

Do You Feel Forgotten?

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by S. Michael Durham
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Genesis 40:23

“Yet the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.”

The weariness of travel is greatly compounded when you have only a foggy notion of where you are going and no idea of how to get there. For Joseph it was not only not knowing how his dreams were going to come true, but the feeling that God had forgotten him that proves Joseph is just like us. It was precisely here that Joseph’s greatest spiritual battle was waged. To pray and ask for an answer and hear none is the toughest of all paths a Christian has to travel. To beseech the omniscient God for just some wee sign that you are doing His will and that He is involved and see no sign is the dark night of the soul. It is here that the faint of heart will turn and go back counting the journey too costly for the prize offered. Even the strong of soul will shutter and grow weak at this trial of feeling isolated from Him, forgotten by Him.

You’ve been there haven’t you my friend? As it was for the disciples of Jesus, so it is for us; you cannot walk with the Master long before He seems to depart unto a high mountain leaving you to navigate upon stormy seas. The waves seem to flood your tiny vessel. They appear intent to break it all apart. The winds of suffering blow so hard that you cannot keep your course. And then you scour the boat looking for Him and He’s not there. He is not in the boat. Panic sets in. You cry His name. Nothing but the threatening sound of wind and wave is all you hear.

Joseph knew in his heart of hearts that he was going to be set free from his dungeon once the butler was restored to position beside Pharaoh. He had accurately predicted the demise of the baker and the deliverance of the butler. Surely now, his plight and case would be heard and prison bars would fly open. All that was left was the waiting. Certainly only a few days; a week or two at the most. The butler is restored and the first day goes by. The first week goes by and then the first month and then the first year. The marking of each passing day reminded Joseph of one thing ... he had been forgotten.

It happens to every saint who leaves their city of destruction to embark upon the trip to the Celestial City. No doubt someone today is experiencing it, the feeling that God has abandoned you. Human patience is wonderful; it had served Joseph well. But if he was to have divine patience, then he must go through the dark fog of spiritual loneliness.

Three factors that contributed to Joseph feeling forgotten not only by the chief butler but also by God was GOD’S TIMING, GOD’S TOOLS, and GOD’S TASK.

I. God's Timing

A. The Darkest Trial.

For two years after this event with the butler there is no indication at all that God spoke to him, worked with him, or had any kind of dealings with Joseph. We know intellectually that God is always there, but as far as any visible sign of God's activity, there was none.

Even in Joseph's oppressive trials, being sold into slavery, being accused of a sexual crime, and then finally being cast into prison, there were still reminders that God was with him. Up to this time it had been recorded in Genesis 39, "And the Lord was with Joseph." It's stated twice. But now for the next two years no such phrase is found.

Once Joseph arrived in Egypt, God began to prosper him. It wasn't anything but the providential hand of God orchestrating every detail so that one of the most politically advanced man in all of Egypt should buy Joseph. Potiphar, the chief of the guards of the Pharaoh, purchased him and brought him into his household and God began to prosper everything Joseph did so that even a wicked pagan could recognize that God was working in this young man's life. It was for that reason Potiphar promoted him and allowed him to be steward of all his possessions. No one was greater than Joseph in the household of Potiphar, except Potiphar himself.

Do you remember how the story goes? Potiphar's wife looks at this young man with lust and she tried to get him to sleep with her. He wholly refuses. She accuses him of rape. Potiphar has him thrown into prison but even then, as soon as he's cast into prison, here comes God's activity in his life. The chief of the guards, the warden, promotes him to assistant warden, if you please. But not now. Now there's nothing.

Now it's shelf time. You know what shelf time is? It's that time in your life when you feel God has put you on the shelf. No more prospering, no more advancements. No more blessings. No more answers to prayer. It's as if God is gone. That's shelf time. That's the time you feel forgotten.

B. The Divine Timetable.

You have to realize your life doesn't work according to your time table. You do know that, don't you? I would think that even the person here who may not even be a Christian, the one who doesn't follow Jesus, would have to realize your life is in His hands. He is the Creator, He gives breath, He gives life, and He gives death. There is a divine timetable and I've noticed in my life that God's activity is according to His schedule, not mine.

