

**NO MAN
EXCUS**

**BE THE MAN GOD
MADE YOU TO BE**

MORE USES

TONY EVANS

10th
ANNIVERSARY
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FOREWORD

By Bill McCartney

When I was coaching football, I used to sit down with my players one at a time the night before a game and ask each young man what I could expect from him on the field the next day.

I didn't do it to make them nervous, of course. It was a way of letting them know that I had confidence in them, that I knew what they were capable of, and that I would be looking for their best effort supported by the best coaching our staff was capable of giving.

That's something of what I believe God is doing with men all across America. He's sitting us down, so to speak, and asking, "What can I expect of you in light of what I've given you?" God is calling men to faithfulness to Him and to their families, to godly leadership in the home and in the workplace.

This is the heart of the movement known as Promise Keepers. And one of the men who has given this movement its vitality and its spiritual direction is Dr. Tony Evans. Tony has been speaking to men straight from his heart for a long time, and in this book he takes his challenge to godly manhood to a higher level.

No More Excuses is not a book you read for a breezy morning

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devotional thought to get you through the day. It's honest and masculine, it's biblical and straightforward. It speaks to us as men in every area of our lives. It probes and convicts and disciplines and empowers and encourages men—everything a good coach wants to do with his players.

There have been a lot of forces pushing men down over the last thirty years, and it would be easy for a man to say, "I'm a victim of forces beyond my control." But Tony doesn't buy that, because the Bible doesn't speak to men as victims. It speaks to them as the ones ultimately responsible for the spiritual health of home, neighborhood, church, and nation.

So don't expect *No More Excuses* to reinforce the reasons a man might offer for being less than God wants him to be. Don't expect Tony to pull his punches—but do expect to be encouraged, loved as a brother, and given a crystal-clear picture of what God wants from men.

In this book, Tony Evans speaks to us as a comrade-in-arms, as a fellow disciple seeking to keep his promises and be a man of God. He's not looking to hammer men down, but to hammer and shape us into men of God who will change this world.

You'll find biblical truth communicated in these pages in a clear way so that you can understand and apply it. I have discovered that Tony possesses that rare talent to challenge us to press through the darkness and enter the light.

So if you're tired of the excuses; if you want to break through your problems, get into the clear, and start running to win; if you are willing to open your heart to the ministry of the Holy Spirit; then I commend *No More Excuses* to you as a book you can't afford to overlook.

Bill McCartney
Founder, Promise Keepers

INTRODUCTION

Today we have a generation of men who suffer from “loser’s limp.” Anyone who has competed in sports knows what I mean by “loser’s limp.” It’s what happens when an outfielder misjudges a fly ball and misses the catch, or when a wide receiver drops an easy pass. They fall to the ground and get up limping.

The purpose of the limp is to camouflage their failure. The impression they want to give their teammates and the fans is that the reason they didn’t make the catch was because of a cramp or a muscle pull or some other sudden malady of the leg rather than their misjudgment.

So the limp becomes the athlete’s excuse, his attempt to be exonerated of blame for his misplay. But while the consequences of a misplay in a ball game are relatively small, the unfortunate fact is that many men have developed a “loser’s limp” when it comes to life. Instead of owning up to their failures and responsibilities, they excuse them, giving the impression that forces beyond their control are responsible for their circumstances.

It’s true that circumstances beyond our control can sometimes make it difficult for us to be all that God wants us to be. But we need to start looking at these things as challenges and opportunities for success rather than as excuses for failure or not doing anything. It’s high

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time that we stop blaming past circumstances or present pressures and start living as real men.

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

That's what this book is all about. It's about Christian men repudiating the "loser's limp" and becoming real men of God. It's about men winning back their families, their churches, and their culture by rising above their circumstances through the grace and power of God.

This book is about men finding purpose, meaning, and direction for their lives despite past setbacks or present pressures. It's about becoming men of character, commitment, power, and influence for Jesus Christ. That's the kind of man I want to be. Are you with me, brother?

It's my contention that when men know God and apply His truths to their lives, they truly will need no more excuses!

