

Genesis 43:1-14 — How do I let go of grief?

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One of my favorite books and movies is Unbroken. It is the life story of Louie Zamperini, a famous Olympic runner that ended up serving in World War II. His job was to serve as a bombardier on a B-24 Liberator. At one point he and a portion of his crew were reassigned to use a B-24 called *The Green Hornet* for a search and rescue mission. *The Green Hornet* was notorious as a lemon. As everyone on the plane feared, a mechanical failure during that flight sent them crashing into the sea. Louie was one of three survivors. Floating in a life raft, the survivors eventually reached the Marshall Islands where they were captured by the Japanese Navy. That began a time of beating and mistreatment until the end of the war. Most of Louie's time as a POW was spent under constant torture by a prison guard named Mutsuhiro Watanabe, a man known to the prisoners as "The Bird." The Bird made Louie the object of his demonic hatred and rage. The Bird was so brutal that after the war he was named as one of the 40 most wanted war criminals in all of Japan.

When the war was over, Louie came home to a hero's welcome. He married and life appeared to return to normal. The problem was he couldn't let go of his past. Louie had a vicious hatred against The Bird and his former captors that he couldn't let go. He turned to drinking. He had continual nightmares of strangling his former captors that woke him during the night in a cold sweat. His marriage was on the rocks. His life was almost ruined. He was free from the

Japanese but he couldn't let his pain and his desire for revenge go. It was literally killing him.

This morning many of us are no different than Louie Zamperini. Maybe we weren't beaten by a Satanic prison guard, but each of us have people in our past that hurt us deeply. We have pain and losses that cratered our hearts. Just like Louie, we have a hard timemoving on. This morning we are going to look at how to move on after we were deeply hurt. We are going to learn how to let go of our past before it ruins our future. We will not do that by studying a man named Louie Zamperini but a man named Jacob.

As a church, we are studying through the book of Genesis. This morning we are in Genesis 43. While you are turning there, let me set the background for this chapter. Jacob had a dozen boys. Joseph was Jacob's favorite son from his favorite wife. Jacob's family was a hillbilly messed up one where Jacob found himself married to four women. He had children through each of them.

When his favorite son Joseph was 17, out of jealousy his brothers sold him into slavery. The brothers made it appear as if Joseph was devoured by a wild animal. Jacob was so devastated by the loss of his favorite son from his favorite wife that he never recovered.

Thankfully for Jacob, his favorite wife had one more child. There was a type of replacement for Joseph. His name was Benjamin. He was particularly special because Jacob's beloved wife died as he was born. Benjamin became Jacob's new favorite son in Joseph's place. He was a favorite son in a different way. Benjamin became one of those overprotected children. Jacob lost Joseph.

He was so afraid of losing Benjamin so he kept him in a bubble and wouldn't let him out of his sight.

Last week in Genesis we saw that famine had overrun the land. Jacob sent 10 sons to the land of Egypt to buy food so they would not die. The one person Jacob wouldn't let out of his sight was Benjamin, because Jacob was an overprotective father, even though Benjamin was 24.

What the sons of Jacob didn't know when they went to Egypt is that through a series of divine events God watched over Joseph and moved him up the corporate ladder. He went from a lowly slave to second in charge of Egypt under Pharaoh. When Joseph's brothers came to buy grain, they didn't realize that when they bowed before that powerful Egyptian official, it was actually their brother. That began a series of tests by Joseph where he wanted to see if they were still the same heartless scoundrels of the past. He accused them of being spies. He asked about their father and about their brother. Joseph took one of the brothers, a man named Simeon, and put him in jail. Joseph said the only way Simeon would be released and they could buy more food was if they brought Benjamin back with them on their return trip. That would be proof they were telling the truth and were not spies. Would they leave Simeon in Egypt like they left Joseph or would they return?

When they arrived home and told their father everything that happened, they were eager to return to Egypt, free Simeon from jail and buy more food if dad would just let Benjamin return with them. Do you think overprotective Jacob

would let Benjamin go? Absolutely not. I love the way Jacob said this at the end of chapter 42 because it revealed his heart.

But he said, “My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is the only one left. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.” Genesis 42:38 (ESV)

What did he mean Benjamin was the only one left? Jacob had nine other sons standing in front of him. How do you think that made the rest of his kids feel when he didn’t even recognize them as his children? He had a son in jail that would be set free if he would just let Benjamin join them for the return trip. Overprotective Jacob wouldn’t let Benjamin go because he was still holding on to the grief of losing Joseph. In fact, Jacob wouldn’t let them go for two full years until the family was dying of starvation. Why wouldn’t Jacob let Benjamin go? He refused to let go of the hurt in his past. It was killing any hope for the future. This is where we pick up the story.

