



WILLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH  
MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT

LIFE'S MISSING INGREDIENTS  
PART 3: FREEDOM

**BILL HYBELS**

**1/18-19/03**

*Old Testament Joseph and 20th century Martin Luther King, Jr.—both were dreamers. Both spent time unfairly incarcerated, were held in high regard by their fellow prisoners, and had huge impact for good even while imprisoned. Both men chose reconciliation over retaliation and revenge. Dr. King's divine assignment was to lift a people and liberate spirits that had been pushed down and held captive for over 300 years. He did it defending the value of nonviolence and choosing light over darkness, love over hate. This message challenges us to make the choice not just to be redeemed from our sin by the power of Jesus Christ, but to forgive those who have wronged us in the past. That freedom ought to mark us with a divine dissatisfaction that empowers us to be radically inclusive instead of exclusive, desiring to work toward greater freedom for all in the areas of race, ethnicity, poverty, and injustice.*

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## WILLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH

### LIFE'S MISSING INGREDIENTS: PART 3: FREEDOM 1/18-19/03 – M0303

Bill Hybels

**Proverbs 22:29**  
**John 8:36**  
**Genesis 45**

**Luke 23:34**  
**Colossians 3:12-14**  
**Genesis 50**

**1 Corinthians 15:52**

Separated by 38 centuries, cultural chasms of unimaginable breadth, an ocean and 2,000 miles to boot, few people would ever think to mention Old Testament Joseph and twentieth century Martin Luther King, Jr. in the same breath, let alone attempt to juxtapose their lives for sermon purposes. But desperate times demand desperate measures and maybe a desperate sermon.

I want to remind you at the outset that from an African-American perspective, it's been desperate times since white slave traders filled the holes of their ships with black men that they ripped from their families at knife point over in Africa. Now I know much progress has been made in our country since the Emancipation Proclamation, the repeal of Jim Crow laws, the civil rights actions of the 60s and 70s, and the diversity training of recent years. Much has been done to right the wrongs of earlier centuries.

I'm just here to tell you there is still much to do. Did you know that as I speak on this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, the infant mortality rate among blacks is more than double the rate among whites? Did you know that while 70 percent of whites are able to own and live in their own homes, only 15 percent of blacks can afford to do the very same thing? Did you know that while only 9 percent of whites live officially below the poverty line in the U.S., the figure for blacks is 26 percent? And the gap is growing.

No one can deny that some good progress has been made over the years, but no one who sees the data could deny there is much more to do. This is why I want to have you look at the life of Old Testament Joseph and at twentieth century Martin Luther King, Jr. and do some learning when we set their lives side by side.

When you look at them side by side, the first thing you notice is they were both dreamers. Ask any Bible student which Old Testament leader's life is dominated by dreams. Joseph, they'll answer. When he was just a young boy, God gave him dreams that earned him the ire of his brothers, who never liked his 'Technicolor dream coat' anyway. But they were so offended by his dreams, they sold him off into slavery.

When he was in slavery, his dreams and his uncanny ability to interpret the dreams of others, by the power of God, eventually catapulted him to a position of national and international influence. Perhaps more than any other Old Testament figure, dreams defined the life of Joseph. The same

can be said of a young black pastor from the deep South in the twentieth century. During his brief 39 years, dreams defined the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I challenge you to go anywhere on the planet, stand on a stage in front of a group, and cry the words: I have a dream. Every mind in the crowd will race back to the sun-drenched steps of the Lincoln Memorial where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke those words that became his enduring legacy: “I have a dream.” For Old Testament Joseph and twentieth century Martin Luther King, Jr., dreams defined their lives and determined to a large extent their destinies.

Parenthetically, your dreams will define your life and your dreams will probably define your destiny. Dreams are a big deal. Another correlation between these two figures—I find it fascinating that in the destiny of these two dreamers, they both wound up incarcerated. Both men spent time in the local jail. Joseph spent more than two years in jail. His crime, if you will, was resisting the sexual advances of his master’s wife to the point where she felt spurned enough to falsely accuse him of rape. It was a bad deal and he wound up in jail.

