

NO

MORE

~~**EXCUSES**~~

BE THE MAN

GOD MADE YOU TO BE

TONY EVANS

NO MORE EXCUSES

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Be the Man God Made You to Be
Updated Edition

TONY EVANS

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No More Excuses: Be the Man God Made You to Be

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To my sons,
Anthony Jr. and Jonathan,
whom I love more than words
could ever express.

Seeing them grow up to become men of God
is my greatest challenge and deepest joy.

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Introduction

Today's generation of men suffers from "loser's limp."

Anyone who has competed in sports knows what I mean by "loser's limp." It's what sometimes happens when an outfielder misjudges a fly ball and misses the catch or when a wide receiver drops an easy pass. He falls to the ground and gets up limping. The purpose of the limp is to camouflage the failure. The impression he wants to give his teammates and the fans is that he didn't make the catch because of a cramp, a muscle pull, or some other sudden malady of the leg rather than a misjudgment. So the limp becomes the athlete's excuse, his attempt to be exonerated of blame for his misplay.

But while the consequences of a misplay in a ball game are relatively small, the unfortunate fact is that many men have developed a "loser's limp" when it comes to life. Instead of owning up to their failures and responsibilities, they excuse them, giving the impression that forces beyond their control are responsible for their circumstances.

It's true that circumstances beyond our control can sometimes make it difficult for us to be all that God wants us to be. But we need to start looking at these circumstances as challenges and opportunities for success rather than as excuses for failure or for not doing anything. It's high time that we stop blaming circumstances, pressures, or challenges and start living as real men.

Now, I'm not saying that real men just leap over every obstacle like Superman. No, we all stumble and fall. But being real men means we don't allow our past to control our present and define our future by coming up with a "limp" to hide our sins and mistakes. Instead, we accept responsibility for our actions, identify what needs to be

corrected, and set about being the men God has created and called us to be.

That's what this book is all about. It's about Christian men repudiating the "loser's limp" and becoming real men of God. It's about men winning back their families, their churches, and their culture by rising above their circumstances through the grace and power of God. It's about men finding purpose, meaning, and direction for their lives despite past setbacks or present pressures. It's about becoming men of character, commitment, power, and influence for Jesus Christ.

That's the kind of man I want to be. I'm sure that is also the kind of man you want to be—what I call a "kingdom man." A kingdom man consistently lives all of life under the rule of God. A kingdom-minded man accepts responsibility and rejects excuses as to why he can't or won't rise to his divinely ordained rule. It's my contention that when men know God and apply his truths to their lives, they need no more excuses.

It is a true honor to revisit this book and its content some twenty years after its release. The principles within it are timeless, as they come from the timeless truth of God's Word—and they are powerful to change your life forever. May this book fully equip you to live as the man God created you to be, ruling with full dominion in every sphere of influence you have—for his glory, for the benefit of others, and for your satisfaction and significance as a man of God who makes no more excuses.

No More Hiding behind the Past

“I’m the way I am today because of what happened to me in my past.”

Some time ago, I was in my backyard and noticed a piece of wood lying beside the air-conditioning unit. It had been there for a long time, so I decided to move it. You can probably guess what happened when I picked it up. The insects that had been making their home under that piece of wood began to scurry for new cover.

Now, when I was walking by, that piece of wood looked normal. But it had become a home for varmints, a dwelling place for colonies of insects who stayed hidden beneath the veneer of the wood until someone disturbed their nest.

That incident serves as a good metaphor for what I want to do in this book, and especially in this opening chapter. I want to show you that we need to “pick up” our lives as men and see what’s hiding under them. If we are willing to deal with whatever comes out, we will see God do a fantastic work in us and then through us.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not suggesting there are “varmint” in

your past. And I'm not a psychiatrist, so we're not going to probe your psyche for deep, dark secrets. But each of us has a past, as they say. And since no man among us is perfect, we tend to cover our hurts and fears with Sunday smiles, nice suits, firm handshakes—and sometimes lies.

Someone asks, "How are you doing this morning?"

"Wonderful! Praise the Lord!"

"How's the family?"

"Couldn't be better!"

But if we picked up that piece of wood in that man's "backyard," stuff might scatter everywhere.

