



SEASONS OF OUR LIVES

EMPTY NEST

Time for Letting Go

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Contents

Introduction 4

Coping with Change 6

Letting Go 19

Loving Anew 30

Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume is one of several volumes that explore the theme of **Seasons of Our Lives**. While the Scriptures remain constant, we have the opportunity to find within them a fresh message as we go through life facing various challenges. Whether the circumstances in our lives change due to our own decisions or due to the natural process of aging and maturing, we bring with us the actual lived experiences of this world to our prayerful reading of the Bible. This series provides an opportunity to acknowledge our own circumstances and find how God continues to work in us through changing times.

Coping with Change



Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through Genesis 37:27-36, a small but important portion of the story of Joseph and his family.

Genesis 37:27-36

²⁷“Come, let us sell him to these Ishmaelites, instead of doing away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed. ²⁸Midianite traders passed by, and they pulled Joseph up out of the cistern. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt. ²⁹When Reuben went back to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not in it, he tore his garments, ³⁰and returning to his brothers, he exclaimed: “The boy is gone! And I—where can I turn?” ³¹They took Joseph’s tunic, and after slaughtering a goat, dipped the tunic in its blood. ³²Then they sent someone to bring the long ornamented tunic to their father, with the message: “We found this. See whether it is your son’s tunic or not.” ³³He recognized it and exclaimed: “My son’s tunic! A wild beast has devoured him! Joseph has been torn to pieces!” ³⁴Then Jacob tore his garments, put sackcloth on

his loins, and mourned his son many days. ³⁵Though his sons and daughters tried to console him, he refused all consolation, saying, “No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol.” Thus did his father weep for him. ³⁶The Midianites, meanwhile, sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh and his chief steward.

After a few moments of quiet reflection on the passage, consider the following background information provided in Setting the Scene.

Setting the Scene

The book of Genesis tells an empty nest story. The Joseph saga relates how the Israelites leave their home in the Promised Land to settle in Egypt. It all begins when the sons of Jacob plot to get rid of their brother, Joseph. His ten older brothers of another mother are jealous of him. Jacob has lavished Joseph with favors, like the gift of a fine tunic of many colors. In his musical version of this story, Andrew Lloyd Weber calls the tunic an *Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Joseph is a dreamer too.

One day, shepherding with his brothers, Joseph tells them about two of his dreams (Gen 37:5-11). In one, he dreamt that ten sheaves of wheat bowed down to his sheaf of wheat. In another, the sun and moon and stars do him homage. Recognizing themselves as the ten sheaves and the stars paying homage to their younger brother, they have had enough. So they decide to kill him.

Genesis 37:27-36 will be explored a few verses at a time. Questions that appear in the margins are for your personal reflection or for discussion with others.

Understanding the Scene Itself

²⁷“Come, let us sell him to these Ishmaelites, instead of doing away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed. ²⁸Midianite traders passed by, and they pulled Joseph up out of the cistern. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt. ²⁹When Reuben went back to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not in it, he tore his garments, ³⁰and returning to his brothers, he exclaimed: “The boy is gone! And I—where can I turn?”

Reuben convinces his brothers to dump Joseph into an empty well. They take his cloak for resale. Then they plan to sell him as a slave to their regular trading partners, the Ishmaelites. In the meantime, another group of nomads, the Midianites, rescues Joseph from the well, takes him to Egypt, and sells him as a house servant to a wealthy Egyptian, Potiphar.

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son's tunic! A wild beast has devoured him! Joseph has been torn to pieces!" ³⁴Then Jacob tore his garments, put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned his son many days. ³⁵Though his sons and daughters tried to console him, he refused all consolation, saying, "No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol." Thus did his father weep for him.

When the brothers discover that Joseph is gone, they soak Joseph's tunic in blood and concoct a story. Back home, they tell Jacob that a lion attacked and killed Joseph. They show him the blood-soaked tunic as evidence. Grief-stricken, Jacob mourns the loss of his son whom he thinks is dead.

