

Skip the Suffering?  
Genesis 45:1–15  
Sunday, August 16, 2020

A few nights ago, I was watching the movie *The Firm*, in which Tom Cruise plays a young lawyer right out of law school who gets a dream job with a prestigious law firm that it turns out is into some *really bad stuff*. There was a scene where Tom Cruise and another lawyer were meeting with a client whom they were trying to help avoid paying his taxes. At one point the client says something that concerns the lawyers, and the client starts saying, “What’d I say? What did I say?” And Tom Cruise says, “It’s not what you said...it’s what you *didn’t* say.” Because sometimes what you *don’t* say matters just as much as what you *do* say.

Let me give you an example. For the past several months, our church’s Task Force has been working to put together our plan for reopening and resuming in-person activities. And we have had to cover every detail you can think of. It has been *incredibly* tedious. And there has been a point in just about every meeting where, as we conclude our discussion on some aspect of the plan, I’ll say, “Alright, is there anything here that we *haven’t* thought of here?” And it is always met with polite smiles and laughter by the rest of the Task Force, because *how do you know what you haven’t thought of?* It’s an impossible question to answer. But when you’re putting together something like this, sometimes what you *don’t* say matters just as much as what you *do* say, because that’ll be the one thing that someone comes back and says, “Well, the plan never said anything about that!” Sometimes what you leave out matters as much as what you include.

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Last week we started looking at Joseph’s story in the book of Genesis. Joseph is the favorite son of his father Jacob, and his 11 brothers *hate* him for that. So they decide to attack him, they throw him in a pit, and then they *sell* their brother Joseph into slavery. He gets taken to Egypt, where he spends the next 20-plus years. He has all these amazing experiences in Egypt where he

goes from being a slave to being thrown in prison to being Pharaoh's right-hand man, one of the most powerful men in all of Egypt. Last week was just the beginning of Joseph's story. But the lectionary (the calendar of assigned scripture readings for each week) goes from *that* introductory story right to the *very end* of Joseph's story, where he is reconciled with his brothers, and it skips the 20-plus years in between where all the action happens!

When I was first looking at the reading for this week, I had to keep looking at the lectionary calendar to make sure that I was looking at the right week, because why in the world would they have skipped seven chapters to go right to the end of the story?! It's like last week when they skipped the seven verses where Joseph had dreams about his 11 brothers bowing down to him. We keep skipping things that are *really important* to the story.

So, a quick summary of what we've skipped. Joseph gets sold as slave and taken to Egypt, while his brothers tell their father Jacob that a wild animal has killed him. In Egypt, he spends three years as a slave to a man named Potiphar, until Potiphar's wife makes false accusations against Joseph, and he is thrown in prison for ten years. While he's in prison, two of the prisoners there with him have dreams that they can't understand. Joseph is able to interpret their dreams, which end up coming true. So Joseph gains a reputation for being able to interpret dreams.

A while later, Pharaoh has a dream that he can't understand. Someone close to Pharaoh remembers that Joseph can interpret dreams, so Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams, and they turn out just like Joseph said. Pharaoh comes to trust Joseph, and he makes him second in command in Egypt, placing him in charge of all the food stockpiles. There are seven good years where lots of crops are produced, and Joseph stores up a lot of food. Those seven good years are followed by seven years of famine, where the whole region around them does not have enough

food. But because Joseph stored up all that food during the good years, there is plenty of food in Egypt. The famine reaches the land where Joseph's family lives, and they are suffering. But they hear that there is plenty of food in Egypt, so Jacob sends his other sons to go there to get food.

When they arrive, Joseph sees them, but they don't recognize him. Remember, it's been 20 years; they all think Joseph is dead. His brothers have come to believe the lie they told their father about him. So, Joseph is this powerful man in Egypt, and he decides to play some games with his brothers; get a little payback for how they treated him all those years ago. He plays all these tricks on him, accuses them of stealing, and they think that they are going to be thrown in prison or killed. Joseph's brothers are *terrified* of him. They are literally bowing down before him, just like in Joseph's dreams at the beginning. That's when we reach the point of today's reading, where Joseph can no longer contain himself and reveals himself to his brothers.

So you can see there that what the lectionary skips in those seven chapters are 20 years of pain and suffering and struggle. We skip all of that to get right to the happy ending where Joseph is reconciled with his brothers. You know what else is skipped in those seven chapters and 20 years? *God*. God is surprisingly *absent* in Joseph's story.<sup>1</sup> They make *reference* to God throughout Joseph's story, but God never physically *shows up* the way God did with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Joseph's great-grandfather Abraham encounters God on multiple occasions. God appears to his grandfather Isaac and gives direct commands. God interacts with his father Jacob, even *wrestling* with him in the middle of the night. God has been physically present all throughout the book of Genesis. But Joseph has no direct experience with God. It's not until

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Nam, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4547](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4547)

this chapter (chapter 45) that Joseph is able to say to his brothers, “It was not *you* who sent me here but *God*, in order to preserve your lives.”

So we skip all of the pain and suffering and struggle to get to the part where God shows up and makes sense of it all. And we do the same thing in our own lives all the time.

