

## The Gift of Forgetting

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Joseph had it bad...life was hard, and it so often did not look like it would get any better. He lived his childhood thinking that things were going to be wonderful, glorious, joyous – and yet things in his adult years were disappointing at best.

He was sold into slavery.

He was tempted and condemned –

Even though he did nothing wrong.

He was imprisoned in a “pit”

He was forgotten and ignored.

Life was pretty bad.

It would have been all too easy for Joseph to lose sight of God...to lose a grip on hope...to abandon joy and give in to despair. Life was hard...and so often it did not look too good.

There has been a period in my life where I shared some experiences that made me feel much like Joseph. No, I have not spent time in prison; no, I have not been sold into slavery by my brothers. But the events of 2011 and 2012 caused me to focus so on the horror of my existence that I didn't see (and I refused to see) the hand of God.

For those that may not know, I share just a brief overview of the events that sent my soul spiraling into a prison of despair. I looked out at my life, and I saw the events through bars that kept me trapped in discouragement, disillusionment, and defeat. These are the events that I relived in my dreams, I recounted in my conversations, I felt in my silences, and I endured in (not so quiet) complaint.

- July 2011 – I was confronted by a growing animosity by two men in our church who actively sought my removal as pastor of the congregation I had led for nearly ten years. This confrontation culminated in an ultimatum; a four-hour complaint session with members of our denomination, numerous business meetings and leadership conversations and a divided, contentious church conflict.
- September 2011 – My step-mother, with whom I had a long and contentious relationship, passed away in Las Vegas. My wife, daughter and I traveled to Vegas to be with my father intending to be there for the final arrangements and funeral. When the funeral was scheduled for two weeks later, we were unable to go, and I felt, not only the sadness for my father but his guilty judgment at only coming for the initial grief and not staying longer.

- October 2011 – My wife entered the hospital for a replacement of her battery for her pacemaker. While it was only an outpatient procedure, she had some allergic reaction to the medication they used, and it was a more prolonged recovery for her.
- November 2011 – Our congregation celebrated its ten year anniversary and also dedicated our new worship building, with a weekend of activities, celebration, reminiscences and worship. Hanging all over the events of the weekend was the sadness and the fear of the summer conflict rearing its head again.
- November 2011 – My father-in-law Don, entered the hospital for five days because he was having heart problems (a-fib) and during those days we were uncertain for his health. He underwent a procedure where his heart was shocked back into rhythm, and he recovered well.
- January 2012 – My wife of 27 years underwent bariatric surgery. The morning following the surgery, I was called to the hospital for she had coded and had undergone resuscitation for 15 minutes. She spent 28 days in the ICU and rehab, had been on the respirator for nine days, dialysis for three weeks and spent the first week in the ICU strapped to the bed, tubes and wires going everywhere, unable to speak and sedated so that she could not respond. She was home before Valentine's Day but had a long road of recovery and rehab ahead of her.
- February 2012 – My mother-in-law, Betty, entered the hospital because of a blood imbalance that was causing her to bleed constantly. Her blood thinner had gotten out of balance, and it took several days for her to recover and rebalance before she came home.
- March 2012 – I received a call from my brother on a Sunday evening telling me my father was being rushed to the ER, unable to breathe and he thought that he would not live very long. I went to Vegas and spent the next four days at the hospital with him until he was stabilized and released to go home. I talked with my brother and Dad about arranging hospice care (all while dealing with the children of my step-mother) who were using my dad for their gain.
- March 2012 – I spent a week helping my daughter move into her new apartment and getting ready for her upcoming wedding. At the end of that week, I traveled to Las Vegas to spend some additional time with my father due to his decline in health (because of his lung cancer).
- April 2012 – I received a call at 8:00 in the morning from my mother-in-law, saying that there was something wrong with my father-in-law. I immediately traveled the

few blocks to the house, and we called the ambulance. He had gotten extremely dehydrated and was sitting on the back porch, on a warm morning, unresponsive and in great distress. He spent the next several hours – touch and go – in the ER and the next several days getting his fluids balanced again before being released to go home. All of this was two weeks before our scheduled family trip to my daughter’s wedding in California – and it was two weeks of complete uncertainty.

- May 5, 2012 – A double shot of joy and stress occurred on this day. This was the day my daughter got married – and it was a joyous day. We celebrated with family and friends, had an incredible party at the Christmas House and had a wondrous time. It was also the day that my father died – right about the time the wedding was getting started. (My brother called me the next morning with the news.) There was an incredible mixture of emotions that it is nearly indescribable.
- May/June 2012 – Daylene and I traveled to Las Vegas twice, once to perform the funeral for my father and the other for his internment at the VA cemetery. During both events, I was the son, the brother but also the pastor and I allowed myself to be veiled behind a mask of ministry, going through the motions of final rites and goodbyes.
- June/July 2012 – The day after the return from my father’s internment, my mother-in-law was hospitalized with numerous issues, mostly related to her COPD and attendant heart issues. She was hospitalized for three weeks. During her last few days, we arranged for her to come home on hospice care and prepared to care for her in the home. She came home and within a matter of hours, she had passed into the eternal care of our Savior. The day after my 47<sup>th</sup> birthday, I performed the memorial service for her, less than two months after performing my own father’s.

During the events of this year, many other minor things occurred that filled my time and my thoughts. My wife continued to rehab and recover from her surgery; my father-in-law had cataract surgery; we had a beloved pet that I had to put down; my wife and I moved into her parent’s home (ostensibly, to care for her mom when she came home but we stayed to live with her dad when she passed).

