

## Trouble

**Big Idea:** God is using our trouble for training.

**Purpose:** To challenge people to see their troubles as an opportunity for training.

**Passage:** Genesis 39:6-23

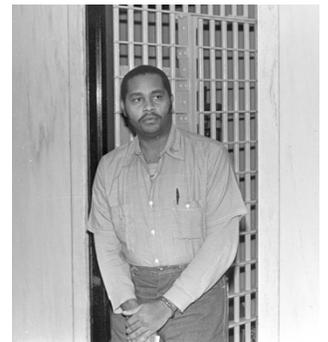
### Opening

#### **Anthony Ray Hinton**

-In 1985, two Birmingham, Alabama area restaurants were robbed and the managers were fatally shot. There were no eyewitnesses or fingerprint evidence, and no suspects. Later that year, a restaurant in Bessemer, Alabama was robbed and the manager was shot, but not seriously wounded. He picked out Anthony Ray Hinton from a lineup even though Anthony had been working in a locked warehouse 15 miles away at the time of the crime. They found an old gun in the home of Anthony's mother and firearm examiners claimed that gun had been used in all three crimes. The prosecutor, who had a documented history of racial bias, claimed Anthony was guilty and evil just by looking at him. The arresting officer told Anthony he knew Anthony didn't do it, but some black person had done it and Anthony was going to pay the price.

-Anthony was 29 years old, had never been in a fight, and steadfastly claimed his innocence. He passed a polygraph, but the judge refused its admittance at trial. Anthony was appointed a lawyer who retained a visually-impaired civil engineer with no expertise in firearms identification to be Anthony's expert witness. With no credible expert to challenge the State's assertion of a firearms match, Anthony was convicted and sentenced to death. Anthony said the only thing he was guilty of was being black in Alabama. He was right. We tend to think we are past that sort of thing, but the recent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery show that we are not. We must be committed to combating racism of any kind so that people of color will no longer have to bear the burden of injustice.

**-Anthony lived for 30 years in a 5x7 cell.** The only things in his cell were a bed attached to the wall and a toilet. At 6 foot 2, his legs hung off the end of his bed. Anthony had the same schedule every day - breakfast at 3 AM, lunch at 10 AM, dinner at 3 PM. He got one hour each day to be in the exercise yard. Fifty-three inmates were put to death while Anthony was on death row. His cell was 30 feet from the electric chair. He said that there was no worse smell than a human being set on fire.



-Anthony was and is a passionate follower of Jesus. **His faith, his sense that God was with him, kept him going.** At the trial, he said he put his life in God's hands. He never stopped doing that. He said he knew that if God was in the plans, he would be alright. He chose to forgive early. He said he didn't forgive so those who wrongly imprisoned him could sleep well at night; He forgave so *he* could sleep well at night. He prayed regularly for those who wrongfully imprisoned him. He prayed regularly for the victims. He prayed regularly for justice. Anthony said they could take everything from him, but they could never take his joy.

-Bryan Stephenson and his Equal Justice Initiative team fought for 16 years to get Anthony released. It finally went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which unanimously granted a new trial. His case was quickly dismissed after the Alabama Department of Forensic Services tested the evidence, the only evidence, and proved the gun could not have been a match to any of the shootings. Equal Justice Initiative had been pleading for the state to do the simple test for 15 years.

-On April 3, 2015 Anthony walked out of Jefferson County Jail in Birmingham, Alabama, a free man for the first time in 30 years. Let's watch [that moment](#). Can you imagine?

Anthony says one of his favorite things to do is walk outside at night to look at the stars. For 30 years he didn't see stars. His first words were **the sun does shine**. That is the title of his best-selling book. It is remarkable book. I am in the process of reading it. My wife and daughter Eden have already done so.

-Anthony has met President Obama and Queen Elizabeth. He attended Nelson Mandela's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party. He has become a sought-after public speaker, talking to more than 1,500 at a church one day and at Boston University the next day. He was even awarded an honorary doctorate.

