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Dare to Dream!

LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF
JOSEPH FOR WEARY SOULS
AND TROUBLED MINDS



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"All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act on their dream with open eyes, to make it possible."

(T.E. Lawrence)

I N T R O D U C T I O N : M A N U S C R I P T F O U N D

It's early summer 2017. I've been digging through old files, reading bits and pieces of stuff I've written over the years. Every now and then I'll uncover something I was working on years ago. As I dust off the metaphors and clean up the sentences, I find priceless gems of insight and invaluable golden nuggets of inspiration.

That's how I feel when I found this work...a bit like reuniting with an old friend. I recognize these words well. I lived them.

I originally penned this book in 2007-2008 as part of a "GodPrints" blog. At the time I was in transition. I had completed my doctorate in April of 2007 and moved to Boise a couple months later to assume an executive director position with a Christian university. After 15 years in the classroom as a professor, I was ready for change and loved the idea of moving back to the West, particularly Boise, Idaho. It was my home in the 1990s and remained a place of roots for me.

Unfortunately, my dreams of success and living large on that director salary were quickly dashed. It's a long story but after only a few months on the job, I stepped down for the sake of myself and the institution. I was positive my unemployment would be a temporary matter. I was highly educated and never struggled for work. But the Great Recession was taking a lot of jobs in my line of work. I mailed out hundreds of resumes, did several interviews and applied for just about anything that would pay the bills. Nothing materialized for me. Literally overnight I witnessed my career crash. I spent decades working to get to this point and now, at 44 years of age, I suddenly couldn't find work...as a professor or a pastor. Even Walmart and McDonalds wouldn't hire me (over-educated and too experienced, they said). I just wanted to work.

I muddled through several years working part-time positions, writing on spec, consulting, speaking and training. I scored a couple online and adjunct courses in a few Christian colleges. I watched the years melt away. I turned 45, then 46, 47, 48, 49 and 50. I waited for phone calls, emails, texts or any sign of reprieve. Surely, one day I would have a job again. Surely, one day I'll be able to teach full-time or pastor in a church again. But, for whatever reason, I was overlooked, ignored or forgotten. Sometimes I was outright rejected. Those were difficult days...and, in reality, I still wait for that reprieve.

When I found this work last night, I read every word again. I found Peace in my own thoughts, Hope in my own insights and Joy in my own pain. Joseph's story is a lot like mine. I can relate to his dreams, his imprisonment, his angst and his journey. Someday, hopefully, I can also enjoy his redemption too. What I wouldn't give to redeem the years the locusts have consumed. It's been a long ten years since I wrote these words and they still preach today. I needed to read them.

If you're somebody who's experienced loss, tragedy, pain or crisis...keep reading. This story is for you. Meditate on the Scriptures. Soak in my words. Marinate in the reality that God ain't done with you yet. Dare to dream! Someday this will all make sense. It's what keeps me going anyway. Looking back, God hasn't let me down yet. He's truly GOoD!

CHAPTER ONE :

THE GIFT THAT GIVES AND TAKES

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. (Genesis 37:3)

I love Christmas (even in July). It's the most wonderful time of the year. The festivities, egg nog and carols, holiday lights and yuletide spirit always conceive a spirit of hope, peace and joy within me. Of course, my language of love is "giving and receiving gifts" and so December 25 is perfectly suited for St. Nick and Rick. Do you think the old elf will ever retire? I'd love to work just one day a year, dig cookies and kids, and I do look pretty sharp in red.

You know, I think the patriarch Jacob was a "gift guy" too. He knew how to bestow the perfect present. His "richly ornamented robe" was the gift that kept on giving for Joseph, his beloved son. It was a robe of relationship sewn with favored fabrics of affection, attention and affirmation. When it was exactly given to Joseph we don't know. Maybe a special birthday present. Or a gift for a sacred holiday. Or maybe it simply showed up on an average day in an ordinary box.

But some gifts also take. And this robe manufactured an odor that reeked with family discord, distaste and dysfunction. The coat was a blessing the other brothers desired but never enjoyed. It's like one kid scoring a holiday haul in presents from the parents while the rest of the children settle for lumps of coal. Consequently, every time Joseph wore the robe it meant different things to different people. To father Jacob, it represented special affection. To Joseph, it symbolized kind blessing. To the rest of the boys, it revealed unfair favor. It's no wonder they raged with hate and made life for Joseph a living hell.

The parent in me must confess Jacob blew it. Even if the sons aren't all saints, it doesn't mean you love them less nor shower one kid with special attention and affection. Furthermore Joseph does seem the type to flaunt. He's got no problem sharing daring dreams to bait his brothers. And jealousy doesn't jump from one lousy coat alone. I'm sure 'lil Joe liked pushing his bigger brothers' buttons (that's only human nature). He knew their feelings about him and dad. A sensitive son wouldn't let dad's eccentricities egg his brother's egos. Ultimately, this ancient family portrait reveals how one gift created blessing and burden, favor and fighting, pride and prejudice. Life is like that sometimes. Sometimes you get the robe. Sometimes you give it. And sometimes the robe gets you.

It's how you wear it that truly determines its worth.

CHAPTER TWO : DARE TO DREAM

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it." His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. (Genesis 37:5-8)

On December 27, 2007, the world lost another dreamer. Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto was assassinated by a coward's bullet and bomb. Bhutto was a revolutionary leader who lived her dream for a democratic Pakistan in the shadow of terror. It's an epitaph for a life lived under a calling. Great dreams can be deadly.

Ultimately, everyone will dream. But I'm not talking about nocturnal nightmares that chill the skin. Nor am I addressing daydreams that casually slip a mind into autopilot. The truly terrifying dreams are dangerous, daunting and daring. They run counter-culture, cross-stream, up hill and against the grain. It's why true visionaries rarely outlive their dreams. Dreams tend to consume the dreamer. President Lincoln was murdered days after the Civil War ended, haunted by nightmares of just such a fate. Camelot died along with JFK on a downtown Dallas street in November 1963. A few years later Martin Luther King's dream for racial reconciliation violently shattered on a Memphis hotel balcony. John Lennon imagined a world of peace and was brutally shot one cold New York night in 1980. Daring dreams are dangerous dreams. Visions that alter history and force societal change are conceived in times of trial and trouble. No real dream is void of opposition. Critics condemn many dreams as delusions. Family and friends finger them as fantasy. Sure, some dreams do seem far-fetched at first. Fly in the air? Never. Walk on the moon? Insane. Transmit image over air? Keep dreaming. Many a dream is discounted not for possibility but rather mounting obstacles against it. Get a college degree? Good luck. Snag your dream job? That's nice, honey. Leave a legacy? I won't hold my breath.

Joseph was an idealistic visionary who neither allowed others to define his dream nor mar his mission. He wouldn't allow even his closest family to denigrate his dream. Visions have value and voice. They speak into the heart and animate the spirit. Those who oppose a dream may eventually discover they're fighting God. That's why many dreams die from malnutrition. Visions must be fed, nurtured and sheltered until the moment is ripe. A dreamer will patiently wait for his (or her) date with destiny. But here's the catch (as noted in Joseph's life): Dreams may take years to materialize and often come at great price. Dreams that change and charge a world mature within adversity, struggle, pain and loneliness. Joseph would eventually live his dream but not before years in pit and prison, as slave and *sentry*.

Dreams drove Joseph to eventually lead all of Egypt. Where will your dreams drive you?

Nevertheless, dream on. Dream on.

CHAPTER THREE : I AM LEGEND, REALLY

Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. (Genesis 37:9-11)

It was one of 2007's hottest flicks and remains a cult classic. *I Am Legend*, starring Will Smith, is a sci-fi thriller about the last man on the planet—an Army colonel and scientist named Robert Neville. The apocalyptic mutation of a viral cure for cancer has decimated 90% of the world's population. Of the survivors, the virus degenerates man and beast into terrifying monsters that live only in darkness and thrive on flesh, especially human. Neville is convinced his life's calling is to create a cure for the beasts, to save them from themselves and return society to normal. When others persuade him to abandon this aspiration, including his own wife and child, Neville resists. "This is ground zero," he says of Manhattan Island and he will die for his dream to save humanity.

It's odd, I know. But legends tend to rise from ashes. The great men and women in history lived larger lives than even they imagined. Those who dare to dream are few and when a dreamer shares his vision you can bet your last dollar there'll be criticism and complaints, rebukes and resistance. Dreamers are only silenced when they no longer speak.

Just ask Joseph. His dream painted a rosy picture where even his parents would bend to his will. Joseph was destined to be an A-lister, top dog, commander-in-chief, head honcho and the big kahuna. Lil Joe would one day own the Ponderosa and be Hoss' boss. Dreams like that don't go unnoticed nor do they attract affection or affirmation. And there's no indication how the dream impacted Joseph. Maybe he hated it as much as his brothers. Maybe the weight of the vision was too heavy for a teen. Maybe he used the dream against his brothers. We really don't know what Joseph felt, but we do know his legendary dream invited jealousy, anger, pain and rebuke (from his father no less). We also know his heroic vision would mean years in prison, unfairly accused and his character slandered.

That's why legends rise from ash piles and garbage heaps. Legends are built not born. Legends are uncommon, unbelievable and undeniable—whether it's a nomad cattle kid becoming Pharaoh's finest leader or a lone army doc bent on crafting a cure to save a savage society. When the credits finally roll in both screenplays, Joseph and Robert live their dreams (though with different twists). Legends give hope. Legends offer salvation. Legends never die. It's why our culture hungers and hates heroes in the same *breath*. *Legends remind us of our immortality, of our unmet destiny, and our unfulfilled desires. Legends reveal God and how we have missed the mark. They also tap into our deepest need to make a difference and leave the world slightly better than how we found it.*

Are we legend? Yes, in a way we are. If only we can believe it.

CHAPTER FOUR : CARRY ON, WAYWARD SON

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams." (Genesis 37:17-20)

The most difficult step toward any dream is the first one. Think about it. The initial leap into God's dangerous, murky and relentless Will is the most daring step of all. To follow God without condition, care or comfort is a fearful thing. It's how dreams become nightmares.

Would Joseph have left the comfortable surroundings of his doting dad if he knew the next chapter in his life was a pit? Would he follow his dream to the palace if he knew it meant years in prison first? I think we often miss a character flaw about Joseph. He had a wrinkle in his personality that God needed to iron out. Like many dreamers, there's a danger of pride. You're something special. You've got the blessing. You're the answer to everyone's problems.

Proverbs 16:18 says pride comes before a fall. It's a tragic reality play, but often the "coat" that appoints and anoints is the same fabric from which we falter and fail. Was Joseph so optimistic and innocent that he couldn't hear his own brothers plotting to kill him? Was his head so in the clouds that the rest of him missed the obvious? A brother doesn't kill his own kin without reason. Nor do your siblings plot an assassination without cause. Maybe it was Joseph's pride that drove him into the desert near Dothan to find his brothers? Common sense would have kept him near daddy's side. Surely he had an idea what his brothers thought of him and his dream.

The difference between confidence and pride is a thin line. The real question is in whom does your confidence reside? God or man? God or yourself? For Joseph, his dreams are about to explode. Fortunately, we know when life grows dark and dank, the boy in the coat of colors will faithfully follow God through pit and prison. Joseph doesn't allow his circumstances to circumvent his calling.

A lyric for one of my favorite classic rock songs comforts the dreamers among us: "Carry on my wayward son, there'll be peace when you are done. Lay your weary head to rest. Don't you cry no more." (Kansas, "Carry On My Wayward Son")

Carry on, dreamer, carry on. And watch God work. You will surely inherit dark times ahead. Carry on anyway. Critics will try to kill your dream. Carry on nevertheless. Let God make you into something greater than your dream. Even if it means knocking off a few chips first.

CHAPTER FIVE : WHEN LIFE IS THE PITS

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it...Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood...Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. (Genesis 37:23-24, 31, 36)

Sometimes life is the pits. You feel deserted, destitute and dirty. Somehow you've found yourself at the bottom, looking up. Calling for help but no one hears. Looking for daylight but lost in darkness. *Stripped. Bruised. Battered. Weary. Thirsty.* You're at the end of your rope. It's easy in the pit to feel sorry for yourself. You were just doing your job. Following orders. Trying to be a good spouse, parent, child, friend, employee or boss. You can do everything right and still be left nothing. On the other hand, maybe you dug this hole yourself. Undisciplined lust. Unchecked greed. Unbridled power. You allowed selfish pride to rule. You're at the bottom because you deserved this destiny. It was bound to happen.

Regardless of why you're in the pit, the reality is your dreams are now dust. The visions you once valued are vapor. Who will hear your cry? Who will care? Who will help?

Brethren and cistern, consider this truth: Joseph's pit was a brotherly revenge and it's easy to see why they'd be a tad ticked. Joseph shows up wearing the fine threads his father gave him. He's not hoping to herd sheep. He's not seeking to serve. You don't wear an Armani suit to gather garbage. Joseph's arrogance was only superseded by his stupidity. He was asking for trouble and he found it.

Yet God was designing a greater work. Joseph wasn't meant to be Daddy's boy but Pharaoh's right hand man. He wasn't destined to work with his brothers but rule over them and save them. Consequently, Joseph's journey to his dreams started in being stripped of his blessing. The colorful coat was a gift that eventually got his brother's goat. Joseph's pride needed re-fitted. He was too big for his britches. He needed to see life from the bottom. He needed to learn some lessons.

The truth is, blessings can be burdens. And sometimes they can even bury you in a deep dank hole. In the pit, you have no one but your own voice. You have nothing but dirt, darkness and your own demons. It's a recipe for suicide, really. The moment you realize what you had will never be again, you either pull the trigger or pray for redemption. You either tie the hangman's noose or thank God you're still breathing. You either pop the pills or patiently hope.

Joseph learned a valuable lesson in the pit. You aren't what you wear. Pits don't care about pedigree. Cisterns have no concern for bank accounts, prized possessions and even daddy's blessing. It takes a hole to show the holes. And deep down, we're all empty. We're all thirsty. We all need a Savior.