In addition to all of this, there were still things going on in the church. We had revised and presented our Constitution and Bylaws. I had several funerals to perform during this time as well as maintaining a preaching schedule while my wife was recovering. During the summer months of 2012, we engaged a process to call additional staff to the church to support the work that was taking place in the church. A lot was happening, both personally and professionally.

If all of this seems overwhelming to read, you should try living the events in real time. It was all I could do to keep my head down, do the next thing that came along in my realm of responsibility and maintain a sense of God’s connection.

I must confess (and I do so quite freely today), the events of that year overwhelmed me and embittered me. I became angry, exhausted, withdrawn, fearful, weary. I felt rejected, unimportant, guilty, frightened for my family's health, anxious about the church situation, and there were times when I wanted to run up an emotional white flag and simply surrender.

In the years since that fateful time, I have almost exclusively focused on the pain, the sorrow, the mourning and the anger of those events. I have often commiserated with others about the exhausting journey of those months and the relentless progression of life's demands.

And in the memories, I harbored anger. I nursed some resentment and bitterness. I held onto a spirit of unforgiveness. I nurtured a feeling a victimization, feeling like life (and God) has mistreated me and done evil things. At the end of that second summer, I was the shell of a man, emotionally, spiritually, physically.

And then I remember Joseph...

He had it bad too. Though I would not have admitted it then, he actually had it worse than I. And then something happened to Joseph. God reversed his experience.

When Joseph was elevated to be second in command in Egypt, he took a wife and he had two sons, and the names of his sons are very telling.

*Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house."<sup>52</sup> The name of the second he called Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."*  
*Genesis 41:51-52 (ESV)*

With his first child, Joseph celebrated the fact that God had made him forget his hardship. The verse tells us that he also "forgot" all in his father's house. He did not literally forget his brothers or his father – in fact in just a couple of chapters, he remembers his brothers and his father quite vividly. So what is Joseph affirming? He affirms that fact that he could not look back on the events of his life without the pain, sorrow, betrayal, and hurt. He forgot the difficulties and now saw something else.

What was the something else Joseph saw?

What he now saw was revealed as he named his second son. With his name, Joseph affirmed that God had blessed him in the midst of his suffering. Instead of seeing the pain of his past, he saw the hand of God working and prospering him in his life.

It has taken me nearly five years to be able to look back at that time of my life and join with Joseph. I can say now, with a clarity of heart and mind, that God has made me forget

my hardship (I remember the events, as the above recitation reveals) but I can remember these events without tears streaming down my cheeks or anger rising in my chest. I can recall the difficulty of those moments without feeling the fear of those times or expressing despair at my pain.

I can now look at those events and say that, even when life was so difficult, God was present, God was a blessing, God was prospering, and God was strengthening me. There is so much I neglected when I focused on the pain – most of all, I failed to see the presence of my God in carrying me through the difficult moments.

With the wisdom of hindsight, what is it that I now know about the events of that year? How can I remember these events without feeling the pain?

- While some rejected me, God never has. There has never been a time in my life where God was done with me, where God rejected my ministry, where God washed his hands of me. God demonstrated in the midst of those years (when I did not get it right and did the wrong things and responded in the wrong ways) he still loved me, still showered me with his grace and mercy and acceptance.
- God broadened my calling. I always believed I was called to ministry (and I have always interpreted that calling as a pastoral ministry). But as I cared for my wife, ministered to my in-laws and spent time with my father, I affirm today that God has been working and expanding my call to be a caregivers to caregivers! And what a joy that calling is!
- God blessed me with resurrection sights! I remember walking into the hospital room of my wife, 19 days after her surgery and seeing her smile and hopeful, spirits lifted and body strengthening because of her angelic visitor that morning. I got to witness a resurrection in a way I have never seen before – or since.
- God gave me the incredible opportunity to walk my daughter down the aisle and perform her wedding ceremony – watching her with joy and tears, rejoicing about a new phase of life opening ahead and mourning the closing of another.
- During those months, God gave me incredible moments with my family.
  - I remember talking with Betty and her telling me that she was glad that she could entrust the care of her daughter and her husband with me before she passed. I was honored and incredibly humbled by her faith, trust, and love in the last moments of her life.
  - I remember being with my dad during his last hospitalization and feeling tremendous love for him and wanting the best for him (after feeling so alienated from him for so many years).

- God imparted physical strength that is beyond description. How I went from crisis to crisis and physically was able to be present and care for my family is beyond my understanding – the only way I can describe it is that it was divine strengthening for the moment at hand.
- God reminded me what was important in my life. Because of how precarious life was in these 12 months, when presented with a choice and challenge I was able to rise to the occasion and declare my love, my loyalty and my affection for my wife and my family. God showed me what mattered.
- God imparted wisdom and discernment – even when things were beyond my control or knowledge, God gave me the things I needed to know just when I needed to know them to keep my loved ones and me going.

These are just a few of the things that I see that God has done in the midst of that year.

Yes...what some intended as harm, God has turned to blessing. And with Joseph, I affirm that God has prospered and blessed me in the midst of my adversity. God was present and allowed me to experience him in ways I never had before – he blessed me more than I realized at the time.

And yes...I have forgotten my hardship. No, I still remember the events, the feelings, the trials, the trauma of those days. But I am no longer paralyzed by the pain of those months. I am able to remember those days with joy...with gratitude...with humility know that God did not leave me alone.

I am thankful for the gift of forgetfulness...and the gift of praise he has put on my lips!