One of the things that is sometimes a burr under my saddle is the fact that God doesn't get in a hurry when He's making a servant. He doesn't get in a hurry. It seems to me that God dilly dallies, He drags His feet, and seems to be preoccupied with other things. "Hey Lord, I'm over here, remember?" He doesn't get in a hurry. I've said this so many times you're probably tired

of hearing it: God is more interested in making the man than the ministry. He's not in a hurry to make you prepared for what He has for you. Why? Because He wants to make sure you're ready.

Really, the problem is we're in such a mess and that's why it seems like it takes such a long time. God is a God of preparation. He never does things at the spur of the moment or in a whimsical way. God has a plan and He executes that plan. Your whole life is a preparation. I'm still being prepared for something. All of us are being prepared to rule and reign with Him in the eternal ages to come. Life on this earth is really one big boot camp or training seminar for the world yet to come. A world where we will labor in a labor that is not toilsome or burdensome but a delight. We will execute judgment for the King.

All of our lives is preparation for that day but at the same time God is preparing you for advancement in this world. He does what He does to get you ready and He will do whatever it takes to get you ready. You'll not be advanced until you are ready and He is finished.

God's preparatory work may be for only one moment. I have witnessed this a few times in my life. When you have finally reached that moment and you have fulfilled the purpose of God, He is done with you and it's time to go home. I think of Anna, that prophetess, who, at above age 90, spent her life in prayer and fasting waiting to behold the Messiah. All of her life was preparatory for one moment—to prophesy over the Christ child, and then when she was done so, she was ready to go home.

It could very well be, my friend, that God has a moment yet to come for you. You've not fulfilled your life purpose. I've always wondered why some of God's best champions die young. I think of the David Brainerds, the Jim Elliots, the Robert Murray McChaynes. I think it's because they are the rare, precious jewels who seem to advance in holiness much more rapidly than others of us and they get to the place where there is nothing else in this life except to go home and be with Jesus. That's the next thing in line. So God takes them on. I don't know if that's true or not, but it very well could be.

I do know this: *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works . . .”*

There it is. God is working in your life so you can work good and He be glorified. How did He do this? How did He do it in the life of Joseph? That's what our text is about so let's look at it.

II. God's Tools

A. The Tool of Suffering.

God uses suffering. I am not so bold nor am I, I don't think, stupid enough to even tenderly offer you suggestions that I know all the reasons God brings suffering into our lives because I don't. I often, like you, wonder at His mysteries. I often think, “Lord, how can You stand by and watch them suffer?” I think of Spurgeon who had several physical ailments. He was never a well man

after reaching adulthood. He suffered from gout, Bright's disease, and lived in pain. At times the pain was unbearable. One day he was in a meeting and was hurting so badly he dismissed everybody from the meeting and cried out to the Lord, "Lord, I don't understand. I would never treat my children like this. Please give me relief." At that moment, God gave him a few moments of precious relief.

I understand that prayer. I wouldn't mistreat any of my children. Suffering is hard. What makes suffering more difficult is when God adds to it His silence.

B. The Tool of Silence.

In his book, *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey quotes a letter that articulates the problem of unmet expectations in all its excruciating reality. Meg Woodson lost two children to cystic fibrosis, and her daughter's death at age 23 was particularly traumatic. The following words speak of her pain and doubt as she struggled to cope with what happened:

I was sitting beside her bed a few days before her death when suddenly she began screaming. I will never forget those shrill, piercing, primal screams. It's against this background of human beings falling apart...that God, who could have helped, looked down on a young woman devoted to Him, quite willing to die for Him to give Him glory, and decided to sit on His hands and let her death top the horror charts for cystic fibrosis deaths.

I think that summarizes our quandary, the enigma that exists in all of us—how can God stand idly by and not give some indication of His presence? I mean, suffering would be more endurable, would it not—think about your trial—if God would just give you some signs and indications of His love and His care. All it would take to comfort you is for the Lord to give some hint as to what He is up to. Often you ask for those kinds of indicators and no response is given. How much more dreadful is the hour of suffering? Why? I can suggest this only by the authority of the Scriptures and not my own, but there is a test of suffering and silence.

