

MUCH MORE THAN A NUMBER A Devotional Meditation from

Genesis 41:1-44:17; 1 Kings 3:15-4:1, 7:40-50; Ezekiel 20:33-38;
John 17:13-18; Romans 12:14-21

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The surest way to make a person compliant is to remove his or her identity. It's the tactic of all oppressors: remove an individual's name, assign them a number, and affirm their status as something less than human. If done properly, with plenty of reinforcement, the individual will in time simply be existing from day to day, not really living.



The key element of Les Misérables may be the struggle of Prisoner 24601 to regain and restore his identity as the man Jean Valjean. (Image via [Les Misérables on Twitter](#).)

Victor Hugo documented this process in his epic novel, *Les Misérables*. Most people know only the musical adaptation of the novel, but that is sufficient. We still grasp the anguish of Jean Valjean, a man we meet as prisoner number 24601. His release on parole is only the beginning of a new struggle as he tries to reconstruct his life. Thanks to the Christian kindness of a priest, he experiences redemption and seeks from then on to make a difference for good. Yet by that time he has already broken parole. To avoid being returned

to prison, he adopts a new name, and soon becomes a prosperous businessman and civic leader. This is the circumstance under which Valjean wrestles with the problem of his identity, especially when another man is mistaken for him and arrested. The crisis of conscience compels him to reveal his identity so the other man may go free, even though he becomes a fugitive once again. Embracing his identity gives Valjean the inner peace that steadies him in the midst of endless troubles.

We are moved by the fictional story of Jean Valjean because it contains elements of real life. The historical account of Joseph in Egypt moves us in the same way. We are so familiar with Joseph's story that we often overlook its profound tragedy. Just as he is coming into manhood, this innocent youth is betrayed by his own brothers, who consign him to exile in an alien land and then continue with their own lives as if nothing had happened other than removal of a pest. His father Jacob mourns for him because he thinks Joseph is dead, but the boy doesn't know that. All he knows is that his father, like his brothers, seems to have abandoned him to a place where the language, the customs, the gods, and the social structure are far different from anything he had known.

One would expect Joseph to crumble into despair in such circumstances. Countless others have lost heart and died when separated from their homes and thrust into the bonds of slavery, but Joseph did not. He prospered in everything, and in his prosperity we find a link with Jean Valjean: Joseph knew his God and held fast to Him. Even when he fell from his place as a privileged slave and became an unjustly-accused prisoner, Joseph remained true to the Lord, although no doubt he questioned God about why he had to suffer so grievously – and why his father never came to rescue him.

Those who have never experienced dreams and interpretations from God may find it hard to believe how Joseph got out of prison, but have not stranger things happened? Joseph interpreted the dreams of two servants who had offended Pharaoh. True to the interpretations one – the butler – was restored to freedom, and the other – the baker – was hanged. Years later, the butler put in a good word for Joseph when Pharaoh himself dreamed of coming years of plenty, followed by years of famine. Joseph’s interpretation and counsel on how to deal with the coming crisis prompted Pharaoh to appoint him as the ruler in charge of harvest and food distribution. Pharaoh gave Joseph a new name, Zaphenath-paneah (God speaks, he lives), and a wife: Asenath, daughter of the priest of On (Heliopolis), city of the sun god, Ra. Soon they had two sons –

Joseph named his first-born Manasseh [causing to forget], “because God has caused me to forget all my trouble and all my father’s house.” And the second he named Ephraim [doubly fruitful], “because God has made me fruitful in the land of my oppression.”

Genesis 41:51-52 TLV

While Joseph’s family were forgetting about him, he was forgetting about them. His own identity slipped away as he became more and more Egyptian. Yet Joseph did not forget his God, and neither did God forget him. His prosperity in Egypt resulted from his obedience to the Lord God, at least as far as he could be obedient in such an alien and hostile place.

In the second year of famine, Joseph’s brothers came looking for food. He recognized them immediately, but he was not able to make himself known to them right away. He had to find out a few things first. Would they be glad to see him? Would they welcome him back? Had his father ever acknowledged his absence? And if so, why had Jacob never tried to find him? Or were his brothers the same selfish, vindictive lot that had plotted to kill him, and then let him be dragged away in the bonds of foreigners? It would not do for Joseph to reveal his identity before he knew the best way to do it, or even whether it would be better to leave things as they were.

Joseph did reveal himself eventually, but before that we learn something of Joseph’s uncomfortable place between two worlds. When the brothers traveled to Egypt the second time, bringing their youngest brother Benjamin with them, Joseph brought them into his home for a meal. Yet he did not eat with them:

So they served him by himself, them by themselves, and the Egyptians who were eating with him by themselves (for Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews because it was an abomination to Egyptians). They were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth. The men looked at each other in astonishment. Then portions were brought to them from before him—and Benjamin’s portion was five times larger than any of their portions. Yet they drank and made merry with him.

Genesis 43:32-34 TLV

Joseph was lord of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, but as a Hebrew, he could not fellowship freely with the Egyptians. However, as lord of Egypt, he could not sit at table with his Hebrew brethren. Consequently, Joseph sat at a table by himself.

No wonder Joseph felt so lonely and out of place. He wielded great power and possessed vast wealth, but he dwelt among a people who could never truly be his own, and who would never accept him as an equal. He could not even eat at the same table with his wife's family. His identity was with the Hebrews, but he could not go to them, for they had cast him out and could not recognize him. Although he tried to forget who he was, neither the people he had married into nor the people who had thrust him out would let him do so, and his growing prosperity only served as a constant reminder of his strange place in the wilderness of the peoples.

This is the life of a Hebrew – one who is in this world, but not of it. Joseph carried that identity from birth, but it is available to all people through the redemptive work of the Hebrew Messiah. Whether we call Him Jesus or Yeshua, all who take seriously His invitation to follow Him soon begin to understand the identity crisis Joseph lived out.

The crisis did not resolve for Joseph until his identity was known to all, especially his own people. Oddly enough, the differences in language, culture, dress, and customs seemed to matter little once they all realized they were of the same family. Those differences may never have been resolved, but once the identity question was settled, the differences ceased to rob peace from the family.

This is the funny thing about peace and identity: we can experience peace if circumstances are favorable, but if we know who we are – and Whose we are – then we not only experience peace, but carry it with us even through the darkest shadows.