

All Things for Good in the Life of Joseph: Genesis 37-50

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Last week we closely examined the great promise of Romans 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” This morning we’re going to look at the Old Testament account of Joseph’s life, which is a striking illustration of this promise. In fact, in Genesis 50:20 we hear essentially the same truth uttered from Joseph’s own mouth. We’ll come to that part of the story toward the end of the sermon.

Many of you are pretty familiar with these chapters in Genesis. Others of you may not be. Genesis 37-50 tell many of the details of Joseph’s life, beginning when he was 17 years old.

Of Jacob’s sons, Joseph was the eleventh born son, out of 12. However, he was the first-born son to Rachel. You see, Jacob had more than one wife, which is never a good idea and is not the way it’s supposed to be. But that’s the way it was in this family. Rachel was the favored wife, and Joseph, being born to Rachel after years of barrenness and being born in Jacob’s old age, was the favored son. It was very evident to everyone around that Joseph was the favorite son. Jacob didn’t try to hide it in any way. In fact, he flaunted it. He made Joseph a robe of many colors to say, “Look, everyone! This is my favorite son!” In a family of 12 sons, we all know that is a recipe for disaster. The father’s favoritism bred jealousy and hatred among the other brothers. Genesis 37:4 says that Joseph’s brothers “hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.”

To add to the tension, Joseph had some bizarre dreams about his brothers and even his parents bowing down to him. And rather than keeping the dreams to himself, he told his brothers, and they hated him all the more.

Then the brothers seized upon an opportunity to harm their brother (37:12ff). The brothers were tending Jacob’s flock near Shechem. And Jacob sent Joseph to check on them. Joseph journeyed from the Valley of Hebron to Shechem, which would have been about a 50 mile trip. Then, as he wandered through the fields, he providentially met a man who directed him to Dothan, another 15 miles north.

Joseph’s brothers saw him coming from a distance. They must have noticed the coat and knew that it was the dreamer, the

favorite son of their father. And they burned with rage toward him and planned to murder him. Reuben, the oldest brother, wanted to rescue Joseph, so he suggested they throw Joseph into a pit. Reuben's plan was to come back for Joseph later. But instead, again providentially, a caravan of Ishmaelites (also known as Midianites) arrived. And Judah suggested that they sell Joseph to these Midianites. And that's exactly what they did. They sold their brother for 20 shekels of silver.

Reuben was absent when this happened. And he was very distraught when he returned and realized that Joseph was gone, because Reuben had planned to rescue Joseph. The brothers, then, put goat's blood on Joseph's robe and then deceived their father, making him think that Joseph had been killed by a fierce animal.

Joseph's story is interrupted by chapter 38, which puts Judah's moral perversity as a dark backdrop behind Joseph's purity and godliness. Chapter 39 opens with Joseph in Egypt, where Potiphar, the captain of the guard, bought Joseph from the Ishmaelites. There's a hint of hope in this, because, first of all, Joseph is not dead. He was spared from his brothers' original plan to kill him. And secondly, even though Joseph is a slave, he belongs to a very powerful man in Egypt, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. And the rest of the story will reveal how God's providential placement of Joseph in Potiphar's house eventually leads to the fulfillment of the dreams and the fulfillment of God's plans. But it doesn't happen how we would expect it to. It *starts* on a positive note. Joseph was very successful, because God blessed everything he did. And Potiphar recognized this and put Joseph in charge of his entire household.

Don't overlook Joseph's exemplary character in this. He has been victimized by his own brothers. He was the favored son of a wealthy man, and now he is owned by a foreigner. If Joseph was normal, he would be deep in the mire of self-pity. He would be griping and complaining and trying to explain to everyone around him that he doesn't deserve this. He was wronged. He was victimized. But instead, he works hard and diligently, knowing that the Lord is with him.

And everything seems to be going alright, except for one problem. Potiphar's wife. Potiphar's wife found the young Joseph very attractive, and she tried to seduce him. She tried this repeatedly. She was relentless. But Joseph refused to sleep with her. He knew that it would be a great offense against his master, and he also said in verse 9, "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" You see, Joseph understood the sanctity of marriage, and he also understood sin in a very God-

centered way. He knew that sleeping with a woman who was not his wife would be a grave sin, not only against her and her husband, but ultimately against God.

