help people make smarter decisions about money. “When people wait, it makes them place a higher value on what they’re waiting for, and that higher value makes them more patient,” study researcher Ayelet Fishbach said in a statement. “They see more value in what they are waiting for because of a process psychologists call self-perception—we learn what we want and prefer by assessing our own behavior, much the same way we learn about others by observing how they behave.”

In the Christian context, Paul makes the point in Romans 5:1–5:

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

The glory of God is yet future for the believer, and suffering may come before then. Even there, says Paul, we can be confident (the meaning of “rejoice”) because we know that endurance produces character that generates a hope that will not let
us down. This was no armchair thinking for Paul:

*For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.*

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. (2 Cor. 1:8–10)

It takes real character to distinguish between God’s no and his not yet.

There is a clear connection between endurance and character and reliance on God that we may legitimately read back into the life of Joseph. The long wait in prison contributed to the depth of character he would need to cope with high administrative responsibility, to say nothing of the resources he would need for the process of being reconciled to his brothers.

No doubt, Joseph had heard many accounts from his father about the exploits of the family and the way in which God had dealt with his ancestors. Yet he himself seems to have lived life trusting a God who was mostly silent. The silence of God is a telling phrase, and many people have had to endure something very like it for many years. The words of Psalm 105 form a telling comment on Joseph’s quiet yet deep-rooted faith: “Until what he had said came to pass, the word of the Lord tested him.”

Sometimes we meet believers whose dealings with God have been dramatic and, apparently, unmistakable. We might, of course, react with skepticism, but we might also react with a feeling of inadequacy if our experience has not been like that.

Well, we can derive a deep encouragement from the story of Joseph because the fact that he could be used by God to achieve so much in later life may well be connected with his trust in God in the absence of the dramatic.

Joseph held on to what he understood God had indicated to him in his teenage dreams, that one day he would come to power, whatever that meant. As a result, at a crucial moment, he became a powerful public witness for God.

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1 The word pharaoh is the Greek form of the Egyptian *pero* or *per-a-a*, which was the designation for the royal residence and means “Great House.” The name of the residence became associated with the ruler and, in time, was used exclusively for the leader of the people.


5 Ibid.


8 Another mark of authenticity—apparently, unlike other ancient peoples, Egyptians at the time shaved.

In an interesting encounter between Jesus and the paralytic given to us in Luke 5:17-26, we see a defining reminder of the relationship between soul and body, the temporal and the eternal. The friends of a paralyzed man did everything they could to bring him within the sight and touch of Jesus. They even disfigured the property of the person in whose house Jesus was visiting in the hope that he would perform a miracle for their friend. I suspect they must have reasoned that if Jesus could make a paralyzed man walk again, then replacing a roof would be a minor problem. But as they lowered this man within reach of Jesus, they were not expecting an apologetic discussion:

Which is easier: to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Get up and walk”? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. So he said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. (Luke 5:23-25)

“Which of the two is harder,” asked Jesus, “to bring physical healing or to forgive a person’s sins?” The irresistible answer was self-evident, was it not? To bring physical healing is harder because that would be such a miraculous thing, visible to the naked eye. The invisible act of forgiveness had far less evidentiary value.

Yet, as they pondered and as we ponder, we discover repeatedly in life that the logic of God is so different to the logic of humanity. We move from the material to the spiritual in terms of the spectacular, but God moves from the spiritual to the material in terms of the essential. The physical is the concrete external—a shadow comparatively. The spiritual is the intangible internal—the objective actuality.

By Ravi Zacharias

The Ultimate Miracle
Rather than chasing truth, we often chase shadows. We chase them because they are a haunting enticement of the substance without being the substance themselves. It takes a jolt, sometimes even a painful jolt, to remind us where reality lies and where shadows seduce.

I think of a man some years ago who was preoccupied with some activity that was quite trivial while he neglected the care of a little life in his trust. That life was lost in a tragic accident within a few feet away from him. Unaware of what was happening, he was giving his rapt attention to something of far lesser value. I have often thought of his unquenchable grief when he saw the cost of his neglect. We all are prone to doing the same thing and then finding out too late the cost we have paid.

Jesus was so aware of this weakness within us that he often walked the second mile to meet us in order that something more dramatic might be used to put into perspective for us what is more real and of greater importance to God. The Bible says we need a Savior and we need forgiveness. Jesus comes and says to you and me that he is offering forgiveness and doing so through the payment of his life on the cross.

Yes, Jesus did heal the paralytic man, but not without the reminder of what the ultimate miracle was. Once we understand this, we understand the relationship between touching the soul and touching the body. In this instance, Jesus followed the act of forgiveness with the easier act of physical healing. If the paralytic was a wise man, he would walk with the awareness that the apparently less visible miracle was actually more miraculous than the more visible one—even as his feeling of gratitude for his restored body would remain a constant reminder to him of the restoration of his soul.

As I have pondered this and the many other examples of Jesus’s acts of mercy, I look at our hurting world that is desensitized to the gospel message—the message that cleanses the soul, heals the inner being, and brings light to the body. Our world is weighed down with pain, fear, suffering, poverty, and unforgiveness. Our world is so broken that if we were to stare reality in the face, we would wish it really were only a shadow and not an actual embodiment. Such is the blind eye people turn to the familiar and dismiss as mere shadows what is tragically real. Sadly, both body and soul are forgotten in the process. The cost in human suffering is beyond computation.

In such a world, the question becomes: Does Jesus still lift body and soul out of the shadow and bring it into the light? I believe he does, and what an answer is the cross upon which “He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:4). Jesus brought God’s offer of true forgiveness and eternal life while affirming each individual as uniquely created in God’s image. For Jesus, suffering is only symptomatic of the life unhinged from right relationship with God. We have broken away from God, from our fellow human beings, and even from ourselves.

The cross of Christ is definitive and complete, offering forgiveness without minimizing the debt. God’s forgiveness gives us a fresh start. There is a full restoration—the ultimate miracle—in this life and for eternity. Such is the power of God’s love; such is the power of his marvelous mercy and healing touch.

Warm Regards,

Ravi
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