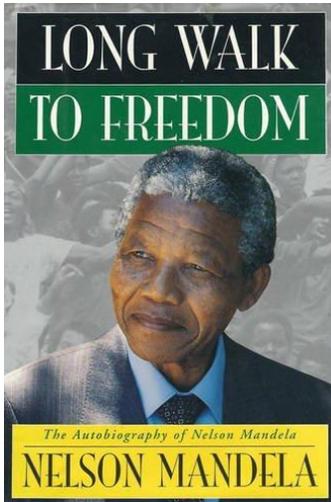


# “Lemonade Faith”

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During my summer vacation I read Nelson Mandela’s autobiography *The Long Walk to Freedom*.



It was not just a long walk to freedom — it was a long walk to the end of the book. But it was a fascinating read, by one of the most influential and significant people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nelson Mandela endured incredible injustice and could easily have become bitter, angry and defeated. Instead he became the first black President of South Africa and led a deeply divided nation away from the brink of a bloody civil war and towards reconciliation and justice. In so doing, he inspired the world.

Mandela’s story is an echo of the story of Joseph, in the Old Testament, who also experienced incredible injustice but somehow emerged from a life of betrayal, incarceration and hardship to be a better person, one able to lead a nation and save them from famine. Out of injustice and hardship and hopelessness emerge goodness and redemption and salvation.

These stories have me wondering how it is that a person could experience suffering and injustice and not only survive it, but somehow become a richer, stronger person than the one they were before. I called my sermon ‘Lemonade Faith’ because of that little aphorism that you likely know: “*When life gives you lemons, make lemonade!*” It’s a sweet thought, but not so easily done in real life. I’ve heard some people say that when life gives you lemons you should freeze them and throw them at the person causing you difficulty. Someone else said that when life gives you lemons; find someone to whom life has given vodka and get together with them!

All of us experience suffering and difficulty in life. Some experience more than others, but all of us get lemons in life. But why is it that some are able to become sweet refreshing lemonade while the rest of us turn sour and share that angry bitterness with everyone we bump into?

Nelson Mandela and Joseph of the Bible are clearly exceptional people. I think there are things that even ordinary people like you and me can learn from them. The scripture reading we read today about Joseph being promoted from prisoner to prime minister is the climax of his story.

From Genesis chapter 39- 48, it really is one of the best stories in the Bible. I encourage you to give it a read.

If you can take a look at this brilliant video synopsis:

<https://youtu.be/NQ7wLTBnF84>

[Joseph was the favourite son of his father Jacob's 12 sons. His father lavished him with praise and gifts, like the fabulous *coat of many colours*, all of which went to the boy's head. The brothers threw the bragging dreamer into a pit and then when a Caravan of Ishmaelites happened to come by, they sold him into slavery and told their father that a wild animal must have killed Joseph.

Despite the misfortune he does well. Sold into a prominent household, he works hard until he is falsely accused of attempted sexual assault when he refused to have an affair with his master's wife. He is thrown in prison and totally forgotten. He remains in jail forgotten for years until one day he is given the opportunity to interpret a dream that the Pharaoh had and that was troubling the Pharaoh greatly. The dream revealed that there would be a great famine in the land for many years, but before that there would be several years of bumper crops. So impressed was the Pharaoh with his wisdom that he put him in charge of preparing and storing up food for the coming famine. Joseph becomes the second most powerful man in Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh. It is while he is in this position that he meets his brothers again, years later when they are forced to come to Egypt to buy grain because the famine has spread far and wide. Instead of seeking revenge on his brothers, Joseph ends by embracing them and saving their families.]

Joseph was not perfect, but he didn't deserve what happened to him. What happened to Joseph was an incredible injustice. I have no doubt that his heart was full of hate and anger. Anger at his brothers, anger at his former employer, anger at God; his heart must have been full of it. Anger is a natural response to injustice.

Nelson Mandela knew about the anger that is born of injustice. Mandela grew up in colonial South Africa, an inherently racist nation as most of colonial Africa was at the time. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the South African government under the Nationalist party systematized and encoded racism into law. Things went from bad to absolutely intolerable for the black majority. The whites were an overwhelming minority and, in a system designed to keep them in power, the all-white government increasingly set limitations and laws on black and coloured peoples. Only whites were

allowed to vote. The system was known as Apartheid, which literally means 'apartness'. Each person was carefully classified as white or coloured (which was anyone of mixed race, Indian or Asian) and then there was the final category of Bantu - black. Apartheid touched every part of life, from economics to politics to education and housing ... you name it, there were rules about how you moved and lived and behaved.

Another book I'd recommend on the subject is Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*. Noah is a late-night talk show host and was born in South Africa to a black mother and a white father, which was literally a crime. His father was not part of the family and his mother raised him, but because she was a different colour from her lighter-skinned son, she hired a coloured nanny so that when they were in public, the nanny could pretend that she was the mother (with the same colouring) and his real mother would pretend to be the nanny.



