

**Unearthed Sermon 3**  
**When Life is Unfair and People Treat You Really Badly - Joseph**

**Emerson Kennedy**  
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There's something to stories of people who, despite ALL circumstances, maintain joy.

In 2017, the late Jane Marczewski received the kind of news that no one ever wants to hear: stage-three breast cancer. The battle became all the more lonely when her husband of five years left her (nice fella) in the middle of it.

Jane went on America's Got Talent, auditioning with the stage name "NightBirde" (see online sermon for photo). What's amazing about her story is that she and her song "It's OK" became a fountain of blessing for all those who encountered her story because of her hope despite unfair circumstances. She got all kinds of comments like that of host Terry Crews who said, "YOU are the voice we all need to hear."

The journalist Angela Davis, picking up on this, wrote, "Why is this unlikely voice the one we need to hear right now? What is her hope despite her circumstances? How can she declare 'It's OK' when it clearly isn't?"

For Jane, her mental courage stemmed what she had gleaned from her Christianity.

We're in a series right now called *Unearthed* and we are digging beneath the surface of our lives to see how God wants to meet us there. Today, we're talking about *when life's unfair*—like those moments in life when you did nothing to deserve the cards you were dealt and there was nothing that could have prevented what happened in your life. What happened, happened. What's happening IS happening. Or what's going to happen is going to happen.

Because ALL of us have moments in life where we experience the harsh unfairness of life, no?

What do I do when my life is unfair, and people treat me badly, and nothing ever seems to go right, and I can't get things to go my way, and I can't catch a break, and no matter how hard I try I keep hitting setbacks, and my family didn't set me up for success, and there's no light at the end of the tunnel, and God seems preoccupied with someone or something else—what do I do?

Anyone been there before?

Of course, maybe your life is good. Maybe you've got everything figured out, and your marriage is effortless, and your kids always listen, and you keep getting promoted at work, and Harvard is begging for your kids to apply, and everyone thinks you're the life of the party, and fashion retailers want to post images of you wearing their clothes on Instagram, and your cat is grateful and appreciative, and you have no plans to die at all. If that's you, then this sermon isn't for you.

But for the rest of us, for those who have had their family bludgeoned by something they didn't see coming, or who have had their marriage begin to crumble, or who have had a diagnosis come to someone they love and felt no hope at all, or who have experienced betrayal at work or in a friendship, or who struggle with infertility, or who can hardly stand to see one more video or

picture of violence and destruction on the news—and for those of you who’s cat isn’t grateful and appreciative—life can feel so unfair.

In those moments, what do you do?

I want you to meet a man in the scriptures named Joseph. I want to give us the arc of Joseph’s life and then three principles from his life, because his, like Nightbirde’s, is a voice we need to hear when it comes to this topic. Here’s Joseph’s story in three chapters.

### **Chapter 1: Betrayed**

Joseph was born to Jacob, who was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham. Joseph was loved dearly. In Genesis 37, we read, “Now Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons...” and he “made an ornate robe for him.” His brothers hated him for both the favor he gets and also for his hubris (“hate” is used 3 times in this chapter).

Joseph had two dreams: (1) everyone is out binding sheaves, and everyone’s sheaves bow down to his; and (2) the sun, moon, and stars bow down to him. Jacob rebukes him for the dreams, but they don’t sit well with everyone else

Joseph was sent to Dothan where he was jumped by his brothers, who then stripped him, threw him into a pit, and sold him into slavery. The brothers told Jacob that Joseph was killed by a wild animal.

### **Chapter 2: Accused**

As if that wasn’t bad enough, Joseph was then bought by an Egyptian named Potiphar. One day, while Joseph was working alone Potiphar’s wife entered. “Sleep with me,” she said. Joseph refused. “Come on!” she said. Joseph refrained. “Do it!” she demanded. And Joseph ran away, only to return to the anger of his master, for Potiphar’s wife falsely accused him of rape. Potiphar put Joseph in prison.

### **Chapter 3: Forgotten**

Joseph sat in prison for a long time. You can imagine what he’d was thinking: *God where are you? What about my dreams? What’s the plan? God, do you even care?*

While in prison, Joseph met two men, a cupbearer and a baker, and *they* have dreams. Joseph interpreted their dreams: the cupbearer would be restored, the baker killed. Joseph asked to be remembered (“Hey, will you put a good word in for me?”), but he is left and forgotten.

Two whole years go by, 730 days without freedom.

