

## INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

# Failure and defeat turning to forgiveness and hope

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**W**hat happens when things do not go as we had planned, when it seems that we are defeated, when we face what seems to be certain failure? Can we still hold onto hope?

The story of Joseph in the Hebrew Bible gives us a powerful example of how to deal with what appears to be failure as well as an example of the principle of forgiveness. Recall that Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, only to meet them again when a famine forced them to go to Egypt where Joseph had risen to power and could determine their fate.



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not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, for God sent me here before you to save life ... to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.” (Gen. 45:4-8)

After their father, Jacob, had died, the brothers were certain Joseph would now repay them for their earlier deeds, but again,

Rather than taking revenge, Joseph spoke to them as follows:

“I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!

And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, for God sent me here before you to save life ... to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.”

After their father, Jacob, had died, the brothers were certain Joseph would now repay them for their earlier deeds, but again,

Joseph forgave them, saying: “Don’t be afraid. You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.” (Genesis 50:19-21)

What had originally appeared as a failure turned out to be the source of saving many lives and the survival of the Hebrew people.

A turning point in this story also was the first example in the Scriptures of a person offering forgiveness to another for a wrong that had been committed. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks called this “a crucial moment in the

history of faith. It marks the birth of forgiveness. ... But it also established another important principle: the idea of divine providence. ... God is at work behind the scenes.”

Defeat and failure often are steps in a life story that leads to a greater success. Sacks points to J. K. Rowling’s initial efforts to get the Harry Potter novel published, only to be rejected on her first 12 attempts.

The Beatles, following their first audition with a record company, were told that guitar bands were “on their way out” and that they had “no future in show business.”

Sacks then quotes Winston Churchill’s remark that “success is the ability to go from one

failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

The example of Joseph also has a counterpart in the central scene in the Christian Gospels, when Jesus cries on the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46) and “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).

What seems to be utter failure turns out to be the central story for Christians.

From a human perspective, defeat and failure can seem to be the end.

But from God’s perspective, it can be a part of a larger plan — a story of forgiveness and salvation.

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