

Andy Stanley
Moving Forward from a Crisis

One of the reasons we respect the people that we respect most is their response to this, to adversity, right? The people that we respect the most are generally people who've walked through a fire or two, maybe through the valley of the shadow of death. We respect people who've been hurt, but who didn't hurt back, who were treated unjustly or unfairly, but who didn't strike back. We respect people who've faced extraordinary health challenges, but didn't lose their love for life, they didn't despair. They exercised their superpower, their superpower. It's a power that we all have and when exercised, it actually keeps us from becoming like our enemies, it keeps us from reflecting our circumstances. It thwarts evil, our superpower allows us to redeem suffering and your superpower is why you can be better for it. We'll come back to that in just a minute.

Now, this is the final episode of our series, "Better For It", and I chose this topic because while we're all ready for things to get back to normal or maybe a new normal. We would all agree that all of this pain without any gain would certainly be a shame. So, we're pausing to ask the question, what have we learned and what have we observed that we wanna carry forward or to the point of our series, how, how can we be better for it? What have we been doing or what were we doing that almost led to our undoing that we need to stop doing? Or the second way of asking it is this, what should we begin doing that we should've been doing all along? Because again, it would be tragic to forget the lessons we've learned and it would certainly be tragic to lose the perspective that we've gained.

So, last week I talked about how to ensure that you can be better for it and I talked about why we can all be better for it, regardless of what it is. And the reason we can be better for it, is we all have, as I just mentioned, we all have a superpower. We all have a special ability that empowers us to be better for anything that life throws at you or actually anything that life has thrown at you. And our superpower, our superpower, is our respond ability, our respond ability. Our ability to respond rather than react because your ability to choose a response rather than have it dictated to you or your ability to choose something rather than just do what's expected of you or to simply model what you've seen done, your ability to respond allows you to dictate and influence your own future because and you know this.

In fact, we've all seen this. To simply react, to simply react to circumstances, it sets us up to reflect those circumstances. Haven't you seen this? You've seen people go through very difficult circumstances and instead of choosing a measured response, they simply reacted and now months later, maybe years later, they reflect the circumstances they didn't even choose. When we react, and this is the point of today's message, when we simply react, we actually relinquish control of our lives and we ultimately relinquish control of our destiny and our legacy. But a measured response, a measured thought through response ensures that that doesn't happen. But as we said last time, there's a catch.

There's a reason we missed this and that's the reason we're talking about it. And here's the catch. The response, the response that has the potential to reverse the natural course of things, isn't natural. The response that has the potential to reverse the natural course of things, isn't natural. Or another way of saying it is this, the catalytic response is the least intuitive response. The response that makes the most difference in a positive direction is the response we are least likely to choose and most often we are tempted our tend to miss.

So to illustrate this and to drag us deep into the context of this, and the emotion of this, last week we began a story that many of us are familiar with. It's an Old Testament story, the story of Joseph, a young man who exercised his superpower for about 25 years before the story is

ultimately resolved. And his story I think better than any other story I've ever heard in any literature, his story illustrates the sustaining, the course reversing, and the sanity preserving power of a measured response. And like me and like you, Joseph didn't know the end of his story. In fact, Joseph didn't even know there was a story worth telling, but throughout his story and throughout his circumstances, he chose the catalytic response, the unusual response, the unexpected response.

So, you're probably familiar with the story, but let me catch you up to where we left off last time. Here's basically Joseph's resume, here's a synopsis of his life so far. Joseph Jacobson, kidnapped once by his brothers, sold twice, first to slave traders and then he's sold once again when he gets to Egypt, then he's framed for a crime that he ultimately didn't commit and the reason he was punished was because he wouldn't commit the crime. Potiphar's wife, his master's wife accused him of trying to rape her because he wouldn't go to bed with her and then ultimately he's in prison.

So basically this is his resume so far and again, to catch you up at this point in the story, nobody's looking for Joseph, nobody's looking out for Joseph. And perhaps that's where your story intersects with Joseph. And yet in spite of these unbelievable circumstances, I mean any one of those things would be enough. In spite of all that, Joseph continued to respond, Joseph continued to respond as if God was with him. And that brings me to the question we left off with last time, the question we're gonna end with this time as well. How would someone, how would someone in your circumstances respond if they were absolutely confident that God was with them? How would someone in your circumstances respond?

