

Music is a universal language for all. One of my favorite artists says it like this: “Funny how a melody sounds like a memory.” When I hear a melody, memories flood over me. No matter what mood I am in, where I am, what situation I've been through, what I have experienced, when I hear that song, I can picture the time, place, outfit, who I was with, the road I was driving on or situation I was in. Do you have songs, artists or lyrics that do that to you?

I have literally traveled tens of thousands of miles throughout my life across the United States. During these way, way back round trips music was always a staple. What is a road trip without good music to keep you company? Those roads would have been lonely without the radio to scan through and find more songs to be my friend on the trips back and forth to Lubbock to care for my dad or the family trips growing up as a kid with my parents' minivan 8 track singing along, or the top five songs that played the summer of 2013 when my family of four took our summer vacation to Galveston. We still can hear those songs on the radio today and talk about the memories of that trip together!

We're going to be exploring the next chapter of Joseph's story today. When I sat down to write this sermon, I wanted to find a song that might have been on his playlist during that time. Probably at the top of the list was Hank Williams' “I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry”

Hear that lonesome whippoorwill
He sounds too blue to fly
The midnight train is whining low
I'm so lonesome I could cry

I've never seen a night so long
When time goes crawling by
The moon just went behind the clouds
To hide its face and cry

Did you ever see a robin weep
When leaves began to die?
Like me, he's lost the will to live
I'm so lonesome I could cry

The silence of a falling star
Lights up a purple sky
And as I wonder where you are
I'm so lonesome I could cry

In this song, we don't know why Hank Williams is sad. He doesn't tell us who left him alone or why. The situation is vague, but the feeling of loneliness, of sadness isn't. No wonder this song is iconic - it has become an anthem for sadness!! Misery loves company! Anyone who's ever been lonely can feel his loneliness. We can tell it is always dark when he feels lonely because he shares with us the dark sky, the clouds and the moon going behind them to cry.

Who is this “you” he talks about? Who do you think it might be? Is it so ambiguous that it could be God? When I hear Hank Williams’ voice and songs I can just feel his pain and sorrow through the sound of his voice, guitar and lyrics much like you can feel Joseph’s pain throughout these chapters we will discuss today.

We're going to ask the question: what does faithfulness look like when we're so lonely we could cry? When it feels like even God has abandoned us, when we're in a pit or prison of despair, how do we remain faithful to God's call? And we'll see that God is with us, even in the pit, even when we can't sense God's presence. Faithfulness begins by trusting God is always working.

Let's begin by worshiping the God who is always with us, always working, even when we can't see.

Message

Our summer series is called "The Way, Way Back". Hopefully that calls to mind summer vacations, road trips and fights over who got shotgun or controlled the radio or CDs you listened to!! This series is all about the things we learn when we're willing to leave home and explore!!!

We're in the book of Genesis, following the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith as they follow God on road trips of their own. We've met Abraham, Isaac and Jacob so far, and last week, we entered the story of Joseph.

Last week, JR introduced us to Joseph. He had the supernatural ability to access the dream world, and God gave him a specific dream: that he would one day rule over his family. This was unthinkable in Joseph's day - Joseph's brothers reacted by throwing him in a pit and selling him into slavery.

Joseph's story begs the question: will God's dream become a reality? Or can the evil of humanity stop God's dream? That's an important question as we consider God's dream for Catalyst and for us.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to Genesis 39. We're going to continue to follow Joseph's story. Today, we're going to cover several chapters of Scripture, hitting the highlights of Joseph's story. Take some time this week to read the stories for yourself. I'll warn you: these are really more like 'lowlights' than highlights. Things don't often go well for Joseph. We will see several accounts of Joseph's ability to interpret other people's dreams, but more often than not, he ends up in pits and prisons, places of darkness. All along the way, we wonder: is God going to be faithful to God's promise? Will the dream come true? Or can other people's sin stop God's plan?