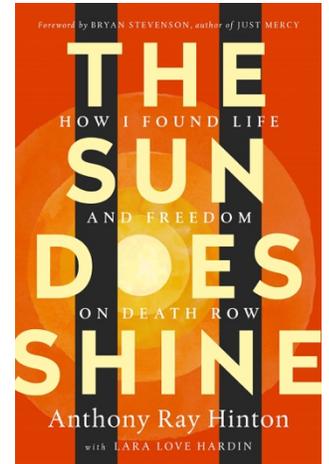
-Anthony is one of the longest-serving death row prisoners to be freed. He is the 153<sup>rd</sup> person exonerated from death row since 1983. For every 9 people who have been executed in the U.S., one person has been exonerated. There have been an extraordinary number of people sentenced to die unjustly. It has been estimated that 4% of people currently on death row are innocent. Race undoubtedly plays a role in this. Change is indeed in order.

-Today we are going to explore the story of another man who was falsely imprisoned. It is the story of another man who, even though he was falsely imprisoned, believed God was with him and that God would get him through the trouble he was in.

## Review

-We are in the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of a 7-week series called *You'll Get Through This: Lessons from Joseph*. Our Big Read for this series is a book by Max Lucado by the same title. I want to encourage you to read it and join our online discussions.

We are introduced to Joseph as a spoiled brat. He was the 11<sup>th</sup> son in a line of 12 sons, and yet he was his father Jacob's favorite son. Joseph made sure his brothers knew that and they hated him for it. Jacob asked Joseph to go on a journey to check on his brothers who were tending the flocks. Instead of greeting him with a hug, they stripped him of his special coat and threw him in a pit. **Joseph went from a penthouse to a pit in about 2 seconds. That is normally what it feels like when we get rocked with trouble.**



Instead of leaving Joseph to rot in the pit, they decided to sell him in to slavery. Joseph was shackled, caged like an animal, and sent down to Egypt. Joseph ended up as a slave in the house of the Captain of the Guard for the most powerful man in the world. Joseph flourished. He rose up. What was his secret? **Joseph knew the LORD was with him.** God had called his great grandparents to birth a *family* that would birth a *nation* that would birth a *Savior*. God promised to always be with them.

Joseph clung to that promise for dear life. **He believed he could never be where God was not.** Joseph also believed that **this God who was with him could transform evil and suffering into something good and beautiful.** Joseph knew that God was the master junk artist. God takes the stuff we want to throw away and says, “What could this become?”

-Joseph’s story is our story. Evil exists. That is on full display in our day. We see the evil of racism. We see the evil of a pandemic. Evil breeds trouble. It is not *if* but *when* trouble will come knocking at our door. When it does, how will we respond? Do we believe God is with us even in the pit? Will trouble break us, or form us into something beautiful? That is the challenge and hope of Joseph’s story.

-Last week, we found Joseph in Egypt flourishing as a slave in the house of Potiphar, Pharaoh’s Captain of the Guard. Potiphar had put Joseph in charge of just about everything. What will happen next? **More trouble is coming Joseph’s way.** Martin Torres will be reading our Scripture passage, **Genesis 39:6-20a.** Please follow along.

*So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph’s care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate. Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, <sup>7</sup> and after a while his master’s wife took notice of Joseph and said, “Come to bed with me!” <sup>8</sup> But he refused. “With me in charge,” he told her, “my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. <sup>9</sup> 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?” <sup>10</sup> And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.*

*<sup>11</sup> One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. <sup>12</sup> She caught him by his cloak and said, “Come to bed with me!” But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. <sup>13</sup> When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, <sup>14</sup> she called her household servants. “Look,” she said to them, “this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. <sup>15</sup> When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.”*

*<sup>16</sup> She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. <sup>17</sup> Then she told him this story: “That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. <sup>18</sup> But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.”*

*<sup>19</sup> When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, “This is how your slave treated me,” he burned with anger. <sup>20</sup> Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined.*

## Color Commentary

### The Test

-The setting for the scene is that Joseph has risen all the way to the top of Potiphar's house. We are told Potiphar *left everything in Joseph's care*. The Hebrew reads that he literally *put almost everything in Joseph's hands*. We don't know how many years have passed since Joseph was sold into slavery, but it is reasonable to guess it has been many years. It is likely Joseph is now in his mid-twenties. Joseph has grown up a lot over these years. He has been transformed from a spoiled brat to a man of character. Joseph now has lots of responsibility, but Joseph is still a slave.