You know how people in your circumstances normally react. You know what's expected of people in your circumstances. You know what's been modeled for you. But how would someone in your circumstances respond if they were absolutely confident that God was with them? That there's more to the story than meets the eye, that your current circumstances are simply a chapter, they're not the entire story.

So back to Joseph's story. Following the rape accusation, Joseph's master, Potiphar, imprisons him and we'll pick up the story there. Joseph's master took Joseph and he put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in prison and here it is again, but while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him. While he was being punished for something he wouldn't do because he wouldn't do it, this is the craziest part of the story to me. While he was being punished for something he wouldn't do because he wouldn't do it, the Lord was with him. While he's being treated unjustly, while he's being treated unfairly, God is with Joseph.

See these are the moments when we wanna say, "God where are you, where are you"? And God says, "I'm right here with you". But it doesn't feel like you're right here with me, it doesn't seem like you're right here with me, where are you? And God would say, "I'm right there with you". So while Joseph was in prison the Lord was with him and God showed him kindness. Now, the word translated kindness in our English text, in the Hebrew text it actually means loving kindness, it's a covenant word. And in fact, throughout most of our English Old Testament, it's translated loving kindness. And the implication is that Joseph considered himself in some sort of covenant relationship with a God who had done nothing for him lately. In fact, what did this loving kindness look like?

Well, the author continues and he tells us. Here's what loving kindness looks like. He showed him kindness and He granted him favor. If only it had stopped there. He granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden, which is a problem for us. Because in our way of thinking, if God is with you and if God is for you, you do not have a relationship with a prison warden. In fact, if God is with you and God is for you, you're not in prison. You're certainly not in prison because you've been accused of something you didn't do and found guilty of something you weren't guilty of.

someone else for a change". Like, God, god be with my brothers or God go be with Potiphar's wife. I need a break from all this with. Well months go by, years go by, there's no weekends off, this doesn't feel like a story, doesn't feel like it's going anywhere and of course, Joseph certainly isn't going anywhere. And then seemingly, totally unrelated, Pharaoh's baker and Pharaoh's butler have a falling out with Pharaoh and Pharaoh is so angry with them, he puts them in prison and he puts them in the same prison where Joseph is.

And then the story has a strange twist. The captain of the guard who was assigned to running the prison, assigned the butler and the baker to Joseph and Joseph attended them. And after they had been there for some time because a lot of times it was by in the story, the story's compressed like most narratives, the butler and the baker, Pharaoh's butler and baker have disturbing dreams on the same night. And Joseph notices that they're disturbed by something and it's kind of a funny part of the story, I mean, here they are in a dungeon.

And so Joseph is serving them breakfast one morning and he actually says, "Hey guys, why do you look so sad today"? To which they could've responded with, "Well let's begin with the fact that we're in a dungeon", but that's not in the text. So Joseph says to them, "Why are you so sad today"? And both of them share that they had a very disturbing dream, a vivid dream, they can remember the details. They're both convinced that the dreams mean something, but they have no idea how to interpret their dreams. And then Joseph responds with this, he says, "Do not interpretations belong to God"?

Do not interpretations belong to God? He's still believing, he's still trusting, even in the midst of these crazy circumstances, he's continuing to respond rather than react. And then he says to the butler and the baker, "Tell me your dreams, tell me your dreams". So, the wine taster, the butler went first and he tells Joseph this elaborate dream and Joseph smiles and he says, "I've got some good news for you, three days from now, three days from now, Pharaoh is gonna lift up your head and restore you to your position".

And of course, the butler doesn't know if Joseph's just making this up, but this is certainly a positive outcome to his dream and it's at this point in the story, we discover something about Joseph that's true of all of us. As much as he had a sense, perhaps, that God was with him, he was not enjoying these circumstances. He despised his circumstances. He was not some sort of superhero, even though he had a superpower. He was not immune to pain and he says to the butler, "Look, when your dream comes true, when you're finally out of here, when all goes well with you, remember me, remember this conversation and show me kindness".