NO MORE HIDING BEHIND THE PAST

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

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

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

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

Now don’t get me wrong. I’m not suggesting there are any “varmint” in your past. And I’m not a psychiatrist, so we’re not going to probe your psyche for deep, dark secrets. But we all have a past, as they say. And since no man among us is perfect, we tend to cover our

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hurts and fears with Sunday smiles, nice suits, firm handshakes—and sometimes lies.

Someone says, “How are you doing this morning, brother?”

“Wonderful! Praise the Lord!”

“How’s the family?”

“Couldn’t be better!”

But if we picked up that piece of wood in that man’s “backyard,” stuff might scatter everywhere. We men have become very adept at covering up our pain. And one of the things that causes us great pain is broken relationships. One reason they are so painful and so crippling is that no one has ever showed us how to fix a fractured relationship. That is for women only, right?

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

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

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

Well, the Bible has a lot to teach us on this subject, because whatever your situation may be, it is no surprise to God. He is very aware of your past, and He knows that when things go wrong in your relationships, it can have a staggering effect. I want to show you how to start overcoming and stop blaming your past by taking you on a biblical journey through the life of Joseph.

Here was a young man with a painful past—and none of it was

his fault. The story of what Joseph did about it is very special, because more than one-fourth of the book of Genesis (chapters 37–50) is devoted to this remarkable man. Let’s meet him now.

JOSEPH: A SHAKY FAMILY TREE

I told you Joseph had a past. It started before he was even born, because his daddy was Jacob. Now Jacob would not win the “Father of the Year” award from the local Kiwanis or Rotary Club. As a young man, Jacob was a deceiver. We know from Genesis chapter 27 that he deceived his brother Esau right out of the family birthright, linking up with his mother Rebekah to trick Isaac and gain the blessing.

When the deal was exposed, Jacob had to run for his life because Esau tried to kill him. Jacob fled to the land of a relative named Laban and fell in love with Laban’s daughter Rachel. Now there is a biblical principle that says, “you may be sure that your sin will find you out.” (Numbers 32:23) Jacob was a trickster, but in Laban he met a better trickster.

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

But because Rachel was barren (before God opened her womb) and Leah stopped having children after four sons, each of them gave their maidens to Jacob as additional wives (Genesis 30:1-9). So here is this patchwork family of a husband and four wives, three of whom the man didn’t really plan to marry. Are you getting the picture of the kind of family into which Joseph was born? In today’s terms, it was dysfunctional.

Jacob’s life of deception continued when he “deceived Laban” by fleeing without telling him (Genesis 31:20). His trickery carried over to Rachel, who stole her father’s household idols and then deceived her father about having them (31:19, 33-35).

Is it any wonder that by the time Jacob had eleven sons, count-

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ing Joseph (Benjamin was born later), his older boys turned out to be as treacherous as their daddy? In fact, they were worse because their treachery involved killing all the men in the city of Shechem in revenge for the rape of their sister (34:25).

Reuben, the firstborn son, then slept with one of his father's wives (Genesis 35:22), and his brother Judah was seduced by his daughter-in-law (38:18). This is not what you would call a well-adjusted family. This is not the kind of family you would want to grow up in, but this was Joseph's family. Here was a young man who had every excuse he needed not to turn out right.

Yet when the Bible presents Joseph to us, it presents a man of greatness, godliness, and dignity. I point this out to let you know that just because your daddy was bad and your mama was messed up and your brothers and sisters turned out rotten, you don't have to wind up the same way.

In other words, a bad environment need not control your present decision-making. Now don't misunderstand. Your past can influence you, but it doesn't have to control you. Joseph could have given up before he ever really got started, but he refused to let the sins of others control him. He refused to hide behind his past.

REJECTED BY MEN, PROTECTED BY GOD

Joseph's story begins in Genesis chapter 37 with the incident that marked him for the rest of his life. He was out with his older brothers in the pasture, and "he brought their father a bad report about them." (verse 2). Nothing is said about this report, so we can assume it was accurate. But here was the real problem:

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

—verses 3-4

So here was serious sibling rivalry. The ten older boys couldn't stand Joseph. A lot of this had to do with bad judgment on Jacob's part. He was openly partial to Joseph, the first son born to Rachel, who was his favorite wife and true love.