Dr. King was arrested 30 times. He got to know the inside of a jail cell very well during his day. His crimes? Well, they ranged from asking to be served a meal in a restaurant that had a ‘No Niggers’ sign out front, to refusing to obey a police officer who was insisting on breaking up a legal civil rights demonstration he was leading.

One time during the days of the Montgomery bus boycott, Dr. King was arrested and thrown in jail for going a few miles an hour over a 25 mile per hour speed limit. They threw him in jail for that. It was a ploy of sheer bigoted intimidation by a white Montgomery cop.

So both Joseph and Dr. King were incarcerated unfairly. Incidentally, read the fine print of their time in prison—they were both held in high regard by their fellow prisoners and wound up having a huge impact for good while they were unjustly imprisoned.

There’s a lesson to be learned there: When good is at work in a good person’s heart, that good gets manifested wherever they are, wherever they get stuck. You can’t keep good people from doing good.

This leads to my next observation. Despite stints in the slammer, both men wound up in the presence of kings, literally. There’s a proverb about this in the Bible. It says in Proverbs 22:29, *Do you see a person skilled in their work? He will stand before kings ...*

Joseph established so much credibility during his time in prison that a former cell mate of his was to mention his name to the king of Egypt. One day through a strange series of events that involved dreams and the interpretation of dreams, Joseph winds up second in command of the entire nation of Egypt. He serves in that office for 80 years. He wins the respect of the entire known world. Think of it. From a prison cell to a king’s palace. God just raised him up for his purposes. His ascent was a ‘God thing.’

Martin Luther King Jr.’s ascent to the corridors of power took far longer and extracted a far costlier price for him personally. But God raised him up too. It, too, was a ‘God thing.’ Dr.

King's divine assignment was to lift a people who had been pushed down for over 300 years. His assignment from God was to liberate spirits that had been held captive for centuries.

His assignment was to challenge a system of justice that was anything but just. Let's say it another way. The system was just for some; it was not just for others—which is not justice at all. Dr. King's orders from heaven required him to attempt to make these dramatic social reforms without resorting to the use of force or violence. The Holy Spirit told him he could speak out, march, demonstrate, strike, boycott, do sit-ins, carry signs, anything to try to change laws; but God's orders were clear to never use force or violence.

Never return evil to those who would beat them over the head with billy clubs, who would spray them with fire hoses during legal marches, or who would throw bricks and fire bombs into the bedrooms of their wives and children. This is where we see the true character and courage of Dr. King.

Civil rights' marches were permitted—they were legal constitutionally and civically, but Dr. King had led enough of these marches to know the brutality that was likely to come from white police officers. And so, before a march, he would often take his civil rights marchers into a back room and would read to them passages from the Bible about nonviolence.

Then he would lead them in a time of prayer to make sure their hearts were prepared. Often before he sent them out of the room, he would say, "In the power of God, we will overcome someday. Our cause is right. Our purpose honors God." He would always remind his followers, "Our means of overcoming all this injustice must honor God as well."

He would passionately defend the value of nonviolence. He would lift up the value of Christ-like love. He would challenge his followers with the value of accepting suffering with dignity. Some of King's followers argued for the buying of guns and knives so that they could spill the blood of the oppressors. King steadfastly refused. He said, "We are not going to overturn social injustice that way."

At the end of the day, he wanted to achieve the mission that God had given him, but he wanted to honor God in the process as well. Like Old Testament Joseph, Dr. King found himself among kings and presidents, senators and congressmen. Often he was invited into the corridors of power so that the politicians could try to figure out why this southern pastor drew such a following. Who was this guy? Why were millions and millions of blacks and whites listening to his views and ideas?

Sometimes Dr. King was wined and dined in the Oval Office in Washington, D.C., to later be patted on the head and told, Settle down, Martin; stop stirring things up. Go back down South and tell your people it's not so bad to have to ride in the back seat of buses so white people can ride up front. It's not so bad that your kids have to go to broken down, rat-infested, segregated schools that don't teach the kids anything. It's not so bad that your people have to live in inner-city squalor. They would pat him on the head and say, Tell your followers to settle down and be patient. Tell your people to wait.

