

LETTING GO OF OUR PAST

Genesis 50:15-21

The Queen Mary sits in the Long Beach Harbor. Once the cruise ship for the well-to-do, now it's just a museum of memories. In its heyday, the Queen Mary majestically sailed the seas, fulfilling the purpose for which its designer made it. Today the ship hugs the shoreline.

Mystic Seaport in Connecticut sports modern sea -clippers. To watch their sails capture the wind as they venture out for the high seas is a sight to behold! There's a sense of excitement when a Yankee Clipper is in its element.

You're like a ship designed to sail the high seas. It may be that instead of cutting through the waves with your sails extended like a Yankee Clipper, you find yourself in harbor like the Queen Mary. What's keeping you from venturing out? Have you been battered by angry waves from nightmare-like storms of your past? Have you retreated after feeling the sharp resistance of adverse winds? Have you been dry docked because you have allowed clinging barnacles to encrust your hull? Is there seaweed tangled around your rudder? Have you encountered a barrier reef?

When dreams are lost, something dies. When dreams awaken, life revives.

What dreams have you dared to dream for yourself?

What dreams do you believe God has dreamed for you?

Has the dream died? Are you afraid to dream again?

The first barrier to daring to dream again is: **Holding on to a painful past.** Sometimes we get stuck in the past and become unable, or unwilling, to move on.

We are like a 12,000 pound elephant held captive by a tiny stake. Chained to the stake as a baby 300 pounder, it learns, after 1000s of tries, that it's no use to pull against the stake. When it gets bigger, the stake still controls its life. Painful memories from the past can keep us captive, like that small stake!

We may *want* to dream again, but feel unable to do so. We are afraid to take a risk.

The solution: *let go of the pain of the past, forgive those who have caused the pain and trust God to allow us to dream again.*

There is no better example of this process in all of Scripture than Joseph.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE PAINFUL EXPERIENCES FROM JOSEPH'S PAST THAT HE HAD TO LIVE WITH?

How much ability to dream was left in his life?

What was his chance for success? Talk about a dysfunctional family!

His mom took part in family deception to get her older sister married to his father, whom she loved.

Then she competed with her sister to earn the love of his dad by having children

Joseph was just a pawn in that competition

He became the "favorite son" of the favorite wife, so all his brothers hated him

His sister was raped by a pagan neighbor

His brothers murdered the relatives of the perpetrator

His brothers hated him and plotted to kill him

Finally, they sold him as a slave and lied to his father about it

His dad, thinking he was with a prostitute, committed incest with his dead brother's wife

He was seduced by his boss' wife

When he rejected her, he was framed and accused of sexual harassment

He was forgotten by friends that he had helped

He spent over two years in prison for a crime he didn't commit

And yet, Joseph was one of the great heroes of the O.T.

Some people think his life intentionally prefigures that of Christ Himself!

How could one born out of such pain and dysfunction amount to anything for God?

As was true of Joseph, our pain often originates in the very place where we expect shelter and security: our family, our home.

Our family may be the place where we experience the deepest pain—the pain of abuse, neglect, feeling unwanted, or uncared for.

We may be living with memories of perpetual parental conflict, family secrets, or the pain of a family break up.

We may feel shame about something someone else did to us, over which we had no control. But the shame is our pain just as if we had done something ourselves.

Sometimes we carry past pain, not from family, but from other places.

We may have been bullied or sexually abused as children.

It may be adult pain we carry—friend betrayed us, financial reversal, crisis in marriage, failed career, or perhaps, a church split, or the failure of a respected spiritual leader, the disappointment of having loved someone, and not being loved in return.

Joseph — like some of you — had more than his share.

When he was trapped in that prison, falsely accused and alone, it didn't seem God was on his side! *Did it?*

How could a loving God let such painful things come into his life?

All he wanted to do was live for God, and look what it got him!

Memories of bad experiences paralyze people—we feel we cannot risk reopening old wounds. So we are paralyzed by our past.

Joseph could have become angry and bitter for the things God allowed him to suffer.

Naomi did. Enduring difficult circumstances—economic hard times caused by famine, job relocation, her husband's death, loss of two adult sons—she said, "Don't call me Naomi (= "pleasant"); just call me "bitter"—that's how I feel about life now.

We are tempted to feel that way sometimes, aren't we?

We try to be faithful to God, but others don't appreciate it.

Things go wrong. Others criticize and attack. Then we become angry and bitter.

How could Joseph dare to dream God's dreams?

He was able to keep dreaming God's dreams because *he never lost his perspective – he never lost sight of God* — His presence and His care in his life.

WHAT LESSONS DID JOSEPH LEARN ABOUT GOD IN THE MIDST OF THOSE PAINFUL EXPERIENCES FROM HIS PAST?

Scripture tells us repeatedly, in all this,

The Lord was with him 39:2-3, 21, 23

The Lord gave him success in everything he did (strange def. of success!) 39:3, 23

The Lord made him forget all his trouble 41:51

The Lord made him fruitful 41:52

He believed that the Lord meant all these things for good 45:5, 7-8; 50:20

He intended it for good

He intended it to accomplish His purposes

He intended it to save His people

In summary,

- 1) Joseph recognized God's presence in his pain

2) Joseph recognized God's purpose in his pain

Joseph was called a "dreamer" by his own family.

