

Welcome

What is a time you can confidently say life did not go according to plan? I've shared before about when I got fired from my first church. Another pastor in town decided he didn't like how I taught about Jesus. He cherry picked some sentences out of a blog post I wrote and misrepresented me to a bunch of pastors in a closed internet forum I didn't have access to. Those pastors got worked up and, rather than engaging me, they contacted both my church and the campus ministry where I was a youth and college pastor.

In one of the most painful experiences of my professional career, the head pastor and the director of the campus ministry sat me down in a private meeting. They walked me through what was happening and then assured me I had done nothing wrong.

Then they publicly fired me.

That all happened in February and March of 2009. My wedding was scheduled for July of 2009.

I was suddenly faced with the end of my employment and possibly my calling and career. I felt lost, hopeless, betrayed - by my leaders and by God.

Have you been there? Maybe you lost a job. Or a relationship you thought was forever turned out to be for now. A huge number of Americans have left churches over the last decade because the churches weren't what they thought. I know a lot of you who currently call Catalyst your home church have experienced that, and that's part of why you're here.

Today, we're going to explore what faith looks like when Plan A falls apart. I can tell you: it's been a winding journey in the almost 15 years since those days. But looking back, I can see how God was with me, faithful even in the darkest, most painful parts of my life. And that recognition gives me the courage to choose faith yet again, in this time when we're on the cusp of another big change.

As we discover God's faithfulness when Plan A fails, friends, I hope you too can find that same courage to trust God is with us more so now than ever!

Message

We just started a series called New Leaf. Now, I know you're thinking that this feels like more of a spring series but I live in Texas, which quit having real seasons a few years ago. And this is a series about change. Change happens to us all the time, at every level. We experience personal change in the form of new relationships, the end of long-term relationships. We experience it in

changing jobs. Having kids, kids growing up. We experience change when we move and the world around us changes when we stay put.

And of course our church is changing. For almost 15 years, we've been a building-centric, locally focused congregation. But over the last few years, our circumstances have changed and we just voted on a new direction for our congregation. That's scary. I don't know very many people who love change, who seek it out. Most of us prefer predictability and stability, and one thing we know about change is that it's seldom predictable or stable.

So we're spending six weeks looking at some people in Scripture who had to face big changes - changes that felt as existential as the changes we're facing right now. We're going to explore the nature of the changes they faced, compare them to the changes facing us, and we're going to ask what we can learn about how to be faithful now from how they were faithful then.

Last week, we began by looking at the role of faith in change. We saw Abram encounter a god he didn't know and set out on a journey with no map, blueprint or plan outside of this God's promise to him. Similarly, we're headed into a chapter that is fraught, and like Abram, God calls us to follow by faith.

Today, I want to acknowledge that change is hard. I think change is always hard, but the sort of change we're experiencing right now as a congregation is especially brutal. I'm going to call it "Plan B" change - a change we embark on because Plan A didn't work out.

There's a deep sense of betrayal that comes when Plan A falls apart. That's not just from the people on the other end of that plan - the bosses or partners or parents or friends. If we're people of faith, we experience a deep sense of betrayal by God too. How could God let this happen? Weren't we doing our best?

Turn with us to [Genesis 37](#).

I want to explore the story of Joseph today. Joseph is Abram's great-grandson. God was faithful to God's promise to Abram, and he and his wife Sarai had a son named Isaac. Isaac had twins, and Jacob, the younger twin, had twelve sons. Joseph was number 11.

I'm not going to stand here as an older brother and say that all younger siblings are annoying. But Joseph sure was. His brothers really disliked him (which probably had something to do with his dad naming and treating Joseph as his favorite).

But the other thing about Joseph is that he had this superpower - he had the ability to see the future in dreams, and to interpret the dreams of other people. And while that might sound like an amazing power, it actually got him into a good bit of trouble. Let's take a look:

One night Joseph had a dream, and when he told his brothers about it, they hated him more than ever. "Listen to this dream," he said. "We were out in the field, tying up bundles of grain.

