

you'll
get
through
this

HOPE AND HELP FOR YOUR TURBULENT TIMES

MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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For Cheryl Green

Steady, wise, full of joy and faith.

Thank you for the innumerable hours of service you
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And Denalyn, my dear wife. You are a candle to my cavern, ever warm and bright. I love you.

you'll get
through this

She had a tremble to her, the inner tremble you could feel with just a hand on her shoulder. I saw her in a grocery store. Had not seen her in some months. I asked about her kids and husband, and when I did, her eyes watered, her chin quivered, and the story spilled out. He'd left her. After twenty years of marriage, three kids, and a dozen moves, gone. Traded her in for a younger model. She did her best to maintain her composure but couldn't. The grocery store produce section became a sanctuary of sorts. Right there between the tomatoes and the heads of lettuce, she wept. We prayed. Then I said, "You'll get through this. It won't be painless. It won't be quick. But God will use this mess for good. In the meantime don't be foolish or naive. But don't despair either. With God's help you will get through this."

Two days later a friend called. He'd just been fired. The dismissal was his fault. He'd made stupid, inappropriate remarks at work. Crude, offensive statements. His boss kicked him out. Now he's a fifty-seven-year-old unemployed manager in a rotten economy. He feels terrible and sounds worse. Wife angry. Kids confused. He needed assurance, so I gave it: "You'll get through this. It won't be painless. It won't be quick. But God will use this mess for good. In the meantime don't be foolish or naive. But don't despair either. With God's help you will get through this."

Then there is the teenager I met at the café where she works.

you'll get through this

She's fresh out of high school, hoping to get into college next month. Her life, as it turns out, hasn't been easy. When she was six years old, her parents divorced. When she was fifteen, they remarried, only to divorce again a few months ago. Recently her parents told her to choose: live with Mom or live with Dad. She got misty-eyed as she described their announcement. I didn't have a chance to tell her this, but if I see her again, you can bet your sweet September I am going to look her square in the eyes and say, "You'll get through this. It won't be painless. It won't be quick. But God will use this mess for good. In the meantime don't be foolish or naive. But don't despair either. With God's help you will get through this."

Audacious of me, right? How dare I say such words? Where did I get the nerve to speak such a promise into tragedy? In a pit, actually. A deep, dark pit. So steep, the boy could not climb out. Had he been able to, his brothers would have shoved him back down. They were the ones who had thrown him in.

So it came to pass, when Joseph had come to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the tunic of many colors that was on him. Then they took him and cast him into a pit. And the pit was empty; there was no water in it.

And they sat down to eat a meal. (Gen. 37:23–25)

It was an abandoned cistern. Jagged rocks and roots extended from its sides. The seventeen-year-old boy lay at the bottom. Downy beard, spindly arms and legs. His hands were bound, ankles tied. He lay on his side, knees to chest, cramped in the small space. The sand was wet with spittle, where he had drooled. His eyes were wide with fear. His voice was hoarse from screaming. It wasn't that his brothers didn't hear him. Twenty-two years later, when a famine had tamed their swagger and guilt had dampened their pride, they would

confess, “We saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear” (42:21).

These are the great-grandsons of Abraham. The sons of Jacob. Couriers of God’s covenant to a galaxy of people. Tribes will bear their banners. The name of Jesus Christ will appear on their family tree. They are the Scriptures’ equivalent of royalty. Yet on this day they were the Bronze Age version of a dysfunctional family. They could have had their own reality TV show. In the shadow of a sycamore, in earshot of Joseph’s appeals, they chewed on venison and passed the wineskin. Cruel and oafish. Hearts as hard as the Canaanite desert. Lunch mattered more than their brother. They despised the boy. “They hated him and could not speak peaceably to him . . . they hated him even more . . . they hated him . . . his brothers envied him” (37:4–5, 8, 11).

Here’s why. Their father pampered Joseph like a prized calf. Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel, but one love, Rachel. When Rachel died, Jacob kept her memory alive by fawning over their first son. The brothers worked all day. Joseph played all day. They wore clothes from a secondhand store. Jacob gave Joseph a hand-stitched, multi-colored cloak with embroidered sleeves. They slept in the bunkhouse. He had a queen-sized bed in his own room. While they ran the family herd, Joseph, Daddy’s little darling, stayed home. Jacob treated the eleventh-born like a firstborn. The brothers spat at the sight of Joseph.

To say the family was in crisis would be like saying a grass hut might be unstable in a hurricane.

The brothers caught Joseph far from home, sixty miles away from Daddy’s protection, and went nuclear on him. “They *stripped* Joseph of his tunic . . . they *took* him and *cast* him into a pit” (vv. 23–24).¹ Defiant verbs. They wanted not only to kill Joseph but also hide his body. This was a murderous cover-up from the get-go. “We shall say, ‘Some wild beast has devoured him’” (v. 20).

you'll get through this

Joseph didn't see this assault coming. He didn't climb out of bed that morning and think, *I'd better dress in padded clothing because this is the day I get tossed into a hole*. The attack caught him off guard.

So did yours. Joseph's pit came in the form of a cistern. Maybe yours came in the form of a diagnosis, a foster home, or a traumatic injury. Joseph was thrown in a hole and despised. And you? Thrown in an unemployment line and forgotten. Thrown into a divorce and abandoned, into a bed and abused. The pit. A kind of death, waterless and austere. Some people never recover. Life is reduced to one quest: get out and never be hurt again. Not simply done. Pits have no easy exits.