While Jacob and his wives do not have an empty house, they do have a fractured family. Their nest is emptier without Joseph. Throughout the years before they find Joseph in Egypt, the family does its best to live in the grief over their loss. They cope with the changes in the dynamics of the family. Jacob misses his favorite son. He may blame his older sons for neglecting



Do you have any regrets about the way you raised your children? If so, ask God for help to forgive yourself.

What concerns do you have for your young adult children who are out of the house? For yourself as an empty nest parent? How can trust in God's loving care help you cope with the uncertainties of the future?

to keep Joseph safe. The older brothers may feel guilty for what they did. They let their jealousy cloud their judgment. They may even miss his dream stories too. Benjamin, Joseph's brother by Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife, has lost his older brother. They struggle with their loss unaware of the future reunion. Much love and care for one another probably helped them cope with the dramatic changes in their family.

Empty nest parents have a lot in common with Jacob. They love and care for their children when growing up. They have sheltered, fed, and clothed them. Many of their clothes still hang in the closet of their empty bedrooms. They sorely miss their young adult child when gone. A missing young adult child is a loss for which to grieve. Their young adult children encounter struggles over which the parents have no control. They rely on the comfort of the remaining family members to adjust to their empty nests.

³⁶The Midianites, meanwhile, sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh and his chief steward.

Midianites rescue Joseph from the well, take him to Egypt, and sell him as a house servant to a wealthy Egyptian, Potiphar. Unknown to his family, Joseph rises to prominence in Egypt (see Gen 42–47). He comes to the attention of Pharaoh by interpreting the ruler's dreams that predict a famine. Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of the food reserves in preparation for the famine. Years later the famine brings the brothers of

Joseph to Egypt looking for food. Eventually Joseph reveals himself as their brother. Overjoyed to have found their brother alive, they go home and bring back their father, Jacob, and the whole family. The Israelites enjoy a privileged life in Egypt until enslaved by a new pharaoh.

God accomplishes this saving work through ordinary human experiences. The Joseph story exemplifies God at work amidst the foibles, mistakes, and even sins of the human family. Joseph's jealous, conniving, and cruel brothers unwittingly become agents in God's plan. If Joseph had not gone to Egypt, the family may have died of hunger. If Joseph did not interpret dreams, he would have never come to the attention of the pharaoh. If Jacob's family had not gone to Egypt for food, they would not have been reunited with Joseph. Jacob and his family did not know what God had in store for them. Yet they trusted in God through their struggles.

The Joseph story and other patriarch sagas in the book of Genesis reveal the saving work of God. Throughout the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, God continues to accomplish great things in the world through ordinary people such as Moses, Joshua, and the tribes of Israel. Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy tell the story of the dramatic intervention of God in human history to fulfill his promises.

The New Testament continues and magnifies the story of God's involvement in our world. A new covenant is initiated between God and God's people through the birth, death, and

Recall a family experience when things turned out better than you had anticipated. What does the experience reveal to you about God's loving care?



resurrection of his son, Jesus. The Holy Spirit acts in us, the church, and in the world as God transforms all by his loving design.

God is at work in the human family, including the family with an empty nest. This experience is common in our mobile culture. Young adult

children move away to find employment. They marry and raise their families in their new locations. They leave behind empty bedrooms with beds ready for their return, personal possessions for which they have no room, graduation pictures and more hanging on the walls, and parents lonely for their company. If they marry and raise families in their new locations, parents miss the grandchildren too. Parents look forward to weekend visits when their children come home or when they travel to see their children. During these visits, hugs and conversation satisfy parents' longing for their young adult children's company. Between visits, regular contact occurs by way of phone calls, texts, Snapchats, Facebook, and other social media. Parents no longer are able to take care of them as when they were toddlers. They complain to one another about the infrequency of return phone calls and messages. So parents worry from a distance that their children are well. They pray for the well-being of their children every time they think of them.

What promise(s) did you make to yourself, your spouse, God about raising your children? How can your reliance on God help you keep these promises with your children out of the house?