Suddenly my bundle stood up, and your bundles all gathered around and bowed low before mine!”

His brothers responded, “So you think you will be our king, do you? Do you actually think you will reign over us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dreams and the way he talked about them.

Soon Joseph had another dream, and again he told his brothers about it. “Listen, I have had another dream,” he said. “The sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed low before me!”

This time he told the dream to his father as well as to his brothers, but his father scolded him. “What kind of dream is that?” he asked. “Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow to the ground before you?” But while his brothers were jealous of Joseph, his father wondered what the dreams meant. — [Genesis 37:5-11](#)

Joseph receives the plan clearly from God: at some point in the future, he’s going to be in power over his family. Now, if you’re an elder sibling, I don’t have to tell you how this landed. In the ancient world, where power in the family passed from the father to the eldest sibling, this was offensive even to dad, who remember favored Joseph.

(Which tells you something, right? Even the dad who played favorites for everyone to see wouldn’t dream of elevating his 11th son to the status of firstborn.)

But Joseph isn’t experimenting with creative writing. This is a promise from God. I wonder if Joseph, still being young and a little too cocksure, expected his family just to shrug their shoulders and go ahead and put him in charge. After all, that’s the plan!

When you think about our church, what was your plan A? We were founded as a church for people who don’t like church. A church for people who have been hurt or abandoned by the church. A church that exists not back where it’s comfortable, but on the front lines of God’s kingdom work.

How did you envision that playing out when you came to Catalyst? Was it to grow into a big building with tons of activities and programs? Was it to be a community hub? Or just a place where you could escape the chaos of the world, a safe harbor in a stormy life?

If you know Joseph’s story, you know his Plan A didn’t work out the way he imagined. In fact, every time he thought he got a leg up, it seemed like life kicked him down again.

His brothers were so incensed by his dreams they faked his death and sold him into slavery. He ended up sold in Egypt to a man named Potiphar. Joseph was so faithful and smart he ended up as the head slave in Potiphar’s house, which was a position of some power and privilege. We can imagine Joseph thinking to himself, “Well, had a rough patch, but I stuck to it and now I may not be #1 like I thought, but this isn’t too bad.”

And then Potiphar's wife accused him of assault, and Joseph landed in prison. He was there for *years*. But remember that dream superpower he had? Well it came in handy when two of Pharaoh's main servants got tossed in prison (apparently, Pharaoh had a bit of a temper.) Joseph interpreted one of their dreams to predict that he would be released soon and restored to his position. When it came true, the guy promised to tell Pharaoh about Joseph.

But he didn't. And Joseph remained in prison another five years.

Five years, y'all. Can you imagine? The hope he felt that maybe his luck was changing - the guy promised! - only to have the days turn to weeks turn to months turn to years.

But then Pharaoh had a couple of wacky dreams that no one could make sense of. Until that servant said, "Uh, your majesty? I might know a guy who's good with dreams..."

So Joseph gets hauled before Pharaoh. He tells Pharaoh that his dreams predict 7 years of bumper crops, then 7 years of devastating famine. Joseph suggests the nation use the first 7 years to save up so they can survive the famine. Pharaoh thinks this is a terrific idea, and also a lot of work, so he puts Joseph in charge.

And just like that, Joseph is the second most powerful person in Egypt, which makes him the second most powerful person in the world at that time.

Does that whiplash feel familiar? In the last decade here at Catalyst, we've experienced a similar sort of rollercoaster. We've had multiple staff who were hugely influential on our congregation who have hurt us and left. Because of our call to be a church for everyone, we took intentional steps to become more diverse. But we did that right as our culture became more and more divided. We lost people to that. We made it a point to be connected to our community, to be a church that's not just in our own walls, but is working to do good in the world. But again and again, our partners proved unreliable. And that's saying nothing about the pandemic we endured or the massive cultural shifts happening beyond our control.

