

What about Suffering? *Responding to God in the Pandemic*
Jonathan K. Dodson | Gen 50:15-21 | April 5, 2020

This week our family was reminiscing about my daughter's February birthday party. How fun it was to be with grandparents and friends. The cake, the laughs, the conviviality of it all. Then my wife said, That was only six weeks ago, feels like years. Familiar joys are fading like an old photograph: coffeeshop chats with friends, trips to your fav restaurant, worshipping *together* at Ballet Austin. We're all isolated in this record-setting pandemic. The mortality rates, deaths, continue to climb. How should we respond? The life and faith of Joseph, who in Genesis was abandoned, isolated, sold, and imprisoned is timely. Joseph endured great suffering but came out a more virtuous person. How will we emerge from all this? Grief, Goodness, God.

Grieving through Suffering

As a teenager, Joseph enjoyed a special relationship with his father Jacob. We're told Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons (37:3). Joseph was so dear to him that he gave him a unique robe, often described as "a coat of many colors." The Hebrew words actually mean "a long-hemmed garment," reaching the palms and feet. Joseph was the envy of his eleven brothers. One night Joseph had a dream in which the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him. When he shared it with his brothers, they responded mockingly, Are you to *rule* over us? They "hated him even more" (37:8). Then one day "the dreamer" visited his brothers in a field. As they saw him approaching, they plotted to kill him until a brother intervened. So, they threw him into a deep, dry cistern that held water for animals and humans, sold him into slavery. They took his long-hemmed robe smeared it with blood, took it back to their father, and suggested his favorite son had been mauled to death. No body was found. Twenty-two years later, Joseph is reunited with his brothers and beloved father, in Egypt, where he rules the empire as second to Pharaoh. Picking up in our passage his father *dies*, [Joseph fell on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him](#) (50:1). Joseph wept, his brothers wept, Egypt wept. For 70 days! We often only allow ourselves a week. The ancient world was onto something our busy modern world has lost, *grief*. Our entire world is experiencing grief. Italy: "Day and night we remove the dead." China: public

vigils held across the country. Spain: 10,000 dead. Psychologists point out it can be very difficult to grieve for thousands, but when suffering has a face, a name, a life, we begin to feel it. Have you felt it? That discomfort at the end of the day, a creeping restlessness as you lay awake on your bed at night? *That* is the sound of grief, what David Kessler, co-author of the 5 stages of grief calls anticipatory grief: China, Italy, Spain, US, Texas, Austin. Will it get worse? How much more will we lose? *Denial: The virus won't affect us. Anger: I have to stay at home! Sadness: When this will end? Acceptance: This is my life; how do I adjust? Bargaining: if I social distance for two weeks everything will be better?* Grief is upon us. What stage do you find yourself in? In the first week of isolation I leapt over denial, anger, and sadness to *acceptance*. I had to get on with leading the church. I contacted the at-risk, recorded video devotionals, wrote articles, prayed for the anxious and disheartened. But I didn't grieve, not until I was forced to, when one night I was unable to distract myself from the restlessness. I cried out to God: I'm not enough for this person or that person. I'm not enough for my sensitive wife and kids, for my church. I'm not enough, Lord. I miss my old life. I grieved. Joseph wept. Egypt wept. *Jesus* wept. And so can you. Make space for grief, for yourself, friends, kids, spouses. I don't know about you but we're more irritable than usual at my house. I've snapped at my wife. The kids have fought more. Failure to execute a Zoom call can reduce you to tears. So my wife pulled us aside and said When we see that someone is sensitive or snappy, let's make a habit of extending *more grace* to one another. Maybe you need to do that in your house? As a family we've talked about what we miss, told God we miss it, thanked him for it. Grieve your sorrows, hand them to the Lord of lament, and receive his *attentive* grace. *The first thing we learn from Joseph is that it's okay to grieve our suffering.*

