

VALLEYS // Beyond Forgiveness

Finding Hope in Life's Hardest Moments

How would your life be changed if you were absolutely confident that God was with you in every situation, in every conversation, in every moment? How would your life be different if you never questioned if God was for you? How would your outlook on life change?

What we've seen over the last 6 weeks in Joseph's life is Joseph is up and down, he's exalted, then he's in the pit, then he's lifted up, only to be thrown into prison. Joseph's life is one enormous let down after another.

Do you remember Pharaoh's dreams from last week? God used them to show Pharaoh that there was a famine coming and people would starve. But, if Pharaoh would follow Joseph's instructions and use the seven good years to store up for the famine, the country of Egypt would be a safe haven for people who needed food.

Joseph led the preparation and stored up food for seven years and then the famine set in. It set in everywhere and off in the distance a family, with an aging father and eleven boys being to feel the pinch. Jacob, the father, decides to send the boys to Egypt because he hears there is food there.

Genesis 42:6–11, "Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he said. They said, 'From the land of Canaan, to buy food.' And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him." (ESV)

This is the moment. The ones who threw Joseph into that pit, who faked his death and lied to their father about it all those years, the ones who betrayed him and sold him into slavery, are bowing before him. He has all the power, all the leverage, and they have absolutely no clue that it's him.

There's something incredible that happens when God grabs a hold of your life, when God grows your character, when He refines you, when He roots out from you the fear of man, when He emboldens you, and helps you step fully into your calling. You almost become unrecognizable to the people who used to know you. There will be people who used to know you, who still think they know you, and if they were to stand before you today you would become unrecognizable because of your confidence in God. And not just confidence in God to do what YOU want, but confidence in God to do what He wants.

When you fully step into your calling, you're going to have some that are cheering you on. And there will be those who you love, that you genuinely thought would be there with you, that are either nowhere to be found or are actively working against what God is doing in and through you. Why? Because your growing is a threat to their comfort. Your change confronts their unwillingness to change. Your unwillingness to settle for the status quo reveals their resistance to the new thing God wants to do.

Joseph was so confident that God was with him all those years, in the lowest moments of life. And now, he's fully stepped into the calling of God in his life, and his brothers are standing right in front of him, and they don't recognize him. One of the many likely reasons is the last place they saw him he was being carted away in shackles, and now he's the prime minister of the nation of Egypt!

Now, there's a series of events, some back and forth between Joseph and his brothers and they still don't realize it's him. And all through the next several chapters, Joseph is emotionally torn up. He's interacting with the very people who hurt him the most in life, and he's navigating those conversations while wrestling with the reality that this is God's promise over his life being fulfilled.

And then he receives word that his father isn't doing well.

Genesis 45:2-5, "And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. So Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come near to me, please.' And they came near. And he said, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.'" (ESV)

Soon after this interaction Jacob dies, and the brothers, including Joseph, go to bury him in chapter 50... picking back up in verse 14.

Genesis 50:14-21, "After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father. When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.' So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this command before he died: "Say to Joseph, 'Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, 'Behold, we are your servants.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.' Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.'" (ESV)

This is one of the most famous moments in the scripture—one of the last main events in Joseph’s story. His father dies and the brothers send a letter to Joseph that essentially said, “*Dad said be nice to us.*” And Joseph wept! Why? Because even though he had forgiven them, and he’d assured them of his forgiveness of them, you can’t rebuild a relationship that has been broken in an instant. The rebuilding of trust takes time. The brothers really don’t trust that he won’t use his power to repay evil for evil.

That is really the question for Joseph here. Will I seek vengeance, revenge...*Will I repay evil for evil?* He could easily allow his own perspective to become twisted and think, this isn’t vengeance, this is justice. I’m justified in doing it. I have the means to do it. Think of all those years... all that pain, all that hurt... why shouldn’t I?

And then in three sentences, Joseph completely tears down the barriers to rebuilding that relationship. In three sentences we see in Joseph the marks of a genuinely changed heart, and life changed by grace.

What does Joseph do?

Genesis 50:19, “...Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?” (ESV)

“Joseph, are you going to harm us or take vengeance upon us? Are you going to throw us into a pit now? Are you going to repay evil for evil?”

What does he say? Am I God? Am I on the throne of heaven? I promise you, we have no idea how important this is. How profound this is. How utterly life changing what Joseph is saying here.

The 1st principle here is:

1. GET OFF THE THRONE

This theme comes up repeatedly throughout the scriptures. Putting ourselves in the place of God is at the heart of nearly every single one of our problems in life by believing that I am the moral authority over my life. I alone know right from wrong, and I can decide for myself whatever that is. This is Adam and Eve. Don’t eat of the tree... what do they do? Eat of the tree. The serpent says, eat from the tree and you’ll be like God. Whenever we say, “*God I know what you say, I know what the Bible says, but I’m going to do this instead,*” you’ve placed yourself in the place of God. When we elevate our opinions and make our perspective absolute, we’re doing exactly what the serpent enticed us to do. Instead of aligning our lives with God’s word, His will, His ways, we’re placing ourselves on the throne.

But in this context, Joseph is talking about the way we place ourselves in the place of God by holding onto offenses, by nursing our anger, by holding a grudge, by resenting someone who has wronged us.

His brothers ask for forgiveness and Joseph says, “Am I in the place of God?” Do you see what God is telling us through this story!? Every single person who holds onto their offenses, every single one of us that is currently resentful toward someone else, who is holding on to their anger toward someone, has put themselves in the place of God.