C. The Test of Suffering and Silence.

We see this in the life of Joseph. God was testing Joseph and do not think that divine love will not test those whom He pities and loves. He does. The greatest test of faith is to be able to trust God when He does not perform as you trusted Him to do and He doesn't tell you why. To me that is the greatest test of faith.

On a few occasions of Jesus' ministry, He would say in response to someone's amazing faith, "Never have I seen so great a faith." I think of the Centurion when Jesus said to him, "Not in all of Israel have I seen this kind of faith." I think of faith as being great when you're able to believe God and rest assured because you have an inner witness that He's going to work, the Hebrews I I kind of faith. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." In other words, God has put such a reality of the certainty of the answer to prayer that you know

that you know you have what you are believing God for. Even though you may not possess it in your hands you possess it in your heart.

That is certainly a great faith. But I think there is an even greater faith. That's the kind of faith that clings to God even when God doesn't seem to bless. Do you remember the Syrophenician woman I talked about a few weeks ago? With tenacity, she grabs onto Jesus, metaphorically, and says, "I'm not going to turn You loose unless You bless me." Remember Jacob of old who did the same thing? I think that's great faith. "Lord, I will not turn You loose unless You bless me." That's great faith, but I think there is an even greater faith that says, "Lord, I will not turn You loose, whether You bless me or not." Now that is the greatest of all faith. "Even if You don't bless me, I'm going to cling to You. Even if You don't answer my prayer and relieve my suffering, I'm still going to trust in You. Even if I have no sense of your presence with me, I'm clinging to You. You will not shake me loose." That, my dear friend, is the test of Joseph and it's your test.

What is God up to? How does He do this?

III. God's Task

A. The Purpose of These Tools.

What is the purpose of using suffering and silence? Again, I'm no expert nor do I have any claim to have all wisdom. Far from it. But I believe that, if not explicit, then implicitly I see this in the text and explicitly I see this in life. I think there is one reason for suffering that is very seldom talked about. We would quickly say, as I have already pointed out, it is to help our faith move from weak faith to strong faith, from strong faith to great faith. Yes. But I think there is another reason very seldom mentioned.

One of the purposes is to expose and eliminate an unholy contentment better known as complacency.

You and I run the risk of an unholy contentment when life is going well. It's like the air is thick with His fragrance. You're enjoying answers to prayer. You're in the Word and it's being open and illuminated to your mind. When you have those seasons of unhindered blessing, when, day after day after day it's wonderful and there are no tests or trials and God's presence is real, you are at a dangerous point. When that happens you run the risk, and you don't even know it, of becoming contented in an unholy way.

What happens to most of us in those days and hours is we often begin to grow a contentment that really isn't contentment but self-righteousness. We begin to think that the blessings of our lives, good times, God's answers to our prayers, things going our way, feeling like David, "Leap over a wall and run through a troop," is because we're good. Why wouldn't God be good to me? Look how good I am or how faithful I've been or how involved and hungry I am for the Word. Isn't this the way God works in His children who are striving to be holy and keep the commandments of

God? Everyone of us believe that the person whom God uses is the man or woman who walks holy before Him. That's Scriptural. If God uses those who walk before Him in obedience and sincere faith we would assume then, therefore, because we are holy and faithful and walking in sincere faith that this is the reason for the blessing. I'm telling you that is an unholy contentment. It is a contentment based on your righteousness and not the righteousness of Jesus.

It's so easy to slide into this and be there before you even know, until God rattles you and disturbs this unholy contentment with suffering and then adds to that suffering with silence. Your heart is then exposed. He mercifully awakens us out of this dangerous place with a dose of suffering or silence. It causes a frustration to occur in your heart and a discontentment with yourself. How many of you are in this place this morning? You're literally frustrated with your relationship with Jesus, frustrated with you? How did that come about? Earlier you were walking in contentment with yourself, "I must be okay, I must be doing what is right. I'm dotting my I's and crossing my T's." Now you're frustrated. You're frustrated with you. You're discontent.

What's going on? God is what's going on. He's drawing you back, away from your own righteousness and back to the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

He's moving you to a new state. Only when we are dissatisfied, only when we are weak, only when we are failures in ourselves, can God come in and take us to the next level of spiritual maturity.