One night, Dr. King wrote these words from a jail cell where he had been yet again unjustly arrested and imprisoned. This time it happened to be in Birmingham.

“We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights....

“Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging dark of segregation to say, ‘Wait.’ But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: ‘Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?’; when you take a cross-county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading ‘white’ and ‘colored’; when your first name becomes ‘nigger,’ your middle name becomes ‘boy’ (however old you are) and your last name becomes ‘John,’ and your wife and mother are never given the respected title ‘Mrs.’; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness,’ then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

“There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.”

Like Joseph in the Old Testament, Martin Luther King, Jr. wound up in the presence of kings later on in his life—kings and powerful people. But he never was co-opted by them. He always tried to leverage his relationships with the power brokers to liberate the people God had called him to lead.

So both Joseph and Martin Luther King were defined by their dreams. Both were incarcerated unjustly. Both wound up in the presence of rulers and kings.

How about this next one? Both men chose reconciliation over retaliation and revenge. You Bible students will remember this about Joseph, late in his life, after he had successfully ruled Egypt for a long, long time and taken it through a horrendous famine. Later in his life his brothers, the very ones who had sold him into slavery, the ones who were jealous and hated him so much, those brothers were living in another country where the famine was so bad that people were starving. So they made a trip to Egypt to look for seed and to look for food.

Through a strange set of circumstances, all of the brothers wind up in the palace standing before their brother whom they had sold into slavery. But they don't recognize him. They probably thought he was dead or that he was shoveling manure for some rich guy. They never expected him to be seated on a throne next to Pharaoh. Well, all of a sudden Joseph recognizes his brothers. Think of the drama going on here. Can you imagine when Joseph saw the brothers who had wronged him so?

How easy it would have been for Joseph to command that his brothers be taken out, flogged and beaten, humiliated publicly, imprisoned or maybe even killed. You know what you learn about people over the years? Hurt people—and Joseph had certainly been hurt often—it's said, hurt people do what? They hurt people. This is Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend. This is the weekend we're talking about freedom, true freedom. The freedom Jesus referenced in John 8:36 when he said, *So if the Son sets you free, you can be free indeed.*

Included in Jesus' freedom is the freedom to choose your response to people who have hurt you, the freedom to choose love over hatred, forgiveness over grudge-bearing, grace over having to get revenge. Jesus said if you want to be free indeed, choose love over hate, reconciliation over retaliation.

Scripture tells us that when Joseph recognized his brothers, instead of retaliating, he reached out to them. Not only did he make generous provisions for them—food, drink, clothing and money—but, amazingly, he took them off the hook for their wrongdoing decades past. Not only does he refuse the vengeful spirit inside of him, he chooses to free them up from their guilt by saying, Hey guys, God turned this all out for the good anyway. Don't worry about it. Don't beat yourselves up over this. Life is too short.

Genesis 45 records that he throws his arm around each one of them, embraces them, weeps with them, and thoroughly reconciles with them one by one. Read the story for yourself sometime. It's one of the great dramas in the Old Testament.

The point I want to stress here, though, is that Joseph knew what the inside of a prison cell was like. He had spent two years in a dungeon in Egypt. Because he knew what the inside of a prison cell was like, he did not want to live a single day after his release re-imprisoned by his own feelings of hatred and revenge. That's what bitterness does, friends. Bitterness and hate put you in the slammer of resentment and revenge-seeking.

Joseph chose reconciliation and forgiveness and the intended spirit of liberty that accompanies that choice. He wanted, in the words of Jesus, to be *free indeed*. He knew imprisonment. He didn't want another day of it. Thirty-eight hundred years later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made the exact same choice.