Joseph's story got worse before it got better. Abandonment led to enslavement, then entrapment, and finally imprisonment. He was sucker punched. Sold out. Mistreated. People made promises only to break them, offered gifts only to take them back. If hurt were a swampland, then Joseph was sentenced to a life of hard labor in the Everglades.

Yet he never gave up. Bitterness never staked its claim. Anger never metastasized into hatred. His heart never hardened; his resolve never vanished. He not only survived; he thrived. He ascended like a helium balloon. An Egyptian official promoted him to chief servant. The prison warden placed him over the inmates. And Pharaoh, the highest ruler on the planet, shoulder-tapped Joseph to serve as his prime minister. By the end of his life, Joseph was the second most powerful man of his generation. It is not hyperbole to state that he saved the world from starvation. How would that look on a résumé?

Joseph

Son of Jacob

Graduate with honors from the University of Hard Knocks

Director of Global Effort to Save Humanity

Succeeded

How? How did he flourish in the midst of tragedy? We don't have to speculate. Some twenty years later the roles were reversed, Joseph as the strong one and his brothers the weak ones. They came to him in dread. They feared he would settle the score and throw them into a pit of his own making. But Joseph didn't. And in his explanation we find his inspiration.

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. (50:20 NASB)

In God's hands intended evil becomes eventual good.

Joseph tied himself to the pillar of this promise and held on for dear life. Nothing in his story glosses over the *presence* of evil. Quite the contrary. Bloodstains, tearstains are everywhere. Joseph's heart was rubbed raw against the rocks of disloyalty and miscarried justice. Yet time and time again God redeemed the pain. The torn robe became a royal one. The pit became a palace. The broken family grew old together. The very acts intended to destroy God's servant turned out to strengthen him.

"You *meant* evil against me," Joseph told his brothers, using a Hebrew verb that traces its meaning to "weave" or "plait."² "You *wove* evil," he was saying, "but God *reweave* it together for good."

God, the Master Weaver. He stretches the yarn and intertwines the colors, the ragged twine with the velvet strings, the pains with the pleasures. Nothing escapes his reach. Every king, despot, weather pattern, and molecule are at his command. He passes the shuttle back and forth across the generations, and as he does, a design emerges. Satan weaves; God reweaves.

And God, the Master Builder. This is the meaning behind Joseph's words "God meant it for good in order to *bring about* . . ."³ The

you'll get through this

Hebrew word translated here as *bring about* is a construction term.⁴ It describes a task or building project akin to the one I drive through every morning. The state of Texas is rebuilding a highway overpass near my house. Three lanes have been reduced to one, transforming a morning commute into a daily stew. The interstate project, like human history, has been in development since before time began. Cranes hover overhead daily. Workers hold signs and shovels, and several million of us grumble. Well, at least I do. *How long is this going to last?*

My next-door neighbors have a different attitude toward the project. The husband and wife are highway engineers, consultants to the department of transportation. They endure the same traffic jams and detours as the rest of us but do so with a better attitude. Why? They know how these projects develop. "It will take time," they respond to my grumbles, "but it will get finished. It's doable." They've seen the plans.

By giving us stories like Joseph's, God allows us to study his plans. Such disarray! Brothers dumping brother. Entitlements. Famines and family feuds scattered about like nails and cement bags on a vacant lot. Satan's logic was sinister and simple: destroy the family of Abraham and thereby destroy his seed, Jesus Christ. All of hell, it seems, set its target on Jacob's boys.

But watch the Master Builder at work. He cleared debris, stabilized the structure, and bolted trusses until the chaos of Genesis 37:24 ("They . . . cast him into a pit") became the triumph of Genesis 50:20 ("life for many people").⁵

God as Master Weaver, Master Builder. He redeemed the story of Joseph. Can't he redeem your story as well?

You'll get through this. You fear you won't. We all do. We fear that the depression will never lift, the yelling will never stop, the pain will never leave. Here in the pits, surrounded by steep walls and angry

brothers, we wonder, *Will this gray sky ever brighten? This load ever lighten?* We feel stuck, trapped, locked in. Predestined for failure. Will we ever exit this pit?

Yes! Deliverance is to the Bible what jazz music is to Mardi Gras: bold, brassy, and everywhere.

Out of the lions' den for Daniel, the prison for Peter, the whale's belly for Jonah, Goliath's shadow for David, the storm for the disciples, disease for the lepers, doubt for Thomas, the grave for Lazarus, and the shackles for Paul. God gets us through stuff. *Through* the Red Sea onto dry ground (Ex. 14:22), *through* the wilderness (Deut. 29:5), *through* the valley of the shadow of death (Ps. 23:4), and *through* the deep sea (Ps. 77:19). *Through* is a favorite word of God's:

When you pass *through* the waters, I will be with you;
And *through* the rivers, they shall not overflow you.
When you walk *through* the fire, you shall not be burned,
Nor shall the flame scorch you. (Isa. 43:2)⁶

It won't be painless. Have you wept your final tear or received your last round of chemotherapy? Not necessarily. Will your unhappy marriage become happy in a heartbeat? Not likely. Are you exempt from any trip to the cemetery? Does God guarantee the absence of struggle and the abundance of strength? Not in this life. But he does pledge to reweave your pain for a higher purpose.

It won't be quick. Joseph was seventeen years old when his brothers abandoned him. He was at least thirty-seven when he saw them again. Another couple of years passed before he saw his father.⁷ Sometimes God takes his time: One hundred twenty years to prepare Noah for the flood, eighty years to prepare Moses for his work. God called young David to be king but returned him to the sheep pasture. He called Paul to be an apostle and then isolated him in Arabia for

you'll get through this

perhaps three years. Jesus was on the earth for three decades before he built anything more than a kitchen table. How long will God take with you? He may take his time. His history is redeemed not in minutes but in lifetimes.