We men have become very adept at covering up our pain and lack. One of the things that causes us great pain is broken relationships. One reason they are so painful and crippling is that no one has ever showed us how to fix them. That is for women only, right?

Not in God's kingdom, it isn't. In this chapter, I want to share with you some principles from God's Word that will enable you, by his grace, to step out from under the shadow of your past and stop letting it control your present and future. I want to help you lay aside what happened yesterday as an excuse for what's happening today.

I'm not denying that something happened in the past. It may even have been something devastating, such as rejection by your father or mother when you were a child, or a divorce that was so painful and/or bitter that you have never been able to get past its effects. Or you may have brothers, sisters, or former friends you don't talk to anymore and wouldn't speak to if they called.

Painful pasts come in all shapes, sizes, and degrees of intensity. In some cases, the person who has been the focus of your pain isn't even around anymore. It's too late to say you're sorry or to hear those healing words from the other person's lips. What can you do in cases like that?

Well, the Bible has a lot to teach us on this subject, because whatever your situation may be, it is no surprise to God. He is very aware of your past, and he knows that when things go wrong in your relationships, it can have a staggering effect.

I want to show you how to start overcoming and stop blaming your past by taking you on a biblical journey through the life of

Joseph. Here was a young man with a painful past—and none of it was his fault. The story of what Joseph did about it is incredibly powerful and empowering, because more than one-fourth of the book of Genesis (chapters 37–50) is devoted to this remarkable man. Let’s meet him now.

Joseph: A Shaky Family Tree

I told you Joseph had a past. It started before he was even born, because his daddy was Jacob. Jacob would not win any “Father of the Year” awards.

As a young man, Jacob was a deceiver. We know from Genesis 25 and 27 that he deceived his brother, Esau, right out of the family birthright and linked up with his mother, Rebekah, to trick his father, Isaac, and gain the blessing. When that deal was exposed, Jacob had to run for his life because Esau tried to kill him.

Jacob fled to the land of a relative named Laban and fell in love with Laban’s daughter Rachel. Now, there is a biblical principle that says, “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23). Jacob was a trickster, but in Laban he met a better trickster. Jacob and Laban could have made great characters in the film *Now You See Me* and its sequel. Both were masters at deception.

Laban told Jacob, “If you will work for me seven years, I will give you my beautiful, vivacious daughter Rachel to be your wife” (see Gen. 29:15–20). Genesis 29:18 says that Jacob loved Rachel so much he accepted Laban’s terms—only to be deceived into marrying her sister Leah instead (vv. 21–25). He had to serve another seven years to get Rachel (v. 27), who would become Joseph’s mother.

Because Rachel was barren (before God opened her womb) and Leah stopped having children after four sons, each of them gave their maidens to Jacob as additional wives (Gen. 30:1–9). So here was a patchwork family of one husband and four wives, three of whom the man hadn’t really planned to marry. Are you getting the picture of the kind of family into which Joseph was born? In today’s terms, it was dysfunctional. Even the Kardashians might have had some trouble keeping up with Jacob and his family drama.

Jacob’s life of deception continued when he “tricked Laban” by

fleeing without telling him (Gen. 31:20). His trickery carried over to Rachel, who stole her father's household gods and then deceived her father about having them (vv. 19, 33–35).

Is it any wonder that by the time Jacob had eleven sons, including Joseph (a twelfth, Benjamin, was born later), his older boys were turning out to be as treacherous as their father? In fact, they were worse, because their treachery involved killing all the men in the city of Shechem in revenge for the rape of their sister. In Genesis 34:25, we read, “Two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males.” Simeon and Levi were mass murderers by anyone's definition. You won't be surprised to learn that the strategy for their murderous campaign was deception. Like father, like sons. They convinced all the men of the town to be circumcised on the same weekend—only to take advantage of their weakened position to ravage them.

Reuben, Jacob's firstborn son, then slept with one of his father's wives (Gen. 35:22), and his brother Judah was seduced by his own daughter-in-law (38:18).

This is not what you would call a well-adjusted family. This is not the kind of family you would want to grow up in, spend holidays with, or go with on an annual family vacation. But this was Joseph's family. Here was a young man who had every excuse not to turn out right.