Like the Israelites, parents have a covenant with God. In marriage they promise God to love and care for one another in sickness and in health until death separates them. They promise to be fruitful and multiply. God provides them what they need and the children they desire. As with slavery in Egypt and forty years in the desert, the empty nest tests these promises. Parents miss the life they had when their children were at home. They wonder why they invested so much time and treasure in raising children who are now gone. They struggle with feelings of loneliness and alienation. Yet parents know God loves them and cares for them. Their love for each other and the love of their family and friends sustain them through the challenging adjustments to an empty nest. Reassured by God's care for them up to this time in their lives, parents can be confident that God continues to care for them and their children whatever the future may bring.

Though difficult, change can transform. God's care for the Israelites transformed a cruel plot by jealous brothers into a recovery from famine. God's care for parents of an empty nest can transform the painful absence of a son or daughter into new and more loving relationships.



Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

The reflection below is provided for your time of prayer. Or you may wish to use the simple words of prayer found at the end of this section.

Families grow. Singles may become couples who marry and have children. Their children grow up and have children. The parents become grandparents. As their children and grandchildren grow, parents and grandparents grow too. Hopefully, they grow wiser and more loving. Weddings, vacations, reunions, funerals, and other occasions where these generations gather are icons of this growing family.

- Where are you in your life's journey as parents?
- Recall some joyful experiences raising your children.
- Give thanks to God for the joy your children have given you.

Families change. Jobs and houses come and go. Parents become coaches, band boosters, counselors, tutors, driving instructors, movers, and more for their children. Children become young adults. Marriages break up. Spouses die. With change comes growing pains. When parents and others look back, they often thank God for the grace to remain steadfast in their love for their families through good times and bad.

- Recall the struggles you have experienced raising your children.

- How has God helped you through difficult times?
- Talk to God about the lessons you are learning from these challenges.

Parents raise their children to be self-sufficient, mature, and loving adults. When they become adults they begin to live their own lives. Parents must now negotiate another change in the life of their family. Behavioral scientists identify this phase of a marriage as the empty nest. Eventually hatchling birds test their wings and fly out of the nest. Children grow up and leave the home. Parents are left with an empty nest. Empty nest occurs in other situations too. Some experience empty nest after the death of a spouse or anyone with whom a home was shared. Others experience it after a divorce.

- What kind of empty nest have you experienced?
- How has God helped you negotiate this significant life change?
- Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for God's grace.

Parents enjoy the benefits of an empty nest. They have less stress with a quieter house. They now have time to spend with one another, grandchildren, and friends—or on their favorite activities. Parents also cope with the losses. They miss their adult children, especially if they are out of town. They worry about their health and

happiness. They have to learn new ways of parenting them. They wonder about their own purpose in life now that their children are grown. Some even suffer depression.

- How has an empty nest affected you personally?
- If you are enjoying an empty nest, thank God for the blessings.
- If you are struggling with an empty nest, ask God for healing.

Parents still love their children who are out of the nest. They raised them to become mature adults. They want their children to grow up happy, healthy, and holy. When children leave home, they are doing what they are supposed to do. Parents thank God they raised them well. Parents enjoy watching their grown children use their God-given talents to make contributions in their work places and in their new communities. Parents watch with pride as their grown up children pursue intimate relationships, marry, and start families of their own.

- What gives you pride about the way you raised your children?
- Thank God for the good things your children learned from you.

You may use this prayer or one of your own making:

God, I give you thanks for the blessings of my spouse and my children.

I have relied on you to provide and care for them while raising my family.

You have never let me down. I need your help again.

My son/daughter has left home.

I am so proud of the young mature adult he/she has become.

But I miss him/her. I worry about him/her.

I am struggling to get used to an empty nest.

I pray for the grace needed to cope with the new changes in my life.

Because of your Son's resurrection,

I have hope that this joyful and painful transition in my life

empowers me to love more deeply my young adult child.

I rely on the loving care of your Holy Spirit for me and for him/her.

Amen.

Living the Word

Consider how you might navigate this time of change in your life. Perhaps resolve to do one or two of the following, or make your own resolution:

- Focus intentionally on the time you are able to spend with your young adult or adult children rather than on the time when they are absent.
- Learn to offer advice to your young adult children when asked by them to do so.
- Find ways to “embrace” your grown children over long distances, making use of various technologies that could bridge the distance.
- Intentionally spend your time and attention on your spouse.