Goodness in Suffering

The second thing we learn is how to be good, how to emerge from our suffering not as victims but as virtuous. Looking back on it all Joseph proclaims to his brothers, *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good* (50:20). You don't say something like that, after great injustice and heartache, if you've only grieved your way through trial. The only way we can say, what you intended for evil God intended for good, is if our character is formed through hardship. Turns out Joseph faced more than brotherly hate. His feet were

crammed into abrasive fetters, his neck latched with an iron collar (Ps 105:18). In Egypt he became household servant, where he was falsely accused of assaulting the woman of the house and thrown in an Egyptian prison. Can you imagine what his brothers were thinking after their father died? Here it comes. Retribution. So, fearing for their lives they implore his forgiveness throwing themselves at his feet, offering to be his slaves. In doing this, they show Joseph to be *in the right*. They grovel at the feet of the dreamer they once mocked, a dream come true! Offer to serve the one they enslaved. *And yet*, Joseph doesn't seek retribution. He doesn't say how dare you traffic me, your own brother! Do you know what it's like in an Egyptian prison! You have no idea the trauma you put me through. Although a victim, Joseph chooses virtue. Theologian Paul **Tillich** says that people who endure suffering are taken beneath the routine busyness of life to discover they are not as lovely as they thought themselves to be. Grief smashes through the floor of what we thought was the bottom of our soul, only to reveal a cavity below. We dig through that floor only to discover yet another cavity. Each floor a new and often unpleasant encounter with ourselves. I've been confronted with pride and anger in all this. What will you do with your suffering? Will you choose victim or virtue? Joseph chose virtue, though I'm sure it wasn't an overnight endeavor. He responds *humbly*. The proud brandish their sufferings, wear them like a badge, gossip about their mistreatment. The humble smash through the floors of their soul, look for opportunities to emerge a godlier version of themselves. Year after year, sorrow after sorrow, Joseph was transformed. 3 virtues emerge: So when his brothers gave him the opportunity to take his pound of flesh, he choose to give! He is **generous** when he could be stingy: "I will provide for you and your little ones (21)." There in a famine! He has every right to refuse them and yet he gives them more than they deserve. I think of those in our church who have made individually packaged meals for the immune comprised and elderly. Those who give away sanitizer and TP, make facemasks for their neighbors. Will you be generous? Give to the benevolence fund or hoard for yourself? Your brothers and sisters, in this church, city, are jobless and in need. Joseph was *generous*. He was also **kind** when he had every right to be brisk: *He comforted them and spoke kindly to them" 21.* When you walk by your fellow Austinites on the street will you see them as enemies to be avoided or neighbors to be loved? When kids are kids at home, will you be kind or snarky? When others are struggling will we comfort them? Joseph was *kind*. Finally, he was

magnanimous to his brothers: [And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here](#)” 45:5. He takes no thought of himself but considers how distressing it must be for his brothers. Here we have a picture of Christ who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but humbled himself, even to the point of death. He stands before us, not in proud retribution but in regal humility. He extends forgiveness to his oppressors. Will we *be humbled* or hardened, *formed* or fossilized by our sufferings?

God in Suffering

Joseph shows us that suffering is an occasion for grief *and* for goodness. But how did he do it? How do we do it? First, **he compared himself to something greater than his sufferings**. He kept his eye on something other than his sorrows. He looked them square in the face, then over their shoulder to something greater on the horizon. Which is why Joseph responds to his brother’s fear of retribution by saying, [“Am I in the place of God?”](#) He compares himself, not to others or to his sufferings, but to God, something greater, weightier, loftier than his sorrows. Second, Joseph **entrusted himself to something bigger than his control**. So he says to his brothers, [So it was not you who sent me here, but God](#) (45:8). [And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life](#) (Ge 45:5). [And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant](#) (Ge 45:7). But, for, and *God*. Joseph entrusted himself to Someone bigger than his control. But why did he trust *God*? He could have resigned himself to blind fate. Because deep, down he knew his God, his heavenly Father, was *good*. See it was the character of his God that he trusted. So he **gave himself to someone better than himself**. How so? God sent him to Egypt *to preserve life*: the pagan Egyptians, surrounding nations. God also sent him to *preserve a remnant*. This is a technical word referring to a chosen people through whom God would bless the *entire* world. How? By one faithful Israelite being stripped of his robes, nailed to a cross, left for dead. The divine Son of God trafficked by human hands, raised from the dead, so when given the opportunity for retribution Jesus extends forgiveness. And now those who confess their smallness before his greatness, repent of their sins and trust in him, are clothed head to toe with the long-hemmed garment of his righteousness. Gal 3:27: For all who have been baptized into Christ



have put on—clothed themselves—with Christ! Joseph didn't just get through his suffering but was transformed by his suffering. He emerged a more virtuous version of himself. How? *Because he compared himself to something greater, entrusted himself to something bigger, gave himself to Someone infinitely better.* Will you? God is greater than our sufferings, bigger than our control, and better than our character! Let's put on Christ in this pandemic: in grief, in goodness, and in a grand vision of God of a great God:, what you intended for evil God super-intends for good.