-The narrator tells us that *Joseph was well built and handsome*. We can surmise that Joseph had the classic Hollywood leading man profile. He had the square jaw, the dimple, the perfect hair, those eyes you can get lost in and just the right amount of stubble. Joseph was also muscular and fit. I feel like I am a romance novelist, and a poor one at that.

Joseph was GQ cover material, a leading candidate for People Magazine's Sexiest Man in the World. And guess who noticed? Mrs. Potiphar. Here comes trouble.

-We can presume Potiphar worked a lot. We can presume he had other wives, or at least other women. We can presume Mrs. Potiphar was much younger and very attractive herself. She probably had a lot of time on her hands and had taken a liking to Joseph. If this was a movie scene, we can picture her putting on just the right outfit and finding just the right moment where she could be alone with Joseph. This is the moment in movies when parents with younger children say, "close your eyes", or just fast-forward the scene. We can see what is coming. Two young, handsome people, romantic tension, opportunity - cue the music - and yet it doesn't go that way at all.

-Mrs. Potiphar says, "*Come to bed with me.*" This is pretty direct, but it is likely she had been working up to this moment for some time. We are told simply that *Joseph refused her advances*. Joseph gives three reasons. **They are the 3 reasons that we all should turn away from sin.**

First, Joseph tells her that to sleep with her would affect his reputation; his character. Second, it would be an offense against Potiphar since she was Potiphar's wife. Finally, and most foundationally, he tells her that to sleep with her would be **wicked and a sin against God**. When we sin, we injure ourselves, we injure others, and we sever our connection with the very One who is meant to give us life. What is true of Joseph is true of us. Joseph is most concerned with how his actions would affect his relationship with God. There was no hiding from God. Joseph knew that God was with him. He knew he could never go where God was not. His sin would bring immediate damage to his most foundational relationship.

-Mrs. Potiphar did not take no for an answer. We are told *she approached him and day after day*. In verse 10, she even gives Joseph the invitation not to *lie with her*, which is code for sex, but to *lie beside her*. "*Joseph, we can just lie beside each other in my bed and talk.*" Each time he refused. He didn't answer her texts. He blocked her on Facebook. He refused to open her Snapchat. When he saw her heading his way, he went the other way.

Mrs. Potiphar was a powerful woman. She was used to getting what she wanted. Typically and historically, it has been men using their power for sexual gain. In this case, it was a woman wielding power inappropriately. Genesis is filled with both men and women behaving badly. Either way, it is evil whenever we use power for sexual gain. These stories are far too common in our day and they are an affront to God.

-Mrs. Potiphar was done talking. She waited until Joseph had come into the house and no one was around. Men had always flocked to her. Joseph must just be playing hard to get. It made no sense why Joseph would not want to sleep with her. She corners Joseph, grabs his cloak, and says, "Come to bed with me." This time, it was not an invitation but a command. *Slave, sleep with me.* The word *grab* implies violence. This was an assault. How does Joseph respond? Joseph runs.

**-Sexual temptation is one of the primary ways the evil one uses to destroy lives, relationships and ministries.** I will never forget a chapel speaker I had in seminary. It is the only chapel talk I remember. With tears in his eyes and a quivering voice, the speaker pleaded with us young pastors to be **to guard our hearts against sexual temptation.** He had graduated decades before from the same seminary. **He told us that all but 2 of the people from his class had fallen to sexual sin.** I was stunned to hear that. It haunted me in a good way.

Earlier in Genesis, we are told that ***sin is always crouching at our door.*** Peter tells us the ***evil one is prowling around like a lion looking for someone to kill and destroy.*** Sexual temptation is everywhere. No one is above or beyond it. In our Big Read, Max talks about taking the time to write out a list of all the lives that would be affected by his sexual sin.

I gave that some thought. First and foremost, it would affect my wife Corrie. It would devastate our marriage. It would affect my daughters Eden and Jubilee. It would affect my parents. It would affect this church because I would likely need to resign. It would affect every person I have pastored for nearly 25 years. It would affect me because Scripture tells us that sexual immorality is a sin against our own body. It would also deeply affect my relationship with God for my body is the temple of the LORD. I challenge you to make a list as well. I think you will discover it is never worth it. Young Joseph knew that.