One would think that after 30 imprisonments, untold number of false accusations and lies about him, 50 death threats, and a stabbing that almost killed him ... One would think that after his home had been fire-bombed and after he had been showered with bricks and rocks right here in our city, 30 minutes from where we're seated right now ... One would think after all that hatred and wrong-doing coming his way primarily due to the color of his skin and the cause to which he

had committed himself ... One would think that Dr. King would have been ready to abandon the nonviolence strategy that he had held so tightly and maybe begin to seek a little revenge, maybe a little payback on the side.

But he took a higher road. He chose the same approach to having been wronged as Joseph did. At the height of unbelievable levels of hatred and intimidation and injustice coming his way, he wrote these words: "I have decided to stick to love. I know that love is ultimately the answer to mankind's problems. So I'm going to talk about it wherever I go. I've seen too much hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen, too many white citizens, counselors in the South.

"Every time I see it, I know it does something to their faces and to their personalities. I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. So I've decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you'll find it through love."

One time when bitterness was raging, he said these words: "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness." One time he said, "Darkness can never drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that."

Dr. King understood the insanity of ever-increasing cycles of hatred, revenge, and retaliation. If only leaders in the Middle East understood what Dr. King understood. If only leaders in other parts of world, even our own leaders, would understand this basic truth.

One time he wrote these words: "Hatred paralyzes life. Love releases life. Hatred confuses life and love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life. Love illuminates it."

Having been in a sufficient number of prison cells himself, Dr. King made the same commitment that Joseph in the Old Testament made centuries prior—to use his Christ-purchased freedom to make choices that would lead to greater levels of freedom in his own heart. And that involved choosing reconciliation over revenge and retaliation, light over darkness, love over hate. What character. What maturity of spirit.

Jesus modeled this magnificently at the time when he was laying on the ground and his executioners were pounding nails through his hands and his feet. Jesus looked to the heavens and said, *Father, would you forgive these guys? They don't even know what they're doing* (Luke 23:34).

You do understand that the sense of freedom that we're talking about—this *free indeed* stuff—this might be the thing that's missing from your life? Some of you say, There's something missing in my life; what is it? Well, it might be this thing called freedom.

I know a lot of Willow Creekers well. I know that there's a percentage of you who are walking around this very day with hurts and betrayals and wrongs that were done to you months, years, or decades ago; and you are choosing to 'rotisserize' those feelings of hurt. You turn them over and over in your mind. You replay the violations again and again.

You replay them in Technicolor and Surround Sound. In so doing, you incarcerate yourself with feelings of hatred, bitterness, and revenge-seeking. You're trading your Christ-purchased freedom for the perverse and self-destructive pleasure of nursing feelings of having been wronged. Some of you can feel the prison walls closing in.

Friends, it's a bad deal. It's a terrible way to live your life when Christ says you can be free. My prayer all week long has been that the lives of Joseph and Dr. King and Jesus of Nazareth might inspire some of you this weekend to consider making a different choice. By the power of Jesus Christ, you can make the choice to be not just redeemed from your sin, but you can make the choice to finally forgive those who have wronged you in your past. You can take them off the hook. You can cancel their bill.

You can unlock the prison that you've been in and walk out into the freedom—freedom from bitterness, freedom from the incarceration of always wanting to hurt back. Scripture says that by the power of Christ, you can choose light over darkness in your life. You can choose love over hate. You can choose reconciliation over revenge. (Colossians 3:12-14) Some of you are a decision away from liberation. It could happen in this very moment.

One final thought regarding Joseph and Dr. King: It has to do with how they died. Genesis 50 describes the death of Joseph. It's every person's dream. We all have to die. If you ever could choose how to die, choose to die like Joseph died. He's surrounded by family and friends. He's at peace with God and himself and others. He's 110 years old. He has lived life well. He has honored God. He has fully prepared for heaven. He blesses his family and friends. He breathes his last breath, and he dies. What a way to go.

Dr. King's death, however, is every person's nightmare. Don't ever want to die the way he died: premature, unexpected, violent, public, on a balcony in a cheap hotel, bloody.