I told you many months ago that the only thing God expect out of you is failure. But when you expect more out of yourself than failure, you're in this unholy discontentment. He has to do something to bring you back to reality and show you who you really are. You're weak, that is in your flesh, to this day, dwells no good thing. Apart from Him, you can do nothing. You're not so hot. You're not so big. You're not so mighty.

B. Silence is an Answer.

What God is really doing in His silence is giving you an answer. God's silence is really Him talking to you. Think with me and may the Spirit help us to see what is happening. When God is silent, when my fellowship seems to be disrupted, the first thing and the right thing to do is check my heart. Is there any unconfessed or unreported sin? If I'm honest and go before the Lord asking Him to test me and try me to see if there be any wicked thing in me and nothing is exposed, then I should no longer be discouraged that God seems to be silent because He's not silent. His silence is speaking volumes.

God is wanting to do something in your life to take you to the next level of spiritual maturity. What He's doing is protecting you so you will not glory in yourself. In His mercy and love, He is preparing you by first showing you that there is nothing in you that will bring about the spiritual maturity or the purpose for which He is preparing you for. He will work in your weakness. He will be your strength. He will be your might. "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might."

God's silence is an answer. His silence, therefore is intimacy.

C. Silence is Intimacy.

To the man or woman who can say to the Lord, "I trust in You, whether You are silent or speaking, You are that real to me and Your Word is that sure, I am confident in You," you will experience an intimacy that new Christians would be amazed by.

I love new Christians. I want to see more. I love their enthusiasm and what they experience in those first hours, days, and weeks. They eat, drink, and sleep the manifested presence of God. For some, it only lasts a few hours and some if lasts for a few months, but God wants to wean you from your physical emotions because He has something better.

I'm not saying that the more spiritually mature you are, the less physically you feel, no, no, no. I just want you to know that is the caboose, not the engine, of our spirituality. Where there is faith there will be feelings. There will be emotions. But there is a level of maturity that Jesus had that transcended the physical body and the physical emotions. There was a certainty of the presence of God with Him and a communion that went beyond what the man or woman may feel in his or her body. And it's better. That silence is really God's intimacy.

Be sure, if there is not known unconfessed sin, that is your sins are known and confessed up to date, then God is active. He was active in that prison cell with Joseph, whether Joseph knew it or not. It didn't matter if he knew it or not because it was happening. He was there and getting Joseph prepared. He was getting the final details taken care of in the soul of that dear man.

Right now it might feel like it's the most difficult part of your spiritual trek, but God is putting the finishing details on you. His silent is an answer, an answer of intimacy.

An old seaman said, "In fierce storms we can do but one thing. There is only one way (to survive); we must put the ship in a certain position and keep her there."

Commenting on this idea, Richard Fuller wrote:

This, Christian, is what you must do. Sometimes, like Paul, you can see neither sun nor stars, and no small tempest lies on you. Reason cannot help you. Past experiences give you no light. Only a single course is left. You must stay upon the Lord; and come what may winds, waves, cross seas, thunder, lightning, frowning rocks, roaring breakers no matter what, you must lash yourself to the helm and hold fast your confidence in God's faithfulness and His everlasting love in Christ Jesus.

That's the place Joseph had to get to and, by the way, it's the place Jesus had to go. Did you know Joseph is a type of Jesus? There are many similarities in the life of Joseph with the life of our Lord.

For example:

Joseph was sold for a few pieces of silver, as our Lord was.

Joseph was sold by his brothers. Well the Bible says Jesus came to His own brethren and His own received Him not.

The Bible tells us those very brothers took away the beautiful robe Joseph's father had given him. The Bible tells us of our Lord that they stripped His only garment from Him.

There are many similarities.

Look at our Lord, arrested, thrown into a prison Himself. For a few hours before He's arraigned, He sits there in a lonely dungeon. Why? Because His interrogators and prosecutors are staging their phony, fake trial, hiring false witnesses to lie against Him. Finally, He's brought before that very crowd of haters and mockers, just like Joseph.