Betrayed. Falsely accused. Forgotten. Life is unfair! For Joseph that unfairness lasted a LONG time. Years and years. Of course, in the end everything turned out all right.

Long story short, Joseph wound up interpreting dreams for Pharaoh, was made second in command of Egypt, and readied Egypt for a seven-year famine. Ultimately, he helped Egypt get to the point where they were able to provide not only for Egypt but for “the whole world,” including Joseph’s brothers and family who come to him seeking help.

In the midst of the pain and the hurt, what can we glean from his story as we think about our own? Three things.

### **The Hiddenness of Presence**

One of my Christian heroes is C.S. Lewis, an atheist turned Christian, a guy who forgot more than I’ll ever learn, a bastion of Christian faith and hope. Even he struggled with God’s presence in the hard times. After the loss of his wife, he wrote in *A Grief Observed*:

“Where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms [of grief]...go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once ...”

Let’s be real: what Lewis described *happens*. In hard, unfair moments people experience one or two things when it comes to God’s presence: (1) they sense what C.S. Lewis describes; or (2) they sense God’s with-ness like never before.

I have had plenty of head buried, knees on the floor, sobbing-into-my-sheets moments in life, when life has felt unfair, and sometimes I feel God close and other times, I don’t.

But God’s presence, even when we don’t feel it, is part of what Joseph’s story is about! This is the truth of which Joseph reminds us.

Think about his story. He is betrayed by his own family. Falsely accused. Forgotten. Left in prison. For years. That’s enough to break a person, no? And yet he made it through unscathed. How?

Look at chapter 39. Four times in this chapter we read things like the following:

- Genesis 39:2, “The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.”
- Genesis 39:3-4, “When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant.”
- Genesis 39:20-21, “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.”

- Genesis 39:23, “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.”

Question: When you’re in the thick of it, what’s your perception of God? Distant, uncaring, far-off? Aloof? (This is where we start *unearthing* things). Or do you know that he’s near, present, attentive, relating to you, closer than the air you breathe?

Here’s what I think Joseph wants us to know about that second state of being: despite what you feel, the truth is that God is present to you. God does care. No matter what. The Psalmist says,

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. (Psalm 139:7-12)

In our pain and hurt it may be hidden, there may be zero trace of it, but he is there.

### **The Hiddenness of Formation**

I was in Japan last week with church planter friends. They’ve seen a lot of struggle: cultural struggle, COVID lockdowns, loneliness, low receptivity to the gospel, personal illness, surgery, medical uncertainty—all wrapped up in one hardship salad.

We asked how they’ve been working through that and the husband said that years ago he read Hudson Taylor. Taylor was asked if he could have all his missionaries learn the native language of the people that they were ministering to, would he want that? Taylor said no. Why? Because to Taylor, missionaries need to go through the process of learning, of struggling, of change because of the hardship.

Making the connection to his own life, this planter said that, in a way, that’s what was happening with them. They could wish for all the hardship to go away, but God was using it to help them love that country and those people, and to grow our marriage and character.

I thought, “Wow. Glad that’s you, not me.” Kidding. Actually, I thought, “He’s so right.”

Here’s the reality: life’s injustices can either be a benefit or a detriment to us. When the bottom falls out of your outer world, you have two options:

#### **(1) Turn it for bad...**

Some people, when bad things happen, use bad circumstances as excuses to behave, think, and feel a certain way.

- Using what happened as an excuse for sin (like drunkenness, sexual immorality, over-eating, laziness, gambling)
- Using what happened for unhealthy expressions of real feelings (complaining, griping, angry outbursts, aggression, passive-aggressiveness, negative self-talk, codependence, independence, self-harm)
- Using what is going on as an excuse to neglect responsibility at home, work, etc.
- Using what *could* happen to be anxious, controlling, despairing, etc.

That's why this series is called *Unearthed* because we're trying to dig up what we're doing, why we're doing it, and seeing if God doesn't have more for us! Because you don't have to go this route. You could...

## 2) Turn it for good...

This is the route Joseph took. Joseph didn't wallow; he was ready when called upon. Joseph didn't let his character slip; he grew. Joseph didn't hold a grudge; he forgave.

In fact, we know that God formed Joseph in his hardship because of Genesis 41:50-52:

Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On. Joseph 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."

Manasseh & Ephraim.

Forgetfulness and Fruitfulness.

This is *formation* for Joseph.