The bullet that ends his life is motivated by the very force Dr. King had spent his adult life trying to defuse and defeat—bigotry and hate. What a nightmare. The only ray of light that afternoon in Memphis was the promise of the Scripture that says that when a Christ-follower dies, he's absent from the body and present with the Lord *in the twinkling of an eye*. (1 Corinthians 15:52)

Thank God that Dr. King was prepared to die that day in Memphis. Thank God that earlier in his life he had opened his heart to Jesus Christ, confessed his sins, received redemption and grace. Thank God he was free from sin. Thank God he was free to love and free to bless despite all the wrongdoing that had come his way. He was free indeed. One can only imagine the welcoming committee assembled on the other side that day when he died.

I don't think anybody on this side of eternity can fully grasp the impact of Dr. King's brief stay on this planet. He got only 39 years to live. This we do know: His untimely death poured fuel on the purposes for which he had given his life—freedom. And not freedom for a select few, but freedom for everybody—true freedom.

He was as concerned about spiritual freedom through the redeeming power of Christ as he was concerned about racial and ethnic freedom, economic and social freedom, emotional and

physiological freedom. He was all about freedom. His untimely death gave exponential amounts of life to his words that remain his enduring legacy, words that school kids of all colors all over the world, in all nations, read and memorized. You know some of them.

“Let freedom ring . . . . When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!’”

It was always about freedom. Would that every Willow Creeker would be that free.

Would that every Willow Creeker would bow their knee to Jesus Christ, receive his forgiving grace, and be free from the penalty and the power and the consequences of sin. You can be free this day from the power of sin if you would turn yourself over to Jesus Christ and trust him as your Forgiver and Leader. Would that every single person here would trust Christ and be free. Would that every Willow Creeker would therefore be freed up with the power to be radically inclusive instead of exclusive.

May Willow Creek folks be the first people in society to reach across a racial line, an ethnic line, a socio-economic chasm. Free to be the first ones to reach a hand in love. May Willow Creek people be the first ones to build bridges across all kinds of divides. May Willow Creek people be the first ones with the power of Christ to forgive, take people off the hook who have wronged us so that we don’t live in ever shrinking prisons of our own making. Would that we be free.

I’m going to end the service a little differently. I’m going to ask all of you to hang with me for a couple more moments, but I need you to stand. What’s going to happen in these next few moments, friends, I think is the most important part of our service. I just ask you to stay tuned in because you’ll be glad you did. I’ve been reading a lot of Dr. King’s speeches the last few weeks.

At the end of one of his speeches, he actually instructs the people how they are to go out when they leave the room. It’s how he wanted them to go back out into the neighborhoods and into the marketplace.

“Let us go out of here with divine dissatisfaction. Let us be dissatisfied until those that live on the outskirts of hope are brought into the metropolis of daily security. Let us be dissatisfied until slums are cast into the junk heaps of history and every family is living in a decent, sanitary home.

“Let us be dissatisfied until the dark yesterdays of segregated schools will be transformed into the bright tomorrows of quality, integrated education. Let us be dissatisfied until integration is not seen as a problem but as an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity. Let us be dissatisfied until men and women . . . will be judged on the basis of the content of their character and not on the basis of the color of their skin.

“Let us be dissatisfied until every state capitol houses a governor who will do justly, who will love mercy and who will walk humbly with his God. Let us be dissatisfied until from every city hall, justice will roll down like the waters of righteousness and flow like a mighty stream. ... Let us be dissatisfied until that day when nobody will shout white power, when nobody will shout black power, but everybody will talk about God’s power ....”

God’s power.

I’m just hoping that you’ll go back out into your world with a divine dissatisfaction. That is increasingly what God has placed in my own spirit. A divine dissatisfaction with the way things still are with regard to race, color, ethnicity, poverty, and injustice. The dissatisfaction in my own spirit is growing.

I’ve been praying that your divine dissatisfaction would increase and that it would inspire you to pray: God, what do you want me to do? Just whatever; what do you want me to do? How do you want me to use my Christ-purchased freedom? Show me the way. I’ll follow.