CHAPTER SIX : THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. Then his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did. (Genesis 39:1-3)

The path to success isn't counted in mere moments or milestones. That's why you can't define success with a dollar sign, a corner office or diploma. Opulence and influence may be a consequence of success, yet it's not the catalyst. Power, position and prosperity are welcome friends, but poor relatives. If you're not careful, you'll find it's difficult to live with them or, worse, without them.

Joseph had his father's blessing but it only brought a curse. Ditched by his brothers, left for dead and sold into slavery, he was "taken down" (literally) to Egypt. His colorful, costly coat now replaced with a blue-collar shirt and his position as daddy's favored child now relegated to being a common slave. Joseph went from the sweet suite life to serving supper and cleaning house. Life has its twists, doesn't it?

And yet Joseph resists an entitlement mentality. He seemingly refuses to feel sorry for himself or fall prey to pettiness. Life is what it is and sometimes you have to play the cards you're dealt. In fact, anyone can win with kings and aces, but real champions turn a handful of deuces, fours and fives into a winner. If God is on your side anything is possible. And that's the true secret to Joseph's success. With God, he always has a faithful Father. With God, he has treasures beyond time and place. With God, he has unlimited opportunity. The Lord was with Joseph. Everything he touched turned golden, even if all he was doing was polishing the master's silver.

If you've been "taken down" a notch lately, just look up. Sometimes the reason for your respite is to restore God's rightful place in your life. Maybe the purpose for the pain, the circumstance or the trial is to prepare you for a coming opportunity beyond anything you could imagine. Sometimes God needs to knock you down before He can lift you up. God may know you can't rule with the Pharaohs until you've served with slaves. Therefore, His plan for your life may involve years of pit and prison before you enjoy life as a palace prince.

That's why if you measure success by what you've earned, bought or created you'll never truly learn to live with have you have. And if all you do is work to make a living you'll miss the real opportunity to make a life.

After all, life is what it is. And so are you.

CHAPTER SEVEN : INTEGRITY IS NO SNOW JOB

So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate. Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her. (Genesis 39:6-10)

Integrity is like fresh snow. *Picturesque. Pretty. Pure.* A little integrity can also drift deep and pile high fairly fast. But also like snow, it doesn't take much for a person's integrity to stain, slick or slush. In fact, all it takes is some heat. *Misguided passion. Mistaken power. Misaligned pride.* In a moment, a lifetime of impact and influence can melt away, leaving only ugly reminders of what used to be.

We know little about Joseph the man save this episode that reveals he was a someone you could trust--a man of deep integrity. His power as a servant was unparalleled. He controlled Potiphar's purse strings. He picked out the china. He ordered the evening entertainment. He managed the guest list. In return, he lived the good life. Joseph dined upon fine Egyptian food. He lived in luxurious lodging. And he enjoyed particular perks like taking the chariot for a spin and meeting high-ranking local celebrities. Joseph was back in the high life. He had everything a slave needed or desired. The "pits" were so yesterday. That is, until the flames of passion started to lick at his principles. His master's wife was hot on his trail for a love connection. *No shame. No consequences. No regrets.* Just pure pleasure, she said. Fortunately Joseph sees the hook buried in the bait. Notice his response: *"How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"* Joseph's integrity was rock solid. Even if Potiphar didn't care, God would. Even if she said a tempting tryst wouldn't hurt anyone, Joseph knew otherwise. Here's a gal that had a hard time hearing "no." She probably wasn't used to refusal, let alone rejection and so she daily tested Joseph's will, working her devilish charm.

But like pure, fresh snow, his integrity only grows. Eventually Joseph wouldn't go near her. Maybe he knew his own weaknesses. Maybe he tired of her advances. Or maybe he was resolved in his principles. Regardless of the reason, Joseph doesn't put out or give in. He cools her jets with an icy integrity that reveals the heart of a man after God's Greater Purpose. Some may call that a snow job, but I think we all know better. Integrity is who you really are in the dark regardless of who you claim to be in the spotlight. And like snow it can come and go in a day, leaving only the grit and grime of a life lived recklessly. Deep down we all long to be principled people. It's our I.D. or Individual Design. Like a snowflake we are uniquely created to build, bless and beautify our world. So never forget what happens when principles stick together.

CHAPTER EIGHT: G R O U N D E D F O R L I F E

One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house...She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house." When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. (Genesis 39:11-20)

I love to fly. There's just something about an airport that fuels my jets. Everybody is going somewhere and most of us aren't doing it very fast. The smell of jet fumes and the roar of an incoming plane drown out the cheesy elevator music and hustle of harried travelers. Inside the security checkpoint it's a different world where paths cross, plans change and possibilities cook. I no longer fly like I used to. Ever since my job changed, my flight plans did, too. I used to fly 2-3 times a month on average for a high-salary job. I flew Delta enough to earn Medallion status—opening a new world of perks like free first class upgrades, early boarding and nicer security people. I love to fly, eat at new places and stay at hotels.

And then one day it all ended. The airport runs. The rental cars. The hotel nights. The fancy dinners and room service. The opportunity to see the country, from Alaska to Alabama and Seattle to Scranton. In a moment, I went from an Executive Director to home-bound Dad. I went from power lunches to whatever I could find in the fridge. I no longer wore ties, sealed deals, worked rooms, gave presentations, shook hands or made impressions.

To tell the truth? I hated it. I felt...well, to be honest...I felt stripped. I won't go into why my life changed but it did and it happened in a moment. In a day, I lost my title, my corner office, my responsibilities, my schedule, my company credit card, my plans and my sense of purpose. I was no longer needed or, more tragically, wanted. I felt abandoned and alone.

Maybe that's why this particular story about Joseph brings me peace. He had the same thing happen to him. Nailed with a false accusation of "sporting" (we'd call it rape today), Joseph watched his world shatter in a second. He went from palace to prison, from head butler to jail bird, from a life of luxury to a cell block. The master that once loved him now burned with rage against him. The woman that once pursued his affection now schemed to destroy him. In a flash, it was all gone. Joseph lost his freedom, his title, his responsibilities, his plans and his sense of purpose. He was abandoned and alone.

He was stripped to nothing. The memory of a coveted coat and a pit surely crossed his mind. The love of a dad and a home-cooked meal had to cause him pause. Unlike his brother's jealousy that robbed him of fancy clothing and dignity, this one cut deeper. Now he was stripped of purpose and prospect; haunted by nagging questions of self-doubt. Who'd hire him now? His references would bury him. His life isn't half over and yet it seems all done. The dream that once danced in his imagination was now dead and cold. The worst part? This final "stripping" wasn't even his fault. He had done his best. He held to principles and resisted passion. He worked hard, found favor and still lost.

It's no fun to lose it all overnight. I can totally relate. Like I said, I miss my former world, but sitting through a long flight delay and wishing we'd be on our way, I realize life is what it is. I also know that, like Joseph, I haven't really lost everything. You can steal a man's title, his possessions, his job and his life, but you can pilfer his integrity. You can't lift God's Purpose for his life. I still know who I am and Whose I am. And as long as I have one Friend, then I have everything I need. That's all that matters.

I'm just thankful I can still sometimes fly. It's one of the few things that grounds me.

CHAPTER NINE : PRISONER OF HOPE

But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did. (Genesis 39:20-23)

Few things in life are lonelier than prison. Incarceration is no picnic or walk in the park (and it's not supposed to be). Danger lurks behind every corner and hides within every shadow. Friends can be few. The daylight hours are long. The nights are filled with fear. The clanging sound of a gate or the closing of a prison door slams hard against even the most calloused soul. *Separation. Confinement. Solitary.* It's hard time and few individuals leave prison without new scars and scrapes.

Over the years, I've visited a few prisons, including the famed Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary in northeast Kansas. I've walked the walls of the Kansas State Penitentiary and witnessed the horrors of the hole. I've preached for convict chapels. I've shook prisoner's hands and saw their souls. The inside of a penitentiary is a different world. And let me say you never wash the smell from your mind. You can't erase the sounds or images either. Every con has an angle. Every conviction has an excuse. Every cell has a story.

Doing time takes its toll on a man--especially the truly innocent ones. Joseph certainly didn't belong in prison. He clearly was framed, but fortunately refused to let others' decisions (and judgments) destroy his purpose. Joseph was a natural leader and if he couldn't head a household, he'd coordinate a cell block. Obviously he was pretty good at it, too. For eventually he was recognized and rewarded by an Egyptian warden—who made Joseph his right hand inmate. Joseph essentially ran the jail. Even the warden "paid no attention" when it was Joseph's turn to take the helm.

I can imagine Joseph probably was puzzled by his predicament. Why prison? Why was he framed? What could he have done differently? Those questions rattle a mind and score a soul. He went from a son to a slave to a prisoner. If overseeing an Egyptian jail was God's idea for a dream of destiny then God must have a wicked sense of humor.

Fortunately, God was "with" Joseph and showered him with "kindness" and "favor" whether Joseph felt the love or not. I mean, maybe we have Joseph pegged wrong. We have no idea how he handled his new prison digs. Maybe initially Joseph clung to life during this dark season of the soul. Maybe Joseph, at least early on, lashed out at God for this ironic twist of fate. If Joe were living in our day, he might have been prescribed Zoloft or spent time on the couch of the prison shrink. I wonder. We often give Joseph the benefit of the doubt. We see Joseph as somebody we aren't, but I tend to think he's more like me that I care to admit. We don't know how Joseph handled prison—at least initially. But we do know how God handled Joseph. No matter how Joseph behaved or reacted, God made it a favorable impression upon the warden (who obviously saw something in Joseph the other guards did not).

Now that's called "grace." *Unmerited favor. Unbelievable blessing. Unmatched kindness.* It's when God shows up and makes everything new. It's when God makes impressions that we simply cannot. It's when God just hangs with us, even if we don't want Him around. It's lighting our life with hope, even if all we see is darkness.

Get the picture yet? Joseph was successful in prison because he did ultimately let God work. No matter how he might have handled his incarceration, eventually he quit kicking against the goads. He finally let go of his pride, once and for all. You see, Joseph was a son, a slave and an inmate all rolled into one. But he was also God's kid. He was also the Almighty's servant. He was also imprisoned by His Master's Will.

Sometimes it takes a ball and chain to roll away the stones that keep God from using us completely. The bars that confine also can be the iron that sharpens. The years that steal can also be the time that heals. The warden's work can also become the opportunity to prepare a man for tomorrow's destiny. Thankfully, there's not a prison on this planet strong enough to incarcerate hope. It's the key that sets captives free, including those of us still imprisoned by our own fears, pride and will.

And sometimes that's still me.

CHAPTER TEN : THANK GOD IT'S FRIDAY

Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined...After they had been in custody for some time, each of the two men...had a dream...When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected... "Why are your faces so sad today?" "We both had dreams," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret them." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams." (Genesis 40:1-8)

"Good Friday" is a day that Christians globally gather to remember the horrific crucifixion of Jesus Christ. What can possibly be "good" about an execution, you might ask? Why would the faithful celebrate a death sentence? Fridays are about ends. *The end of the week. The end of work. The end of dreams.* People get fired on Fridays more than any other day. It's called Friday for a reason. *Fried and frayed nerves. Fried and frazzled schedules. Fried and flawed lives.* We don't know what day of the week these two Egyptian officials got tossed in the clink, but it could easily have been a Friday. Both men were V.I.P.s in Pharaoh's court. A cupbearer tasted every drink destined for his master's lips. The baker satisfied the king's appetites. Whatever these two guys did to get Pharaoh's goat was no laughing matter. Perhaps they were in cahoots to lace his lunch with arsenic? Regardless of the reason, these two high-ranking servants were now enjoying an extended brig vacation. And then they both had nightmares that led to depression. It was a Friday funk. Their minds were mystified by visions they received. Suddenly life wasn't fun anymore. Their imaginations probably ran wild as they desperately tried to interpret the dreams. Ultimately, both men were empty, anxious and in despair. It was a "fry" day.

Fridays are like that, you know. It's why the world hits the bars after work. *Let's numb the pain. Forget the past. Feel something real. Find a friend.* Fridays can be good for nothing. Fridays can be final. Fridays can be forever. The fact Jesus was executed on a Friday shouldn't surprise anyone. God made Fridays and even God can't skip to a Saturday sabbatical. Fridays have to be lived and loved, endured and embraced. The secret to surviving Friday, is to set your sights on Sunday. Friday pain becomes Sunday healing. Friday problems become Sunday solutions. Friday executions become Sunday paroles. Jesus knew that without a death there can be no Resurrection. Without Friday's despair and disappointment we can't discover Sunday joy and hope. Fridays keep us human. Sundays reveal Divinity. Fridays pierce dreams. Sundays roll away obstacles. Fridays convict and judge. Sundays release and restore. Friday's doubts lead to Sunday's destiny.

So why is Friday "good?" That's easy. In the dirt of Friday's mess lies the seed for Sunday's Messiah. No Friday is final. Life is what it is, whether you're a baker, a butcher, a prisoner or even Pharaoh. Fridays are forgettable in light of forever (which is why we shouldn't let nightmares bury the possibilities waiting to blossom). Fridays are "good" because "God" is still there. If you only care to look...TGIF!

CHAPTER ELEVEN : STUCK IN A MOMENT (S I G H)

So the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream... "This is what it means," Joseph said to him... within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position... But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon"... Now the third day was Pharaoh's birthday, and he gave a feast for all his officials... He restored the chief cupbearer to his position... just as Joseph had said to them in his interpretation... The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him. (Genesis 40:9, 12-15, 20-23)

Forgotten. Misplaced. Left alone. It's worse than any nightmare on Elm Street. It's our greatest fears realized. It's a living portrait of Hell. After all, the human soul was designed for connection and community, for purpose and passion. We were created to belong and when we find ourselves lost, alone or worse, forgotten,...well, it's Hell on earth. Don't kid yourself. No one wants to be the last man on the planet. One truly is a lonely number.