Now the famine was severe in the land. And when they had eaten the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, “Go again, buy us a little food.” But Judah said to him, “The man solemnly warned us, saying, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.’ If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. But if you will not send him, we will not go down, for the man said to us, ‘You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.’ ” Israel said, “Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?” They replied, “The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our kindred, saying, ‘Is your father still alive? Do you have another brother?’ What we told him was in answer to these questions. Could we in any way know that he would say, ‘Bring your brother down?’” And Judah said to Israel his father, “Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I will be a pledge of his safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice.” Genesis 43:1–10 (ESV)

The story started out and Dad realized they were desperate. I don't think he was rational. He told his sons to go and buy a little food. This was not a trip to Casey's Corner market. It was 250 miles one way. As Judah said, "If dad hadn't delayed, they could have made this trip twice."

Judah, his fourth son, took leadership. This is interesting. He would continue to be the leader in the family for the rest of Genesis. That is especially interesting if you know his dark past, which we studied a few weeks earlier in Genesis. Judah was a man saved by grace who was now returned to the family and used to lead the family in a great way.

Judah said, "Dad, you know they told us not to even bother coming if we don't bring Benjamin with us. Dad, you need to let him go or everyone will die."

I like the way Jacob said this. He said, "Why did you tell him about your brother? You should have lied." The truth is when our hurt becomes our idol it becomes so precious to us that we use it to justify our sin. Holding on to Benjamin was so precious to Jacob that he felt he could justify lying to preserve Benjamin.

Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry a present down to the man, a little balm and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds. Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks. Perhaps it was an oversight. Genesis 43:11–12 (ESV)

This is interesting. How hungry is everyone? They were starving. What did Jacob tell them to do? Bring what little food they had left and give it to the man who had all the food in the world so they could butter him up. Jacob was trying to manipulate people, which was his personality.

Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man. May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.”
Genesis 43:13–14 (ESV)

Here is another interesting part of the story. What did he call Simeon? The “other brother.” Do you notice he didn’t even call Simeon by name? He called Benjamin by name but he couldn’t even remember his second-born son’s name. This is incredible favoritism. It was only two years, and he already forgot him.

Then he said, “If I am bereaved, I am bereaved.” He finally let go of his past hurt. Here is what is interesting: By holding on to his past hurt, he thought he was protecting himself from getting hurt but in reality he was killing himself and his family.

1. He was pouring the poison of dysfunction into his family by showing blatant favoritism to Benjamin.
2. He left Simeon, his second-born child, rot in an Egyptian jail because he wouldn’t let go of Benjamin because he held onto his past hurts.
3. He brought his family to the brink of starvation because he wouldn’t let Benjamin go.
4. He unknowingly kept himself from seeing Joseph, because he wouldn’t move past the pain of the past and let Benjamin go.

Holding on to the past kept him from moving into what God had for him in the future.

For the balance of our time I want to take this incident in Jacob’s life and put it in our real world. Last week, we saw how guilt defined Joseph’s brothers. This week we saw how grief defined Jacob, Joseph’s father. Just like Jacob, it is

easy for each of us to become defined by our deep wounds because we are never willing to move forward and let them go. Unless we learn how to process that hurt, just like Jacob, we will end up hurting our family, and never moving into what God has for us in the future.

This morning we are going to look at three questions about grief and hurt to help us move forward. They are: Why did it happen? What should I do now? How can I move on?

Why did it happen?

Whenever life falls apart for us, like it did for Jacob, we can't help but ask why. The Bible gives us three reasons why hard times come our way.

1. **Sometimes we bring hardships on ourselves.** A classic example is the story of David and Bathsheba. David slept with Bathsheba, who was the wife of one of his elite soldiers named Uriah. When she became pregnant, he arranged for Uriah to die on the field of battle making David guilty of adultery and murder so he could take Bathsheba as his wife. David thought he got away with it until Nathan the prophet came to him and told him a story of a minor injustice. David reacted in rage, saying the man who committed the injustice deserved to die. Nathan pulled the trap door on his story and said, "David, you are that man." You are the one who sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba. Psalm 32 talks about how David was filled with grief and remorse and literally felt sick all the time he held in his sin. Even though God forgave David's sin, from that point forward, his life went downhill.

Application: Never blame God for self-inflicted pain and hurt.

We do this all the time. We drive 20 mph over the speed limit then blame God for the cop that pulled us over and gave us a ticket. We drink alcohol and wonder why we struggle making poor choices when we get drunk. The classic example is the young girl who conceives unexpectedly after having sex with her boyfriend and she says, "Why did God do this to me?" Unless your name is Mary, God didn't do this to you.