So as far as Jacob was concerned, Joseph was his number-one son. He showered Joseph with affection and gave him a multicolored coat. When the brothers saw that coat, they blew.

You say, "Why would they go off over a trench coat?"

Oh, but that was a very special coat. That was the kind of coat you would give to royalty. Not only was it expensive, but the other brothers knew what it meant. It meant that Pop had chosen Joseph, not Reuben, to be the heir to the family birthright.

The older boys weren't about to let a baby brother, born of a woman who wasn't mother to any of them, horn in on their territory. It didn't help when Joseph told them his dream that they would all bow down to him someday (37:5-11)! So they concocted a plan to kill him, but Reuben talked them into throwing Joseph into a pit instead (37:20-24).

So they tossed Joseph down into an empty cistern and sat down to eat. What they did to him didn't even curb their appetites! Then they sold him into slavery to some passing traders (37:25), and the rest of the chapter relates how they tricked old Jacob into thinking his favorite boy was dead. I would call that rejection by your family.

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

What are you going to do now? Stay where you are? Decide never to trust anyone again? All of this and more happened to Joseph. Let's follow him down to Egypt where he began his life as a slave:

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites. . . . [But] the LORD was with Joseph.

—*Genesis 39:1-2a*

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

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

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

WHOM WILL YOU TURN TO?

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

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

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

The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master . . . his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did.

—verses 2-3

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

If you will walk with the Lord, He can do the same for you. All Joseph did was allow God to use him. The problem with the past is that it can become a dictator that rules you today. The only way to

overcome that is to change dictators—to allow the Lord to dictate your life today.

There are things from the past that you may not be able to fix. You may never be able to get your parents to accept you, your brothers and sisters to talk to you, or your boss to atone for previous injustices. But with the Lord in your present, He can always make something happen.

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

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

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

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

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

COMMITTED TO GODLINESS

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

That becomes very apparent beginning in Genesis 39:7: "After a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, 'Come to bed with me!'" Now this is a bold sister here. She wanted Joseph because he was "well-built and handsome." (39:6) He looked good, and so Potiphar's wife said, "Uh, huh!"

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

"With me in charge, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"

—verses 8-9

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

So Joseph refused her advances, but she persisted in trying to seduce him. Finally she made a grab for him, and he fled without his shirt. Mrs. Potiphar got mad, cried rape, and framed Joseph for a crime that never happened. Potiphar took one look at the "evidence," heard her phony testimony, and slapped Joe in jail (Genesis 39:10-20).

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

I think by now some men in Joseph's shoes would be pacing back and forth in that jail cell talking about, "Lord, have mercy. I try to do

right and I get fired. Shucks! I should have at least had some fun. I could have held on to my job and had some fun too. Now I don't have either one." But that wasn't Joseph's mind-set because he had already learned something important: the Lord was with him (verse 21).

GOING SOMEWHERE WITH GOD

No matter what has gone on in the past, if you are willing to stay with God on this thing, then even going to jail is where you ought to go if it is within God's will for you. For Joseph, there was no better place to be than in the king's jail, because he was right where God wanted him to be.

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

That's why I love verse 21 of Genesis 39: "the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden." The head turnkey put Joseph in charge of everything in the place. My man was busy again. Joseph didn't have time to dwell on the past and let it eat at him, even if he had wanted to. The Lord was with him and had something more important for him to do.

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

This is the sense in which Paul says, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:13-14) Yet he was keenly aware of his past as a persecutor of the church (1 Corinthians 15:9).

I think as men we really need to come to grips with this, because

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we tend to let past failures keep us from trying again. But once we are committed to the Lord, we have His power available to help us move forward instead of looking back.