If there's three words in the Bible that terrify me it's this phrase about Joseph: *"he forgot him."* In this episode where Joseph interprets the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and his baker—and one is restored while the other hanged in three days—we find the only hint of Joseph's desperation. He openly pleads with the cupbearer to "remember" him and "mention" him to Pharaoh. He argues for justice and states his case. "I have done nothing wrong to deserve" this fate, he notes. Mere words probably tell half the story. If you read between the lines you can also sense anger, bitterness, jealousy and hopelessness. Joseph was begging for mercy. He was trying to dig himself out. He was, to quote a U2 lyric, stuck in a moment he couldn't get out of. The real tragedy is Joseph will be stuck another two years. For whatever reason, the joy of favorable parole by the cupbearer caused amnesia. He forgot Joseph. Like a toy no longer enjoyable or a tool no longer useful, Joseph was laid aside. Misplaced. Forgotten.

It happens all the time. Life is full of surprises, twists and ironies. Every now and then, we find ourselves alone, lost and feeling forgotten. It's a moment even the Messiah couldn't avoid when He cried from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46)." Our deepest fears are to be left behind like a small kid in a busy mall. Solitary confinement is called "the hole." It's where you live only with yourself. It's used to break the will of a criminal or the silence of a POW. Life's "holes" serve notice to break the human spirit. An unexpected death. Getting fired. A marriage dissolves. Bankruptcy. Cancer. A child rebels. A home burns to the ground. A company goes under. A dream dies. Life's holes are Hell. Lonely. Lost. Forgotten.

Thankfully, holes don't have to be eternal. The valley with shadows of death can be navigated. We don't have to linger, pause or dwell in those dark moments. You may never understand them either. You may never rationalize why you're in this hole. *It is what it is.* For some of us, we are given the holes as gifts to construct character, build blessing and hammer hope. For most people holes are circumstantial and consequential. *It's just life.*

For Joseph, his hole had Divine Purpose. He was destined for the king's court and, as such, had no direct link to Pharaoh. *He was an outsider. He was a nobody. He was a slave.* It would take prison to free his full Purpose. His sentence would seed his Resurrection. Think about it. Without imprisonment Joseph would've never met the cupbearer (two totally different social circles for slaves). Furthermore, without an injustice Joseph might've forgotten the little guy, too. Joseph learns in the hole that everyone matters and that belief would save his family and all of Israel in the years ahead.

So if you're stuck in a hole, be thankful and even rejoice. *Look up. Look out. Look around. Look forward.* You are being shaped for a greater Purpose. You are not alone. That's a lie of the evil one. You have God. And with God, you are a majority. With God, you have hope. With God, all things work for good in time. I know, I've dug a lot of holes and faced my share of life's sentences. But if I've learned anything it's that God really does care about the little guy.

And that's me...and I also bet that's you.

CHAPTER TWELVE : WHY WEIGHT ?

The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him...when two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream... (Genesis 40:23; 41:1)

Nobody likes to wait. Waiting is that time of suspended anticipation. We're stuck in a moment. Our life is on pause. We wait on God or, maybe, God waits on us. Whatever the reason, it's a period of healing and hope, pain and promise, fear and faith. Every minute is pregnant with possibility. Will this be the day God finally shows up with the key?

Or not.

The reality of the moment drains even the most spirited optimist. The expectation that God will pull through, lift up, mow down or fill in the cracks is juxtaposed against a rising waterline that your last breath might be nearer than imagined or worse, closer than you feared. Life never becomes more real than when you see the end, especially if that finality is a lifetime of physical, emotional, mental or spiritual chains.

We don't know how long Joseph was in prison before he interpreted the dreams of the baker and the cupbearer, but we do know how long he waited afterwards: "two full years." Let me say it again. Two full years. 24 months. 730 days. 17,520 hours. 1,051,200 minutes. That's a long time for anyone. It's a lifetime for someone lost and lonely...or, in Joseph's case: framed and forgotten.

When you've been marginalized by life, every day begins with prospect and nearly always ends with disappointment. You pray today will be the day the phone rings with good news. Your heart skips when you get an e-mail that's not spam or scam, hoping this one holds a promising future. You feel delight when the postman delivers, only to sink in disappointment when his daily bread is only another moldy magazine, stale junk mail or a crusty rejection letter.

It doesn't take a prison cell to barricade your life either. The walking "waiting" pass us every single day. People imprisoned by circumstances or bound by consequence. People waiting for God to act. Hoping He still hears. Wondering if He still cares. Wondering if anyone still cares.

I know we like to think Joseph faced every day of his waiting with honor and a positive spirit, but that's an assumption. We really don't know how Joseph worked through his issues. He didn't belong in prison. We already know he begged to be remembered by the cupbearer. Maybe Joseph (nicely) told his story to everyone who'd listen and commiserate. "*I don't belong here.*" "*I was framed.*" "*I didn't do anything wrong.*" "*I don't understand.*" "*It's not fair.*" "*I just want to go home and see my family.*" Maybe Joseph privately and angrily scratched messages to Potiphar to assuage his anger. Maybe he buried his head in a pillow and cried himself to sleep every night. Maybe he even considered suicide.

Think about it. What would you do if you were wrongly sentenced to a dank and dark cell? Sure, you were respected enough that they trusted the whole prison to you. You're a model prisoner. You're a good guy. You're not like the other thugs in this place. Which is even worse, because nobody suspects your pain. They see your smile and figure you're doing fine. They catch your optimism but don't have a clue you're dying inside. *Afraid. Anxious. Angry.* Emotionally exhausted and spiritually spent. Anybody can play nice for a week, a month or even a year. Anybody can be patient for the moment. But what happens when it becomes a long haul? When the bills mount? When the job leads fail? When the cancer worsens? When she finds another man? When he moves to another city? When friends stop calling? When even your confidants question your integrity, competence and future?

We know Joseph's story ends well, but don't skip over those three words that molded his character: *two full years*. No insight. No detail. No explanation. Two more years in a prison cell. Two more years where Joseph fought his demons, found himself and forged whatever acceptance he could muster for the mystery.

It's a weight to wait. Yet in the silence we hear God and maybe that's its real Purpose. God speaks the loudest in the quiet. Sometimes it just takes a while for us to finally listen.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN : DAY 731

When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream...in the morning his mind was troubled, ...but no one could interpret them for him. Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "Today I am reminded of my shortcomings. Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me...now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us, giving each man the interpretation of his dream. And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us"...So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. (Genesis 41:1,8-10, 12-14)

Every dreamer eventually has his day in court. It's that miracle moment when the stars align, the trump card is drawn, the ship comes in and the rain stops. It's when a heart starts beating again. It's the day the phone truly does ring and it's no joke. It's good news. *Really good news.*

For Joseph we don't know how long he was imprisoned, but it's clear two full years passed after he rightly interpreted the baker and cupbearer's dreams. If you're counting, that's 730 additional long, lonely days. I imagine Joseph awoke every morning to a day laced with a hope the cupbearer might "remember him" and fell asleep every night lanced with a despair that, yet again, he did not. The first week was easy. "I'll get out soon," he'd wink at the Egyptian guard, "I've got a feeling my friend-you know, the cupbearer—he's got my back."

After several days, Joseph's optimism remained strong yet tempered. Then as a month passed, then two, then three, perhaps he started to entertain delusional hopes. "I know it's been a while, but there's no way he forgot me," Joseph said, with a forced smile, "besides these things take time. Probably a load of red tape involved." I suspect the anniversary date was hardest. One year of tortuous waiting had passed. "Where's your 'friend' now, Joseph," another prisoner chided, "and where's this God of yours that you say remembers the lonely and lost?" It's been a year. No one is coming. And even if they did, it would be with a death notice. Face it, Joseph, you're toast.

And so the days pass. 38 days. 122 days. 243 days. 365 days. 399 days. 450 days. 504 days. 559 days. 613 days. 648 days. 702 days. 723 days. 730 days. Every day another hope. Every night another fear. What was God teaching Joseph? What was the purpose? Patience? *That was day 328.* Persistence? *Completed day 201.* Contentment? *Passed the test on day 549.* The tears had long dried. Any hope was evaporated. The dreams of a favored boy were now dead.

Until day 731.

You can bet there was nothing unusual about the day, in particular. The same prison slop for food. The same sounds of complaint from a fresh crop of inmates. The same iron bars and hard bed. The same job as "Resident Inmate Morale Officer." Joseph probably made the rounds, checked his list, followed protocol, submitted a report, smiled and headed for a shower. Life was pretty dull and an afternoon nap was now an anticipated habit.

"Hey Joe!" one of the Egyptian guards yelled, "we got a call to transport you to the Pharaoh." If it was April 1, Joseph might consider the call a cruel joke. "Yeah, right," he replied, "but nice try anyway." Still the guard insisted it was no trick. This was for real. The king wanted him pronto. "Let me see those orders," Joseph asked, and he read them twice—even a third time—for authenticity. But it was no joke. The orders were real. Pharaoh sought an audience and after a shower and shave, Joseph was actually standing in the king's court.

This was no dream. This was his moment.

Like Joseph, every dreamer gets his day in court. So if you're feeling locked away, hopeless and abandoned, take heart. God didn't raise you from the river to destroy you in the desert. In His time, a day will come for you. In the Twilight Zone, it's day 731. It's the day luck looks your way and circumstance seeks a dance. It's when hope offers a hug and life finally plants a kiss. The music swells, the clouds scoot, the weight slips and the sun smiles. You can breathe. You can see forever. You're free.

It's the moment only God could create and only you can inherit. It's the power of the present. And it's a gift just for you.

It's your day... day 731.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN : CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW ?

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires." (Genesis 41:15-16)

Everyone dreams. We all possess a divine calling, whether we choose to accept it or not. All men inherit vision and inhabit voices that call and commission. The question isn't whether you can see the dream, but whether you can hear it.

Can you hear me now?

You see, real visionaries move not with their eyes, but with their ears. This is the lesson Joseph finally mastered. We don't know how long it took for him to finish the exam, but it's obvious he scored high. Since childhood, the dreamer Joseph naturally had viewed life through a lens of what he possessed and the dreams he imagined. He was a favored son with colorful coat. He was Potiphar's finest slave with perks. He was captain of the prison guard. *Titles. Possessions. Connections. Opportunity.* Consequently, Joseph (like most dreamers) was always looking forward and hoping to see the next big thing. He moved with his eyes. But don't fault him, we all tend to prefer sight. We all want to see where God is leading.

The problem is the eyes can deceive. What you see may not always be true, real or possible. It's easy to become discouraged when everything in sight is negative, painful or destructive. The eyes always see reality and are often blind to possibility. *Can you hear me now?*

And that's why true dreamers see with their ears. You can't see the wind, but you can hear its howl. Vision is limited to where the eyes look, but ears are 360 degree audio portals. *Can you hear me now?* I can't see the garbage truck picking up my trash outside, but I hear every move it makes. Those who live their dreams don't seek signs but rather wait for the whisper. When they hear opportunity, they leap (even if their eyes scream "no!"). That's what Joseph finally learned. From the prison to the palace, the greatest dreamers are ultimately designed to listen not look. He was uniquely created to hear (and interpret) not see. Joseph also realized a central Truth about Who guided his life. *"I cannot do it,"* he told Pharaoh, but God can. After years behind bars, Joseph finally heard the light. *It wasn't about him.* It never was and never would be.

Can you hear me now? *Good.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN : LIFE SWINGS

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream I was standing on the bank of the Nile, when out of the river there came up seven cows, fat and sleek...after them, seven other cows came up—scrawny and very ugly and lean...[who] ate up the seven fat cows...Then I woke up. In my dreams I also saw seven heads of grain...[and]...seven other heads sprouted—withered and thin...The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven good heads...Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven good cows and the seven good heads of grain are seven years...the seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine. (Genesis 41:17-27)

The nightly news is a living nightmare. Presidential politics. Urban unrest and racial discord. Around the globe there's famine, flooding, earthquakes, fires, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, pestilence and other natural disasters. Wars are waging. Terrorists execute deadly deeds. Celebrity scandals and pastoral sins create injustice and mistrust. Armageddon is surely around the corner. Everything is swinging towards the bad. Face it, it's the end of the world as we know it. Of course, a wider view of history reveals a more sensible perspective. In almost biblical fashion, there are good years mixed with bad years. *Feasts and famines. Prosperity and poverty.* We enjoy times of peace and endure tribulations of war. Paradise resides between calamity and catastrophe. Florida's beauty and beaches can be tragically washed away by wind and wave. The gold in California's hills is regularly shaken by quake. From Montana to Mozambique and Atlanta to Zurich, life can turn on a dime and cost millions.

That's why Pharaoh's dreams were private nightmares. He spent years building a kingdom that could collapse in a moment. The good years can easily be consumed by bad, leaving a terrible taste on anyone's legacy, let alone a Pharaoh's. When life unravels and disasters mount, people fondly remember former fortunes and the "good old days." Pharaoh had a right to his sleepless nights. He was swinging in the wind. And yet history hinges on a balance between two extremes: *living large and surviving lean.* It's what makes life "life." Middle ground may solve argument but it doesn't create spice and spontaneity. Mid-road is a recipe for road kill. Mid-life is crisis and conflict. Middle-management is a curse.

The bad times remind of us of the good. And, if we're wise, the blessings will be counted when burdens come to call. Too much sun and deserts emerge. Too much rain and floods prevail. And yet every drought has its deluge and every paradise has its pests. Are you loving the sun right now? *Prepare for rain. You'll never know when the clouds will roll in.* Are you dry and destitute? Pray for His Reign. God is in control. He'll provide your needs. After all, life truly is a swing to which we're all tied. *Good and bad. Bad and good. Good and bad.*

I know, I'm swinging, too. If I didn't know God was in charge, I couldn't hang on.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN : THE MAN WITH THE PLAN

"And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine." The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" (Genesis 41:33-38)

Every door has a knob. Every window has a latch. Every problem has a plan. Most individuals who enjoy success aren't blessed with luck, but rather an insight to create opportunity where others see obstacle and opposition. Some call it working a plan. I call it planning a work. Plans don't come out of thin air. You can't buy, barter or beg a plan. The plans that innovate, instigate and initiate change emerge only after long hours, much sweat, deep thought and great price.