We can't move into the future unless we accept our own responsibility in the tragedies in life and refuse to blame God. We can't blame our parents, our teachers, our friends or our country. In every life-disaster, stop blaming other people, look inside yourself and take responsibility for your own sin and poor judgment. Even if everything is not your fault in a situation, be quick to own whatever is your fault, confess it, seek forgiveness with God and with the people you sinned against. Unless we do that, we will end up stuck in the grief of the past, just like Jacob. Unless we own our sin, we can't do something to repent and change our sin.

A great example of owning sin, repenting of sin and moving forward is found in 2 Samuel 12 with David and Bathsheba. As a result of David's sin, Nathan the prophet told David that the child conceived by his illicit union with Bathsheba would die. Shortly after their son was born, the child became sick. David was heartbroken. He fasted and prayed with tears, but over time the child passed away. After he died, David got up and ate. His servants couldn't understand why he stopped mourning after his son's death. David answered them this way.

Then his servants said to him, “What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food.” He said, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, ‘Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?’ But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.” 2 Samuel 12:21–23 (ESV)

There was nothing more he could do. What was done was done. It was over. There was no point living in the past. It was time to move on. David went back to Bathsheba and they were comforted in being together after the loss of their son. From that union another son was born. His name was Solomon, the great king of Israel, the author of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. Solomon is literally called the beloved of the Lord in the Bible. What would have happened if David refused to move on after his son’s death? What would have happened if he kept living in the past, he never returned to playing the role of Bathsheba’s husband and Solomon was never conceived?

2. Sometimes we suffer because of other people’s sin. If you weren’t the cause of the pain and suffering in your life, ask yourself if you are caught in the backlash of someone else’s sin. In a fallen world, that happens. The classic example is the story of Achan. When ancient Israel conquered Jericho, they were to destroy everything and devote it to destruction. Achan decided to keep some for himself and he buried it under his tent. When they went to the next battle against Ai, instead of defeating this small city, they were defeated. Thirty-six men died that day. Wives lost their husbands and children lost their fathers. None of it was because of their sin. It was all because they were caught in the consequences of Achan’s sin. When we sin, other people suffer.

When I lived in Michigan, I lived on the east side of Lake Michigan. In the spring, after the lake thawed, oil drums with skulls and crossbones on them sometimes washed up on our shore. Usually they were leaking toxic material into the lake. The people to find them were usually the children. The children were innocently playing in Lake Michigan with toxic waste leaking into the water. I often wondered if they would become sick or come down with cancer later in life because of their exposure. Why would they get sick? Not because of their own sin but because of someone else's sin. The man or woman that decided to get rid of toxic waste by pushing it into Lake Michigan was unwittingly poisoning children. Until Christ returns and rights all wrongs, that is the way things work in a fallen world. There are times and places where bad things happen to people not because they sinned but because they are caught in the backlash of someone else's sin.

3. God often has a larger purpose we may not see. This is how it was for Joseph. We are going to cheat a bit and jump forward in the story.

So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. Genesis 45:4–5 (ESV)

God had a grand purpose for all of Joseph's suffering that he did not understand, while he was going through it. When he was in the pit crying and asking for release when his brothers sold him into slavery, he had no idea it was all part of God's plan to send him to Egypt to save the lives of millions. When he was falsely accused of rape, he had no idea it was part of God's plan to get him close to the cup bearer so he could remember Joseph at just the right time to

Pharaoh. Joseph had no clue all the hardships he faced were part of God's master plan to refine Joseph's character and save the lives of millions in the ancient world. In particular, God's plan involved using Joseph to save the lives of the very brothers that wanted to kill him. Joseph had no clue what God was up to until 22 years later, when he looked into the rearview mirror and could see the way God worked things out. That is the way God works in our lives, not just Joseph's. When we go through some of our most painful tragedies, we may never understand God's purposes until years down the road.

Why did this happen to me is the wrong question to get stuck on. What should I do now is the right question to focus on.

What should I do now?

When we ask this question, we see Joseph did exactly what we should do in tragedy and loss. Jacob did the opposite.