On a certain occasion Potiphar's wife found Joseph in the house alone, and again she tried to seduce him. Verse 12, "But [Joseph] left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house." This is exactly what we ought to do when confronted with sexual temptation. 1 Corinthians 6:18, "Flee from sexual immorality." Don't give that temptation a chance. Don't flirt with the idea. Don't put yourself in a compromising situation. Flee! Run! That's what Joseph did, and he was right to do it.

But instead of being rewarded for his righteous behavior, Joseph was punished for it. Potiphar's wife, in her rejection and rage, decided to lie about what had happened. She turned the tables and accused Joseph of trying to seduce her, and this landed Joseph in jail.

Again there is a glimmer of hope, because at least he's not dead. He very well could have been executed for this accusation that was brought against him. And even though Joseph is now a prisoner, he is "where the king's prisoners were confined" (v. 20). He is put in a place where he is going to meet someone who has direct access to Pharaoh himself!

That person is Pharaoh's cupbearer. Just like Joseph's success in Potiphar's house, God also blesses him in prison. God is with Joseph throughout all of these difficult times. In 39:21 it says, "the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison."

In chapter 40 Pharaoh got angry with his chief cupbearer and his chief baker, and threw them into the prison where Joseph was, and the captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them (v. 4). Then one night each of them had a dream, and they were troubled by their dreams and couldn't find anyone to interpret them. In verse 8 Joseph says to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" Here's another evidence of Joseph's God-centered, God-honoring understanding of life. He interprets their dreams, while humbly recognizing that it's only God who can reveal these things to him. He doesn't take any of the credit for himself.

Joseph told the chief cupbearer that he would be restored to his position, and, sadly, the chief baker was going to be hanged. Joseph said to the chief cupbearer, who would soon be in the presence of Pharaoh again, in verse 14, "Only remember me, when

it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house.” Notice this: Joseph is looking for a way to be freed. His trust in God does not mean that he allows himself to be a doormat. I think this is a significant point. The promise of Romans 8:28 does not mean we just sit back and allow injustices to be done to us or to others. We can defend ourselves. We can seek escape from wrongs that are being done to us. The Apostle Paul says to slaves in 1 Corinthians 7:21, “if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.”

Joseph was seeking help. That was an appropriate thing for him to do. And yet, in God’s providence, it was not time for him to be delivered from this trial. He would spend two more years in prison. The last verse in chapter 40 says, “Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.”

Joseph was wronged by his brothers, by Potiphar’s wife, and now also by Pharaoh’s cupbearer. Many wrongs were committed against him, but the Lord was with him, showing him steadfast love, and the Lord had a reason and a purpose in all of this.

In chapter 41 the story turns around and Joseph is exalted. It’s a story of going from riches to rags to riches. He had been the favored son of wealthy Jacob, then a slave and prisoner, and now he is exalted to a very elevated position in Egypt.

Pharaoh had two dreams, which nobody could interpret for him. And that’s when the cupbearer remembered Joseph. In God’s providence this is the first step of Joseph’s exaltation. Pharaoh sent for Joseph. Joseph interpreted the dreams with amazing insight and wisdom. And it pleased Pharaoh so much that he said to Joseph in verse 39, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.” Joseph rode in Pharaoh’s second chariot, and everyone bowed down to him. He was second in command. He ruled over all of Egypt.

He who was once in an exalted position and was then humiliated, has now risen to the right hand of the throne. This sequence of exaltation, humiliation, and then exaltation, ought to remind us of the One who is so much greater than Joseph. Our Lord Jesus Christ, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing [here’s His humiliation], taking the form of a servant [doulos=slave], being born in the likeness of men. And being

found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him [here's His exaltation] and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow [the people of Egypt bowed the knee to Joseph (Genesis 41:43), but *every* knee will bow to Jesus], in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:6-11). Joseph's humiliation and exaltation is a type of Jesus' humiliation and exaltation. We have a Savior who humbled *Himself* on our behalf. Joseph's humiliation was involuntary, but Jesus willingly made himself nothing. He suffered and bled and died. And now He is highly exalted. He is at the right hand of the Father, and one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord.