Mandela had gone to school and trained and worked successfully as a lawyer before becoming increasingly politically active. He opposed the government, calling for equality for all and a "one-person-one-vote" system. He initially advocated for peaceful resistance; but when the peaceful resistance was met over and over with violence, he began to change his mind. He started to believe that it might only be through violence that the government

would change, so he headed up the military arm of the ANC (African National Congress). Mandela and most of his colleagues were arrested and tried sentenced to life imprisonment for conspiring to overthrow the state. He spent 27 years in prison from 1962-1990.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has often commented that without the time in prison, Mandela would not have turned into the man he became and the one who has inspired the world. He went into prison an angry young man but came out quite different. When he walked out of the gates, he walked out with greater humility, forgiveness for those who had imprisoned him, and a laser focus on healing the divisions of the country through working with his enemies to bring change, equality and reconciliation.

The question I have is: how is it that both Joseph and Mandela were able to transform their injustice and suffering into a force for good that was

so powerful they didn't just bring healing and peace to themselves but to an entire nation?

The first similarity I see between these two stories is that both saw opportunity in their misfortune. Now I don't mean that they joyfully clapped their hands and thought "What a great opportunity to be unjustly imprisoned!" Not at all. Yet once they were able to accept the reality of their situation, they saw that there were things they could do and were willing to do to make it more meaningful. Both ended up even making a difference to others in the midst of being somewhere they did not want to be and should not have been if the world was a right and just place. Joseph sold into slavery did as good a job as he could and ended up in charge of his master's household ... until he was unjustly accused and was thrown in prison. Even in prison he became valuable to the prisoners and the guards. In fact, it was because he had correctly interpreted the dreams of some fellow prisoners that he ended up with the opportunity to interpret the Pharaoh's dream, which led to his release and rise to power.

Mandela was a lawyer by trade. In prison he did what he could to fight for rights for the prisoners — like fighting for the right to have a toothbrush (which I think took about 6 months) and the right to wear trousers instead of shorts. At that time in South Africa only children wore shorts. Prisoners of other races were given trousers, but black prisoners were given shorts to further degrade them. Blacks were also given less food than white and coloured prisoners.

Using his legal skills, negotiations and protest, Mandela advocated for better rights for prisoners. It was a slow and difficult process. Nevertheless, inch by inch he made a difference. Though he and the other political prisoners were separated from the common criminal prisoners, Mandela was also able to informally act as an attorney to many who were in prison for crimes that did not warrant the prison sentence they had received. Many blacks could not afford proper legal representation and therefore ended up languishing in prison far more frequently and for a greater length of time than others.

Whatever challenge you are going through, can you see any opportunities in it? Can you see any way that you might help someone else who is going through something similar?

Another similarity that I think makes all the difference in the world is to see your time of suffering and struggle as a season and not as a destination. Though I don't know as much about Joseph—we don't get nearly the detail that you get reading Mandela's autobiography—Mandela never gave up hope that he would one day be free again. He accepted his

reality and made something of it on the one hand — but never gave up believing that one day he would be free. Sometimes when you are in the middle of horrible suffering it can be difficult to see the shore, but keep swimming, keep breathing and trust that you will make it across the lake. Trust that the Shepherd is walking with you in the valley of the shadow of death, even if you don't see him in the overwhelming darkness. I suspect that Joseph had that same hope because he was ready and able to ask God to interpret the dreams. When we focus our eyes on God, there is always hope.

Another thing I see in them is gratitude. Mandela does not exactly speak of gratitude formally in his book, but it is so clear that he noticed and delighted in small things while in prison. Mandela and the others spent their days in very hard manual labour, breaking rocks. Though he was not grateful for the work, he delighted in the long talks with his friends as they walked to the quarry and as they worked the day away. They talked about everything and anything. Some of it was about weighty and important things, but a lot of it was pure philosophical silliness. My favourite was the long running debate they had about whether or not there were tigers in Africa. One person, who was a former professor, was adamant that there were not and had never been tigers in Africa; others were quite sure that there were but that they were very difficult to spot. Mandela himself argued that because there was a word for tiger in his native Xhosa language, there must have been tigers at some point in Africa perhaps 100's of years ago but that there were none anymore! He also delighted in growing a garden.

Finding small things to be grateful for when you are in a season of struggle is so very important.

At a big picture level I want you to see that God was with Joseph and with Nelson Mandela through all the tragedy and triumph of life. God is with us in the darkness. God is good and could not cause evil or harm. God would never say: 'The end justifies the means.' So I don't believe that God caused the brothers to sell Joseph into slavery. But God will take the bad things that happen to us and use them for good if we allow him to.

Romans 8:28 reads: "*In all things, God is at work for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.*" God wants to actively create something new out of the manure that is in your life. This is not a case of things that just happened to 'work out'; it is God who is working things out. Let me say that again. It is not things that work out for good; it is God who is at work in all things seeking for the good.

Don't underestimate the life that can come when you give your dark times and hurts to God. God has a plan for you and for others through you.

I was reminded of an old 70's gospel song by Christy Lane that goes like this:

*He never said you'd only see sunshine,  
He never said there'd be no rain,  
He only promised a heart full of singing,  
About the very things in life that cause you pain.*

*Give them all, give them all, give them all to Jesus,  
Shattered dreams, wounded hearts, broken toys,  
Give them all, give them all, give them all to Jesus,  
And He will turn your darkness into joy.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.