1. Embrace the grief and pain. A season of mourning when life falls apart is normal. It is natural. It is helpful. Throughout Scripture, when horrible things happen, there is always a season of mourning. Even Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. When Jesus was on the cross he cried out, "God, why have you forsaken me?" He didn't say, "This doesn't hurt because it is part of God's larger purpose." Grief and despair when life falls apart is normal and healthy. Here is the key. Don't set up camp there. It is OK to be broken. It is OK to cry to God, your spouse or a close friend when tragedy strikes, but then you need to set yourself to move on. The best way to help someone when tragedy strikes is to weep with those who weep as it says in Romans 12:15. Cry with them. Don't

give them explanations. Just love them. Allow yourself to genuinely feel their loss, then when it is time, help them to take baby steps to move forward.

2. Embrace the blessings. In the dark times, look for the good things and focus on thanking God for them. Recently, Merle Wallace, one of our camera men, had a heart attack. As I sat with him and his wife in the hospital, Bonnie was thanking God for little islands of grace in that tragedy. They thanked God for the lady who was late that afternoon so they didn't drive out of town that night for dinner but went to Remington's, a restaurant in town, which happens to be right next to the ambulance. They thanked God that when the heart attack happened, Merle had the car started and his hand on the gearshift but hadn't put the car in gear. If the heart attack hit him 30 seconds later they would have been driving down the road. That was just the beginning of their list of little islands of God's grace in the middle of life falling apart. When hard times hit, look for those little islands of grace to stand on to keep your head above water in the hard times and see God's goodness.

...give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (ESV)

An attitude of thankfulness when life is falling apart is like penicillin to the bacteria of bitterness that gets injected into our hearts when our world comes undone. If you live in the pain and bitterness and don't cultivate thankfulness for the little things, you will find yourself stuck in the pain of the past like Jacob.

3. Embrace your new normal. This is what Joseph did as a slave. When he found himself as a slave in Potiphar's house, rather than whining about his misfortune, he worked hard to serve his master. When he found himself falsely

accused in jail, he embraced the new normal and set about serving the prisoners rather than whining about his misfortune. Jacob did the opposite. He kept grieving. He kept a bubble around Benjamin. He favored Benjamin and spread the toxic poison of grief and favoritism into the lives of the rest of his children.

How can I move on?

1. **Stop picking the scab.** It is normal to remember what was done to you and learn from it but don't be defined by it. Joseph remembered the pain but moved on. Jacob remembered the pain and let his life become defined by it. Everything in his life was lived in reference to the pain of losing Joseph.

How do you know if you are picking an emotional scab?

1. **Does your the wound of your past constantly dominate your thoughts?**

If there is nothing else you can do or think of, it is scab picking.

2. **Does it isolate you from others, from family and friends?** If all you want to do is be alone and grieve and not be around other people, you are scab picking.

3. **Does it paralyze your decision making?** If you can't make a decision, like Jacob, it is because you are scab picking and stuck in the past.

4. **If you become hyper-controlling because you are afraid of the future,** you are scab picking. That is what Jacob did with Benjamin.

2. **Cast your anxieties on God.** Know that when life falls apart, God cares for you. Know God loves you. Leave your worries at the foot of the cross in prayer and know that while you don't have life under control, God does.

...casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. 1 Peter 5:7 (ESV)

If we don't give our worries about the future to God, we will become bitter people. In fear, we will ruin all our relationships because we will never trust people. If you are in leadership, out of fear, you will make long lists of rules for people that work for you to follow but in doing so you will stifle their creativity and joy.

Conclusion

Louie Zamperini was dominated by nightmares of strangling his former captors, which led to drinking and ruining his marriage. A turn around in his life began in 1949 when his wife attended a Billy Graham crusade and became a born-again Christian. Later, he reluctantly agreed to go to a crusade himself. In that crusade Louie gave his life to Christ. He forgave his captors and his nightmares ceased.

After he became a Christian, he stopped asking the question, "Why did this happen?" and he started asking the question, "What should I do now?" It was when that happened when God began using the deep wounds of his past to make a difference in his life and in the lives of others in the future. Louie became a famous Christian evangelist who constantly talked about forgiveness. He even visited many of the guards that tortured him in his Japanese prison to let them know he forgave them for what they did.

Most famous of all was four days before his 81st birthday when Japan asked him to run a leg in the Olympic torch relay at the Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan — not far from the POW camp where he was held and tortured. While there, he attempted to meet with The Bird to offer forgiveness, but The Bird refused to see him.

Little did Louie know his life story of hardship and torture followed by forgiveness through Jesus would become a famous book and then a film that told his life story to millions, and in so doing, made the name of Jesus and the powerful transformation he brings to a life famous around the world.

The key to all of this is why Jesus helped him to stop asking the question, “Why did this tragedy happen to me?” and to start asking the question, “What should I do now?” That was the key to God using his pain for God’s glory.

This morning, when it comes to the pain of your past, which questions are you asking?



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