See again how Joseph gives God all the credit. Just like when Joseph was speaking to the baker and the cupbearer, he does the same in his interaction with Pharaoh. When Pharaoh summoned Joseph to interpret his dreams, Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it" (41:15). This would have been a great opportunity for Joseph to exalt himself in Pharaoh's eyes. He could have said, "Yes, Pharaoh. I can interpret dreams. I accurately interpreted the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker, and I can do the same for you." But instead Joseph very intentionally shifted the focus away from himself and gave God all the credit. He said to Pharaoh in verse 16, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

Then in verse 25 he says, "God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do." And again in verse 28, "God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do." Finally in verse 32, "And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about." Joseph gave God the credit. Joseph is radically God-centered throughout this entire conversation with Pharaoh.

Through these dreams it was revealed that a famine was near at hand. There was going to be 7 years of plenty and then 7 years of famine. During the 7 years of plenty, Joseph went throughout Egypt and stored up food in each city. So Egypt was prepared when the famine came. And apparently they were the only ones prepared, because the last verse in chapter 41 says, "all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth" (v. 57).

This is what sets the stage for the reunion of Joseph and his brothers, and the fulfillment of Joseph's dreams. Joseph had those

dreams years before about his brothers bowing down to him, and now he is a ruler in Egypt and his brothers come to him in desperate need for food.

At the beginning of chapter 42 Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy grain. Verse 6 says, “Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph’s brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground.” Joseph recognized them, but they didn’t recognize him. And Joseph didn’t reveal his identity immediately. He first wanted to test his brothers to see if they had changed at all.

So he accused them of being spies. And he demanded that they return home and bring back their youngest brother— Benjamin. He kept Simeon in custody, and sent the other brothers home. It was obviously difficult for the brothers to convince their father to part with Benjamin. Jacob had already lost Joseph, his favorite son. It would be unbearable if he lost Benjamin, too (the other son of Rachel).

Eventually, when they needed more food, Judah convinced his father to let Benjamin go with them to Egypt to get more grain. Look at what Judah says to his father in 43:9, “I will be a pledge of his safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever.” Israel their father reluctantly agreed and sent them back to Egypt with double the money and many gifts.

When Joseph saw his brother Benjamin, he was overcome with emotion and rushed out of their presence. He still didn’t tell them who he was, but he continued to test them. He wanted to see if they were still filled with jealousy. So he had them seated according to their birth order and served them a meal, and Benjamin, the youngest, received a portion 5 times larger than the others. When the brothers headed back home Joseph set up a trap for them. He had his steward put a silver cup in Benjamin’s bag, then the steward ran after them and asked, “Why have you repaid evil for good?” (44:4). Why have you stolen? The brothers insisted they were innocent, but then the steward found the cup in Benjamin’s sack. Benjamin would have to be punished for this. He would have to remain in Egypt. It’s hard to imagine the despair that the brothers must have felt at this point. This is exactly what they had hoped would not happen, and what they were confident could not happen. This is the pledge that Judah had made to his father, that Benjamin would return safely.

In chapter 44:18ff Judah makes a long speech to Joseph, explaining the entire situation and pleading for mercy. Let me read the conclusion of his speech in vv. 33-34:

“Now, therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy’s life, as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.’ Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father.”

This is a striking contrast to the Judah of chapters 37-38. The man who sold his brother Joseph into slavery and was so morally perverse, is now changing and *has* changed. And he is even a type of Christ here, as he offers himself in order to restore Benjamin to his father. In a similar way Jesus Christ offered his own life in order to free us and restore us to the Father.

Judah’s Christ-like, sacrificial attitude impressed Joseph. He could see the moral transformation that had taken place in Judah’s life. It was at this point that Joseph made himself known to his brothers. Chapter 45:2-3, “And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?’ But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.”

What a reunion this would have been, filled with a massive range of emotions for everyone involved. Joseph had surely struggled with resentment toward his brothers who abused him and almost killed him, and then sold him as a slave. But Joseph had forgiven them and was now delighted to be with them. For the brothers, though, this would have been terrifying. The brother they abused now has absolute control over them. He can do with them as he pleases. And this is his chance for revenge. They thought they were done for.

But look at the amazing things that Joseph says in the following verses of chapter 45. He says these things to comfort them, and what he says is an amazing testimony to God’s providence over all things, especially evil. Joseph recognized God’s providence over evil. And here’s where we get to the

Romans 8:28 truth revealed in Joseph's story—both here and in chapter 50, which we'll come to shortly.