What do you think Joseph did all those years in prison? How do you think he filled his mind? You don't just stroll up to the Pharaoh, discern a dream and pronounce a plan (especially one of this depth and detail). Some will say God revealed the plan on the fly. That's true. God can do that. But it's also possible, even probable, that God had been revealing the plan to Joseph for weeks, months or even years. Joseph was a caretaker for both Potiphar and the prison captain. He administrated, delegated and proportioned resources. Surely he oversaw food distribution to other inmates and had experience in meal rations. We don't know the size of this Egyptian prison but it's somewhat certain Joseph led a team of some type. He certainly guided a staff, as Potiphar's top servant. No, Joseph was an opportunist. He didn't know where life was leading but he wasn't waiting for it to happen either. He was planning to work—whether it was a slave or sentry, pauper or prince. It's why Joseph was ready when he saw the knob. He was prepared to unlatch the window of opportunity. He was ready for the question, as he had been dwelling on the answer for God only knows how long.

So how about you? Are you standing at the door waiting for someone to open it? Are you praying for a window to a new life chapter? What's holding you back, up or out?

Whatever it is, don't work a plan. Just plan to work. God will fill in the dream. All you have to do is be ready to dig. You see, doors and windows are everywhere, but it's the knobs and latches that truly hold the keys.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN : GOD, MOVE THAT BUS!

"Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you... Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, "Make way!" Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt." Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and...Asenath daughter of Potiphera...to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt." (Genesis 41:39-45)

Life is filled with surprises. In fact, it's the euphoric and eureka moments that forge hope and frame healing. I'm a fan of reality television and few shows made me smile more than ABC's *Extreme Home Makeover*. For an hour every Sunday night, I enjoyed the story of a family—caught by circumstance and trapped by trial—who is surprised with a new home, life and outlook. These families literally go from poverty to prosperity...in a moment. Their doubt and despair vanished to delight with a simple command to *"move that bus!"* Beyond the blockade is a new home. *A better life. A fresh opportunity. Picturesque. Personal. Perfect.* It's an extreme home makeover, true, but it's also a portrait of "grace." *Unmerited. Unbelievable. Undeniable. Unstoppable.*

Similarly, with the wave of a Pharaoh's hand, Joseph experienced a "move that bus" moment. He was released from years of wrongful imprisonment and anointed the new palace prince. His prison stripes changed out for royal silk. A ball and chain replaced with a ring and chariot. He was given a new name and a wife (I wonder if he got to pick?). He was the king's right hand man in a mere moment. His old life and past washed away with a simple christening and command that only a king could utter. It was an extreme life makeover. It was a gift of grace.

"Move that bus" moments are rare in life, especially the ones that radically change disposition, outlook, fortune or identity. That's why the wise realize every day harbors smaller, even undetectable "move that bus" gifts. It's that moment when the whole world seems right. When you break out in smile. When you sense inner peace. When you recognize something greater is at work. It's that eureka moment when some one blesses you with kindness or hears your heart or senses your passion. It's that fleeting euphoria that follows a kiss from your kid, a sensational sunset, or the taste of fine chocolate. The secret to life isn't living for a bus to move. It's enjoying the moments as life moves. It's finding grace in the grit and grime. It's discovering beauty in the beasts. It's listening to your heartbeat and realizing in God's eyes you're both a peach and prince.

Maybe that was what God was trying to teach Joseph all those years in prison. *Enjoy the moment. Seek peace. Welcome joy.* You'll never be a prince as long as you live like a frog. You'll never dance until you find your feet. You'll never be free until you unchain your heart from anxiousness and apathy, revenge and rage.

Maybe that's what He's teaching me (and probably you, too). Renovations take time and buses don't roll without command. Nevertheless, the "extreme" life makeovers are always worth the wait--even if it seems like forever. After all, if you're faithful to God, you are promised a day when the bus will roll away your earthly frames and eternity will reveal your new mansion in Heaven. It'll be an Eternal home makeover.

That's a day I can't wait to enjoy. On that day we'll all be truly free from the chain gang. *God, move that bus!*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN : THE RAIN DANCE

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt...During the seven years of abundance the land produced plentifully...Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure. Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph... [he] named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering." (Genesis 41:46-52)

Several years ago I led an April mission trip to Eagle Pass, TX and into a region where it hadn't rained for months. Crops had failed. Streams and wells had dried. It was dusty and dirty. When our team of college students arrived the mercury hung in the 90s and flirted with the century mark. No rain was forecast and the clouds were few. We anticipated a long hot week of work and, for the most part, were not disappointed.

And so the team prayed for rain--not a gentle spring shower to tempt hope, but a cloud burst of heavy rain to restore, rejuvenate and refill the reservoirs. *It seemed crazy, really.* Rain was a long shot as months of drought had become the norm. Nobody expected it to happen though we hoped in faith that God would show up. Monday proved hot and dry. Tuesday blistered and Wednesday sizzled. The weather forecast seemed stuck on swelter with no possibility of precipitation, but we prayed like Elijah for a miraculous drenching nevertheless.

At our Wednesday night vacation Bible school, the church was packed with Hispanic kids and adults. As we worshipped and studied the Word, the wind began to howl and then a rumble of thunder interrupted the early evening singing. The sky darkened. Then lightning flashed, thunder rolled and large drops of rain pelted the tin roof. Within minutes the months of drought melted away as wave after wave of water pounded the Eagle Pass area. We prayed for rain and God delivered a miracle! Several danced in the mud puddles and everyone praised God for His Favor. And the deluge just kept coming. Not for a few minutes but for several hours solid. From out of nowhere it poured. With no human forecast it delivered. With only the whispered prayers of faithful college kids from Kentucky the downpours came. The cool days of Thursday and Friday capped a great week of service.

Joseph experienced a similar abundance, except his blessing was with clear foreknowledge of drought. The grain silos filled to overflowing. The books boasted record achievements. Joseph masterfully diversified the Egyptian stock portfolio. Every city was set for the coming seven-year desolation. God even blessed these years with kids and Joseph insightfully named his boys "forgetfulness" (Manasseh) and "fruitful" (Ephraim). Who could miss the irony there? From Joseph's seed would come only an abundant memory of goodness and grace. Joseph chose to ponder only upon the positive.

Just like rain has a way of washing away dust and droughts, heat and hard times, God's grace showers every life with blessing. Sometimes it's just a gentle spring sprinkling. Sometimes it's a gully washer. Sometimes it's a passing thunderstorm. Sometimes its days of welcomed prolonged precipitation.

The question is do you dance in the downpours? Do you boogie in the blessing? Do you name the seeds that sprout "Manny" and "Ephraim"? Don't pray for rain if you refuse to play in the puddles. Don't seek a drenching if it'll never drown your desperate past. You see, life is watered (and wasted) by the memories we hoard. What is remembered will moisten current circumstances and flood future choices. It's why the wise remember nothing but good, pursue nothing but hope and choose nothing but love. Joseph had learned to store more than just grain. He discovered the value of stashing away positive memories for when desperate days came calling again.

Now that's something worth remembering.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: RUNNIN' ON EMPTY

The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food. Then Pharaoh told all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph and do what he tells you." When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world. (Genesis 41:53-57)

In the late '00s the oil crisis was a daily headline. Economists predicted \$5 a gallon gas by Labor Day 2008 (but, thankfully, they were wrong). American Airlines initiated a new fee for checked baggage to offset skyrocketing jet fuel prices. The trucking industry rode on the verge of catastrophe, pushing up the price of food and other grocery items. The restaurant business was hurting as patrons chose fuel over a frivolous meal on the town. When people don't eat out, they also stay home and that impacted the retail industry. It was a real mess during the "Great Recession" years of 2007-2012.

Globally, it proved no better. Most countries paid even higher for fuel. In Great Britain, the price of gas was nearly \$10 a gallon. China's economic boom in the 00's reinvented their transportation habits from bicycles to motors—further stealing gas reserves away from other civilized countries. Only oil-rich Saudi Arabia (where gas remained a paltry .45 a gallon!) seemed exempt from recession. Everyone wanted Saudi oil and they willing paid big bucks a barrel to get it.

Four thousand years ago, the commodity of choice wasn't oil but grain. Wheat and barley was the gas and diesel of Joseph's day. Because of his divine foreknowledge about a coming famine, Joseph secured Egypt's fragile economy to withstand seven years of crisis. In years of fat production, he wisely stored vast reservoirs of grain. In hindsight, his leadership and vision was inspiring. It makes perfect sense if you knew a famine was on the horizon. And yet I suspect Joseph's economic plan probably met stiff resistance and criticism in his day. Wheat was abundant. Corn was plentiful. Barley was bountiful. Social commentators surely criticized Joseph's work as greed and maybe corruption. *"Do we really need another silo of grain? When is enough enough?" "Egypt's economics are tied to a half-witted Hebrew with a shady past." "Joseph's pyramid scheme is only making the rich richer."*

Of course, once the famine blew into town, Joseph's silos saved Egypt. A vast reservoir of grain became an economic boon for Pharaoh as nations paid premium prices for Egyptian grain (while the local natives enjoyed, presumably, a cut-rate, low-ball deal). The famine actually made Egypt stronger and more influential.

Fast forward to today's world. America's dependence on foreign oil continues to cripple our economy and we have no one to blame but ourselves. In the past four decades we moved from an exporter to importer. We buy more than we sell. Perhaps, we need to rip a page from Joseph's book and begin to invest in our own rich natural resources. We need to silo energy (like sun, wind and water) to power our 21st century economy. The web is becoming the boardroom and desktop as more businesses recognize the economic value of work-at-home situations. We need to think and act differently.

Recent American generations have also lived too well, above our means, and beyond an affordable lifestyle. Most of us live in debt to a bank and survive paycheck to paycheck. Greed greases our economy and when we don't buy, everything suffers. We never know when the next recession or economic crisis will hit, nor how long such desperate times will last, but it's clear we'll always need a Joseph to silo our financial future and free us from economic tyranny.

CHAPTER TWENTY: DIVINE CROSSING

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you just keep looking at each other?" ... Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die." Then ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt... Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the one who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph's brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground... although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Then he remembered his dreams about them... (Genesis 42:1-9)

It's a moment of absolute clarity. It's when everything makes perfect sense. It's what I affectionately call the "divine crossing" of destiny. Like jet vapor trails in a azure summer sky this crossing creates the picture of personal purpose. It delivers the dream and sparks the story of where we originated, why we exist and where we're headed. Divine crossings are the sky paintings of our lives. They provide hope, peace and insight.

Joseph's divine crossing came years after pit and prison, accusation and abandonment, sabotage and slavery. As a boy he had a dream that one day his family would bend their knee to his will. It was a vision that vilified and victimized Joseph and proved to be a prophecy soaked in pain. His brothers robbed Joseph of coat and kin. Potiphar's wife raped him with falsehood and framing. Years of exile in a foreign land and incarceration were the vapor trail of Joseph's life, his reputation wrongly soiled and his integrity inappropriately stained. And even though Joseph eventually enjoyed the silver lining to these storm clouds that shaped him, he certainly still struggled with clarity. For a Jew nothing means more than heritage and family and Joseph was an island, cut off from his family and former life.

Then one fateful day, ten Israelite brothers appeared in his palace corner office begging for food. In this magical moment, years of life finally crossed. Joseph's eyes opened as he recognized both his brothers and his Purpose. He remembered a dusty boyhood dream and his imaginations of Destiny. Joseph's life finally made sense. It was a Divine Crossing. He knew why he was where he was.

Like vapor trails, our lives stretch across time and space. As we travel our worlds, we fight life's storms and brave turbulent winds that batter our hopes. It's hard to see what God is designing because we see only in part. We gaze out small portals and watch our lives waste away, seemingly without Purpose. We witness passing planes of friends and family that seem more blessed with financial resources, rich opportunity and emotional stability. We can't see the horizon of where we're headed (that view is only for the Captain). Life just moves us forward and we sit belted to our fears, dining on peanuts, and wishing we were somewhere or someone else.

But if we could simply step back, we'd see our lives, like vapor trails, are painting beautiful pictures. As they divinely cross, with plan and purpose, the sky spells out our name. If we could see what God sees (or even others), we'd recognize we were created for such a moment as this one. It's when the irony becomes clarity. It's when forgiveness and forgetfulness becomes blessing. It's when our eyes recognize we're part of something much bigger and better.

The stories of divine crossings are everywhere. An Iowa HyVee grocery stock boy, stuck in neutral and arena football, never passed on his vision for NFL greatness and one day Hall of Fame quarterback Kurt Warner piloted the upstart Rams to one of the greatest Super Bowl victories ever. A rock band on it's last leg, about to lose it's recording contract and any dreams of musical greatness, releases a last-ditch, final hope recording that catches cultural flame and launches the band into rock history (KISS, Rush, Lynyrd Skynyrd). It's a small-town Sunday School teacher named Donna who saved my life as a renegade boy. Divine crossings are special moments where everything connects and, believe me, you may never see your trail until God calls you home.

The key is faithfulness to the Call. Someday we'll all see the big picture. And for some of us, if we're fortunate, like Joseph, we might enjoy a divine snapshot on this side of eternity just so we can recognize the cross really does make sense.

And how we are the pictures that point people toward God.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE : SWEATING BULLETS

Then [Joseph] remembered his dreams about them and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected." "No, my lord," they answered. "Your servants have come to buy food. We are all the sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies." "No!" he said to them. "You have come to see where our land is unprotected." But they replied, "Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no more." Joseph said to them, "It is just as I told you: You are spies! And this is how you will be tested: As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of your number to get your brother; the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth. If you are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies!" And he put them all in custody for three days." (Genesis 42:9-17)

Nothing seems sweeter than watching someone sweat. I'm not talking about some athlete who is exhausted from his sport, but rather a con caught in his own fabricated lies. The more they talk the worse it gets. Loose lips sink ships, you know. Give enough rope and a fibber will hang or, at least, sweat bullets. Metaphors abound so mix at will.