When we last saw Joseph, his brothers had thrown him in a pit and sold him to slave traders. The slave traders took him to Egypt. Meanwhile, the brothers lied to their father, telling him Joseph had been killed by wild animals all because Joseph's dream threatened them. They didn't want to serve their younger brother. So they tried to stop the dream. Did the brothers' sins against Joseph stop God's dream?

Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar who was captain of the guard for Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. It did not take long for Potiphar to see Joseph had been blessed by God and everything he did, he did well. Potiphar made Joseph his personal assistant and God continued to look over Joseph and protect him by giving much prosperity to Potiphar's household. Joseph worked hard for Potiphar, still staying faithful to God, but there seemed no end in sight. Joseph is working hard and making his master a lot of money, but he is still a slave.

Have you felt this way? That you were working hard and seeing no end in sight? Have you been stuck in a job and your work was not recognized. Or in a relationship when the other person is not doing what is needed to make it grow. Have you sat wondering why God wasn't answering your prayers or wanting something better for you? Do you think this is how Joseph felt working for Potiphar and not receiving any of the profit or benefits of his labor.

Potiphar began to trust Joseph more and more, but you see Joseph was a very handsome looking man and Potiphar's wife began to make advances at him. Joseph would repeatedly resist her because he was loyal to Potiphar for all he had done and it would be a great sin against God. But one day the wife tricked him!! While Joseph was alone she cornered him and when he pulled to get away from her part of his cloak was ribbed remaining in the wife's hand!! The wife called to the other servants that he had tried to take advantage of her and how dare her husband bring this man into their home.

Potiphar was furious when he heard his wife's story about how Joseph had treated her. So he took Joseph and threw him into the prison where the king's prisoners were held, and there he remained. -- Genesis 39:19-20

Doesn't sound so great does it? Being thrown into jail for a crime Joseph didn't commit. He did everything right, everything God had asked of him, he did not sin against those around him, but he kept being sinned against. He was innocent. Have you had someone sinned against you or brought you harm? We all have. What about when an injustice has happened to a loved one or friend. How did it make you feel? Anger, sad, furious, mad, defeated, hopeless? What did you want to do to protect them, help them in the ways they needed? Did you find in those times of darkness you reached out to God for help, for guidance, for comfort? Did you feel alone for longer than you can remember?

God was faithful to Joseph, even in that cold, dark, hopeless, lonely and never ending imprisonment. God made Joseph a favorite with the warden, who gave Joseph many responsibilities. Joseph still remained in prison unjustly for a long time and honestly I don't care how much God is with me, I would be infuriated and felt abandoned. We might not have had the experience of being in prison, but we have had experiences here on Earth that felt as if we were in a pit. You might have sat with a sick loved one and wanted to take their pain away, struggled financially wondering if you would ever be able to see over the stack of bills, started over in a career, waited for a new job to come along that you never thought would or struggled to leave a relationship that left you in the pit. But Joseph trusts and trusts and trusts that God is with him. Should we?

[Scripture Slide 2] Flip over to chapter 40. Pharaoh had imprisoned two of his officials who had betrayed him, a chief cupbearer and chief baker. Guess who was in charge of them? That's right - Joseph. One morning Joseph noticed the two seemed upset and asked why they were this way. They both said they had dreams the night before, but there was no one there that could interpret them. Joseph told them that interpreting dreams was God's business, but he asked to hear their dreams. In these dreams one of the servants will be freed and the other one will be executed. After deciphering their dreams he asks starting in verse 14:

Please remember me and do me a favor when things go well for you. Mention me to Pharaoh, so he might let me out of this place. For I was kidnapped from my homeland, the land of the Hebrews, and now I'm here in prison, but I did nothing to deserve it." -- Genesis 40:14-15

The dreams come true - the baker is executed and the cupbearer is freed and restored to his place at Pharaoh's table. But do you think he remembered Joseph? Nope. So Joseph continues to rot in prison, despite being faithful to God. If you were like Joseph, forgotten and alone in the pit would you faithful to God? We all experience those dark times, where we feel alone, abandoned. Where we sit in silence waiting for God to speak.