**-Joseph provides us with a great playbook for dealing with sexual temptation.** Earlier we are told Joseph would not be near to Mrs. Potiphar as she was propositioning him day after day. He avoided her to the best of his ability. When he could no longer avoid her, he ran. We all face sexual temptation. It is part of being human. When we are face to face with it, we should follow Joseph's example and run. We should put as much distance between us and the sexual temptation as we are able to.

-This response by Joseph reveals how much he has grown in the Lord since we first met him. He has grown into a Godly young man. He has grown into a man of character. What is the best measure for character? **The best measure of character is to do what is right even when no one is watching.** Joseph could have slept with Mrs. Potiphar and no one would have been the wiser. But Joseph would have known. And God would have known.

Joseph had become a man of integrity. That word means things fit together. Our outward lives match our inward lives. Our lives in public match our lives in private. Would that be

true of us? Could we put video of our private lives on the big screen for everyone to watch?

I am sure Joseph was tempted. After everything he had been through, he deserved some physical pleasure. No one would know. Potiphar had other women. But Joseph didn't think long about it. It wasn't worth the cost. So he ran. I think this commitment to doing what was right no matter the cost is why Joseph kept rising even when he fell. Proverbs says, *a righteous man falls seven times, but rises again.*

-At that point I think Mrs. Potiphar realized that Joseph was different. He wasn't just playing hard to get. He wasn't playing at all. I imagine she was angry and hurt that he rejected her advances. She was also probably worried that he would tell the other servants what had happened. She had to act quickly. She went running outside holding up Joseph's cloak as evidence. She essentially falsely accused Joseph of sexually assaulting her. She was an excellent actress. It was an Oscar-worthy performance.

-Mrs. Potiphar was waiting for Mr. Potiphar when he got home that night. She was sitting on the coach, sipping a glass of wine and holding Joseph's cloak when he arrived. She repeated the same thing she told the servants earlier. "This Hebrew you brought us came to make sport of me." A couple of things. She refers to Joseph as **the Hebrew**. It was an ethnic slur. She puts the blame on Potiphar. *You brought him to us.* The Hebrew word for **sport** means *to fool with someone*. *Potiphar, he is making fools of us.* We are told *Potiphar burned with anger*. Did he burn with anger at Joseph or his wife? It is inconclusive.

We can assume Joseph strongly denied the allegations. Potiphar must have put some credence in Joseph's denials. Attempted rape by a slave meant certain death. In Joseph's case, Potiphar spared his life and sent him to one of the nearby prisons that Potiphar ran. Even if Potiphar believed Joseph, his hands were tied. He would look weak if he didn't respond in some way. From the penthouse to the pit to the penthouse back to the pit. Trouble found Joseph once again. But God is still with Joseph.

### **Genesis 39:20b-23**

*-But while Joseph was there in the prison, <sup>21</sup> the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. <sup>22</sup> So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. <sup>23</sup> The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.*

### **God is using our trouble for training**

-The narrator brings back the main idea from last week's scene. Twice once again we are told **the LORD was with Joseph**. God was with Joseph. Imagine Joseph sitting in that cell. It was similar to Anthony sitting in his cell. Two faithful, God-fearing men sitting in prison for something they didn't do. Both men could have given up. I probably would have. I probably would have thrown in the towel. But neither man gave up. Both men knew God was with them. Both men knew that the God that was with them was the same God could take evil and suffering and transform into good; transform it into something beautiful.

Both men didn't allow evil and suffering to break them, but put placed it into God's hands and allowed it to form them.

-Max says it this way - "*God is using our trouble for training.*" We try to build our house far from trouble, but trouble always finds us because we live in a world full of evil and suffering. God hates evil and suffering. God is continually working to overcome evil with good. God wants *us* to continually work to overcome evil with good. But until the Kingdom finally arrives, we will find ourselves in trouble. The story of Joseph reminds us that when we are in trouble we should not give up. God is still with us. God doesn't *cause* evil and suffering, but God can *transform* evil and suffering. God can use our trouble for training so that we can be even better equipped to do good.