This verbal sparring between Joseph and his brothers (who don't know it's him) is sweet and sweaty. It's also funny. "You are spies!" Joseph accuses. It's a comical moment for even James Bond wouldn't camouflage himself as a poor, hungry nomad, let alone ten poor, hungry nomads. You can't make this stuff up. "No!" they plead, "we are your servants and honest guys, really." Hmmmm. Servants? Honest? This is the same bunch that bound Joseph and tanked him for traveling slave traders.

But Joseph wasn't through. He kept his line and again accused them of being spies bent on exposing Egyptian weakness. Now the eleven brothers start spilling their guts. "We're twelve brothers!" (You can imagine here Joseph is checking their math). "We're Canaanites." "We have one brother at home and, well, the other one is dead." (Maybe this lie will fly for a Pharaoh's prince like it did for dear old dad). The perspiration must've really been percolating now. The fact that a bunch of unsophisticated, dirty desert dogs procured access to the Vice President of Egypt was ironic. How much money could they have? Or power? Could Joseph have seen this one coming? Or saw them coming? You can bet your bottom dollar he dreamed of the day he might confront his brothers.

So Joseph ordered the brothers to enjoy a taste of his former life and put them in prison. He knew they were telling the truth, but justice is always sweet. Besides, the youngest brother named Benjamin wasn't party to the family conspiracy and neither was his dad, so Joseph hatched a plan for a family reunion. He knew his father well. There's no way Jacob would send Benny back to Egypt with a single sibling. His dad would definitely come, too.

Are there any life lessons in this story? Certainly what goes around comes around. You can't live a lie forever. Sometimes it's sweet to savor sweat. Honesty isn't lip service. Blood is thicker than water. Be careful who you're calling master. A hungry man is a dangerous man. Sometimes life dishes out justice all by itself.

It's sweet when someone sweats bullets. Especially if they're blanks to begin with.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO : THE TAXMAN COMETH

On the third day, Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households. But you must bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die." This they proceeded to do. They said to one another, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother...Reuben replied, "Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood." They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter. He turned away from them and began to weep, but then...had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes. (Genesis 42:18-24)

Only a few things strike immediate terror in the heart of any man (or woman). *Face to face with a spitting cobra. A tornado tearing through town. A stuck elevator between floors 144 and 145. A bulletin from the pilot to prepare for a crash landing. Or the fear that pitches when the postman delivers the news: I.R.S. audit.* It's enough to send the tough and brave to their knees praying for divine intervention.

Audits are necessary evils that verify our checks and balances. It's an accounting of math and motivations, the ability to follow instructions and personal integrity. When the taxman calls to scrutinize the ledger, only the pure will pass. If you must confess financial crimes, let them be ones of ignorance and omission, right?

Unfortunately, for Joseph and his ten brothers, the analysis of their activities already stinks. It's the reason the brothers spend seventy-two hours in solitary while a final audit is prepared. They still don't recognize the prince of Egypt is their own flesh and blood, implying a terrible sin of outright ignorance or blatant omission. This band of brothers are either fools or fiends. Were they so self-deluded to seriously think Joseph was dead? Or so selfish they willfully forgot he even lived? Only Reuben connects the dots and proposes it's probably payback time. You can't run forever. The audit was delivered. Sin for sin. Blood for blood. Life for life. The tax man comes to make an "accounting."

Joseph was wrecked by Reuben's assessment (so much so he weeps), but vows nevertheless to release all but one relative to return home. He's even going to sell them grain. The catch? Bring back baby brother. This was the ultimate test of their integrity and opportunity to right any and all previous wrongs. Think about it. They're already one brother down (Joseph). If they give up a second (to be shortly named), that still leaves ten kids for daddy's legacy. Reuben's right. If this is some divine retribution then pay the piper, be grateful for the grain, head for home...and never return.

Pay the fraternal tithe (one-tenth of the remaining brothers) and call it a day. Maybe dad will understand (again). At least he'll still have baby Ben. Of course, all's well with that scenario until Simeon draws the short straw. Now he's looking at life while the rest of the brothers scoot home scotch-free.

Boy, can I relate. It's easy in my spiritual life to cut the losses. Make the necessary sacrifice and be done with it. Even though showered with blessings more valuable than full grain sacks, I routinely miss the obvious. I'm either self-deluded or self-centered to an extreme. I stand before God with one hand out while the other hides, fingers crossed, behind my back. Occasionally, when I'm caught red-handed, I spin the truth to my corner, offer a sacrifice of time, treasure or talent and pray nothing worse comes. Better to be in the divine doghouse for a day, than hang in Hell forever. If I sense God wanting more from me, I stall and hope that short-straw goes to another person. I suspect I'm not alone. I probably have plenty of brothers (and sisters) who do the same.

It's no wonder God, like Joseph long ago, weeps. And waits.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE : SILVER LININGS

Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to put each man's silver back in his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. After this was done for them, they loaded their grain on their donkeys and left. At the place where they stopped for the night one of them opened his sack to get feed for his donkey, and he saw his silver in the mouth of his sack. "My silver has been returned," he said to his brothers. "Here it is in my sack." Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, "What is this that God has done to us?" (Genesis 42:25-28)

On June 18, 2008 the funeral for Tim Russert was held, the gregarious host of *Meet The Press* and political pundit for NBC News. In the wake of his unexpected heart attack five days earlier, accolades, adulation and affirmations marked his memory. His life, by those who knew him best, was framed by family and faith (he was a devout Catholic). He also loved his country and was passionate about politics. His exuberant 2000 election insight, hastily scrawled on a portable whiteboard: "Florida, Florida, Florida?" is political history. He also coined the terms "red" (Republican) and "blue" (Democrat) states.

Tim Russert was an eternal optimist. His book about "Big Russ" (his father) renewed faith in our fathers. Tom Brokaw commented how Tim always had a smile. His colleagues fondly recall his positive attitude, work ethic and desire to make a difference. He never let his head swell or grow too big for his britches. He remembered his roots and helped others to take flight. That's what made Russert a "silver lining" type of guy. So what if it rained occasionally, don't miss the rainbows. If life pitches a curveball, slap a single and call it good. Even if you foul out, there's still another at bat. What makes lemonade tasteful is both the sour and the sweet. No wonder he always smiled.

Maybe Russert learned his life lessons from Joseph. After all, Joseph also viewed life through a positive lens (most dreamers and visionaries do). Despite jealousy and imprisonment, false accusations and servitude, Joseph recognized life is too short for hard feelings, planned revenge, sharp retorts, or repressed hate. He could've buried his brothers in Egypt. All of them. He could've tossed them in prison for no reason (like he was). He could've stolen their silver and sent them home empty-handed. Joseph could've forced them to bow, bend or break. But instead he lined their lives with silver. He loaded their luggage with grace and grain. He even gave his brothers "provisions for the journey."

It's no wonder they were puzzled at the revelation of finding the money with the grain. *Full bellies. Full lunchboxes. Full sacks of grain.* And now the real silver lining was their own silver. And yet, they still somehow missed the blessing. The fortune in their possession brought fear. The bounty in their bags "sank their hearts." You'd think generosity would evoke gratitude but instead it created torture and trembling. *"What has God done to us?"* they confessed. They think we're spies. We were jailed. Simeon still is. We've got to face dad again and somehow bring back Ben. And now they're going to think we didn't pay. Or worse, stole the grain. Why is all this happening to us?

But I've got a different question: Why is it when blessings line a life, no matter the trial or test, it's hard to see the truth?

You'd think the Brothers Grim would be jumping for joy over Joseph's gift. He serviced their trip, filled their bags and returned their money. It was a free gift. It was grace. And yet, they hardened their hearts toward terror and depression. They saw the glass half empty. They turned their backs to beat the rain and missed the rainbow. I think Joseph just wanted his brothers to realize every cloud can have a silver lining. You'll get your grain. Simeon will be safe. God will provide. I trust you. Life is good.

The Tim Russerts and Josephs in life beg for us not to lose grip on the silver linings, whether deserved or not. You can't dare to dream if you allow nightmares to reign. You can't leave a legacy if fear is your focus. Sometimes life not only lets you go home, it also lines your journey with financial providence and full protection. In reality, it's not "what has God done to us?" but "what has God done for us?" that matters. One word makes all the difference. It's also what makes people take note of your life. It's what frames attitude, perception and outlook. It's the difference between leaders and losers, champs and chumps, sweet and sour.

It's also how you'll ultimately be remembered.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR: WHEN THE LEVEE BREAKS

When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them...As they were emptying their sacks, there in each man's sack was his pouch of silver! When they and their father saw the money pouches, they were frightened. Their father Jacob said to them, "You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me!" Then Reuben said to his father, "You may put both of my sons to death if I do not bring him back to you. Entrust him to my care, and I will bring him back." But Jacob said, "My son will not go down there with you; his brother is dead and he is the only one left. If harm comes to him on the journey you are taking, you will bring my gray head down to the Sheol in sorrow." (Genesis 42:29-38)

In the spring of 2017, everywhere you looked it was a soggy mess. A wet winter piled snow 200% of average in the Rocky Mountains. Spring storms dumped more precipitation. Reservoirs filled to capacity. Rivers ran at flood stage. For those in the Midwest it was reminiscent of 2008 when a deluge of rain in late May caused a bevy of levee breaks on the Mississippi River throughout the month of June. Wisconsin flooded first, then Iowa. Cedar Rapids literally lived up to its namesake. Illinois and Missouri watched fields flood, streets submerge and dreams drown beneath rising water levels. In the wake of the flooding laid a muddy path of destruction that cost Americans billions, even if you didn't live in the flood plain. In those moments of catastrophe, every day seemed to forecast another round of rain. Grab an umbrella or find the canoe, you decide. Of course the Mississippi River is historically known to flood (anybody remember 1993?).

Flooding has, no doubt, caused more than one water-soaked survivor to shake his fist at the sky and scream, *"Everything is against me!"* But I think we've all been there. We've all encountered those moments when nothing goes right. Nothing works. Nothing makes sense. Life's storms blow away our blessings, drown our dreams and leave us vulnerable for desperate times and measures. We hang on, hold out, stay up, give in, look around and pray we live to see another day. A flooded life is soaked with either silent resignation or steeled resolve. Our pride is what keeps us paddling.

If anybody was drowning by life's levy breaks and flooding it was Jacob. Years earlier he lost Joseph, his favored son, supposedly to accident. Then a famine swept through Canaan creating drought. Jacob desperately sends his boys to Egypt in hopes the rumors that the Land of Pyramids is flush with food are true. Maybe he can buy enough grain to keep his family afloat. We don't know how long the boys were gone but I suspect every day Jacob worried about their fate. Any father would. Egypt was the big dog and Jacob sent his own pups to bark up a business deal that might easily bite back. The family fortune could be confiscated. The ten brothers captured. It was a risk to send the boys to Egypt, but a hungry belly makes many fools.

So it's easy to understand Jacob's reaction when his sons return sans Simeon. He's grateful for the grain, sure. The returned silver stumps him, true. He's glad nine sons are back home safe. But the Egyptian request to now send Benjamin as guaranty is mystifying. "*Over my dead body,*" says dad. No way. Benjamin was Jacob's last link to Joseph. What kind of father would risk yet another son? This whole situation smelled. Something was up. "*No,*" says Jacob, "*Benjamin is the only one left.*" Wait, stop the tape. The only one left? What about the nine sons desperately seeking dad's absolution and approval? Ah, now the muddy picture clears. Jacob's heartache had left him emotionally blind. He didn't have eleven sons, he only had one (and ten stewards)! Simeon, like the other brothers, had little value to dad. Benjamin was his "Joseph" in spirit.

This family's fatal flaw was selfish pride. Jacob couldn't let go of Joseph so he selfishly blessed Ben, forcing him to inherit a life he couldn't possibly live. The ten brothers couldn't win dad's affection so they selfishly fed Joseph to the lions. Jacob's pride masked the pain. The brother's pride covered the crime. Is it possible Jacob worried more about his silver than his sons? I'm beginning to think so. He ultimately cared more for his fortune than his family (save Ben). Many of us do.

After all, pride always comes before a flood. It's the original sin. And it'll leave one muddy mess when life heads south. Joseph's redemption was the pit and prison. He was now free to lead his family home.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE: FAMILY FIREWORKS

Now the famine was still severe in the land. So when they had eaten all the grain they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go back and buy us a little more food." But Judah said to him, "The man warned us solemnly, 'You will not see my face again unless your brother is with you.' If you will send our brother along with us, we will go down and buy food for you... Israel asked, "Why did you bring this trouble on me by telling the man you had another brother?" They replied, "The man questioned us closely about ourselves and our family. 'Is your father still living?' he asked us. 'Do you have another brother?' We simply answered his questions. How were we to know he would say, 'Bring your brother down here?'" Then Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the boy along with me and we will go at once, so that we and you and our children may live and not die. I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him here before you, I will bear the blame before you all my life. As it is, if we had not delayed, we could have gone and returned twice." (Genesis 43:1-10)

Few things are more frustrating and faithful than family matters. The dysfunction we inherit is often deep, disturbing and debilitating. Meanwhile the pleasant memories we manufacture serve to mask whatever pain our families produce. Yes, the family ties bind, but they can also blind. Like July 4 fireworks our family systems are beautifully explosive; one moment thrilling and the next choking with dysfunctional smoke.

Of course, few family dynamics matched Joseph's. It was a powder keg of spite, bitterness, rage and pettiness. And in order to understand, you have to have some history. The family "Israel" beats any daytime soap opera (Genesis 29-35). It's a desperate household about all Jacob's children. The story opens when Jacob falls madly in love with Rachel, the stunning daughter of his uncle Laban. He proposes marriage and Laban counters with a work-for-sire contract. Seven years later, Jacob finally gets his girl, only to be hijacked by a classic bait and switch (Laban secretly swaps older sister Leah for Jacob's love). As the honeymoon hangover wears off and Jacob realizes the deception he's ticked, to say the least. He had worked for the lovely Rachel, not the homely Leah. It does make you wonder how Jake could marry and even make love to a woman without recognizing her true identity? Maybe true love really is blind.