Yet when the Bible presents Joseph to us, it presents a man of greatness, self-control, patience, and dignity. I point this out to let you know that just because your father was bad, your mama was messed up, and your brothers and sisters turned out rotten, you don't have to wind up the same way. In other words, a bad environment need not control your present life.

Now, don't misunderstand. Your past *can* influence you, but it doesn't have to control you. Joseph could have given up before he ever really got started, but he refused to let the sins of others control him. He chose to learn from his past, not live in it.

Rejected by Men, Protected by God

Joseph's story begins in Genesis 37 with the incident that marked him for the rest of his life. He was out with his older brothers in the

pasture, and he “brought a bad report of them to their father” (v. 2). Nothing is said about this report, so we can assume it was accurate. But here was the real problem:

Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him. (vv. 3–4)

Joseph wasn't Jacob's favorite for no reason. He was the favorite because he was born of Rachel, the woman Jacob truly loved. Jacob had worked seven long years for Rachel, only to have to work another seven when he got Leah instead. So when Rachel gave Jacob their first son together, Joseph, the boy stole Jacob's heart like no other.

The robe Joseph received was also a gift like no other. No one else got such a special symbol of love and status. I say that the robe was a status symbol because in biblical times, robes meant something. In 2 Samuel 13:18, we read about the royal robes the daughters of the king wore to indicate their royalty. While the comparison isn't exact, it does tell us that robes are more than clothing. They carry a message, much like graduation gowns, a professor's robes, or even medical cloaks do today. Joseph's robe spoke volumes. It said that he was the most loved of all Jacob's children, and despite being the eleventh son, he would occupy the honored position that belonged to the eldest son.

As you might imagine, this left his brothers frustrated, hurt, and angry, to say the least. We read, “When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him” (Gen. 37:4). Joseph's brothers hated him so much they couldn't even talk to him correctly. These brothers understood that the robe meant much more than favoritism. It showed whom their father had chosen to receive the double portion of his blessing. It communicated legacy, inheritance, and an exalted position, which was why Jacob had placed Joseph as overseer and investigator of his brothers' work. All this was, in short, a perfect storm for a family disaster.

Add to this storm the lightning and thunder of a dream and you have a recipe for murder. Shortly after getting the robe, Joseph had a

dream in which he saw his brothers bowing down to him as sheaves of grain (Gen. 37:5–8). At the tender age of seventeen, Joseph didn't have the wisdom to keep that type of dream to himself. So when he told his brothers about what he had seen, they mocked him and said: "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words" (v. 8).

The ten older brothers couldn't stand Joseph. They weren't about to let a baby brother, born of a woman who wasn't the mother to any of them, zero in on their territory. It didn't help when Joseph told them about another dream in which they all bowed down to him (Gen. 37:9)! So they concocted a plan to kill him, but Reuben talked them into throwing Joseph into a pit instead (vv. 20–24).

So they tossed Joseph down into an empty cistern and sat down to eat. What they had done to him hadn't even curbed their appetites! Then they sold him into slavery to some passing traders (Gen. 37:25–28), and the rest of the chapter relates how they tricked their aging father into thinking his favorite son was dead.

Joseph faced the most severe rejection by his family at a time when he was young, vulnerable, and idealistic. Rejection has a way of turning a soft heart into a cynical one, but as we will see, Joseph's response to his trials molded him into a significant ruler and subject of our Lord, the King.

Perhaps you were rejected by your family or some other important person in your life. Maybe you found out that people who claimed to love you really didn't love you. Maybe someone you trusted deeply turned on you, and you were hung out to dry.

What are you going to do now? Stay where you are? Decide never to trust anyone again? You can make those choices, friend, but those choices will also make you. They will make you into a man who is afraid of the future and cut short of his dreams. All of this and more happened to Joseph, but he chose the better response.

Let's follow him down to Egypt, where he began his life as a slave:

Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites. . . . [But] the LORD was with Joseph. (Gen. 39:1–2a)

Don't miss that last phrase. You say, "Joseph sure had a terrible family background." Yes, but the Lord was with Joseph.

You say, "Yeah, but his brothers couldn't stand him." True, but "the LORD was with Joseph."

"But he had such a bad break." No, you didn't hear me: "The LORD was with Joseph."

To Whom Will You Turn?