That's what Joseph did. We're now up to Genesis 40, and Joe is still a jailbird. Chapter 40 is the story of his interpretation of the dreams experienced by Pharaoh's baker and cupbearer, who were in the King of Egypt's doghouse. I don't have the space here to go through each verse in detail. If you're not familiar with the story, or if you've forgotten how it goes, you can read Genesis 40 in just a few minutes.

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

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

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

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

The message of Pharaoh's dream was that Egypt would have seven good years followed by seven years of famine. Joseph's advice was that Pharaoh had better appoint a "famine commissioner," and do

it pretty quick so that Egypt could survive the “seven ugly cows” years (vv. 4, 30). Pharaoh said, “Great idea, Joseph. I appoint you. You’re now number-two man in Egypt. In fact, if anyone asks my permission to do something, I’m sending him to you.”

I have only one theological observation to make about the story of Joseph at this point: wow! Here we’ve got a young slave going nowhere and rotting in jail, and now he’s going somewhere—if you call being the number-two ruler in the most powerful nation on earth going somewhere. No one can do that but God.

The lesson here is simply this: God knows where He’s taking you. And He knows the lessons you need to know in order to be equipped when you get there. God knew what you were going to go through as a five-, ten-, or fifteen-year-old. He knew how people were going to mess over you at twenty-five.

But He allowed those things in his purpose because of where He’s going to take you when you’re forty or fifty. And when you get there, there will be no question as to who gets the glory. Joseph could never sit beside Pharaoh as second in command and say, “Look who I am and what I did.” He knew God was doing the work, so he was able to look at his circumstances in terms of his relationship with God and not just in terms of the nasty things people did to him.

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

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

BREAKING THE POWER OF THE PAST

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

Let me say again what we’ve been trying to say throughout this

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chapter: we can't use someone else's irresponsibility in the past as an excuse for our irresponsibility in the present. If you are blaming what your parents or your wife or the government did for what you are not doing now, you need a wake-up call, my brother. You need to live up to your responsibilities.

I know your father or mother or "the system" may have stripped away your self-esteem. But Jesus Christ can give it back to you. I sometimes get into a lot of trouble when I talk to African-American groups because I reject the idea of using the reality of slavery as a reason for irresponsible behavior today.

Please read me very carefully here. Slavery was bad. Slavery was horrible. It was inhuman, ungodly, and unbiblical. It did a number on my people who were oppressed. But to tell me that what happened to our forefathers then is keeping African-American men from being what God wants us to be now is just giving us an out, an excuse, for our irresponsibility. No more excuses.

Let me tell you something. When the Dallas Cowboys get into their huddle during a football game, they don't say, "We'd better not try to move the ball, or those men on the other side of the line are going to nail us." The whole point of the game is to run your plays and find the ones your opponent can't stop so you can move the ball and score without getting nailed every time.

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

Too many of us are looking for an excuse to hang our fears and shortcomings on. If I weren't in the ministry, I would be a psychiatrist because I would be free to charge people \$200 an hour to tell them why they need to come back next week. They would come back too, because a lot of people want to keep blaming.

You say, "My father wouldn't work." Well, you'd better get a job.

You say, "My father beat my mother." Then you'd better learn

some self-control. The problems in your past should become object lessons to show you where you need to be different, not excuses for you to repeat them.

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

MAKING THE MOST OF THE PRESENT

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

Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."

—Genesis 41:50-52

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

Appropriate relationships will help you not to dwell on the negative things in the past that hurt you, but on the positive things that God is doing in your life. You can't beat something with nothing.

If old relationships are destroying you, maybe it's because you have not yet replaced them with appropriate relationships. Now I'm not talking about replacing your wife with a new one, so don't tell anyone I said that. I'm talking about hanging out with people who remind you how bad off you are and how you have every reason to be mad and not set things right. The reason some men are depressed is because they hang out with depression; that is, with other guys who are as messed-up as they are, and who aren't planning to go anywhere either. That just reinforces the pain.

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

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

God took a slave jailbird, a nobody in the world's eyes, and made him the second biggest somebody in Egypt. A lot of men are fretting about the nobodies in their lives while God is waiting to make them somebody.