But the dreams he was dreaming, were really God's dreams for his life!

Joseph couldn't see the plan that God had set out for him, but God's dream was to use Joseph's affliction for good, both for him personally, and for God's people.

God's dream was the direct result of the circumstances causing Joseph's pain.

That's the way it works for us also.

God uses our pain for good — to accomplish the things He wants.

THREE STEPS FOR DEALING WITH OUR PAINFUL PAST:

- 1) **Acknowledge the pain of your past** Pain is part of all of our lives. Healing doesn't come until we acknowledge the existence of that pain. Denial is all too prevalent — even among Christians.

People say, "It really didn't hurt!" "Wait a minute! Do you mean you lived in a family marked by screaming and yelling; you were continually called 'stupid,' you were pushed around, and even beat up, and it didn't hurt?" "That's right. I was just tough!" That's denial!

Others try to cover their pain through overwork, television, obsessive behaviors, compulsive eating or spending, alcohol or drugs.

We can even try to hide our pain through compulsive *church* activities.

The first step in overcoming our pain is to acknowledge it!

In a "Peanuts" strip, Linus is talking to Charlie Brown: "I guess it's wrong, always to be worrying about tomorrow. Maybe we should think only about today." Charlie Brown replies, "No, that's giving up. I'm still hoping yesterday will get better."

Some of us are stuck — still trying to fix yesterday. Yesterday is over. Being able to admit that it happened, that it hurt, and that we can't change what happened, is the springboard to letting go of a painful past — to learning to dream again.

The prodigal son realized that life independent of the Father was destroying him. He had to acknowledge what he was missing, before he could go home.

When our lives come unglued, we see that what we are doing to manage our lives isn't working. The sooner we acknowledge our pain, the better off we'll be.

Joseph acknowledged right up front the reality of the pain of the past.

2) Look for God's presence and His desire to use the pain for good.

The outstanding feature of Joseph's story is his recognition that God had a plan to accomplish good through his painful experiences (Gen. 50:20).

Sandra Wilson: "Pearls are the product of pain. A grain of sand slips into the oyster. On the entry of that foreign irritant, all the resources in the oyster rush to the spot and release healing fluids that otherwise remain dormant. The irritant is covered and the wound healed—by a pearl. It is the symbol of stress—a healed wound . . . a precious, tiny jewel conceived through irritation, born of adversity, nursed by adjustments. Had there been no wounding, no irritating interruption, there could have been no pearl."

3) Move past the pain and allow God's purpose to be accomplished in your life.

One thing that binds us to the painful past is refusal to forgive. We remain bound to those in the past who have caused our pain. Thus we continue bound to the pain

To move past the pain and allow God's purpose to be accomplished in our lives, we have to **FORGIVE those who caused the pain.**

Tim Sledge: "The goal is spiritual and emotional wholeness, and forgiveness is an important component of wholeness. You must acknowledge the hurt and the anger, but don't stay there. Move on to forgiveness. Take down the barriers. Face the hurt, the fear, and the anger. Understand what forgiveness really means and abandon your stubborn decision to hold on to the past.

Perhaps none have had to struggle more with forgiveness than those who endured the atrocities of the holocaust. Corrie ten Boom describes her tension:

It was at a church in Munich that I first saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our jailers that I had seen since that time. Suddenly it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein. To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!"

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I kept my hand at my side.

As the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin, Jesus had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. So again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

Those who caused our pain may never ask forgiveness. The wrong may never be recognized nor the injustice righted.

Our healing isn't based on what other people do, or how they respond to us.

Healing comes when we allow ourselves to be loved by God and by other people.

Healing comes when we allow God to give us a new dream — His dream — for our lives.

We need to dare to dream again as individuals — to dream God's dreams for us

To have the courage to trust God to do whatever He wants to do in our lives.

We need to dare to dream again as a church — to dream God's dreams for us

To have the courage to trust God to do whatever He wants to do through us.

Tim Sledge: Story of a young Hawaiian pastor named Rick.

His father had been a politician. They lived in a large house. He came home late one night. After arriving, he heard a splash in their swimming pool and went out to see what it was. He found his mother at the bottom of the pool. She had tied some of his barbells around her neck and thrown herself into the pool attempting to take her life. He pulled her out and called for help. She was saved. The next day his father said to him, "If you hadn't left your barbells out, this wouldn't have happened!"

Rick understands the meaning of a painful past. But he has moved beyond it.

He's developing different patterns of thinking and acting.

He's finding joy in his relationship to God, because he's not willing to be locked into a painful past.

If Rick can let go of his past, so can you!

We worship *the God of New Beginnings!*

He wants to start over in our lives. To get our minds off the painful past. To get us to trust Him and dare to dream again! Will we take the risk?

During WW II, a beautiful stained glass window in the Reims Cathedral in France was shattered. After the disaster, the people of the community gathered and picked up all the tiny pieces of glass and lead. When the war was over, they hired artists to build a new window, out of the fragments from the original. When the skilled artists had put the pieces back together the window was more magnificent than before, and had much greater value to the people who knew the story of where the window had come from. *God can do that with the pieces of your past too!*