But God will use your mess for good. We see a perfect mess; God sees a perfect chance to train, test, and teach the future prime minister. We see a prison; God sees a kiln. We see famine; God sees the relocation of his chosen lineage. We call it Egypt; God calls it protective custody, where the sons of Jacob can escape barbaric Canaan and multiply abundantly in peace. We see Satan's tricks and ploys. God sees Satan tripped and foiled.

Let me be clear. You are a version of Joseph in your generation. You represent a challenge to Satan's plan. You carry something of God within you, something noble and holy, something the world needs—wisdom, kindness, mercy, skill. If Satan can neutralize you, he can mute your influence.

The story of Joseph is in the Bible for this reason: to teach you to trust God to trump evil. What Satan intends for evil, God, the Master Weaver and Master Builder, redeems for good.

Joseph would be the first to tell you that life in the pit stinks. Yet for all its rottenness doesn't the pit do this much? It forces you to look upward. Someone from *up there* must come *down here* and give you a hand. God did for Joseph. At the right time, in the right way, he will do the same for you.

down, down,
down to egypt

Joseph's troubles started when his mouth did. He came to breakfast one morning, bubbling and blabbing in sickening detail about the images he had seen in his sleep: sheaves of wheat lying in a circle, all bundled up, ready for harvest. Each one tagged with the name of a different brother—Reuben, Gad, Levi, Zebulun, Judah . . . Right in the center of the circle was Joseph's sheaf. In his dream only his sheaf stood up. The implication: you will bow down to me.

Did he expect his brothers to be excited about this? To pat him on the back and proclaim, "We will gladly kneel before you, our dear baby brother"? They didn't. They kicked dust in his face and told him to get lost.

He didn't take the hint. He came back with another dream. Instead of sheaves it was now stars, a sun, and a moon. The stars represented the brothers. The sun and moon symbolized Joseph's father and deceased mother. All were bowing to Joseph. Joseph! The kid with the elegant coat and soft skin. They, bow down to him?

He should have kept his dreams to himself.

Perhaps Joseph was thinking that very thing as he sat in the bottom of that cistern. His calls for help hadn't done any good. His brothers had seized the chance to seize and silence him once and for all.

But from deep in the pit, Joseph detected a new sound—the sound of a wagon and a camel, maybe two. Then a new set of voices.

you'll get through this

Foreign. They spoke to the brothers with an accent. Joseph strained to understand the conversation.

“We'll sell him to you . . .”

“How much?”

“ . . . trade for your camels . . .”

Joseph looked up to see a circle of faces staring down at him.

Finally one of the brothers was lowered into the pit on the end of a rope. He wrapped both arms around Joseph, and the others pulled them out.

The traders examined Joseph from head to toe. They stuck fingers in his mouth and counted his teeth. They pinched his arms for muscle. The brothers made their pitch: “Not an ounce of fat on those bones. Strong as an ox. He can work all day.”

The merchants huddled, and when they came back with an offer, Joseph realized what was happening. “Stop this! Stop this right now! I am your brother! You can't sell me!” His brothers shoved him to the side and began to barter.

“What will you pay for him?”

“We'll give you ten coins.”

“No less than thirty.”

“Fifteen and no more.”

“Twenty-five.”

“Twenty, and that is our last offer.”

The brothers took the coins, grabbed the fancy coat, and walked away. Joseph fell on his knees and wailed. The merchants tied one end of a rope around his neck and the other to the wagon. Joseph, dirty and tearstained, had no choice but to follow. He fell in behind the creaking wagon and the rack-ribbed camels. He cast one final glance over his shoulder at the backs of his brothers, who disappeared over the horizon.

“Help me!”

No one turned around.

“His brothers . . . sold him for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites who took Joseph with them down to Egypt” (Gen. 37:28 MSG).

Down to Egypt. Just a few hours ago Joseph’s life was looking up. He had a new coat and a pampered place in the house. He dreamed his brothers and parents would look up to him. But what goes up must come down, and Joseph’s life came down with a crash. Put down by his siblings. Thrown down into an empty well. Let down by his brothers and sold down the river as a slave. Then led down the road to Egypt.

Down, down, down. Stripped of name, status, position. Everything he had, everything he thought he’d ever have—gone. Vanished. Poof. Just like that.

Just like you? Have you been down in the mouth, down to your last dollar, down to the custody hearing, down to the bottom of the pecking order, down on your luck, down on your life . . . down . . . down to Egypt?

Life pulls us down.

Joseph arrived in Egypt with nothing. Not a penny to his name or a name worth a penny. His family tree was meaningless. His occupation was despised.¹ The clean-shaven people of the pyramids avoided the woolly bedouins of the desert.

No credentials to stand on. No vocation to call on. No family to lean on. He had lost everything, with one exception. His destiny.

Those odd dreams had convinced Joseph that God had plans for him. The details were vague and ill defined, for sure. Joseph had no way of knowing the specifics of his future. But the dreams told him this much: he would have a place of prominence in the midst of his family. Joseph latched on to this dream for the life jacket it was.

How else do we explain his survival? The Bible says nothing

you'll get through this

about his training, education, superior skills, or talents. But the narrator made a lead story out of Joseph's destiny.