Do you get what I'm saying to you? The first step to overcoming the past is realizing that no matter what others do to you, if the Lord is with you, that is truly all you need. So your assignment is to stay with the Lord. Joseph was rejected by his family, but he was accepted by the Lord. Even though he was mistreated, he didn't turn against the Lord. His faith held him firm.

Regardless of what happened yesterday, if you stick with the Lord today, your yesterday doesn't have to control your tomorrow. If you are still thinking about the people who caused your problem, you are focusing on the wrong thing. You need to focus on someone who is there to help you.

The Lord was with Joseph, so this rejected child was under God's watchful eye in slavery:

The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. (Gen. 39:2-3)

Joseph had a job to do. He worked for Potiphar now. In fact, Joseph made such an impression on Potiphar that Potiphar turned his whole house over to Joseph (Gen. 39:4-6). The Lord met Joseph where he was and made him successful in a strange land.

If you walk with the Lord, he can do the same for you. Joseph simply allowed God to use him. The problem with the past is that it can become a dictator that rules you today. The only way to overcome that is to change dictators—to allow the Lord to rule your life today.

There are things from the past that you may not be able to fix. You may never be able to convince your parents to accept you, your

brothers and sisters to talk to you, or your boss to atone for previous injustices. But when the Lord is in your present, he can always make something happen.

Now, let me tell you one reason Joseph may have turned out better than Jacob's older boys. There's a part of Jacob's story I didn't mention. He was a mess for a long time, but when he got old, he had a confrontation with God. According to Genesis 32:24–32, Jacob wrestled with someone whom the prophet Hosea later called an angel (Hos. 12:4).

Jacob asked for a blessing, so this heavenly being, who may have been Christ in a preincarnate appearance, blessed him with a new name, Israel. Jacob also was crippled in the deal, so this was a life-changing experience in more ways than one. Jacob said, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered" (Gen. 32:30). Later, he renewed his covenant with God at Bethel (35:1–5).

So in his later years, Jacob made a decision for God that benefited Joseph because he was still young. It may have been too late for Jacob's ten older sons, but he made the decision anyway, and it made a difference in his family.

I want to encourage you with that reminder if you're a husband and father who can look back and see bad decisions that messed up your family. You may not be able, by your own efforts, to fix what is broken. You can't raise your children over again. But if you start walking with God now, he can make up some of those lost days, years, and opportunities. He can fix what you can't even touch anymore because it's behind you.

By the time Joseph was a young boy, Jacob was committed to God. He could not fix the past, but he could walk with God in the present and see God bless his present in spite of his past. And that's just what he did.

Committed to Godliness

Besides knowing Joseph's background and his rejection, you need to know that Joseph was committed to living a godly life.

That becomes very apparent beginning in Genesis 39:7: "And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, 'Lie with

me.” Now, this was a bold woman. She wanted Joseph because he was “handsome in form and appearance” (v. 6). He looked good, and so Potiphar’s wife said, “Uh, huh!”

Mrs. Potiphar made a move on Joseph, but he refused and said to her:

Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God? (Gen. 39:8–9)

Do you see Joseph’s mind-set? He said: “Look, I’m in a situation that I can’t possibly explain other than that God is doing it. How can I be in the midst of what God is doing and do what you are asking me to do?”

So Joseph refused her advances, but she persisted in trying to seduce him. Finally, she made a grab for him, and he fled without his shirt. Mrs. Potiphar got mad, cried rape, and framed Joseph for a crime that never happened. Potiphar took one look at the “evidence,” heard her statements and accusations, and put Joseph in jail (Gen. 39:10–20).

Now, at this point in the story, you may want to say: “Come on. The man is living right. He refuses the illegitimate demands of his boss’s wife because he wants to obey God and he cares about his boss. And for that he gets fired and lands in jail. I mean, Joseph has done absolutely nothing wrong!”

I think some men in Joseph’s shoes would be pacing in that jail cell and saying: “Lord, have mercy. I tried to do right and I got fired. I should have at least had some fun. I could have held on to my job and had some fun too. Now I don’t have either one.” But that wasn’t Joseph’s mind-set because he had already learned something important: the Lord was with him (Gen. 39:21).

Going Somewhere with God

No matter what has gone on in the past, if you are willing to stay with God in any and all situations in life, then even jail is where you

ought to go if it is within God's will for you. For Joseph, there was no better place to be than in the king's jail, because he was right where God wanted him to be.