Laban plays political genius and permits Jacob to also marry Rachel under one provision: he works another seven years. It's a solid solution for everyone but Leah. Jacob's a one-woman man and he has no affection for older sister, leaving her only lonely. But Jacob has a bigger problem: Leah's "fertile" and Rachel's not. So Leah avenges Jacob's lack of love by naming their kids "misery" (Reuben), "someone else hears" (Simeon), "maybe my husband will bond now" (Levi) and "I'll just praise God anyway" (Judah). Leah definitely has tact.

Of course Rachel's inability to produce kids causes an explosion of jealousy and anger. "Give me children or I'll die!" she tells an exasperated Jacob and then provides her maid as a proxy (who quickly gets pregnant). Rachel names "her" surrogate kids "revenge" (Dan) and "I beat my sister" (Naphtali). Not to be outdone, Leah then supplies her personal servant to Jacob and names their offspring "good fortune" (Gad) and "I'm happy" (Asher). Are you still following this family folly? Leah then gets pregnant again and calls the boys "reward" (Issachar) and "honored" (Zebulon). Add a daughter (Dinah) and the line score looks like a baseball game: Leah 9, Rachel 2. Of course, Rachel's runs are pinch hit homers. In truth, the lovely and loved Rachel is a shut out. Thankfully, in the bottom of the ninth, she manages two kids of her own: Joseph ("God has taken away my disgrace") and later, dying in childbirth, Ben-Oni ("son of my trouble"). You can only imagine how the dinner table was a nightly nightmare. It was the *Brady Bunch* meets the *Osbournes* or *Eight is Enough* moves in with *Desperate Housewives*. You can't make this type of drama up.

The Israel family was just getting started though. They built their business on fraud and deception against daddy Laban. Rachel then stole his household gods when they high-tailed it out of town to escape father's justice. Jacob and his own brother Esau aren't exactly on speaking terms. Dinah and Dan murder a mess of Shechemites after she's raped. The Family Israel was a mess. *Two wives. Thirteen kids (4 by proxy)*. Rachel was loved. Leah was blessed. And then there's Jacob. He's got four women, two at each other's throats. He can't mention a kids name without getting a history lesson. The woman he loves is bitter. It's no wonder he emotionally escapes and pours all his affection and attention on her two legitimate boys alone. He protects them. Showers them with gifts and fancy coats. Renames Ben-oni to Benjamin ("son of my right hand") and makes the other boys work. It's a recipe for trouble and that's what we've learned throughout Joseph's journey

It also explains why Jacob is dead-set against Benjamin going to Egypt. He assumes Joseph is dead. He's not going to let Ben out of his sight...ever. He doesn't trust his other boys. He's seen too much deception. Shoot, his whole life has been one big trick. You can't play poker without losing a hand and Jacob isn't about to call someone's bluff. The stakes are too high. But so are the hunger pains. The cupboard is bare again. The famine remains fierce. Jacob faces a difficult decision. It's in crisis that our family ties bind and blind. We can only close our eyes so long to the truth. Most of us are dealt a "Leah" (ordinary) life, but long for "Rachel" (lovely) reality. When our choices create consequences that become our family history—good and bad—we mark the memories with "names" like misery or trouble. Our lives literally become tombstones and testaments, mile markers and monuments. In the desperate times we discover who we really are.

Like a July 4 firework, our families incinerate and implode, enthrall and explode. But these shells aren't formed in vacuums. What others see is only the sparks and smoke of what we hide within our family casings. No family is perfect, but the secret to healing lies in getting out of the shell. Joseph's family dynamic only birthed more dysfunction. Unknown to him, his Egyptian pit and prison experience would free him from a deeper emotional incarceration.

And so it is with us. The crises that cause our lives to cave also hold the key to escape. Our progeny proclaims our choice. Loud and clear.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX: IT IS WHAT IT IS

Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be, then do this: Put some of the best products of the land in your bags and take them down to the man as a gift—a little balm and a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds. Take double the amount of silver with you, for you must return the silver that was put back into the mouths of your sacks. Perhaps it was a mistake. Take your brother also and go back to the man at once. And may God Almighty grant you mercy before the man so that he will let your other brother and Benjamin come back with you. As for me, if I am bereaved, I am bereaved." (Genesis 43:11-14)

It is what it is. As I grow older, and hopefully wiser, I've found deep comfort in that little phrase. *It is what it is.* I used to consider such thinking as giving up, resignation or tossing in the towel. Nope. I even believed it could be detrimental, deceptive or destructive. Boy, was I wrong. *It is what it is.* Until I recognized this truth, I lived a life of worry, regret, frustration, anger and sadness. In truth, those five words—all of only twelve letters—are the key to personal freedom. They don't announce resignation, but rather release. It's not tossing in the towel or waving the white flag, but rather an acceptance of assignment. You're not quitting. No, in fact, you're just getting started. It's the recognition there's more work, more opportunity, more pain, more crisis. *It is what it is.* You can't change it (right now). You just have to live through it.

Jacob's youthful zeal had evolved into elderly wisdom. He knew which fights to pick and which hills to die upon. He wasn't going to beat the famine. *It is what it is.* He couldn't bring Joseph back from the dead. *It is what it is.* He couldn't rescue Simeon or buy more food without allowing beloved Ben to leave. *It is what it is.* A paraphrase of that sentiment is wrapped in his comment: *"As for me, if I am bereaved, I am bereaved."* Whatever you do, don't see Jacob's words as a sign he's quitting or giving up. If that was Jacob's mindset, he'd have done nothing and starved to death, leaving Simeon to rot in Egypt and his family to fend for themselves. If resignation were his rationale, then he'd never let young Ben leave. He'd have covered his assets and called it good, not give away the family fortune in silver and spices. No, Jacob had learned the value of acceptance. *It is what it is.* Life isn't always fair, nice, generous, reasonable or timely. *It is what it is.* Stuff happens. Things break. People get hurt. Sometimes it's bleak and we face fights, foreclosures, fires and floods or divorce, debt, disease and death. *It is what it is.* Sometimes life smiles on you. The wallet is thick. Friends are many. The weather is sunny and 75. Not a cloud in the sky, except to shade just when you start to sweat. The secret to life is acceptance. It's in the vows. In good or bad, rich or poor, sickness or health, *it is what it is.* You can't change it, only roll with it. Like an ocean tide you can choose to surf or sit, dare or drown, smile or sulk. *It is what it is.* Happiness is fleeting but joy is eternal. At this moment, as I write these words, my air conditioning is broke and the temperature outside is climbing near the triple digits. *It is what it is.* At least I still have cold water, ice cream and sprinklers.

In a nutshell, accept life, come what may. Live each day as if it's your last (you never know). Don't fake your pain, but never let the pain break you. The sun will still come up tomorrow, you can bet on it. *It is what it is.* Enough said.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN : THROUGH THE FEARS

So the men...hurried down to Egypt and presented themselves to Joseph. When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, "Take these men to my house, slaughter an animal and prepare dinner; they are to eat with me at noon." The man did as Joseph told him and took the men to Joseph's house. Now the men were frightened when they were taken to his house ...So they went up to Joseph's steward and spoke to him at the entrance to the house. "Please, sir," they said, "we came down here the first time to buy food. But at the place where we stopped for the night we opened our sacks and each of us found his silver—the exact weight—in the mouth of his sack. So we have brought it back with us. We have also brought additional silver with us to buy food. We don't know who put our silver in our sacks." "It's all right," he said. "Don't be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks; I received your silver." Then he brought Simeon out to them. (Genesis 43:15-23)

Fear is the devil's greatest weapon. Fear steals, stunts and stalls a man. Fear can paralyze, pain and pummel. Fear works like a cancer. First it attaches, and then attacks and finally, it assassinates. Franklin D. Roosevelt's historic words were right: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." I heard a friend describe fear with the acronym: "false expectations appearing real."

So what are you afraid of? What worries you? What terrifies you? Phobias are funny things. One man's anxiety is another man's ardor. Many fear the dark (achluophobia) or even going to bed (clinophobia). Others panic at clowns (coulrophobia), dentists (dentophobia), work (ergophobia) and needles (aichmophobia). Some might think I have a fear of hair (chaetophobia) given my bald noggin though I'm really gripped by melissophobia (the fear of bees). Would you believe there's even a fear of church (ecclesiophobia), probably driven by homilophobia (fear of sermons) or hamartophobia (fear of sinning)? And we mustn't forget hippopotomonstrossequippedaliophobia: the fear of really long words!

One of my favorites is euphobia or the fear of good news. Maybe that's the terror Joseph's siblings felt when they trekked back to Egypt to replenish the family's dwindling food supplies. It had already been a surreal experience. Joseph initially jailed them and then released all the brothers but Simeon. The silver somehow stayed in their sacks and their first trip was miraculously fully financed. Now they're back in Egypt and immediately slapped with a lunch invitation at Joseph's private villa. Every time they turned around something good was happening. It was too good. Too good to be true.

You have to imagine, as the aroma of barbeque tempted the tastebuds, how easily their fears shifted into overdrive. They don't belong in this situation (foreign rednecks in a blue blood mansion?). They don't know this man (could be a trap?). They don't deserve filet mignon (poison? a final meal?). They just want to rescue their brother (without losing Benjamin), pick up the groceries and beat it for home. Even when they try to explain the "silver situation" they learn the steward wasn't angry. He was paid in full. This is weird. Too weird.

For most of us, our lives are marked by the fears that control us. We fear the big stuff, like death (thanatophobia) or disease (pathophobia). We're afraid of failure (atychiphobia) or flying (aviophobia). We fret about wrinkles (rhytophobia), weight (obesophobia) or waiting (macrophobia). We're anxious about strangers (xenophobia), speaking (glossophobia) or spiders (arachnophobia). You name it and we can fear it.

So what are you afraid of? What's holding you back from experiencing the best parts of life? You can't explore the world if you're afraid to leave the backyard. You can't live your dreams if you're locked inside your nightmares. You can't move forward if you're anchored by anxiety.

If you seek a mantra to overcome any fear try this one: With God's help, I can handle it. With God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26). I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13). We have not been given a spirit of fear or timidity (Romans 8:15), but of power and strength (2 Timothy 1:7). Fears thrive in the future because they've already camped in our past. The reason they riddle, rock and ruin our lives is we can't touch them nor change what happened. Fears fly elusively beyond this moment to make us look back. However, the present has no room for fear. It is what it is. So the simple mantra "With God's help, I can handle this" is all we need.

It's all we'll ever need. Fear is a vapor that rises from yesterday's failure, faults and frailty. This moment is reality. Embrace it and enjoy it. It's all you really have.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT: WHEN BARK COMES TO BITE

The steward took the men into Joseph's house, gave them water to wash their feet and provided fodder for their donkeys... When Joseph came home, they presented to him the gifts they had brought into the house, and they bowed down before him to the ground. He asked them how they were, and then he said, "How is your aged father you told me about? Is he still living?" They replied, "Your servant our father is still alive and well." And they bowed low to pay him honor. (Genesis 43:24-28)

I used to have a dog named "Bear." He weighed in at around a hundred pounds and possessed a bark that sent postmen into panic. He roamed the roost like he owned it. Most of the time, especially in his later years, he slept harmlessly at my feet. In canine culture, he was top dog. He occasionally tore into the trash for a midnight snack, viewed the toilet as his drinking dish and left a mat of black fur wherever he lounged for a nap. All was well until Bear found trouble. Let's just say he had a tendency to sometimes lack discipline.

One time he attracted the ire of my wife over some type of dog delinquency. Within seconds, this massive black beast was in her dominance hold--a physical bear hug that resembles a steer wrestling move. Bear instinctively knew he was in the proverbial dog house as she laid on top of him. My wife eventually released her grip but not her command for him to lay low. Every time Bear moved she barked a "no" and his massive body froze flat to the floor. His ears were pinned down, his paws pulled in, his mouth shut. He knew who was in charge (and it wasn't him). Get the picture? *Good.*

Joseph's brothers got the same picture, too. When he finally appeared, they hit the floor like a rock. When Joseph asked them about their dad, they gave their report and "*bowed low to pay him honor.*" They had no idea who this Egyptian prince really was, but they knew he held all the cards. Joseph had them in a dominance hold. Years earlier their bark had bit him but now the mutt was on the other hand. The brothers' eyes were blind to Joseph's identity, shielded by his honor and humbled by his presence.

Sometimes I feel like God has me in a dominance hold (maybe you do, too). Like a mongrel mutt, I've trashed His holiness, drank sloppily from His grace and barked a few times too loud, too much. My life is pinned down by circumstance and I'm frozen by a fear of the unknown. My dog day afternoons have suddenly become dark nights of the soul. It's in those moments that I realize God's loving discipline. Hebrews 12:7-10 says: "*Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.*"

For Bear, our discipline made him a better dog. And if man's best friend needs a dominance hold from time to time, surely I do too. Sometimes it takes a famine to find a feast. Sometimes it takes a pit to produce a prince. Sometimes it takes a bow to bury the bone or pull the hatchet. Divine discipline always bites at the time, but for those who bend the knee eventually they find it brings hope and healing. The good news is we're not dogs in God's eyes. We're His kids. His discipline helps us grow in Grace.

You see, with apologies to the late great "Bear," God is man's only best friend.