You know why Jesus is there? Of course you do. If you've been around here, I've told you more than once. Should I say it again? Please let me. He's there because you ought to be. He stands in your place today. "In my place, condemned He stood."

Joseph knew the silence of God. So does Jesus. It goes back to the Garden of Gethsemane before He's arrested and wrestles with the Father over His death for our sin. "Father, if there be but any way for this cup to pass before Me, but nevertheless not My will but Your will be done." Three times He struggles in prayer to get a hold of God. So intense was the struggle that the Bible tells us His perspiration turned to blood because the capillaries in the surface of the skin burst and filled the pores of the sweat glands. How intense must that struggle have been?

He's beaten and even His own forsake Him. He's there all alone. One denies Him. And finally, He's brought before Herod. He's brought before Pilate. Pilate says, "Are You a king?" Jesus said, "You answer correctly." At that moment He knew that the Father was still with Him because He said, "If I call twelve legions of angels right now, they would come." When He stands before Caiaphas the High Priest and asks, "Are You the Son of God?" Jesus declares in the affirmative. "Yes, you will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds." From His answers you know He had the presence of God with Him. But there came a moment, riveted to the cross between heaven and earth, something happens to the man Christ Jesus. The man—Deity can never be severed from deity, but the man was somehow mysteriously, beyond description and understanding, severed from the communion of the Father. Finally, like Joseph—Jesus is alone, outcast, treated like the vile criminal we are. The Father looked upon Him and then turned His face and Jesus, in that agonizing moment, cried out with a horror that no soul has ever cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" What have I ever done to You? What kind of crime have I done that You would turn Your back on Me?

Jesus knew the answer. He knew it was not His crime. He cries, even in His loneliness, for your benefit. He cries so you would understand that He being innocent could therefore bear your guilt. And He did. He bore it all. There's not one thing left to satisfy the Father. God does not ask of you anything other than simple, child-like faith. He's not asking you to join this church. He's not asking you to be a preacher. He's not asking you to go to China or Africa. He's simply asking you to trust in His beloved Son who was abandoned by God so that you can experience the presence of God; even when He is silent you can know He is active in your life.

I don't know how long it took or how it worked out, but before Jesus dies the presence of the Father is restored to Him, for His last words were, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My Spirit." I think of Psalm 30, "For His anger is for a moment, His favor is for life. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." God will not remain silent forever. You are not on a perpetual silent list.

I love that song, I think, the Gaithers' wrote, from that very verse,

*If you've knelt beside the rubble of an aching broken heart
When the things you gave your life to fell apart
You're not the first to be acquainted with sorrow, grief or pain
But the master promised sunshine after rain
Hold on my child joy comes in the morning
Weeping only last for the night
Hold on my child Joy comes in the morning
The darkest hour means dawn is just in sight*

There came a moment when Joseph heard a key inserted into the cell door. He heard the tumblers turn and the door swing open. He heard a voice say, "Get ready. Pharaoh wants to see you."

Deliverance never comes as you expect. Joseph had imagined how God would rescue him from imprisonment. But God was determined to prove His power. Joseph's way would not have done that, nor will your way prove God's power. It's never as we expect. Think of Abraham rolling on the floor with not his great-grandchild but his son. See Moses practicing to be a shepherd of a nation with his father-in-law's herds. Do you think he in his wildest dreams imagined such? Surely David never dreamed of what would have to occur for him to become king. First he would have to become a fugitive on the run. As the oil of Samuel's horn slid down his face all he could see was a scepter and a palace. Instead wilderness and cave was his domain for ten long years. Never is it as we expect. God seldom works in the way we have imagined. We may be able to see the end result but just how we get there is as clear as mud. We just need to sit back and enjoy the ride and leave the driving to the Lord.

Hope in God has never brought a person to shame. Hope in Christ will lead you home. Your hope in Christ will not go forever unnoticed nor is it wasted. Listen to the writer of Hebrews,

“that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. 19 This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, 20 where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 6:18-20)

Maintain your hope in Him. Others may ridicule your unexplainable hope. They may scorn you as foolish for to them they see no reason for such confidence. But then this type of hope has no explanation. It is an unexplainable confidence in God's promises Joseph was not forgotten and neither are you! Believe it. Amen.