Sometimes God must lead you downhill to take you uphill. He must take you to the bottom in order to get you to the top. You have to go through the valley to get to the mountain's peak. The problem comes when we're at the bottom or in the valleys of life, because we tend to assume that it's the end of the trip. But when the Lord is with you, something is going to happen.

That's why I love Genesis 39:21: "The LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison." The person in charge went ahead and put Joseph in charge of everything in the jail. He spotted someone who had character, discipline, and dignity, so he delegated his responsibilities to him.

Joseph got busy again. And we all know that keeping yourself busy during trying times is a positive way of getting through them. Idleness is the best friend of the Devil. Joseph didn't have time to dwell on the past and let it eat at him, even if he had wanted to. The Lord was with him and had something more important for him to do.

When you commit yourself totally to God, your past no longer has to be the controlling factor in your life. This means that what happened to you five or ten years ago—or even last month—no longer dictates your steps. Is what happened to you still real? Of course it is. I'm not talking about having a frontal lobotomy so you don't remember anything. I'm talking about breaking the past's control.

This is the sense in which Paul says, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13–14). Yet he was completely aware of his past as a persecutor of the church (1 Cor. 15:9).

As men, we must come to grips with this, because we tend to let past failures keep us from trying again. But once we are committed to the Lord, we have his power available to help us move forward instead of looking back. That's what Joseph did.

We're now up to Genesis 40, and Joseph is still in jail. Chapter

40 is the story of his interpretation of the dreams of Pharaoh's baker and cupbearer. I don't have the space here to go through each verse in detail. If you're not familiar with the story or if you've forgotten how it goes, you can read Genesis 40 in just a few minutes.

I want to focus on verses 12–15. The news was good for the cupbearer. He was going to be released from prison and restored to Pharaoh's service. So Joseph made a small request—to be remembered to Pharaoh (v. 14). In verse 15, Joseph protested his innocence without any apparent bitterness, which is very enlightening when you're talking about getting free of the past.

But the cupbearer forgot about Joseph (Gen. 40:23), and Joseph stayed in the dungeon for two more years (41:1). Now Joseph could really feel sorry for himself, saying: “You know, life would be good if it weren't for people. Every time I try to help someone or do what is right, something wrong happens.”

Nothing is recorded about those two years, however. What's interesting is that when Pharaoh had a dream and needed someone to interpret it, Joseph was ready to go. So I don't believe he spent those two years seething with bitterness and resentment, or he would not have been ready for God to use him so dramatically.

Now, again, since my purpose is not to retell the whole story of Joseph's life, let me summarize what happened in Genesis 41:1–45. Things really started turning around for Joseph when Pharaoh woke up from a dream in a cold sweat. The cupbearer got his memory back, and Joseph was summoned.

The message of Pharaoh's dream was that Egypt would have seven good years followed by seven years of famine. Joseph advised Pharaoh to appoint a “famine commissioner,” and do it pretty quickly, so that Egypt could survive the “seven ugly cow” years (Gen. 41:3–4, 30). Pharaoh said: “Great idea, Joseph. I appoint *you*. You're now the number-two man in Egypt. In fact, if anyone asks my permission to do something, I'm sending him to you” (see vv. 37–44).

I have one powerful theological observation to make about the story of Joseph at this point: this young slave was going nowhere and rotting in jail, then suddenly he *was* going somewhere—if you

call being the number-two ruler in the most powerful nation on earth going somewhere.

No one can do that but God.

The lesson here is simply this: God knows where he's taking you. And he knows the lessons you need to know in order to be equipped when you get there. God knew what you were going to go through as a five-, ten-, or fifteen-year-old. He knew how people were going to mess you over at twenty-five. Or forty. Or even fifty. But he allowed those things because of where he's going to take you.

And when you get there, there will be no question as to who gets the glory. Joseph could never sit beside Pharaoh as second-in-command and say, "Look who I am and what I did." He knew God was doing the work, so he was able to look at his circumstances in terms of his relationship with God, not just in terms of the nasty things people did to him. No one would use Joseph's life map as a way to get ahead in a career. Joseph couldn't teach an online course about certain career choices to make in order to advance up the ladder of life. Nothing could have predicted his success.