Perhaps a different kind of kindness than my God is showing me at this point. Mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrew's, I was kidnapped, and even here, I've done nothing to deserve being put in this dungeon. So even though God was with Joseph, Joseph felt what we would have felt. He was as frustrated as we would be and he says to the butler, "Look, you are my only way out, remember me when this dream comes true".

Well meanwhile, the baker's sitting there hearing all of this and he's thinking, "Hey, my turn, my turn". So Joseph says, "Okay, tell me about your dream", and the baker again explains this very detailed dream and when he's finished, Joseph shakes his head and he says, "Gee, that's a tough one. I'm afraid I can't help you". Actually that's not what he said, but that's probably what he should've said. He looks at the baker and he says this, "Well, here's what your dream means". Within three days, Pharaoh isn't gonna lift up your head, he's gonna lift off your head and he's going to impale your body on a pole. He's going to impale your body on a pole. A little TMI, right?

Well apparently Joseph was in a really bad mood that morning and he should've just stopped with

that, but he didn't and he continued and he said, "Oh yeah, and there's more to your dream. And the birds will eat away your flesh". Have a nice day. Anybody else need a dream interpreted this morning? Well sure enough, three days later, it's Pharaoh's birthday and just like Joseph predicted, he restored the cupbearer and he beheaded and impaled the baker.

And now, think about it, Joseph waits expectantly. Because he knows what's gonna happen. As soon as these dreams come true just as he predicted, he knows that the butler's gonna go to Pharaoh and say, "Pharaoh, you're not gonna believe this, while I was in your dungeon, sorry to bring that up, while I was in your dungeon, I met a Hebrew boy who predicted this would happen".

So every time somebody bangs on the door of the dungeon, Joseph thinks, "This is my day, I'm out of here". Every time there's a guest, every time there's a visitor, every time the warden calls his name, he thinks, "This is the day I'm out of here". But the text tells us that the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph and he forgot him. And yet this is the young man, now this is the older man, he's in his late 20s by this point that God was supposedly with.

Two years go by, he's 30 years old and then suddenly again, unrelated to anything happening in the dungeon, Pharaoh has a series of disturbing dreams. Nobody can interpret the dreams. And finally, the butler remembers Joseph and he says to Pharaoh, "Hey Pharaoh, you remember a couple of years ago we had that falling out, hate to bring that up, you put me in the dungeon, which I'm sure I deserved, but while I was there, there was a Hebrew young man and he interpreted my dream correctly".

And the text tells us that immediately, Pharaoh sent for Joseph and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. And when he had been shaved and they changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream and no one can interpret it, but I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream, you can interpret it". And what comes next are perhaps the most courageous ever spoken by anyone in history. Here's this foreigner, for whom God had done nothing for lately, this is his big break, he hasn't smelled this good or looked this good in years and Joseph looks at the most powerful man in the world, his ticket out, and he says, "I cannot do it". I cannot do it.

And I think the butler is over in the corner and he's squirming like, "Oh no"! Joseph replied to Pharaoh, he should've just stopped with, "I can't do it", but God, but God, but God... The problem with this is simply that Pharaoh thought he was a god. And Pharaoh believed in other gods and clearly the Gods of the Egyptians were more powerful than the Hebrew gods. And now here's this foreigner who has this one opportunity for freedom and he says, "Pharaoh, I can't do it, but my God can". My God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.

Well, I think everybody at that moment in the royal courtroom thought this was the end for this young Hebrew boy, but fortunately for Joseph, Pharaoh was more curious than he was offended. And so he explains these two dreams to Joseph and Joseph listens patiently. And then it's quiet and he looks at Pharaoh and he says, "Pharaoh, here's what you dreams mean. For the next seven years, there is going to be an abundant grain harvest in Egypt. There's gonna be so much grain you are not even gonna know what to do with it. But after those seven years, those seven years will be followed by a famine and nothing's gonna grow".

In fact, the abundance will not even be remembered. The seven years of plenty will not even be remembered because of the famine that follows because it's gonna be so severe. He's silent, no one says anything. And then Joseph does the unthinkable, he leans in and he begins to tell Pharaoh what to do, he begins to advise Pharaoh and he says, "Pharaoh, here's what you need to do, you

need to appoint somebody and put them in charge of this problem, there needs to be somebody who wakes up every single day focused on solving this problem and preparing Egypt during the seven years of plenty for the seven years of famine".