St. Ignatius once remarked, "Everything has the potential of calling a deeper life with God in us." Everything, *including* suffering and hardship. It gives you a chance to reorder your loves. To learn patience. To learn faithfulness. To learn forgiveness. To learn to trust. To learn healthy expectations. To let go of lies from the Enemy. To not hold a grudge. To learn to move forward.

What would it look like for you to learn forgetfulness and fruitfulness? To not be consumed or controlled by the hurt or the pain? To use the wrong done to you for spiritual formation?

How you do that is for a different time. But in our pain, in our hurt, how God is using and shaping us through it may be hidden and obscured. There may be zero trace of it, but he is calling forth in you the character of Christ. He is fashioning you, like a potter with clay, to become a person of love.

## The Hiddenness of Providence.

There's an ancient Chinese story about an old farmer whose only horse ran away. Knowing that the horse was the mainstay of the man's livelihood, all his neighbors came and tried to console him. The man's response? "Who knows if this is good or bad?" he said, rejecting their sympathies. A few days later, the farmer's horse returned with a wild horse. The farmer went from one horse to now having two! The neighbors returned. They congratulated him! "Who knows if this is good or bad?" he said, rejecting their exuberance. Indeed, the next day, the farmer's son, riding the wild horse fell off and broke his leg. After this, the townspeople came back to express their sadness at the son's misfortune. You know what the farmer said? "Who knows if this is good or bad?" A few weeks later, the country went to war, conscripting men to go and fight. Because the son had broken his leg, he didn't have to face certain death.

What's the point?

Easterners use this story to relay that life is always changing and that it is full of paradox. And that's that. So, get used to it. Christians interpret this story with an added twist: while we can say, "Yes, indeed, life is always changing and not everything can be controlled, WE can know that God is working behind the scenes to bring about our ultimate good." This is what Christians call "God's *providence*"—his working behind the scenes of your life to bring about the good.

In Joseph's life, God was providential, working behind the scenes. Why? Because he had plans for Joseph, plans for Israel, and plans for the entire cosmos that Joseph and no one else can see in the moment!

Look at **chapter 45** with me.

- Genesis 45:5, "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."
- Genesis 45:7, "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 45:8, "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."
- Genesis 45:9, "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.'"
- Genesis 50:20, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

Of course, you can imagine Joseph as he is sitting in the pit, as he is on the judgment seat as accusations are hurled his way by Potiphar's wife, as he is inactive in prison: *Why won't you just save me God? You gave me those dreams—make them come true! Where are you? Maybe that you. I've been there. Why won't you just save me God? Where are you!? Do you care? What's the plan here?* I get it.

But in hindsight, Joseph is able to look back and say, "Oh, God was working."

Of course, that may not be a reality in your lifetime—that is, seeing how God used something for the good. But here's what I know:

Just weeks ago, the pastor of Covenant Presbyterian (and father of one of the children killed in the Nashville shooting) preached on Jesus as Death's Conqueror, using the story of Lazarus.

In his sermon he said this: "A strong confidence in the end of the story does not undo the presence of grief in the middle...Jesus said 'Blessed are the ones who mourn,' all the while not losing confidence in how that sadness will EVENTUALLY be overcome in him."

That truth is part of the blessing of God's providence, his working to overcome despite the grief in the middle.

As Paul says in Romans 8: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Trevin Wax said, "No matter what's going on in your life right now, the day is coming when it won't be all hell breaking loose, but all heaven breaking loose for you forever."

In our pain, in our hurt, it may be hidden, there may be ZERO trace of it, but God is working. What people intend for evil, God can use for the good. God's presence is there. He will form you into the image of His son, and he is working providentially to bring about the good!

As we wrap up, here's the last thing I want you to see:

God doesn't want us to learn some truths on how to overcome the hardship and inequity of life ourselves. The truth is, we cannot.

Life is unfair and you and I are caught up in the throes of the ineptitude of the universe. There is a three-headed dragon—Satan, Sin, and Death—wreaking havoc on the earth. Like with Joseph, there is a famine in all the land. And here's the thing: we are helpless to resist!

Who will save us from our predicament? The story of Joseph says, "Ahhh. There is one." There is one, *like Joseph*, one from amongst us, a brother who has gone before us. We have One who is beloved by the Father, one thrown into the pit, sold into slavery, faithful and true, sitting at the right hand of the King, one who is bringing blessing not only to his home country, but to anyone who draws near, even from the furthest region!