Joseph was seventeen when he was sold into slavery (Gen. 37:2). He was thirty when his promotion came (41:46). He had thirteen years of a messed-up life, of confusion, of not knowing whether he was going to be up or down, in or out, dead or alive.

Yet through it all, Joseph maintained his faithfulness and his commitment, so God was able to use the negatives in his life to achieve his good plan. God was able to take Joseph somewhere—and he has a definite "somewhere" he wants to take you too.

Breaking the Power of the Past

Please note also that Joseph didn't let his bad family background interfere with his present responsibility.

Let me say again what I've been trying to say throughout this chapter: we can't use someone else's irresponsibility in the past as an excuse for our irresponsibility in the present. If you are blaming what your parents, your wife, or your workplace did for what you are not doing now, you need to reorient your thinking. You need to live up to your responsibilities, not theirs.

I know your father, mother, or “the system” may have stripped away your self-esteem. But Jesus Christ can give it back to you. Let me tell you something: when the Dallas Cowboys get into their huddle during a football game, they don’t say, “We’d better not try to move the ball, or those men on the other side of the line are going to try and stop us.” The whole point of the game is to run your plays and find the ones your opponent can’t stop so you can move the ball and score without getting stopped every time.

I am saying that you can learn from your past, but you cannot allow your past to control your present decisions. When you do that, your life becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: “Well, I knew I was going to get stopped because of what has happened to me. But I tried, and sure enough, I got stopped.”

Too many of us are looking for excuses on which to hang our fears and shortcomings. You say, “My father wouldn’t work.” Well, you’d better get a job. You say, “My father disrespected and abandoned my mother.” Then you’d better learn honor and commitment. The problems in your past should become object lessons to show you where you need to be different, not excuses for you to repeat them.

Let’s go back to Joseph, because his story gets even more interesting from here on out. His brothers had done a number on him, but he didn’t just forget it. Anyone who tells you, “Just forget it, don’t think about it,” is not living in the real world. If it happened, you can’t just pretend that it didn’t. Other people did some bad things to Joseph, but God also did something.

Making the Most of the Present

The first thing God did was elevate Joseph to the rank of prime minister in Egypt. That took care of his living conditions. But he was still bereft of his family, so God gave him a new family, new relationships to replace the bad ones. Joseph married Asenath (Gen. 41:45), an interracial marriage. Then God gave the couple two sons, to whom Joseph gave very interesting names:

Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On, bore them to

him. 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.” The name of the second he called Ephraim, “For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.” (Gen. 41:50–52)

By naming his sons this way, Joseph was declaring one more way he resolved to look ahead and let the pain of his past stay behind. That’s what he meant when he talked about forgetting. Obviously, as we will see, he didn’t forget the facts of his past. Those facts just didn’t hurt anymore.

Appropriate relationships help you not to dwell on the negative things in the past that hurt you, but on the positive things that God is doing in your life. If old relationships are destroying you, maybe it’s because you have not replaced them with great relationships. Now, I’m not talking about replacing your wife with a new one, so don’t tell anyone I said that. I’m talking about no longer hanging out with people who remind you how bad off you are and how you have every reason to be mad and not set things right. The reason some men are depressed is because they hang out with depression; that is, with other guys who are as messed up as they are and who aren’t planning to go anywhere either. That just reinforces the pain.

Sure, you still have scars from the past. We all do. But they’re like a surgical incision. That cut may have hurt tremendously when you first woke up from your operation, but ten years later, the pain should be long forgotten. If that incision still hurts ten years later, something is wrong.

Why? Because God wants you to have a “Manasseh” experience. He wants to help you forget. He also wants to give you an “Ephraim” experience. He wants to make you fruitful in the very place where you were afflicted.

God took a slave rotting in jail, a nobody in the world’s eyes, and made him the second biggest someone in the world’s most powerful nation at the time: Egypt. A lot of men are concerned about the “nobody scenarios” in their lives, while God is waiting to make them somebodies if they will but surrender to him.

As Christian men, you and I need to develop thankful hearts toward God. We need to say: “Even though someone messed me over,

I'm still here to talk about it. Even though someone tried to stop me, I'm still progressing. Lord, I'm going to stop focusing on how they messed up my yesterday, and I'm going to look at how you are putting me together today."