Well, the plan seemed good to Pharaoh and it seemed good to all of his officials, so Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God", and then this is so amazing, and then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God, your Hebrew God, since God has made all of this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you, you shall be in charge of my palace". He makes him the Prime Minister of Egypt. You shall be in charge of my palace and all of my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect, only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you and I'm making this up, I think perhaps Joseph thought, "Yeah, that's what Potiphar said as well".

Anyway, so Joseph goes to work, he begins preparing Egypt for the seven years of famine. In fact, the text says that Joseph began to store up such huge quantities of grain, it was like the sand of the sea. It was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure. In fact, what he did was brilliant, he built store houses in all the major cities and purchased the grain from the people and again, as there was more and more grain, the price kept dropping, dropping, dropping, dropping, dropping, so he stored up all of this grain, seven years after this time of plenty, the rain stopped, nothing will grow. The people of Egypt begin to starve and he opened up these store houses in these primary cities and he began to sell grain in Pharaoh's name to the people.

Well, as is the case with all famines, it spread across the borders, it spread to the surrounding regions, and up North of Egypt where Joseph's family lived, Jacob and his sons, Joseph's brothers, they began to starve as well and this is where the store takes a very interesting twist. Here's what happens next. When Jacob, Joseph's father learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you just keep looking at each other? Do something. I have heard there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we live and not die".

Again, if you've heard this story, you know what happens next. But I mean, there is so much drama because now the stage is set, fortunes have been reversed. Joseph is 40 years old. His brothers have not seen him since he was 17 years old and this will be the ultimate test of Joseph's superpower. This will be the ultimate test of his willingness to respond rather than react. And everybody that knew or knows his story, knows exactly how he's expected to react. And if we can put ourselves in his position, we know exactly what we would probably do if we were Joseph. The story continues.

Now Joseph, by this time, is the governor of the land, he's the second most powerful person in Egypt, which means he's for all practical purposes, the second most powerful person in the world. He was the governor of the land and the person who sold the grain to all his people, so when Joseph's brothers arrive, they bow down to him with their faces to the ground. And as soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them. But he pretended to be a stranger.

Imagine this moment. He remembers the terror of having his clothes stripped from him when he's thrown into that empty well, he remembers the dampness of the pit and the fear of wondering, "Are they going to abandon me here"? He remembers the fear of the slave traders, the humiliation of being sold on an auction block. He remembers the hopelessness of prison, and then he remembers the despair at being forgotten by the butler. And then he does the most remarkable thing. For a while as he's trying to make up his mind, he toys with his brothers, he actually finds out from them that their father is still alive, he finds out that they have a brother that's not with them, Benjamin, and so he sends them back.

He keeps one of them as a hostage, it just goes on and on and on, chapter after chapter, as he's trying to decide what he's going to do and trying to decide have they really changed and are they still the brothers they used to be? And finally, after this long back and forth situation that's so fascinating, there's so much detail in the text, he finally at the end defies expectation, he defies certainly his own instinct and his own emotion and he employs his superpower one more time. They're gathered with him, by this time they had brought Benjamin, so there's all 11 brothers, he sends everybody else out of the room, they are on their knees and suddenly they are alone with the Prime Minister of Egypt and they are so confused. And he stares at each of them.

And then he announces, imagine this, "I am Joseph, I am Joseph". And they look up and they see that 17 year old in the face of that 40 year old man and they realize and before they can say anything, Joseph says, "Is my father still living"? The text says of course, but his brothers, his brothers were not able to answer him because they were terrified, they were terrified at his presence. But they did not need to be terrified in his presence because in their absence, Joseph had lived every single day of his life as if God was present. And now, when it counted most, Joseph once again, chose not to react, but to respond and he forgave his brothers.

The text says this, "Come close to me", he said. And I'm sure that took a while don't you think? Come close to me and he said, "I am your brother, Joseph". And I guess he just can't help himself, "the one", you remember the one, "you sold into Egypt". But now do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.