This is why God tells us in,

Romans 12:19, “...Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (ESV)

What’s God saying to us? If you refuse to forgive, you’re playing God! You’re sitting in my seat! You’re in my spot! See, if we sit in judgment over someone who has wronged us, or hurt us, we are, as finite flawed incredibly limited human beings, trying to do God’s job. That, my friends, is a recipe for utter disaster and only ever brings more harm into the world. On top of all of it, every single one of us deserves our own judgment, and only God has the knowledge and wisdom to judge rightly.

See, when we hold onto these things, we begin to think about what we’d like to see happen, what we think they deserve, what we think “justice” looks like. And whoever it is you’re thinking about right now, we don’t know their journey! We don’t know the pain they’ve had to suffer. We don’t know what kinds of examples and influences they’ve had. To sit and think, “this person deserves fill in the blank” and wish it upon them, or worse yet, act upon it... we’ve done exactly what Lucifer did in heaven. We’re saying, God you don’t know, and I do.

What happens to us when we refuse to forgive? What happens to us when we hold onto our grudges and nurse our offenses and anger? Or what happens when we seek the power to pay back what was done to us. The irony is if we refuse to forgive the evil done to us, we begin to become evil. The evil that motivated the perpetrator to do this thing to you, when we refuse to forgive, and get out of God’s seat, that evil begins to grow in us.

We become so inward-focused, so self-absorbed, that before long, we can’t recognize any of the good all around us. We become blind to the goodness of life because we’re fixated on what brought us death.

If we ever do get vengeance, we lose. See, when we repay evil with evil, we are the ones that become evil. The fastest way to become like the devil is by trying to be God. And if we want to become like God, we have to refuse to put ourselves in the place of God. The first mark of a person changed by the grace of God, is a refusal to put ourselves in God’s place. A refusal to sit in the place of God.

2. GAIN GOD’S PERSPECTIVE

If you get the view from the top of the mountain, you can see where you've come from, and where you need to go, and what you want to avoid. But, when you're in the valley, you can't have that elevated perspective. You can't see things clearly.

Here's the question for us: How do we get God's view on our lives? How do we look at our life? Our journey? Our hardships? Do we view our life, our problems, our pain from the valleys? Or from the peaks?

Down in the valley, you can't see the complexity of real life. You can't see life clearly. But only when we view life from the peak can we actually say what Joseph said to his brothers...

Genesis 50:20, "...you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good..." (ESV)

In life, there are optimists and pessimists. The optimists are people who say, life is good. If you're good to people, people will be good to you. People won't take advantage of you. If you love God and you're a good person, God will bless you. Then, there are the pessimists who believe people will stab you in the back. You can't trust anyone. They're out to harm you. Life is filled with pain. And if you're having a good life right now, you just wait.

Now, very few of us fit neatly in these categories, but many of us tend to view life primarily as one or the other. And from a human perspective, from the valleys of life, it's either life is good and therefore God is good, or life is awful and God is awful, or uncaring, or uninvolved, or not powerful, or not even there.

But that's not what Joseph says. He doesn't fall into either category. It's not either/or it's both/and. And Joseph says, *"Yes, what you did was evil, and it made for an incredibly painful and difficult life, but God is still good."*

In the valley, it's easy to say, "My life is bad, so God is bad or unloving." But up on the mountain, on the peak, you look down and only then can you say, "Life can be awful, but God is still good."

See, the Bible is unbelievably realistic about evil. Read the book of Job. The three people in to book of Job who say, *"If you live a good life good things will happen to you,"* are the villains of the story! They're the fools!

Life is far more complicated that we'd like to give it credit for. No human being is capable of holding this view unless the Holy Spirit reveals it to them. It's not romanticism, and it's not cynicism. And if you can get there, like Joseph does, it will utterly change your life.

3. GO BEYOND FORGIVENESS

This is where we tune out and say it's too hard, its impractical, can't do it, you're asking too much.

Gen 50:20, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.” (ESV)

Only when you refuse to put yourself in the place of God, and only when you see life from God’s perspective, will you ever be able to come close to doing this. He’s humble, and he’s confident. He knows he’s not God. He knows God is always working for his good. And he only gained this perspective through years of hardship and distance from those who hurt him. Humble confidence. The reason he had this was because he knew he didn’t deserve God’s grace over his life. He knew God had seen him through all those horrific moments, even though he didn’t deserve God’s hand on him. See, if we think we earn God’s grace, and that we deserve God’s grace, we will view ourselves as superior to other people and begin to move toward placing ourselves in the place only God deserves to be.

But only when we recognize that we’re saved by undeserving grace, can we extend grace to another person who doesn’t deserve it either. This is what Joseph does with all that power. And he doesn’t just pardon them, he takes care of them. He goes above and beyond to bless them and their children.

What would it take for you not only to not hate your enemies, but for you to practically bless your enemies? Because when Jesus says to love your enemies, He’s not talking theory. It’s not philosophical. It’s practical. We say, “I can’t do what Joseph did.” You’re right. Jesus says you’re right. You can do better than Joseph. Why? Because Joseph didn’t see Jesus. And you have. Joseph didn’t know that God was going to suffer and die for His enemies, and you do. Joseph embraced the suffering in his life because he believed it came, not from his brothers but from God. And because that was his perspective, he could not only forgive, but bless.

Jesus Christ was thrown into suffering, and He pleaded with His Father to let the suffering pass from Him, and what the enemy meant for evil God used for the ultimate good. Jesus is the ultimate example of God bringing good from an act of unspeakable evil. The cross is the ultimate example of good coming from something evil. And when our eyes are fixed on the cross, we see not only how undeserving we are but we also see how loved we are. How much more assurance do we need that God means every single thing for our good?

If you don’t have that kind of humility and that kind of confidence, that kind of power— it’s only found in the person of Jesus. And He invites you to come. Come and get what only God can give.