Many of us can't love our present families because we remember the families we grew up in. So we are causing misery rather than enjoying our relationships. If you had a bad father, you need a new father. If you had a bad mother, you need a new mother. If you had bad siblings, how about some new ones?

You say, "But you only have one father and mother." Not according to Jesus. Jesus told his disciples, "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19:29). God says he will be "a father of the fatherless" (Ps. 68:5).

But you say, "Where am I going to find this new family?" That's what the church is all about. The family of God is often the replacement for the messed-up family relationships we used to have. That's what Joseph's family was for him. But he had one more step to take.

Letting God Be God

This is the hard one. Joseph let God take care of the people who messed him over rather than trying to take care of them himself. A Scripture passage you need to know is Romans 12:17-19:

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord."

If you are thinking about revenge on those who have hurt you, you're stuck. Why? Because once you look back, you can't move forward. Besides, God commands you to leave the thing in his hands. And he can do a better job of settling things than you could ever do. Look at what he did in Joseph's case.

Genesis 41:56-57 describes the fulfillment of Pharaoh's dream

about the coming famine. And because the famine reached into Canaan, Jacob's family was affected by it too. So he sent his ten older sons to Egypt to buy food (42:1–3).

When they arrived in Egypt, guess whom they had to deal with? Joseph. What's more, Joseph recognized them right off. "Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he said. They said, 'From the land of Canaan, to buy food'" (Gen. 42:7).

We have arrived at the part of this story that could have been written by a Hollywood screenwriter. The intrigue, drama, and emotion of Genesis 42–45 are incredible. God had dropped all ten of the offending brothers in Joseph's lap. It was time for these men to face what they had done. It was reckoning time.

You'll want to read these chapters for yourself, because even if you remember the gist of the story, there are so many poignant moments and side plots going on that you need to know the whole account to get the full flavor.

The key thread of the story is that Joseph kept his brother Simeon and sent the others back home, warning them not to return without their little brother Benjamin. Jacob reluctantly agreed to let Benjamin go to Egypt with his brothers, where, after further testing of the brothers' attitudes, Joseph revealed his identity to them. After this, they were tearfully reunited. Then they sent for Jacob to live in Egypt, where food was plentiful. So the family was restored and their lives were saved.

That's the main story, but there is so much going on here that we need to learn from. I think one reason Joseph put his brothers through such a scary time was to test the depth of their repentance and to see if there was ground for a renewed relationship with them. He wanted to know if they were moving forward like he was or if they were just hanging around in the past.

Look at Genesis 42:36, which is the saddest part of the story. When Jacob heard that his sons had to take Benjamin back with them, he cried: "You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me."

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt like everything has broken down, everything has gone wrong? Let me tell you something: it all depends on whose glasses you are looking through.

To Jacob, everything seemed to be against him because he was looking at the present through the lens of the past, so his vision was blurred. He didn't know that Joseph was alive and that Simeon was eating at Joseph's table in Egypt. Jacob didn't know that Joseph was getting ready to bring the whole family to Egypt so they could eat again.

When all things seem to be against you, it may be because your vision is obscured by the past. When you look at your situation from a heavenly perspective, all these things may be *for* you. They just haven't been put together yet.

Things were about to be put together for Jacob and his sons. At first, Jacob refused to let Benjamin go to Egypt with the remaining ten brothers. But by the time we come to Genesis 43, the food shortage was again so severe that Jacob told his sons to get themselves back to Egypt to buy more grain.

That's when Judah reminded Jacob of Joseph's warning about Benjamin: "The man solemnly warned us, saying, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you'" (Gen. 43:3). So Jacob reluctantly agreed to let Benjamin go with the older sons.

It was during this visit, in which Simeon was reunited with his brothers (Gen. 43:23), that Joseph's emotions really began to overwhelm him. He had the brothers come over to his house for a little luncheon, and when he saw Benjamin again (he had seen him briefly back in v. 16), Joseph couldn't control his emotions. He went off by himself to cry, then later came out for the meal (vv. 29–31).