“So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.” (Genesis 45:4–8, ESV)

Notice a couple things about Joseph's words here. Notice his God-centeredness again. Just like we already noticed in the things he said to Pharaoh, and to the baker and cupbearer, Joseph gives all the credit to God and recognizes that God is in control of everything. He refers to God 4 times. Verse 5, “God sent me before you to preserve life.” Verse 7, “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth.” Verse 8, “it was not you who sent me here, but God.” And verse 9, “God has made me lord of all Egypt.” Joseph sees God's hand in all these events. He knows that his brothers sold him into slavery. He acknowledges that in verses 4-5, “you sold me here.” But he can also say in verse 8, “it was not you who sent me here, but God.” Do you see how Joseph understood the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility? Yes, the brothers had done a very wicked thing against their brother, and they were guilty for that sin. *And* that evil was part of God's providential plan to save his people.

Another thing to notice is that Joseph's understanding of God's providence is what enabled him to forgive his brothers. This is such an important application for us. When you're struggling to forgive someone who has done evil against you, remember that God is in control of that evil that was done against you. This doesn't minimize the gravity of the sin. It doesn't diminish the guilt of the person who committed the wrong. But if we see the trial in the big picture of God's good plans for us, that frees us to let go of grudges and let go of bitterness. It frees us to forgive.

Joseph makes another amazing statement in chapter 50, after his father dies. In the intervening chapters Joseph is reunited with his father, and the whole clan moves to Egypt and settles in Goshen. Then their father, Israel, dies. And Joseph's brothers

become worried again, that Joseph is going to take revenge now that their father is dead.

“When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.” So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died: ‘Say to Joseph, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.”’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.” (Genesis 50:15–21, ESV)

Again, Joseph demonstrates his forgiveness. He forgives because he recognizes God’s providence over evil. This verse (verse 20) is the Romans 8:28 of the Old Testament. Here is Joseph’s statement of that same reality—his brothers meant evil against him, but God meant it for good. The brothers’ wicked actions were part of the “all things” which God works together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

I challenge you to apply this to your life, and let this sink into your heart. When someone commits an evil against us, like Joseph’s brothers did to him, and our anger burns against that person and all we can think about is wanting revenge and wanting that person to be punished for their sin, we need to step back and see the big picture. We need to realize that we are not in the place of God. And we need to recognize that God’s providence encompasses even that sin. In God’s providence, even that evil that was meant against us, God intends for our good. He doesn’t just *use* it for good, after the fact. He intended it for good. He designed it. He planned it. All things, even the evil and sin and wickedness, will work together for our good if we belong to God.

In closing, think for a moment about some additional ways that Joseph’s life foreshadows the life of Christ. I mentioned the point about his humiliation and exaltation. Consider these similarities as well. Just as Joseph’s brothers wanted to kill him, so also Jesus’ brothers, his fellow Jews, hated him and wanted him dead. Just as Joseph was sold for 20 shekels of silver, Jesus was sold for 30 pieces of silver. Just as Joseph’s brothers put him into

the hands of Gentiles, so also Jesus was handed over to the Gentiles (see Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis*, pg. 344). Just as God used the evil things that were done to Joseph in order to save his people, God used the evil things that were done to Jesus in order to save his people. And in this we see how Jesus is so much greater than Joseph, because he didn't just save his people from starvation, but from the eternal punishment of hell. And just as Joseph was punished for wrongs that he did not commit, our Savior suffered and died on the cross, not because He had done anything wrong, but because He was dying for the sin of His people. He died in the place of all who repent of their sin and put their full trust in Him.

One last thing to notice in this amazing story is that Joseph saved those who once hated him. Joseph forgave his brothers. He saved them, even though they were the ones who abused him and turned their backs on him. He saved them from the famine. When they were helpless and needy, he provided for them beyond what they could have imagined.

This, too, points us to our Savior Jesus Christ, who forgives and saves those who once hated Him. We hated Him. We were His enemies. We put Him to death. But Christ died for His enemies, for those who abused Him. He suffered and died for our sins, in order to forgive us and save us. Trust in Christ today. See the glory of this forgiveness, of this salvation. Give yourself to the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who forgives and saves His enemies. And in this salvation be freed to forgive others, knowing that God does work *all things* together for the good of His children.