The Hebrew boy lost his family, dignity, and home country, but he never lost his belief in God's belief in him. Trudging through the desert toward Egypt, he resolved, *It won't end this way. God has a dream for my life.* While wearing the heavy chains of the slave owners, he remembered, *I've been called to more than this.* Dragged into a city of strange tongues and shaved faces, he told himself, *God has greater plans for me.*

God had a destiny for Joseph, and the boy believed in it.

Do you believe in God's destiny for you?

I'm entering my fourth decade as a pastor. Thirty years is plenty of time to hear Joseph stories. I've met many Egypt-bound people. Down, down, down. I've learned the question to ask. If you and I were having this talk over coffee, this is the point where I would lean across the table and say, "What do you still have that you cannot lose?" The difficulties have taken much away. I get that. But there is one gift your troubles cannot touch: your destiny. Can we talk about it?

You are God's child. He saw you, picked you, and placed you. "You did not choose me; I chose you" (John 15:16 NCV). Before you are a butcher, baker, or cabinetmaker, male or female, Asian or black, you are God's child. Replacement or fill-in? Hardly. You are his first choice.

Such isn't always the case in life. Once, just minutes before I officiated at a wedding, the groom leaned over to me and said, "You weren't my first choice."

"I wasn't?"

"No, the preacher I wanted couldn't make it."

"Oh."

"But thanks for filling in."

“Sure. Anytime.” I considered signing the marriage license “Substitute.”

You’ll never hear such words from God. He chose you. The choice wasn’t obligatory, required, compulsory, forced, or compelled. He selected you because he wanted to. You are his open, willful, voluntary choice. He walked onto the auction block where you stood, and he proclaimed, “This child is mine.” And he bought you “with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:19). You are God’s child.

You are his child *forever*.

Don’t believe the tombstone. You are more than a dash between two dates. “When this tent we live in—our body here on earth—is torn down, God will have a house in heaven for us to live in, a home he himself has made, which will last forever” (2 Cor. 5:1 TEV). Don’t get sucked into short-term thinking. Your struggles will not last forever, but you will.

God will have his Eden. He is creating a garden in which Adams and Eves will share in his likeness and love, at peace with each other, animals, and nature. We will rule with him over lands, cities, and nations. “If we endure, we shall also reign with Him” (2 Tim. 2:12).

Believe this. Clutch it. Tattoo it on the interior of your heart. It may seem that the calamity sucked your life out to sea, but it hasn’t. You still have your destiny.

My father walked the road to Egypt. Family didn’t betray him; his health did. He had just retired. He and Mom had saved their money and made their plans. They wanted to visit every national park in their travel trailer. Then came the diagnosis: amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS or Lou Gehrig’s disease), a cruel degenerative disease that affects the muscles. Within months he was unable to feed, dress, or bathe himself. His world, as he knew it, was gone.

At the time my wife, Denalyn, and I were preparing to do mission

you'll get through this

work in Brazil. When we got the news, I offered to change my plans. How could I leave the country while he was dying? Dad's reply was immediate and confident. He was not known for his long letters, but this one took up four pages and included the following imperative.

In regard to my disease and your going to Rio. That is really an easy answer for me, and that is *Go* . . . I have no fear of death or eternity . . . so don't be concerned about me. Just *Go*. Please him.

Dad lost much: his health, retirement, years with his children and grandchildren, years with his wife. The loss was severe, but it wasn't complete. "Dad," I could have asked, "what do you have that you cannot lose?" He still had God's call on his heart.

We forget this on the road to Egypt. Forgotten destinies litter the landscape like carcasses. We redefine ourselves according to our catastrophes. "I am the divorcée, the addict, the bankrupt businessperson, the kid with the disability, or the man with the scar." We settle for a small destiny: to make money, make friends, make a name, make muscle, or make love with anyone and everyone.

Determine not to make this mistake. Think you have lost it all? You haven't. "God's gifts and God's call are under full warranty—never canceled, never rescinded" (Rom. 11:29 MSG). Hear and heed yours.

Here's how it works. Your company is laying off employees. Your boss finally calls you into his office. As kind as he tries to be, a layoff is a layoff. All of a sudden you are cleaning out your desk. Voices of doubt and fear raise their volume. *How will I pay the bills? Who is going to hire me?* Dread dominates your thoughts. But then you remember your destiny: *What do I have that I cannot lose?*

Wait a second. I am still God's child. My life is more than this life. These days are a vapor, a passing breeze. This will eventually pass.

God will make something good out of this. I will work hard, stay faithful, and trust him no matter what.

Bingo. You just trusted your destiny.

Try this one. Your fiancé wants his engagement ring back. All those promises and the proposal melted the moment he met the new girl at work. The jerk. The bum. The no-good pond scum. Like Joseph, you've been dumped into the pit. And, like Joseph, you choose to heed the call of God on your life. It's not easy. You're tempted to get even. But you choose instead to ponder your destiny. *I am God's child. My life is more than this life . . . more than this broken heart. This is God's promise, and unlike that sorry excuse for a guy, God won't break a promise.*

Another victory for God.

Survival in Egypt begins with a yes to God's call on your life.

Several years after Dad's death I received a letter from a woman who remembered him. Ginger was only six years old when her Sunday school class made get-well cards for ailing church members. She created a bright purple card out of construction paper and carefully lined it with stickers. On the inside she wrote, "I love you, but most of all God loves you." Her mom baked a pie, and the two made the delivery.

Dad was bedfast. The end was near. His jaw tended to drop, leaving his mouth open. He could extend his hand, but it was bent to a claw from the disease.

Somehow Ginger had a moment alone with him and asked a question as only a six-year-old can: "Are you going to die?"

He touched her hand and told her to come near. "Yes, I am going to die. When? I don't know."