Here Joseph apparently decided to plant a little bit of consternation in the minds of the brothers, because he had them seated in rank according to their ages without anything being said. He went from number one right on down to number twelve without missing a beat. No wonder Genesis 43:33 concludes by saying that "the men looked at one another in amazement." How did this Egyptian know their birth order? What was the deal here?

Seeking God's Greater Purpose

Joseph was getting ready to reveal the truth of their reality. He had all the factual information he needed. He knew Jacob was well and he had seen his beloved brother Benjamin—remember, they were both sons of Rachel—with his own eyes. Now it was time to test his older brothers again.

Joseph had a good idea how they felt about him, but he wanted to see if they had any love for Benjamin. So he had incriminating evidence planted in Benjamin's sack and hauled the brothers back to his house after sending them away. Judah pleaded for Benjamin's life, which meant they passed the test (Gen. 44:1–34).

All of that set the stage for the high point of this drama, the moment when Joseph revealed his identity:

Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, "Make everyone go out from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please" (Gen. 45:1–4a).

Joseph wanted his brothers to get close and see that it was really him. He may have even revealed his circumcision to them as proof that he was a Hebrew, because no Egyptian would have borne that mark of the Hebrews. This would explain his sending everyone else out of the room and telling his brothers to come close.

But they were afraid to get close because they thought the next words out of his mouth would be: "Yeah, I'm Joseph, and you're dead! I've waited twenty years for this, and now I'm going to kill you!"

But that's not what Joseph said. In a great declaration of forgiveness and a tremendous statement of God's sovereignty, Joseph told his brothers three times that God had sent him to Egypt to save their lives (Gen. 45:5, 7–8).

Later, he said, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for

good” (Gen. 50:20). That’s the Old Testament version of Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Joseph’s vision wasn’t blurred; in fact, he saw the past in the light of God’s purpose.

Don’t miss what’s happening here. You don’t read that the brothers wailed, lamented, and begged Joseph’s forgiveness. It wasn’t necessary. His forgiveness took care of the terrible wrong they had done to him.

Forgetting What Lies Behind

If someone who has wronged you is not going to come around for another twenty years, you’d better get on with your life. You don’t want to look up one day and realize you’ve made no progress for the past twenty years or so because that thing and that person from the past have been controlling your mind. Let God cause that person to catch up with you while you keep moving.

Even if you don’t understand why certain things happened, God will always work out his purposes for good if you’ll give him a chance.

But you say, “My life is painful.” Oh, but God can make lemonade out of lemons. He can take a messed-up scenario and totally transform it if you allow his sovereignty to work in your life. That’s what God is after. He wants to mend your broken past so you can be fully useful again. God can turn a mess into a miracle.

A few years ago, an old lamp in our house fell and broke. It was in pretty bad shape, but we liked that old lamp, so I got out the Super Glue and went to work. I fit the pieces back together, let the glue dry, and put that lamp back on the stand. It’s still there. In fact, if you saw this lamp, you would never know it was once broken. I know it, but that’s irrelevant now because the glue worked and the lamp is giving light.

You may have a broken past, cracked by an uncaring father, a domineering mother, jealous siblings, perverted relatives, or a careless mate. But I want you to know that if you will bring that cracked vessel to Jesus Christ and let the Holy Spirit apply the glue of his grace, he can put your life together so that only you will know it was ever

cracked. And you may even forget it was once cracked because your light is still shining. That's what God can do. Because of him, you can also bring light to others.

My challenge to you, as one man to another and as a brother in Christ, is to not allow your past to control your walk with God in the present as you keep moving toward the future he has for you. It can happen if you will submit your past and your present to the lordship of Jesus Christ and live under the rule of God and his kingdom agenda for your life. When you do that, you won't need the past as an excuse anymore. In fact, you won't need *any* excuses anymore, because God will reveal the full power of his strength, redemption, and provision through you.

SOMETIMES HARD CIRCUMSTANCES IN LIFE MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR US TO BE ALL THAT GOD WANTS US TO BE.

But Tony Evans urges men to stop looking at these things as excuses and instead see them as challenges and opportunities for success.

Looking at men of God throughout the Bible such as Moses, Joseph, and David, Evans challenges men to put down our excuses, stop compromising, and fight to be men of commitment and character. Despite setbacks, failures, and pressures, we can still find purpose, meaning, and direction in life and be the men God calls us to be.



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MEN