-We know this is true in Joseph's story because of the commentary on God in Psalm 105. *He called for a famine on the land of Canaan, cutting off its food supply. <sup>17</sup> Then he sent someone to Egypt ahead of them—Joseph, who was sold as a slave. <sup>18</sup> They bruised his feet with fetters and placed his neck in an iron collar, <sup>19</sup> until the time came to fulfill his dreams, [a] the LORD tested Joseph's character.* (Psalm 105:16-19)

-Joseph was spoiled brat. His brothers hated him. They shipped him to Egypt. In time, because Joseph believed in God's redemptive presence, he became a man of character, a leader of leaders. God used Joseph's trouble for training to prepare him to be Prime Minister, the 2<sup>nd</sup> most powerful person in the world; the man who likely saved Egypt and Israel from starvation. Joseph never would have been ready for that if he had stayed in his Father's penthouse playing video games and bingeing on Doritos. The pit, slavery, and prison were his trainings for what was ahead.

-What is true of Joseph is true of us. God has the capacity to use everything in our lives, even evil and suffering, as training to shape us into the people He created us to be. Do you believe this? That colossal business failure, that relationship that came apart, rehab, the unemployment line, a hospital bed are all training grounds. Do you believe this? If God can make a prime minister out of a prisoner and a best-selling author who is friends with Presidents out of a death row inmate, God can bring good out of your mess. When we find ourselves in the pit, God has not forgotten us. We are in training.

-Author Bob Benson recounts a conversation he had with a friend after a heart attack. He asked his friend, "*How did you like your heart attack?*" His friend responded, "It scared me to death." "*Would you do it again?*" "No." "*Would you recommend it?*" "Definitely not." "*Does your life mean more?*" "For sure." "*Is your marriage more intimate?*" "Yes." "*Do you have more compassion?*" "Absolutely." "*Are you closer to the LORD?*" "Without a doubt." "*How do you like your heart attack?*" As I am someone who came close to a heart attack and had heart surgery, that conversation hits close to home. And it is true.

-Peter writes, *And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.* (1 Peter 5:10) Paul tells the Roman followers of Jesus that *suffering produces perseverance and perseverance produces character.* God is using our trouble for training. Two practical things about training...

## **Life Lessons**

## Training hurts

-**Training hurts.** I have never been much of a weightlifter. But there have been times in my life when I have decided that I wanted to beef up and tone up and I have joined a gym. I would usually give it a go for a stretch and then decide I would rather use my time in other ways. Why? It hurts. Lifting weights is painful. I was using muscles in a new way and pushing them to new heights. That is how muscle grows. There is that old adage. *No pain, no gain.* It is true in the gym, and it is true in our spiritual journeys.

-In my mid-twenties, I hit a rough patch. Due to finances and a back injury, I had to move back home from Dallas where I was in seminary. I found a job, but it was physically and emotionally demanding with minimal pay. I was living with two other friends in a small farm house in the middle of nowhere because that is all we could afford. All three of us had just had serious relationships come to an end. My one friend Doug would just walk around the house in his bathrobe. At night, he would play really sad ballads on his saxophone. We were a sad lot. I had always been a confident kid, but I was a mess. I was in the pit. But as I look back at my life, that was a period where I grew significantly in my relationship with God. It was a really hard time, but it was also a beautiful time. **I was being trained. Training hurts. No pain, no gain.**

-In gyms, you often encounter men and women who are in exceptionally good shape. Their bodies are bursting with muscles. When we encounter people like that, we intuitively know they have been in training. They look the way they look because they have been through a lot of training. They have been through a lot of pain. No pain, no gain.

-The same is true spiritually. When I meet godly men and women, I know they have been through a lot of trouble in their lives. I have never met a godly man or woman who has not been through a lot of trouble. There is no other pathway to spiritual maturity. Training hurts but it is worth it. No pain, no gain. I wish this weren't true. I wish there was a shortcut to spiritual maturity without pain. But there is not. Just like there is no way to get muscular without working out. We must go through it.

## Training allows us to do tomorrow what we cannot do today

-Second, *training allows us to do tomorrow what we cannot do today.* Years ago, I decided I wanted to run a marathon. I have never been much of a runner. It is the same reason I have never been much of a weight lifter. It hurts.