She asked if he was afraid to go away. "Away is heaven," he told her. "I will be with my Father. I am ready to see him eye to eye."

About this point in the visit, her mother and mine returned. Ginger recalls:

you'll get through this

My mother consoled your parents with a fake smile on her face. But I smiled a big, beautiful, *real* smile, and he did the same and winked at me.

My purpose for telling you all this is my family and I are going to Kenya. We are going to take Jesus to a tribe on the coast. I am very scared for my children, because I know there will be hardships and disease. But for me, I am not afraid, because the worst thing that could happen is getting to see “my Father eye to eye.”

It was your father who taught me that earth is only a passing through and death is merely a rebirth.

A man near death winking at the thought of it. Stripped of everything? It only appeared that way. In the end Dad still had what no one could take. And in the end that is all he needed.

alone
but not
all alone

Melanie Jasper says her son, Cooper, was born with a smile on his face. The dimple never left his cheek. He won the hearts of every person he knew: his three older sisters, parents, grandparents, teachers, and friends. He loved to laugh and love. His father, JJ, confessing partiality, calls him practically a perfect child.

And Cooper was born to the perfect family. Farm-dwelling, fun-loving, God-seeking, and Christ-hungry, JJ and Melanie poured their hearts into their four children. JJ cherished every moment he had with his only son. That's why they were riding in the dune buggy on July 17, 2009. They intended to cut the grass together, but the lawn mower needed a spark plug. While Melanie drove to town to buy one, JJ and five-year-old Cooper seized the opportunity for a quick ride. They had done this a thousand times, zipping down a dirt road in a roll cage cart. The ride was nothing new. But the flip was. On a completely level road with Cooper safely buckled in, JJ made a circle, and the buggy rolled over.

Cooper was unresponsive. JJ called 911, then Melanie. "There has been an accident," he told her. "I don't think Cooper is going to make it." The next hours were every parent's worst nightmare: ambulance, ER, sobs, and shock. And finally the news. Cooper had passed from this life into heaven. JJ and Melanie found themselves doing the unthinkable: selecting a casket, planning a funeral, and

you'll get through this

envisioning life without their only son. In the coming days they fell into a mind-numbing rhythm. Each morning upon awakening they held each other and sobbed uncontrollably. After gathering enough courage to climb out of bed, they would go downstairs to the family and friends who awaited them. They would soldier through the day until bedtime. Then they would go to bed, hold each other, and cry themselves to sleep.

JJ told me, “There is no class or book on this planet that can prepare you to have your five-year-old son die in your arms . . . We know what the bottom looks like.”¹

The bottom. We pass much of life—if not most of life—at mid-altitude. Occasionally we summit a peak: our wedding, a promotion, the birth of a child. But most of life is lived at midlevel. Mondayish obligations of carpools, expense reports, and recipes.

But on occasion the world bottoms out. The dune buggy flips, the housing market crashes, the test results come back positive, and before we know it, we discover what the bottom looks like.

In Joseph's case he discovered what the auction block of Egypt looked like. The bidding began, and for the second time in his young life, he was on the market. The favored son of Jacob found himself prodded and pricked, examined for fleas, and pushed about like a donkey. Potiphar, an Egyptian officer, bought him. Joseph didn't speak the language or know the culture. The food was strange, the work was grueling, and the odds were against him.

So we turn the page and brace for the worst. The next chapter in his story will describe Joseph's consequential plunge into addiction, anger, or despair, right? Wrong.

“The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian” (Gen. 39:2). Joseph arrived in Egypt with nothing but the clothes on his back and the call of God on his heart. Yet by the end of four verses, he was running the

house of the man who ran security for Pharaoh. How do we explain this turnaround? Simple. God was with him.

The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man. (v. 2)

His master saw that the LORD was with him. (v. 3)

The LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake. (v. 5)

The blessing of the LORD was on all that he had. (v. 5)

Joseph's story just parted company with the volumes of self-help books and all the secret-to-success formulas that direct the struggler to an inner power ("dig deeper"). Joseph's story points elsewhere ("look higher"). He succeeded because God was present. God was to Joseph what a blanket is to a baby—he was all over him.

Any chance he'd be the same for you? Here you are in your version of Egypt. It feels foreign. You don't know the language. You never studied the vocabulary of crisis. You feel far from home, all alone. Money gone. Expectations dashed. Friends vanished. Who's left? God is.

David asked, "Where can I go to get away from your Spirit? Where can I run from you?" (Ps. 139:7 NCV). He then listed the various places he found God: in "the heavens . . . the grave . . . If I rise with the sun in the east and settle in the west beyond the sea, even there you would guide me" (vv. 8–10 NCV). God, everywhere.

Joseph's account of those verses would have read, "Where can I go to get away from your Spirit? If I go to the bottom of the dry pit . . . to the top of the slave block . . . to the home of a foreigner . . . even there you would guide me."

Your adaptation of the verse might read, "Where can I go to get

you'll get through this

away from your Spirit? If I go to the rehab clinic . . . the ICU . . . the overseas deployment office . . . the shelter for battered women . . . the county jail . . . even there you would guide me.”

You will never go where God is not. Envision the next few hours of your life. Where will you find yourself? In a school? God indwells the classroom. On the highways? His presence lingers among the traffic. In the hospital operating room, the executive boardroom, the in-laws' living room, the funeral home? God will be there. “He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27).

Each of us. God does not play favorites. From the masses on the city avenues to the isolated villagers in valleys and jungles, all people can enjoy God's presence. But many don't. They plod through life as if there were no God to love them. As if their only strength was their own. As if the only solution comes from within, not above. They live God-less lives.