And it feels like even God has forgotten us. We read this story and ask, “Is God REALLY with Joseph?” It sure doesn’t seem like it.

[Scripture Slide 3] Now flip to the end of chapter 41. Fast-forward several more years and now Pharaoh is the one who’s had a dream no one is able to interpret. Remember, ancient people saw dreams as messages from the gods, so the fact that Pharaoh can’t understand this divine message terrifies him. And here, finally, the cupbearer remembers Joseph interpreting his dream. He tells his master and Pharaoh brings Joseph to explain his dream.

Joseph tells Pharaoh that God is warning him: Egypt is about to experience seven years of bounty, but it will be followed by seven years of severe famine. Joseph recommends Pharaoh appoint someone to oversee famine preparation, building up stockpiles of grain from the years of plenty so that when the famine hits, Egypt can survive. Let’s read what happens next:

Joseph’s suggestions were well received by Pharaoh and his officials. So Pharaoh asked his officials, “Can we find anyone else like this man so obviously filled with the spirit of God?” Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has revealed the meaning of the dreams to you, clearly no one else is as intelligent or wise as you are. You will be in charge of my court, and all my people will take orders from you. Only I, sitting on my throne, will have a rank higher than yours.” Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I hereby put you in charge of the entire land of Egypt.” -- Genesis 41:37-41

Joseph is suddenly the second most powerful person in the world. The Dream is coming true. Even after years of darkness and being alone thinking Joseph was forgotten by God, God was always at work for Joseph’s future.

And maybe the most amazing part of the story is that, through it all, Joseph never wavered. Did he have doubts? Was he afraid? Did he question? Of course he did - he was human. But he always acted with integrity. He always stayed faithful to God.

When we are in the pit, how can we have faith like Joseph? Is it making space to look for Jesus in your everyday life? Is it waiting for God to give you an answer to a prayer even when it is not on your time frame? Is it reflecting Jesus’ heart to those that have lied or sinned against you? Is it offering forgiveness when you don’t feel like you should or the other person is undeserving? Is it giving yourself grace in the sins you have committed? This is hard stuff!

God knows your frustrations with your job, your neighbor or your relationships. God wants to help guide you through your frustrations. God is working with you in your relationships to grow your relationships stronger and healthier.

We need to pause and state clearly that God didn't do any of this to Joseph. When bad things happen, often times Christians shrug our shoulders and say, "Everything happens for a reason." But saying that is saying that God causes us to sin, that God wills evil to happen so God can get what God wants.

God doesn't do this to us.

God doesn't bring us harm or want harm to be done to us. God doesn't cause bad things. God is not responsible for sin. God doesn't make us sin. God doesn't WANT us to sin. But God will work around our sin to accomplish the Dream.

Did God have Joseph's brothers sell him as a slave? NO. Joseph's brothers did that. Did God make Potiphar's wife falsely accuse Joseph? NO. Potiphar's wife did that. Did God choose to put Joseph in prison to get Joseph where he needed to be? No. God did not cause any of this to happen. God is not the author of Sin.

So how can the Bible say God is with Joseph if God is not causing these things to happen? Paul tells the Church in Rome, "**We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.**" -- Romans 8:28

God did not sell Joseph into slavery, but God would not let the sin of Joseph's brothers stop the Dream. God did not falsely accuse Joseph, but God would not let prison stop the Dream. God did not cause the cup-bearer to forget Joseph, but God would not let forgetfulness stop the Dream.

Even when we're in a pit, even when we feel so lonesome we could cry, God is with us, working to bring about the Dream. Even when we are the victims of others' actions, God will not be stopped. Even when we're the ones who got ourselves in the pit, God is working.

Having intimacy with God frees us from the worries and sins we bear. Praying, spending time in scripture, talking to God, meditating helps us become more free and feel closer to God.