You just have to spell "dog" backward to see it.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE : SHANGHAI ' D I N B E I J I N G

Now Joseph gave these instructions to the steward of his house: "Fill the men's sacks with as much food as they can carry, and put each man's silver in the mouth of his sack. Then put my cup, the silver one, in the mouth of the youngest one's sack, along with the silver for his grain." And he did as Joseph said. As morning dawned, the men were sent on their way...They had not gone far from the city when Joseph said to his steward, "Go after those men at once, and when you catch up with them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid good with evil? Isn't this the cup my master drinks from and also uses for divination? This is a wicked thing you have done.' "

"Very well, then," he said, "let it be as you say. Whoever is found to have it will become my slave; the rest of you will be free from blame." Each of them quickly lowered his sack to the ground and opened it. Then the steward proceeded to search, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. At this, they tore their clothes. Then they all loaded their donkeys and returned to the city. (Genesis 44:1-13)

The 2008 summer Olympic Games was a medal slugfest between the United States and the host country China. The Chinese were golden in gymnastics and diving while American athletes shattered world records in swimming (thanks to superstar Michael Phelps) and dominated in volleyball and basketball, among many other competitions. The U.S. finished first in overall rank (110 medals)--36 gold, 38 silver and 36 bronze. However, China won more gold (51) and finished with 100 medals overall (21 silver, 28 bronze). The spoils of third went to the Russian Federation with a distant 72 medals.

So imagine this scenario: America finished even bigger in Beijing. I mean, really big. Michael Phelps still gets his record eight gold medals. The dream team of professional basketball players roars to an expected golden championship. World records shatter and the U.S. enjoys unprecedented medal counts. The proud Chinese national team loses face on their home court, especially when the Star Spangled Banner is played so much the communist Chinese children now hum it from heart. Imagine the U.S. Olympians at the Beijing airport, after the Games, just about to fly home when Chinese police detain the flight and accuse the Americans of doping, stealing and cheating. It's neither true nor fair, but according to Chinese law it's a serious felony. Within hours an international scandal brews as Michael Phelps, Kobe Bryant and the whole Olympic team is detained indefinitely. Nobody is going home for now.

Of course that would never happen, right? Maybe not in Beijing but it did once play out in Egypt. The Hebrew brothers were on the fast track home to father; unaware their donkeys were doped with more than just Egyptian grain. One beast held a special prize of burden: *Joseph's silver cup*. Of course stealing this silver chalice is akin to pilfering the President's personal cellphone. We're not talking lifting a pillowcase or pocketing an ashtray. The silver cup was special. It had power and purpose. It protected Pharaohs from being poisoned. Nobody—I mean, nobody—touched the chalice—especially low-life, dirt-bag foreign beggars.

So it's no minor offense that brings Joseph's private security forces in pursuit of the Hebrews.

The brothers are stunned by the situation, and hopes of going home without accident or incident wilts beneath the midday desert sun. Appealing innocence, the brothers willingly consent to a search. *"Steal silver? Us? No way!"* one says. *"We even returned the cash from last time,"* another brother chimes in, trying to build a case for confidence. *"We know nothing about a silver chalice"* still another offers, sweat beading on his forehead, *"but feel free to keep searching."* *"Shoot, if one of us did steal the cup, he should be hanged and the rest of us should be your slaves,"* another brother glibly suggested, surely nailing dirty looks from the others. If they'd learned anything, it's that strange things happen. Be careful what you say.

About that time one of the cops uncovers the cup in Benjamin's trunk, not to mention all the silver in everyone else's. Busted. This isn't looking good. A framed Benjamin is shocked and the brothers are confused. As Ben is hauled off in handcuffs, the rest of the siblings hightail it back to town. *"Why is this happening to us?" "Are we cursed?" "Dad is going to kill us." "I can't believe Benny would steal silver?" "By the way, I thought we paid for the food. Where'd all that silver come from?"*

I'll get right to the point. Sometimes life makes no sense whatsoever. Sometimes everything can go from right to wrong in an instant. Sometimes innocent people pay the piper while the guilty dance for free. Sometimes silver linings weigh more than they're worth. You can't see everything coming and if you're not careful the baggage you haul can eventually bury you.

Nobody wants to be shanghai'd in Beijing or cuffed outside Cairo. Joseph knew how it felt to be cornered without cause and innocently imprisoned better than anyone. Now his brothers would, too.

You might say it was their "just desert."

CHAPTER THIRTY: IT TAKES A THIEF

Joseph was still in the house when Judah and his brothers came in, and they threw themselves to the ground before him. Joseph said to them, "What is this you have done? Don't you know that a man like me can find things out by divination?" "What can we say to my lord?" Judah replied. "What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves—we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup." But Joseph said, "Far be it from me to do such a thing! Only the man who was found to have the cup will become my slave. The rest of you, go back to your father in peace." (Genesis 44:14-17)

I'll confess that I'm a reality television junkie. Ever since Cops hit the small screen, I've been captivated. I love game show reality (Survivor), business reality (Undercover Boss), family reality (Little People Big World, Alaska the Last Frontier), DIY reality (Flea Market Flip) and extreme job reality (Deadliest Catch, Life Below Zero).

My son once hooked me on a now defunct Discovery channel show called "It Takes A Thief." This riveting hour of heist and home security stole the attention. The premise is simple. Two reformed crooks case neighborhoods for a home begging to be robbed. The show's producers then persuade the owners to let "John" pilfer the place while the cameras roll. In less than ten minutes, he can lift and loot jewelry, electronics, cash, cars, boats and motorcycles. The accomplice "Matt" then debriefs the raid and sets the family up with top-flight home security. The moral: it takes a thief to know a thief (and stop them).

Similarly, Joseph was quite familiar with thievery. His brothers stole his relationship with dad and pawned it for a pit into slavery. A desperate housewife robbed him of his role as Potiphar's finest butler. As a prisoner, Joseph conversed with crooks and cheats and surely learned their larcenies. Joseph also bet his brothers were still stealing affections and purposely framed them in typical Hollywood fashion. Framed them like he was framed. Accused them (falsely) like he was accused (falsely).

Benjamin was the pawn in the plot as Joseph envisioned a greater outcome. Dear old dad thinks he's dead (and probably wouldn't believe the brothers if Joseph was outed or risk his life for a lie). His siblings are clueless to his identity (which only has to hurt Joseph more). So the only way to manufacture a family reunion is to create an international crisis. Consequently, Ben is fingered with a theft. The brothers, especially Judah (who's responsible for the boy), get the emotional hijack and learn Benny will be forced into slavery. In reality, Joseph hatches a heist to steal his dad back into his world. He can't go to Jacob but he can bring Jacob to Egypt through his beloved Ben.

Like I said, it takes a thief to understand theft.

I don't know about you, but some days I sense the losses in my life. Relationships I never developed now stolen by time, distance or death. Roads not taken now robbed of opportunity. Choices not selected now victims of circumstance, pilfered of possibility. Sometimes I've been robbed blind by life, especially sinful habits of the heart and unchecked vices, failing to recognize the damage until years later. Sometimes I've been pick-pocketed by pain, crisis or disaster. If I'm not careful, I'll resort to stealing time or looting friendships to my advantage. And God knows that even in my innocence, I can be falsely framed, accused and sentenced to situations I never saw coming.

Unlike Joseph, we many never have an opportunity to avenge the bandits in life. If you live for revenge, you'll only rob yourself of peace, gratitude, love, joy and a good night's sleep anyway. Some muggings will never make sense and when you allow the crime to crimp your life it only gives more power to the burglar. Let go of what you no longer own.

It may take a thief to thwart a theft, but Joseph learned a richer truth. Sometime that which is stolen might eventually become a gift. Our losses may be for our progress and gain. The pain caused by one of life's larcenies might serve to strengthen the soul. To paraphrase John Lennon, suffering wounds all heels.

We all know what it's like to lose. Thankfully, Joseph reveals how to steal back an occasional victory.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE: IMPALIN' PALIN

Then Judah went up to him and said: "Please, my lord, let your servant speak a word to my lord. Do not be angry with your servant, though you are equal to Pharaoh himself. My lord asked his servants, 'Do you have a father or a brother?' And we answered, 'We have an aged father, and there is a young son born to him in his old age. His brother is dead, and he is the only one of his mother's sons left, and his father loves him.' "Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me so I can see him for myself.' And we said to my lord, 'The boy cannot leave his father; if he leaves him, his father will die.' But you told your servants, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you will not see my face again.' ... "So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father and if my father, whose life is closely bound up with the boy's life, sees that the boy isn't there, he will die...Your servant guaranteed the boy's safety to my father... "Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father." (Genesis 44:18-34)

Alaska is a long way from Washington, D.C., in more ways than one. Just ask Sarah Palin, who in 2008 was a young, fresh governor from the frozen tundra. Despite an 80% gubernatorial approval rate, the nation's watchdogs and media elite had a field day with Palin—who joined John McCain on the 2008 Presidential Republican ticket. She was vetted, paraded, skewered and toasted (and that was just her first week!). Sarah's national "coming out" speech at the Republican Convention reinvigorated the conservative base, challenged the status quo and sent tremors through the liberal left. As Palin popularly confessed, the only difference between a "hockey mom and a pit bull is the lipstick." Palin certainly wasn't the reincarnation of Ronald Reagan for the Grand Old Party, but she proved no B-list actress either.

What's truly remarkable is how this ordinary, obscure woman made her meteoric rise onto the national political stage. Born in Idaho and raised in Wasilla, AK, Palin was a champion basketball player known affectionately as "Sarah Barracuda" for her team leadership and Christian witness. She's a former beauty queen and television sports reporter and just your average mom until the day she ran for City Council. Palin's no-nonsense political prowess and leadership made her a formidable foe, especially on issues related to fiscal irresponsibility, taxation, abortion, religion and gun control. In 1996, she beat an incumbent mayor and spent the next 10 years being groomed for a higher calling as Alaska's governor. Two years later John McCain tagged her as a running mate. Palin is a committed Christian "hockey mom" of five children with the right stuff and spunk to make political waves. Even a McCain loss didn't dishearten Sarah. She just headed back to Alaska and went back to work (though the media never stopped dogging her and her family).

Still, Sarah would say you just never know where life will lead you.

Joseph and Sarah Palin have a lot in common. They both understand character assassination, setbacks, the bleeding edge and the favor of a pick. Pharaoh vetted an accused Hebrew rapist and named him just a heartbeat away from the Egyptian throne (a decision that surely wagged media tongues and ignited political fire from critics). Of course, back then, such protest was futile and suitable for a quick desert burial. There was no freedom for the suppressed.

Joseph is no Egyptian insider. He doesn't have pedigree or wealth or social security. He earned his master's degree as a slave. He's as at home with thugs and thieves as he is with princes and presidents. Joseph understands the little guy. He's been on the bottom looking up. He knows hunger and hate, pain and pressure. In fact, he probably missed life as a nomad rancher. Big city Egyptian culture has its perks but some days the sound of bleating sheep is attractive. Joseph, like Sarah Palin, is just an ordinary guy with an extraordinary calling. And as with Palin, he has his private family matters and, sometimes, that means the need to raise some Cain. In this particular episode, Judah pleads with Joseph (still not recognizing his own brother) to change his mind about Benjamin. *"This'll kill dad!"* Judah begs, *"the boy is his only hope in life."* Judah knows if he goes home without Ben, his father Jacob will have nothing left to live for. It's a situation pregnant with possibilities.

Ultimately, Sarah Palin, Judah, Jacob and Joseph remind us that we can't see everything coming. We can be equally blindsided and blessed by life. Sometimes bad things and good things happen. Sometimes daughters make mistakes. Sometimes brothers create pain. Sometimes daddies die. Sometimes mommies lead. Sometimes we get picked by princes and sometimes elected mayor of a small town in the middle of nowhere. It's not where we start that matters; in the end it's how we finish.

And how we live and lead every moment in-between.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO : OF MASKS AND MEN

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. (Genesis 45:1-3)

Halloween is a holiday of horror. It's always had its shady side of divination, demons and darkness but in recent years it's gotten a facelift due to good old American greed and gluttony. We love to consume (and costume) so Halloween is perfectly pitched for American appetites and masks. It's an opportunity to hide behind rubber, makeup and spirit gum to escape the true terror of our own realities. Halloween gives us permission to mask our lives with plastic as penance for the other 364 days where reality is truly shaded.

So what happens when the real self bleeds through? What happens when the makeup melts? Or the façade falls? Or the mask is moved? Sometimes we reveal on purpose. We've all had that trick or treat moment when we lift our plastic mask to someone just to say, "Look, it's me! It's really me!" Our costume may cloak our identity but underneath we're still just crazy kids...no matter our age. Adults love to trick or treat, too.

Joseph's Halloween moment happened after years of trial and tribulation. It was the culmination of a life lived on purpose. Joseph knew who he was deep down inside. He didn't need Egyptian fashion or Pharaoh's power to impress. Joseph was already beside himself, literally. He was about to explode with emotion. So he orders his entourage to beat it. No sooner does the door close and Joseph loses it. This man who survived pit and prison is bawling like a baby. His weeping and wailing could be heard on the streets. His brothers were blown away. Who was this guy? We're the ones who should be shedding tears. Is he crazy? Has he dived into the deep end? It's no wonder they were "terrified at his presence." You would be too. Here's a powerful ruler who controls your family's destiny and he's an emotional wreck. The brothers didn't need a nut job on top of everything else. It was tough enough to make sense of this whole sorry episode rationally. If lunacy guides the discussion nobody will make it back to dad.

And then Joseph draws near and (between sobs) takes off the mask. *"I (sob) am (sob) Joseph (wiping his tears). Is (takes a breath) my father (sob) still (sob) living?"* The brothers were stunned. Mortified. Frozen in their tracks. Years of denial had convinced them Joseph was dead. So who was this guy? Even if Joseph was alive, he was a slave not a ruler. Is this a joke? The tragic twist is Joseph's revelation doesn't elicit joy but terror. You'd think this revelation would be welcome.

The real truth? We all wear masks. Sure, some are manufactured by years of abuse, alienation or abandonment. Many people have built elaborate emotional walls to prevent further pain and rejection. Other masks are momentary. We don them to survive a sticky situation or nerve-wracking activity. In the church we've made Halloween a weekly worship ritual. Most people wear masks to church to hide their true identities and to cloak their reality. We smile and sing and then beat it to the parking lot to ditch the makeup. Perhaps someday Church can become "real" again.