But there are Josephs among us: people who sense, see, and hear the presence of God. People who pursue God as Moses did. When suddenly tasked with the care of two million ex-slaves, the liberator began to wonder, *How am I going to provide for these people? How will we defend ourselves against enemies? How can we survive?* Moses needed supplies, managers, equipment, and experience. But when Moses prayed for help, he declared, “If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here” (Ex. 33:15).

Moses preferred to go nowhere with God than anywhere without him.

As did David. The king ended up in an Egypt of his own making. He seduced the wife of a soldier and covered up his sin with murder and deceit. He hid from God for a year, but he could not hide forever. When he finally confessed his immorality, he made only one request of God: “Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me” (Ps. 51:11).

David did not pray, “Do not take my crown from me. Do not take my kingdom from me. Do not take my army from me.” David knew what mattered most. The presence of God. He begged God for it.

Do likewise. Make God’s presence your passion. How? Be more sponge and less rock. Place a rock in the ocean, and what happens? Its surface gets wet. The exterior may change color, but the interior remains untouched. Yet place a sponge in the ocean, and notice the change. It absorbs the water. The ocean penetrates every pore and alters the essence of the sponge.

God surrounds us in the same way the Pacific surrounds an ocean floor pebble. He is everywhere—above, below, on all sides. We choose our response—rock or sponge? Resist or receive? Everything within you says harden the heart. *Run from God; resist God; blame God.* But be careful. Hard hearts never heal. Spongy ones do. Open every pore of your soul to God’s presence. Here’s how.

Lay claim to the nearness of God. “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Heb. 13:5 NIV). In the Greek this passage has five negatives. It could be translated “I will not, not leave thee; neither will I not, not forsake thee.”² Grip this promise like the parachute it is. Repeat it to yourself over and over until it trumps the voices of fear and angst. “The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing” (Zeph. 3:17 NIV).

You may lose the *sense* of God’s presence. Job did. “But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him” (Job 23:8–9 NIV). Job *felt* far from God. Yet in spite of his inability to feel God, Job resolved, “But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold” (v. 10 NIV). What gritty determination. Difficult days demand decisions of faith.

you'll get through this

The psalmist determined:

When I am afraid,
I will trust in you. (Ps. 56:3 NIV)³

Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,
for *I will yet praise* him. (Ps. 42:5 NIV)⁴

Don't equate the presence of God with a good mood or a pleasant temperament. God is near whether you are happy or not. Sometimes you have to take your feelings outside and give them a good talking-to.

Cling to his character. Quarry from your Bible a list of the deep qualities of God, and press them into your heart. My list reads like this: "He is still sovereign. He still knows my name. Angels still respond to his call. The hearts of rulers still yield at his bidding. The death of Jesus still saves souls. The Spirit of God still indwells saints. Heaven is still only heartbeats away. The grave is still temporary housing. God is still faithful. He is not caught off guard. He uses everything for his glory and my ultimate good. He uses tragedy to accomplish his will, and his will is right, holy, and perfect. Sorrow may come with the night, but joy comes with the morning. God bears fruit in the midst of affliction."

When JJ Jasper told his oldest daughter about Cooper's death, he prepared her by saying, "I need you to hold on to everything you know of who God is, because I have some really tough news to tell you." What valuable counsel!

In changing times lay hold of the unchanging character of God.

When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my hope and stay.⁵

Pray your pain out. Pound the table. March up and down the lawn. It's time for tenacious, honest prayers. Angry at God? Disappointed with his strategy? Ticked off at his choices? Let him know it. Let him have it! Jeremiah did. This ancient prophet pastored Jerusalem during a time of economic collapse and political upheaval. Invasion. Disaster. Exile. Hunger. Death. Jeremiah saw it all. He so filled his devotions with complaints that his prayer journal is called Lamentations.

[God] has led me and made me walk
In darkness and not in light.
Surely He has turned His hand against me
Time and time again throughout the day.

He has aged my flesh and my skin,
And broken my bones.
He has besieged me
And surrounded me with bitterness and woe.
He has set me in dark places
Like the dead of long ago.

He has hedged me in so that I cannot get out;
He has made my chain heavy.
Even when I cry and shout,
He shuts out my prayer. (3:2–8)

Jeremiah infused five chapters with this type of fury. Summarize the bulk of his book with one line: this life is rotten! Why would God place Lamentations in the Bible? Might it be to convince you to follow Jeremiah's example?

Go ahead and file your grievance. "I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him" (Ps. 142:2 ESV). God will not turn

you'll get through this

away at your anger. Even Jesus offered up prayers with “loud cries and tears” (Heb. 5:7 NIV). It is better to shake a fist at God than to turn your back on him. Augustine said, “How deep in the deep are they who do not cry out of the deep.”⁶

Words might seem hollow and empty at first. You will mumble your sentences, fumble your thoughts. But don't quit. And don't hide.

Lean on God's people. Cancel your escape to the Himalayas. Forget the deserted island. This is no time to be a hermit. Be a barnacle on the boat of God's church. “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, *I am there* in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20).⁷

Would the sick avoid the hospital? The hungry avoid the food pantry? The discouraged abandon God's Hope Distribution Center? Only at great risk. His people purvey his presence.

Moses and the Israelites once battled the Amalekites. The military strategy of Moses was a strange one. He commissioned Joshua to lead the fight in the valley below. Moses ascended the hill to pray. But he did not go alone. He took his two lieutenants, Aaron and Hur. While Joshua led the physical combat, Moses engaged in a spiritual fight. Aaron and Hur stood on either side of their leader to hold up his arms in the battle of prayer. The Israelites prevailed because Moses prayed. Moses prevailed because he had others to pray with him.