I don't know whether Mother Teresa was a Hank Williams fan, but I think they would've had a lot to talk about. Mother Teresa spent the largest time in her life working in the

slums of India caring for the poor and orphaned children in a place filled with disease, poverty and desperation. She is universally regarded as a saint, one of the holiest, most godly people ever to live.

So many people were shocked when, after her death, Mother Teresa's journals and letters revealed she was tormented by doubt and had long periods of time when she didn't feel God was with her. "Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear. The tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak." -- Mother Teresa of Calcutta

The pictures we remember and see of Mother Teresa in her signature white and blue sari holding a baby with her large smile or praying with a sick person. This woman I never can recall a time where she does not seem happy to be caring for those that others would not. Can you imagine a woman who had dedicated her life to God's work and seemed so faithful, full of love, compassion and caring for those in need would secretly question God's faithfulness for over fifty years? One author called it 'spiritual heroism'.

What makes Mother Teresa letters and confessions so profound is even after years and years, decades of not feeling God's love she was still faithful. Being in a pit doesn't mean you're bad, or that you're doing something wrong. Joseph was in the pit. Mother Teresa spent decades in a pit. Being in a pit means you are human! That is just like us as people of the church! God doesn't call us to have perfect lives. God calls us to be faithful!! Faith means following God even in the pit. Even when we can't sense God. Because we trust. We trust God is with us. We trust God is working all things for our good.

When we doubt or don't feel like we're good enough Christians or God has forgotten me and my struggles. If I am in a pit is it because I have not been faithful enough to God? Are you in a job you no longer have a passion for or have been searching for a job and wonder where God is? Is there a relationship you are struggling with, financial situation, feel the lack of community or connection with others. Do you wonder where God is in your pit of career, love, home, community or nation? What about Mother Teresa or Joseph or others that have been in the pit? How long will you wait in God's faithfulness to bring light into your darkness?

Joseph's story invites us to have faith. We continue to live as a child of God, to do the next right thing. And we trust. By our lives, we insist God is with us, working unseen to bring about the Dream.

Communion + Examen

The Communion Table invites us into the pit with Jesus. When we come to this table, we join Jesus and his disciples at the meal they shared the night before Jesus was killed.

This was the night all the forces of darkness came together to stand against the Son of God. This was the night Jesus' closest friends and followers would betray, deny and abandon him.

And still, he called them to this table. He ate with them. During the meal, he broke bread with them, gave it to them as his body. He said, "Take and eat this, broken for you."

Later in the meal, he gave them a cup of wine, saying, "This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Take and drink it."

Jesus invites us into his darkest hour that we might remember he is with us in our darkest hour. No one could see it, but God was working with Jesus all the way to the cross. And God is with us, working everything for our good, even when we can't see it.

We come to the table by faith, trusting God to be at work, bringing life. We come to the table to receive God's grace. You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion with us today. If you're willing to come in faith, trusting God is with you, then you're welcome to join us today.

Before we come, I'm going to lead us in a Prayer of Examen. I'm going to ask you a series of questions and give you space to reflect prayerfully on them. Then, I'll pray for us all, and as you're ready, you can approach the table.

1. When in the last week did you see God at work in your life?
2. When in the last week did it seem God was absent?
3. When in the next week might God seem distant?
4. How can you choose to look for God at work with you this week?

Gracious God,

You have gathered us today to remind us that you are always with us, always at work. We confess that we struggle to remember you are with us in the dark times. Thank you for the faithful witness of your servant Joseph, who shows us what it looks like to seek out your unseen hand in even the pits and prisons of life.

We come to your table today to receive wafers and juice. We pray they become a spiritual food for us. Give us grace that our eyes might be opened to see you at work even in our darkest times.

Send us into your world as your people, eyes open to see you everywhere, that we might help others see you too.

We offer these prayers and approach your table today in the name of your Son, Jesus.

Blessing/Assignment