As Christian men, you and I need to develop thankful hearts toward God. We need to say, "Even though someone messed over me, I'm still here to talk about it. Even though someone tried to stop me, I'm still progressing. Lord, I'm going to stop focusing on how they messed up my yesterday, and I'm going to look at how You are putting me together today."

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

You say, "But you only have one father and mother." Not according to Jesus. Jesus told his disciples, "And everyone who has left

houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.” (Matthew 19:29) God says He will be “a father to the fatherless.” (Psalm 68:5)

But you say, “Where am I going to find this new family?” That’s what the church is all about. In the church you can say, “Lady, you never had a son? You’ve got one now.” “Mister, you never had a boy? You have one now.” “I need a brother. Will you be my brother? I need a sister. Will you be my sister?”

The family of God is the replacement family for the messed-up family relationships we used to have. That’s what Joseph’s family was for him. But he had one more step to take.

LETTING GOD BE GOD

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

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.

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

Genesis 41:56-57 describes the fulfillment of Pharaoh’s dream about the coming famine. And because the famine reached into Canaan, Jacob’s family was affected by it. So he sent his ten older sons to Egypt to buy food (42:1-3).

So when they arrived in Egypt, guess who they had to deal with?

My boy Joe, who recognized them right off. “But he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. ‘Where do you come from?’ he asked. ‘From the land of Canaan,’ they replied, ‘to buy food.’” (42:7)

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

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

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

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

If you and your wife are split up, for example, before you try to resolve your problem you need to make sure that both of you are moving forward. If one or the other is still dragging the past into the present, it will drag the marriage backwards. Both of you need to be moving forward.

Look at Genesis 42:36, which is the saddest part of the story. When Jacob heard that the boys had to take Benjamin back with them, he cried, “You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here Joseph apparently decided to plant a little bit of consternation in the minds of the brothers, because he had them seated in rank according to their age without anything being said. He went from number one right on down to number eleven without missing a beat. No wonder verse 33 concludes by saying, "they looked at each other in astonishment." How did this Egyptian know their birth order? What's the deal here?

SEEKING GOD'S GREATER PURPOSE

What Joseph was doing was getting ready to bring it on home. He had all the factual information he needed. He knew Jacob was well, and he had seen his beloved brother Benjamin—remember, they were both sons of Rachel—with his own eyes.

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

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

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me."

—*Genesis 45:1-4a*

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

But they were afraid to get close because they thought the next words out of his mouth would be, "Yeah, I'm Joseph, and you're dead, you good-for-nothing jive turkeys! I've waited twenty years for this, and now I'm going to kill you!"

But that's not what Joseph said. In a great declaration of for-

giveness and a tremendous statement of God's sovereignty, Joseph told his brothers three times that God sent him there to save their lives (45:5, 7-8).

Later he said, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good." (50:20) That's the Old Testament version of Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." Joseph's vision wasn't blurred because he saw the past in the light of God's purpose.

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

FORGETTING WHAT LIES BEHIND

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

Obviously, if they want to repent and get things straight, you must reach back to them. But I'm saying don't be stifled by folk who want to hang out in the past and keep you there. Even if you don't understand why certain things happened, God will always work out his purposes if you'll give Him a chance.

But you say, "My life is a lemon." Oh, but God can make lemonade. He can take a messed-up scenario and totally transform it if His sovereignty is allowed to work in your life. That's what God is after. He wants to mend your broken past so you can be fully useful again.

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

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but that's irrelevant now because the glue worked and the lamp is giving light.

You may have a broken past, cracked by an uncaring father, a domineering mother, jealous siblings, perverted relatives, or a careless mate. But I want you to know that if you will bring that cracked vessel to Jesus Christ and let the Holy Spirit do the "glue thing," He can put your life together where only you will know it was ever cracked. And you may even forget it was once cracked because your light is still shining. That's what God can do. Because of Him now you can bring light to others.

My challenge to you, as one man to another and as a brother in Christ, is not to allow your past to control your walk with God in the present as you keep moving toward the future He has for you. It can happen if you will submit your past, and your present, to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Then you won't need the past as an excuse anymore.