My wife did something similar. Years ago Denalyn battled a dark cloud of depression. Every day was gray. Her life was loud and busy—two kids in elementary school, a third in kindergarten, and a husband who didn't know how to get off the airplane and stay home. The days took their toll. Depression can buckle the knees of the best of us, but it can be especially difficult for the wife of a pastor. Congregants expect her to radiate joy and bite bullets. But Denalyn, to her credit, has never been one to play games. On a given Sunday when the depression was suffocating, she armed herself with honesty and went to church. *If people ask me how I am doing, I'm going to tell them.*

She answered each “How are you?” with a candid “Not well. I’m depressed. Will you pray for me?”

Casual chats became long conversations. Brief hellos became heartfelt moments of ministry. By the time she left the worship service, she had enlisted dozens of people to hold up her arms in the battle of prayer. She traces the healing of her depression to that Sunday morning service. She found God’s presence amid God’s people.

So did JJ. His hurts are still deep, but his faith is deeper still. Whenever he tells the story of losing Cooper, he says this: “We know what the bottom looks like, and we know who is waiting there—Jesus Christ.”

He’s waiting on you, my friend. If Joseph’s story is any precedent, God can use Egypt to teach you that he is with you. Your family may be gone. Your supporters may have left. Your counselor may be silent. But God has not budged. His promise still stands: “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go” (Gen. 28:15 NIV).

stupid won't
fix stupid

The Fourth of July. Everything about the holiday was red, white, and blue. My face was red, the clouds were cotton white, and the sky was a brilliant blue. My redness came not from sunburn but humiliation. Denalyn had warned, “Remember, Max, the lake level is low.” The depth finder had alerted: thirty feet, then ten, then five, and then three feet. The caution buoys bobbed up and down in the water. But did I listen to Denalyn? Pay attention to the depth radar? Take note of the shallow-water markers?

Who had time for such trivialities? My three teenage daughters and their friends were counting on my navigational skills for a Saturday of entertainment. I would not disappoint. Wearing sunglasses and a big-brimmed hat, I hammered the throttle, and off we went. *Zoom!* Then five minutes later, boom! I had driven the boat onto a sandbar.

Passengers lurched forward. I nearly fell out. Seven sets of eyes glared at me. A lesser man might have told everyone to get out and push the boat back into deep water. Not me. Not throttle-happy Max. No sir. I was captain of the outboard, sovereign of the lake. I would debank the boat the manly way. I shoved the throttle again.

The boat didn’t budge.

“Max,” Denalyn kindly opined, “you messed up.” I raised the rudder. It was bent like a dog’s ear. This time we had no choice. We pushed until we floated. When I started the engine, the boat vibrated like a three-wheeled jalopy. Our speed peaked out at five miles per

you'll get through this

hour. As we chug-chugged across the lake and the other vacationers stared and the teenagers sulked, I asked myself, *Well, Captain Max, what were you thinking?*

That was the problem. I *wasn't* thinking. Dumb became dumber because I treated a bad decision with a poor, impulsive choice. Forgivable in a boat. But in life?

Joseph was probably in his twenties when he crashed into, of all things, a sandbar of sexual temptation. When his brothers sold him into slavery, they likely assumed they had doomed him to hard labor and an early death. Instead, Joseph moved up the career ladder like a fireman after a cat. Potiphar, who promoted Joseph in his home, no doubt promoted Joseph among his circle of officials. He boasted about the Midas touch of this bright Hebrew boy who had made him a wealthy man.¹

Joseph came to have clout. He could spend and hire, send and receive. Merchants reported to him, and other people noticed him. Most significantly, women noticed him. “Now Joseph was a very handsome and well-built young man” (Gen. 39:6 NLT). A Hollywood head turner, this guy—square jaw, wavy hair, and biceps that bulged every time he carried Mrs. Potiphar’s tray. Which was often. She enjoyed the sight of him. “And it came to pass after these things that his master’s wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, ‘Lie with me’” (v. 7).

The first lady of the household made a play for the Hebrew slave. “Jo-eeey, how about a little sugar with my coffee?” Wink, wink. As she passed him in the hallway, she brushed up against his arm. As he brought dessert to the table, she touched his leg. By the clothes she wore, or didn’t wear, she made it clear: “I’m yours for the taking, Joseph.” She courted him “day by day” (v. 10). He had plenty of opportunities to consider the proposition. And reasons to accept it.

Wasn’t she married to his master? And wasn’t he obligated to obey the wishes of his owner, even if the wish was clandestine sex?

And it *would be* clandestine. No one would know. What happens in the bedroom stays in the bedroom, right?

Besides, a dalliance with the randy lady would give Joseph a chip in the political poker game, an ally at the top level. The end justified the means. And the means wasn't all that unpleasant. Powerful Potiphar had his pick of women. His wife was likely a jaw-dropper. Joseph didn't lose his manly urges when he lost his coat of many colors. A few moments in the arms of an attractive, willing lover? Joseph could use some relief.

Didn't he deserve some? These were lonely days: rejected by his family, twice bought and sold like livestock, far from home, far from friends. And the stress of managing Potiphar's household. Overseeing the terraced gardens and multitude of slaves. Mastering the peculiar protocol of official events. Joseph's job was draining. He could have justified his choice.