I don't know about y'all, but there have been so many times over the last decade I've wondered if I'm crazy. I've asked where God is in the face of all this. If we're really following God's call on our church, why does it all look like... this?

Friends, we're kidding ourselves if we don't think Joseph experienced these same thoughts and emotions during his life. The path his life took was so different from his dream, and yet through it all, he remained faithful to God.

I want to invite us to take those thoughts and emotions we've experienced, that gap between our plans and dreams and the reality we're living - take all that into this next song with us. Because God isn't afraid of our questions and doubts. God isn't afraid of our pain, our sense of betrayal. Part of authentic worship is expressing those things to God.

Song

I told you Joseph is a model of faithfulness when our Plan As don't work out. I want to show you how Joseph's story ends:

Turn with us to [Genesis 45](#).

Remember, Joseph ended up being the second most powerful man in the world. He spent seven years preparing Egypt for the famine, then when the famine hit, he was in charge of administrating the distribution of government food stores.

And after a couple of years, guess who showed up needing food? That's right - his brothers. They came before Joseph and of course didn't recognize him (who could have *possibly* predicted that Joseph's vision would come true in such a twisty, turny way?)

Joseph does a bunch of wild trickery to test his brothers, to see whether they've changed in the decades since they faked his death and sold him into slavery. And it turns out, they have! So I want to read what happens when Joseph reveals his true identity:

Joseph could stand it no longer. There were many people in the room, and he said to his attendants, "Out, all of you!" So he was alone with his brothers when he told them who he was. Then he broke down and wept. He wept so loudly the Egyptians could hear him, and word of it quickly carried to Pharaoh's palace. "I am Joseph!" he said to his brothers. "Is my father still alive?" But his brothers were speechless! They were stunned to realize that Joseph was standing there in front of them. — [Genesis 45:1-3](#)

Now... "I am Joseph." Wow... that's quite the revelation. You can imagine the brothers' reaction - shock, fear. The brother the sold into slavery now holds their fates in his hand. What is he going to do? You can feel their reaction in how Joseph has to beg them to approach him:

"Please, come closer," he said to them. So they came closer. And he said again, "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into slavery in Egypt. But don't be upset, and don't be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place. It was God who sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives. — [Genesis 45:4-5](#)

Joseph doesn't ignore what they've done. He names it - I'm the brother you sold. But Joseph's faith has allowed him to see something bigger happening: God was at work in all Joseph's circumstances, ensuring God's plan of salvation never failed.

Now friends, I want to be very clear about something here: God does not cause sin. God didn't make Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. God didn't make Potiphar's wife falsely accuse Joseph of assault. And God didn't make that prisoner forget the promise he made to remember Joseph. God didn't *cause* Joseph's trauma.

But late in his life, as Joseph looks back at all hardship he's endured, Joseph doesn't experience God as one who betrayed him, but rather one who was faithful even in the worst of circumstances.

Joseph looks at all those evils he endured and says, "What others might have meant for evil, God used for the good not only of me, but of the whole world."

That's a powerful statement - that God is the God of Plan B, too. That no matter what happens to us, God is still at work, faithful even when we can't see how. In fact, it's only after the fact, from the vantage of hindsight that we can discern God's work.

So as we look to what's next for us, I hope we can all feel the freedom to admit this was not our Plan A. None of us expected or planned for this when we came to Catalyst. And yet, I hope too, by faith, we can like Joseph remain faithful. Trust that God is not done with us.

Because the same call God put before us in the beginning - to be a church for people who don't like church - is before us now. There's a whole world of folks out there who are experiencing injustice and alienation from themselves, from their neighbors, from their creator. And God has invited us to be part of the healing of that alienation in surprising ways.

Will we continue to say Yes? Will we continue by faith to trust the God who is still working among us and around us?

Communion + Examen

Jesus reminds us he is with us in every meal.

When in the last week have I trusted God is with me?

When have I struggled to believe God is with me?

When in the next week might I struggle to believe God is with me?

What does it look like for me to respond to God in faith in this next week?

Assignment + Blessing