Can I pause and just say something about this real quick? When we are able, when we are able to believe and when we are able to respond as if God is with us, we gain a perspective on what's behind our circumstances that we can't gain any other way. And this is such a powerful reminder of that because Joseph is able to come to the conclusion, the reason I'm here, the reason I went through everything I went through, God had a plan in my suffering, God had a plan in the injustice, God had a plan in circumstances that I would not have chosen for myself. God had a plan for me being forgotten, God had a plan for me being sold, not once, but twice.

When we choose to respond, looking back, we will have a perspective on our suffering that we cannot gain any other way. And if all we do is react, not only will we not be better for it, we will never have the perspective that allows us to move successfully into our future. Now, what nobody knew about this encounter was that God's entire plan of salvation for the world, hung by the thread of Joseph's response. That before him is the Nation of Israel, the 12 brothers represented the 12 tribes of Israel and Joseph did what and the 12 tribes of Israel that would become the Nation of Israel that ultimately through him, that nation would come the Messiah, the Messiah who would do for the world exactly what Joseph did that day for his brothers.

And this is why I said last time and this is why I hope you'll never forget, never ever ever, never underestimate, never underestimate the power of a measured response. Never underestimate the power of a measured response. Well, the story wraps up this way, Joseph brings his entire family to Egypt and he provides for them for years and years and years. Eventually, his father, Jacob, dies. And once they buried Jacob and they had this elaborate funeral, and they all come back to the land of Egypt, his brothers get together, the 10 brothers that sold him into slavery get together and they realize uh oh, perhaps Joseph was just waiting for our father to die before he exacts his revenge.

And so they go to Joseph and the text says this, his brothers came to him and they threw themselves down before him and they said to him, "We are your slaves". But Joseph continues to respond rather than react and here's what he said, these famous words. But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God"? Am I in the place of God?

Guys, don't you understand? That God was in this, that God worked through this. Am I in the place of God? The Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, it's written this way, do not be afraid, for I am God's. Do not be afraid, I belong to God and since I belong to God, who am I to act like or to step into the place of God.

"You intended", he said, "You intended to harm me". That day when you kidnapped me, that when you stripped me of my clothes, that day when you threw me into that empty well, you had the power, the odds were in your favor, there was evil in your heart, you created circumstances that generally transform victims into perpetrators. But not this time. You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good. "To accomplish", he said, "To accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives".

Don't ever ever ever forget this. Don't ever forget this. God's intention, this is amazing, God's intention became a reality through one man's catalytic unprecedented circumstance defying responses. Responses, listen, none of which seem significant at the time. Drop into his story and take any one of his responses, none of his individual responses seemed all that significant, but all together, they were part of the unfolding story of my redemption and yours. God's plan of salvation for the world.

Here's the thing, our superpower, our respond ability gives us the potential to be better for it, whatever it is. And you know this, we don't get to choose the it, that's part of the problem, right? We don't choose the it. But our response, your response is what determines whether or not we will be better for it, regardless of what the it is. And it all boils down to this terrifying, liberating, destiny altering question, how would someone in my circumstances respond? How would someone in my circumstances respond? How would someone in my circumstances respond? We know how someone in my circumstances would react, we see that all the time, but how would someone in my circumstances respond if they were absolutely confident? God was with them.

Your answer, your answer to that question is your invitation to exercise your superpower. Your answer to this question is your best way forward. And if you act on it, you will emerge from whatever you're facing, better for it. Let's face it, we are no better than our responses, but our responses have extraordinary potential to make us and to make the world better.

So one more time. How would someone, how would someone in your circumstances respond if they were confident? God was with them. If they were absolutely confident that it was more to their circumstances, more to your circumstances than meets the eye, that your current circumstances are not the story. They're simply a chapter in the story and that God has chosen to be part of your story and that God is going to connect the dots of your responses, to do something great for you and something great through you. You have a superpower, your respond ability, use it. If you do, you will be better for it, the people around you will be better for it. And who knows? Perhaps, the world would be better for it as well. How would someone in your circumstances respond if they were confident? God was with them.

**Preached at North Point Church
www.sermons.love**