So can you. You've been jilted and bruised, sold out and turned away. Stranded on the sandbar of bad health, bad credit, bad luck. Few friends and fewer solutions. The hours are long, and the nights are longer. Mrs. (or Mr.) Potiphar comes along with a sultry offer. She slides her room key in your direction.

Or a friend slides a bottle in your direction. A coworker offers some drugs. You can pay some personal bills with company cash or stave off bankruptcy by embezzling funds. Justifications and rationalizations pop up like weeds after a summer rain. *No one would know. I won't get caught. I'm only human.*

Can we talk candidly for a moment? Egypt can be a cruddy place. No one disagrees with that. But Egypt can also be the petri dish for brainless decisions. Don't make matters worse by doing something you'll regret.

Joseph went on high alert. When Mrs. Potiphar dangled the bait, "he refused" (v. 8). He gave the temptress no time, no attention, no

you'll get through this

chitchat, no reason for hope. "He did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her" (v. 10). When her number appeared on his cell phone, he did not answer. When she texted a question, he didn't respond. When she entered his office, he exited. He avoided her like the poison she was.

"[Potiphar] has committed all that he has to my hand," he announced (v. 8). To lie with her would be to sin against his master. How rare this resolve. In a culture that uses phrases like "consenting adults" and "sexual rights," we forget how immorality destroys the lives of people who aren't in the bedroom.

Years ago a friend gave me this counsel: "Make a list of all the lives you would affect by your sexual immorality." I did. Every so often I reread it. "Denalyn. My three daughters. My son-in-law. My yet-to-be-born grandchildren. Every person who has ever read one of my books or heard one of my sermons. My publishing team. Our church staff." The list reminds me: one act of carnality is a poor exchange for a lifetime of lost legacy.

Dads, would you intentionally break the arm of your child? Of course not. Such an action would violate every fiber of your moral being. Yet if you engage in sexual activity outside of your marriage, you will bring much more pain into the life of your child than would a broken bone.

Moms, would you force your children to sleep outside on a cold night? By no means. Yet if you involve yourself in an illicit affair, you will bring more darkness and chill into the lives of your children than a hundred winters.

And you, single man or woman. You wouldn't desecrate a Bible or make a mockery of a cross. Yet when you have unmarried sex, you disregard one of God's holy acts. "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you?" (1 Cor. 6:19).

Actions have consequences. Joseph placed his loyalty above lusts. He honored his master . . .

And his *Master*. Joseph's primary concern was the preference of God. "How . . . can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9).

The lesson we learn from Joseph is surprisingly simple: *do what pleases God*. Your coworkers want to include a trip to a gentleman's club on the evening agenda. What do you do? *Do what pleases God*. Your date invites you to conclude the evening with drinks at his apartment. How should you reply? *Do what pleases God*. Your friends hand you a joint of marijuana to smoke; your classmates show you a way to cheat; the Internet provides pornography to watch—ask yourself the question: How can I please God? "Do what is right as a sacrifice to the LORD and trust the LORD" (Ps. 4:5 NCV).

You don't fix a struggling marriage with an affair, a drug problem with more drugs, debt with more debt. You don't fix stupid with stupid. You don't get out of a mess by making another one. *Do what pleases God*. You will never go wrong doing what is right.

Thomas made this discovery. He in many ways was a modern-day Joseph. Born in 1899 to a Baptist pastor and a church pianist, Thomas was exposed to music early on. By the age of twelve he was imitating the jazz music of the African American community in the Deep South. In his late teens he went to Philadelphia and then to Chicago, where he played in speakeasies. Somewhere along the way he forgot his faith. He compromised in his lifestyle and turned away from the convictions of his youth. His talent opened the doors, but his conscience wouldn't let him rest. Long nights on the road left him exhausted and weary. A relative urged him to return to God. At the age of twenty-one, he did. He had an encounter with God that later led him to write: "My inner-being was thrilled. My soul was a deluge of divine rapture; my emotions were aroused; my heart was inspired to become a great singer and worker in the kingdom of the Lord."²

you'll get through this

Young Thomas poured his energy into God-honoring music. Rhythm and blues met worship and praise. The result was a brand-new genre of toe-tapping, soul-lifting music. He took a position as a music director at a Chicago church. At the age of twenty-six Thomas met the love of his life and got married. He began a publishing company and founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses. He worked with some of the greatest singers in the history of gospel music, including Mahalia Jackson. By 1932, Thomas was enjoying the blessings of God at full throttle: happy marriage, growing ministry, first child on the way. Life was good.

But then the sandbar. One night after singing to a Saint Louis audience, he was handed a Western Union telegram. It read simply: "Your wife just died." She had passed away in childbirth. Thomas hurried back to Chicago, where his newborn son died the following day. The musician fell into a crevasse of grief. He avoided people and grew angry at God. "I just wanted to go back to the jazz world I knew so well. I felt God had done me an injustice. I didn't want to serve Him anymore or write gospel songs."³

He secluded himself, nursing his anger and sorrow. A friend seemed to know what he needed. He took Thomas to a neighborhood music school. That evening as the sun was setting, Thomas sat down at a piano and began to play . . . and pray. He poured out his heart to God, and what wonderful words they were.

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light:
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.⁴

For the rest of his life, Thomas A. Dorsey testified that the Lord healed him that night as he sat at the piano. He went on to pen more than three thousand songs and become one of the most influential Christian songwriters of all time.⁵ All because he reached out to God.

Do the same. Turbulent times will tempt you to forget God. Shortcuts will lure you. Sirens will call you. But don't be foolish or naive. Do what pleases God. Nothing more, nothing less. And for heaven's sake, think twice before you press that throttle.