At the beginning of my training, I could barely run a few miles. But I found a marathon training schedule and stuck to it. Six out of seven days, I ran. Week by week, I added miles. Finally, after four months of training, I successfully ran 26.2 miles. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't quick. It was painful, but I did it. Training allowed me to do something I wasn't able to do before I trained.

-The same is true spiritually. God takes our trouble and uses it to train us to do tomorrow what we cannot do today. God trains us and develops our character through trouble. The next time we are in the pit, the next time we face trouble, we can begin to view it as training. If we allow trouble to train us, then we will be able to do tomorrow what we cannot do today. As Paul reminds the Corinthian church, *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort.* <sup>4</sup>He

*comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. (2 Cor. 1:3-4)*

-When we go through trouble, it uniquely equips us and prepares us to care for others who go through that same type of trouble. The best person to care for someone going through a divorce is someone who has been through a divorce. The best person to care for someone who is battling cancer is someone who battled cancer. The best person to care for someone experiencing depression is someone experiencing depression. Training allows us to do tomorrow what we cannot do today. What did Anthony's training allow him to do?

## **Closing**

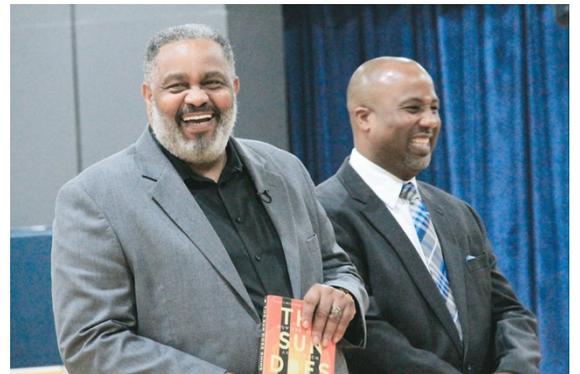
### **Key Questions**

-Anthony said that he was very angry for his first three years on death row. I don't blame him. I would have been angry for my entire 30 years. His mom had always told him that *God would be with him wherever he went*. In those first three years, he doubted her words. He had always spent a lot of time reading his Bible, but his Bible remained untouched. And then things changed. One day, he heard a grown man sobbing. He also heard another man laughing. It reminded him he was still alive and that God was not done with him. He decided right then and there to make the most of each and every day he had to live. Every morning he woke up and shouted - *We're alive!* Most of his fellow death row inmates would respond back - *I'm alive*.

-Over time Anthony effectively became the chaplain of death row. He introduced his fellow prisoners to God. He taught them the Bible. He prayed with them. Even the guards started coming to Anthony for advice on life, marriage, and how to deal with trouble. Bryan Stephenson said that in all his years working with prisoners he has never met anyone as beloved as Anthony. He was constantly laughing and constantly getting others to laugh.

Anthony even started a book club on death row, even though most of the men struggled to read. The warden only allowed 6 of them to be part of the book club. You could never guess who Anthony chose for the first spot. Anthony asked Henry Francis Hays to be part of the book club. Henry was a member of the KKK and was on death row for the lynching of a young black man. The first book they read and discussed was by famed black author James Baldwin. Anthony and Henry became friends. Anthony thought Henry had been brainwashed and that in time, love could wear down his hate. Here are Henry's last words before he was executed: *"All my life I have been taught to hate. In the end, the people I was taught to hate taught me to love."*

Anthony came to believe what his mom had taught him - *God was in his plan*. Anthony says, *"I'm a true believer that God will never allow you to go through anything that He cannot bring you out of. It just shows you what God can do if you put your faith and trust in Him."* Even though Henry admits he wants to ask God one day what took him so long, Anthony believed his 30 years behind bars were not wasted. He believes it made him a



better man. Is the same true for us? Will trouble break us, or will we allow God to use it to form us into the people he created us to be?

-Jesus had a lot in common with Joseph and Anthony. Jesus was a brown-skinned MiddleEastern man. Jesus endured discrimination and ethnic slurs. Jesus was falsely accused and unjustly put to death. But God transformed that evil and suffering into good. God used the cross as the primary tool for overcoming evil with good. As we follow Jesus this week, let us remember that we are called to partner with God as the hands and feet of Jesus. We are called to enter into evil and suffering in the name of Jesus and begin to transform it for good.