It also hurts to remove the mask. If you wear one long enough it gets under your skin and you easily confuse the facade with your real face. It's painful to peel away the masquerade. Peel it off anyway. You may do some serious sobbing. Remove it nevertheless. You may even create confusion with loved ones. Ditch the mask regardless. What you lose in face will be gained in freedom.

After all, God didn't make us with (or even) for masks. So let me be real with you. I've had my share of mask moments. I'll confess I've cloaked myself in clever costumes, whether as professor or pastor. I often use humor to hide my pain. Maybe it's due to years of hurtful remarks. Small people get tired of being small. All I know is there's peace in peeling off the plastic and freedom is losing the façade. I'd rather be the real deal than some cheap replica.

God designed me for authenticity. I am what I am.

And that's very good!

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE : EYE OF THE HURRICANE

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. (Genesis 45:4-7)

It's always a wild time in late summer and early fall...especially if you live near an eastern coast. The Gulf of Mexico routinely churns with hurricanes while the southeastern states annually braces for one of these wind and water disasters. From Texas to Virginia, nobody is completely safe. We even memorialize these monster storms with personal names. *Ike. Gustav. Katrina.*

A hurricane looks simply divine from above but is downright devilish from below. The massive spinning storm travels at will, with wind speeds over 100 mph and precipitation that often exceed a baker's dozen. Beneath the fury, the wind gusts tear apart structures and topple trees. The rain pounds, then floods, then becomes a living sewer in the days to follow. A hurricane's greatest feature is its eye. It's a moment when the mayhem pauses, the sun shines and the winds die. Inside the eye is peace. *Clarity. Calm. Even comfort.* It's not permanent by any means, but it's a brief reprieve from the rage.

Joseph and his brothers had such a moment when he drew them close and revealed his identity. In a moment of clarity, he calmed and comforted his siblings. He relieved their distress and assuaged their anger, if only for that single moment. Joseph, their brother, was in charge. They didn't have to worry anymore. The famine that forced their pilgrimage to Egypt was no longer a problem. Joseph wasn't just a kind-hearted Egyptian official, he was flesh and blood kin. No, the storm wasn't over by any means (five more years of famine remained), but in the eye of their hurricane and the fury that threatened their very lives, there was Peace and Hope.

Joseph also found his own clarity in this moment. In the eye of the hurricane that raged for many years in his life, he finally discovered his Purpose. The devilish deed of his brothers (to sell him into slavery) now made perfect sense. The false accusations against his character (that cost him years in prison) were now justified. Like a beam of sunshine into the eye of the hurricane, Joseph realized it was God who designed his destiny. It was God who carved his career. It was God who forged his future. It wasn't about him. It was never about him.

Maybe that's why we miss so much of life. It's too easy to lose perspective.

From beneath life's tumults, we tend to view poverty, pain and problems as devilish and evil when, if properly viewed from above, they're really Divinely-guided storms that frame destiny. God may not cause the storm, but He can use it to make us a better person. We just can't see the big picture. That's why, in the terror of the tempest, it's easy to forget the Son still shines. Or in the fear of the fury, when all Hell is breaking loose and our souls are flooded, we often overlook the massive beauty of the beast that reminds us how small we truly are. It's why sometimes the hurricane eye is God's gift. It allows us to see Heaven, if only for a moment, to realize no storm is eternal.

Hurricanes, like most of life's storms, roll through, tear up and leave a mess. But if you're fortunate to enjoy the eye, if even for a moment, then embrace the Clarity. Find Peace in the problems. Find Hope in the heartache. Find Grace in the grit. Find Love in the losing. Find Joy in the journey. Find Humor in the horror. Find Life in the lamentation. Look up. Breathe deep. Soak in the Son. And enjoy the embrace.

After all, it means you're now on the back end of the tempest. And that's good, because that's God.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR: FORECLOSED FUTURES

"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay. You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me—you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.'" (Genesis 45:8-11)

During the Great Recession (2008-2012), America tiptoed on the precipice of financial collapse. In December 2007, America officially entered a recession. Foreclosure signs littered the suburbs. Stocks fell like autumn leaves. Banks, companies and the auto industry failed, despite government bailouts to stimulate the economy. In 2009, the average American family owed more the \$12,000 in credit card damage. Unemployment lines got longer every day. Everyone was more than nervous. All this talk of recession had become depressing.

America has always been the land of opportunity and opulence. It's always been a nation of power and possibility. But the American dream was now a nightmare. We were like Humpty Dumpty. We had fallen and couldn't get up. Our fragile economy was cracked and, if we were not careful, could poach us all. What we needed was a leader, but such individuals were in short supply. After all, real leaders don't point fingers of blame but roll up their sleeves and work a solution. They don't rely on rhetoric or political ploy but blood, sweat and tears.

What we needed was someone like Joseph.

In times of trial, we desperately seek someone who feels called. In moments of trouble, we hunger for someone who recognizes God is ultimately in control. In times of crisis, we seek someone who knows their political place and power. We desire someone who creates solutions and initiates real change. We look for a leader (like Joseph) who loves his family more than his position and someone who recognizes the consequences of inaction, apathy and failure.

"Hurry back to my father," Joseph commands his brothers, "and pack the moving truck." You can sense the urgency in his voice. This is no time to dilly dally. Joseph has learned that today is the only day that matters because you never know what tomorrow holds. "I've got a great neighborhood all picked out for you," Joseph continues, "you'll love it!" He's going to fully protect his family, all of his family. Goshen is choice land. It's a new beginning and a fresh start. "So come on, boys!" Joseph concludes, "we've still got five more years of famine left." The future certainly looked bleak, but Joseph had the plan. He designed a new dream for his family. They couldn't see this one coming anymore than Joseph foresaw his pit, prison and palace experiences.

Life is like that, you know. One minute you're rolling in the dough and the next your goose is cooked. One day you're dancing on your street of dreams and the next the golden bricks have turned to dust. One day you're life is rich and the next it's gripped by poverty.

Face it, it's easy to lead when life is easy. But trying times call for men of valor and women of value. So here's a question: Who will be our Joseph (or Josephine)? Who will lead us through this troubling times? Who will do more than preach "change" and actually make change? Who will stop stumping and start strategizing? Who will rise to the challenge to both inspire and perspire? Who will care about main street as much as Wall Street?

The solution, to quote Bob Dylan, is still "blowing in the wind."

Let's just hope the howl doesn't drown out the answers.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE : SEEING IS BELIEVING

"You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly." Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him. (Genesis 45:12-15)

I had a blind college professor named Ralph Johnson. Now, as you can imagine, such an educational situation was ripe for extortion, exploitation and escape and I regularly took full advantage. I used to sit in the last chair next to the door. I'd wait for roll call, wink at my buddies and quietly exit for lunch or my room. What could a blind professor teach me anyway, I reasoned? But I'd soon learn the real blindness was my own. Ignorance and insolence darken many a mind.

You see, as I got to know Ralph Johnson I learned he could see far more than I ever did. His other senses were so acute that he could smell, I mean tell, subtle differences between his students. His ears were sharp and the slightest movement in class caught his attention. He also had no fear. One time a friend of mine caught this blind man climbing a ladder to his roof! What I remember most about the old professor was his joy. He loved life and never viewed his disability as destructive. *"God made me blind,"* he once said, *"so I could truly see."*

The professor was right. You can be blind in many ways.

Joseph's brothers, except for Benjamin, were blind to the truth. They just couldn't see how this was Joseph standing before them. Sure, he was a big dreamer (once). Sure, he was cocky about that coat. Sure, he was daddy's pet kid. But that Joseph was dead. Whoever stood before them didn't look or sound or even smell like the Joseph they once knew. This Joseph was powerful beyond measure. This Joseph was rich and regal. This Joseph was a king. Even after Joseph physically hugged the stuffing out of them, wept a river of tears and kissed them profusely, the best his brothers could do was "talk" to him.

Now to quote the church lady from *Saturday Night Live*: "Isn't that special!"

Joseph's brothers still can't see it. Benjamin has eyes to hear, but his brothers remain blind as bats.

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Of course, it's hard to see what you can't imagine. It's difficult to grasp what you won't touch. Blindness affords a blessed excuse: *"I just can't see it."* I can't see how God is getting me out of this one. I can't see how the bills will get paid this month. I can't see how God heals some and let's others die from cancer. I can't see how we'll ever retire. I can't see loving that person. I can't see how I'll ever be forgiven of that failure or fault. I can't see God's plan in this mess. I can't see how we'll make it out, off or work. I can't see that God truly loves me. I can't see how God is good. I can't see God blessing that person. I can't see why evil men prosper while the righteous suffers. I can't see any purpose to this predicament.

I just can't see!

The truth is we're all blind fools. None of us see very well. We're blinded by our own egos, desires and selfishness. We can't envision how God truly works all things to the good for those who love Him. We're color-blind to black and white promises in the scriptures. Cataracts of casual sin steal our perceptions and purity. We're stigmatized by our past to the point we can't see a future.

Professor Johnson taught me a deep truth: *what you see may not be real.*

What you believe to be true might be false. What you imagine to be good might be bad. Or vice versa.

Maybe the real truth is you must believe to see. Ah, now that changes everything.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX : HEAVENLY HILLBILLIES

When the news reached Pharaoh's palace that Joseph's brothers had come, Pharaoh and all his officials were pleased. Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Tell your brothers, 'Do this: Load your animals and return to the land of Canaan, and bring your father and your families back to me. I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you can enjoy the fat of the land... Never mind about your belongings, because the best of all Egypt will be yours.' " So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. They told him, "Joseph is still alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt." Jacob was stunned; he did not believe them. But when they told him everything Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the carts Joseph had sent to carry him back, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. And Israel said, "I'm convinced! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die." (Genesis 45:16-20, 25-28)

Come and listen to a story about a man named Joe,
from a poor desert family, livin' mighty po,
then one day he was sold out by his kin
and wound up cryin' in a dirty 'Gyptian pris'n.
Years, that is, tough times, on his knees.

Well then one day Joe's called to Pharaoh's side.
It's a seven-year famine that demands a wise guide.
Joseph's influence is exceedingly great and grand,
and his leadership helps save a desperate foreign land
Famine, that is, poor times, Pharaoh's friend

Some time later his starving brothers came to call,
Joseph revealed himself and ordered a Cairo U-Haul.
Said "Eqypt is really the place you ought to be"
so they loaded up daddy Jacob and moved southerly.
Land o' Goshen, that is. Waterin' pools, the good life.

If you want to meet the original Beverly Hillbillies, you only have to read about Joseph's family. These Canaan rednecks won a lotto ticket for an extreme life makeover (thanks to brother Joseph). Like the Clampetts, the family of Jacob (now 66 in number) were backcountry folk who lived off the land and smelled of sheep dip, desert dirt and old sweat. Jacob's clan was from the wrong side of the country. They were uneducated, unrefined and definitely uncouth. If it weren't for Joseph, they'd never get past the bellhop let alone meet personally with a Pharaoh.

Like most life stories, Jacob's family would be lost to history if it hadn't been for Joseph. How many other desert folk starved in that famine? Without Joseph, this family of mischievous malcontents might be a mere historical footnote at best. With Joseph, they're front page news and biblical legend. The family Jacob (a.k.a. Israel) moved to Goshen, which was choice Egyptian real estate to dine upon Joseph's meal ticket. Consequently, they got the royal treatment. Egyptian spas. Prime parking. Front row seats. Posh parties with paparazzi. Wake up calls and maid service.

Life is a curious thing, really. It's unpredictable. Like a snake on the loose, you can't guess it's next move. It could slither away harmlessly after devouring the rats in your pantry or coil to bite you hard on the heel just for spite. Life doesn't always rhyme with reason. Fortunately, Joseph discovered the secret of life is patient persistence. It's not giving up, going down or growing bored. It's plowing forward even when the ground is solid stone. It's a belief in resurrections even when hope is dead. It's praying for dawn through the deep darkness of the night.

God gives every person a unique path to walk. Some enjoy years of blessing and bounty, living well and loving full. Others endure times of torture and testing, surviving lean and struggling mean. Everybody has their story. You may be a victim or victor it doesn't matter. You may be a pauper or prince, redneck or white collar, cash strapped or money magnet. In the end, nothing matters except Who you know. Joseph went from prison to palace riding coincidence and contacts. Jacob went from famine to feast on the back of family and faith. Even Pharaoh survived political disaster through working his address book. It's all in who you know.

So who do you know? The truth is you only need One Name to win in life. Go ahead and look it up. It's filed under G.

I like to think we're all just hillbillies heading for heaven. We're just po folks living for our daily bread. Some day, in this life or the next, our ship will sail and if you know the Captain it'll be a blessed bon voyage. Heavenly hillbillies recognize temporary troubles can't trump the eternal benefits. We may be ridin' in a rental lemon but one day we'll soar on a chariot of fire. We may dwell in a sagging shack but one day will reside in a mansion of many rooms. It's all about perspective.

The story of Joseph is pretty much over now (as is this book). He brings his father and family to Egypt to live the good life. It's an extreme family makeover. His father will die, as will Joseph, in Egypt. The family inheritance and Joseph's memory will last several generations but eventually will perish in the hot sands of time. Nevertheless, his story is a cherished biblical episode for those who think life can't get much lower. It's a clarion call for patient endurance. It's a revelation of hope for those in pit or prison, poverty or pestilence. It's a beacon of light for those walking in the dark shadows of doubt, discouragement, disillusionment, disease or death.

So vow to keep hope alive. Dare to dance when the flute is silent. Dare to dream when all you see are nightmares. For all things really do work for good to those who love God. It's Joseph's story in a nutshell. It's my story in real time. And I hope it will be yours, too.

Well now its time to say goodbye to Joe and all his kin.
And I'd would like to thank you folks fer kindly readin' in.
You're all invited back again to journey in my shoes.
And to have a heapin helpin' of another timely muse.
God moments that is. Set a spell, Take your souls off.
Y'all come back now, y'hear?

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