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When I was watching that movie *The Firm* the other night, the first 30 minutes or so are all about Tom Cruise getting started as a young, successful lawyer. It shows us the loving relationship he has with his wife, all the job interviews and offers he is receiving, the unbelievable offer from this one firm, so then he and his wife move to Memphis and get a house, and he starts working and studying for the Bar Exam. It’s all the exciting character development that helps you get to know him and start to like him. It’s a lot of fun to watch *that* part of the movie. But then everything starts going wrong, his perfect life starts falling apart, and the movie gets very tense and hard to watch.

Now, I’ve seen this movie a lot of times, but what I usually do is that I’ll watch the first 30 minutes that are all happy and exciting, and then I’ll turn it off. I don’t like the part where he starts to struggle and everything falls apart. And what I’ve realized about myself is that it’s not just *this* movie. I do that with a *lot* of movies. The movie *Batman Begins*. The first hour is all about how Bruce Wayne becomes Batman; how he loses his parents and goes on this long, transformational journey around the world, and then he comes home years later as this totally different person. I love the first hour of that movie. But then when he comes home, he actually has to start fighting crime, and he realizes just how hard it is to *be* Batman. That part is not as fun to watch. It’s not as *good*. I usually turn it off after that first hour.

*A Star Is Born* with Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga. The first hour of the movie is all about how Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga's characters meet and fall in love and make all this great music together. But in the second half of the movie, we start to see Bradley Cooper's problems with alcohol and addiction take over. They start fighting, and their relationship starts falling apart, and it becomes a *really hard* movie to watch. I love the first happy hour of it, but then I usually turn it off after that.

There are all these other movies that I really love the first half where everything is happy and going well and just getting started. But as soon as things start getting hard and falling apart, I don't want to watch that. So I skip the suffering and the struggle and the pain of those stories and focus on the part where everything is happy and makes sense. So often in life we try to skip over the suffering and struggle and pain and go right to the part where God makes sense of it all.

When someone we love dies, so many people will go right to saying, "Well, it was just his time. God needed her more than we did. She's in a better place now. It was just God's will." When someone we know gets sick, "It's going to be okay. God has a plan." In the aftermath of natural disasters like tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis, people have said, "God is sending us a sign. This is a *warning* or a *punishment* for sin." Even with this pandemic, I know that *I* talked a lot in those early weeks about how God was using this time to do good things – slowing us down, helping families spend more time together, bringing neighborhoods and communities closer together. It's like when we are faced with suffering and pain that we simply cannot process, we want to jump right to a place where God makes sense of it all. We want to inject God into these places where, on the surface, we don't see any sign of God's presence and power, because doing so helps us feel like life still makes sense. We want to skip the bad to get to God. Skip the suffering to get to salvation.

But God does not skip the suffering. God dwells in it, becoming one of us in Jesus Christ, meeting the pain and suffering of life head on. In Christ God experiences the joy and love and beauty of life but also the pain and suffering and struggle – betrayal, abandonment, and even death. Christ has to go through *those* things before he can be resurrected and raised up into glory. God doesn't just *skip* those things and say, "Hey, it's alright. Everyone is forgiven." It's *through* Christ's suffering that we come to see just how much forgiveness and salvation *costs* God. And it's when we look at Christ's suffering and pain that we can see the ways that God is with us in *our own* suffering and pain.

Now, I want to stop right there and make clear, that doesn't mean that God *causes* the suffering and pain that we experience. If Jesus Christ shows us who God is – the image of the invisible God – then what we see in Christ is that God is a God of healing and wholeness and life. *That* is God's will for us. And what Joseph's story shows us is that God does not *cause* suffering, but God *takes* the suffering and pain that we experience and *uses* it to further God's purposes of healing and wholeness and life. Joseph says to his brothers, "I am your brother Joseph, *who you sold into Egypt.*" He's very clear here about where the *blame* lies, and it's not with God. But he says to his brothers at the very end of the story, "What *you* meant for evil, *God* has worked for good."

So we don't need to *skip* the suffering to get to God, because God is *with us*, even in our suffering and pain, even when like in Joseph's story, it doesn't seem like God is present at all. God doesn't speak directly to Joseph like God does to Abraham and Isaac. God isn't physically present with Joseph like God was with his father Jacob. But Joseph affirms after 20 years of suffering and pain and struggle that God has been present with him all along. The Christian

philosopher Erasmus once wrote, “Called or not called, God is present.” That even when God is not named or mentioned, when it seems like God is not present at all, God is nonetheless there, even the midst of suffering and pain. God is working to *redeem* it, *using* it to bring about something *good*. While our tendency is to skip the part where it seems like God is absent, we can’t skip the suffering, because it’s a part of the story, and it is what ultimately allows us to see God’s presence and power and redemption in our lives.

It says that when Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers, he weeps so loudly that people can hear him from the other room. He doesn’t skip the suffering and the pain. He allows himself to *feel* it and *express* it. He mourns and laments it. Sometimes we need to be reminded to do the same thing. Not to skip the suffering and the pain of life or rush to make sense of it all, but to sit with it, allowing ourselves to *feel* it and *express* it, to *mourn* and *lament* it. Because it’s when we *do* that that we are reminded of God’s *presence* with us and God’s *power* to bring healing and transformation even to the places where it seems like God is not.