

The Joseph Story | Broken Family/Beautiful Plan

Providence and a Broken Family

Genesis 12-37; Psalm 77.1-15 & 105.5-17

September 8, 2013

My voice rises to God, and I will cry aloud; My voice rises to God, and He will hear me. ² In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord; In the night my hand was stretched out without weariness; My soul refused to be comforted. ³ When I remember God, then I am disturbed; When I sigh, then my spirit grows faint. Selah. ⁴ You have held my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. ⁵ I have considered the days of old, The years of long ago. ⁶ I will remember my song in the night; I will meditate with my heart, And my spirit ponders: ⁷ Will the Lord reject forever? And will He never be favorable again? ⁸ Has His lovingkindness ceased forever? Has His promise come to an end forever? ⁹ Has God forgotten to be gracious, Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion? Selah. ¹⁰ Then I said, "It is my grief, That the right hand of the Most High has changed." ¹¹ I shall remember the deeds of the LORD; Surely I will remember Your wonders of old. ¹² I will meditate on all Your work And muse on Your deeds. ¹³ Your way, O God, is holy; What god is great like our God? ¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders; You have made known Your strength among the peoples. ¹⁵ You have by Your power redeemed Your people, The sons of Jacob and Joseph.

(Ps 105) Remember His wonders which He has done, His marvels and the judgments uttered by His mouth, ⁶ O seed of Abraham, His servant, O sons of Jacob, His chosen ones! ⁷ He is the LORD our God; His judgments are in all the earth. ⁸ He has remembered His covenant forever, The word which He commanded to a thousand generations, ⁹ The covenant which He made with Abraham, And His oath to Isaac. ¹⁰ Then He confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, To Israel as an everlasting covenant, ¹¹ Saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan As the portion of your inheritance," ¹² When they were only a few men in number, Very few, and strangers in it. ¹³ And they wandered about from nation to nation, From one kingdom to another people. ¹⁴ He permitted no man to oppress them, And He reproved kings for their sakes: ¹⁵ "Do not touch My anointed ones, And do My prophets no harm." ¹⁶ And He called for a famine upon the land; He broke the whole staff of bread. ¹⁷ He sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave.

Today we begin a new teaching series on the life of Joseph and his broken family. *This story is told in The Book of Genesis and in that sense this is really a continuation of a series from last Fall, when we looked at the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).*

You *MAY* be wondering (if you're extra perceptive), "WHY, if we're looking at the life of Joseph from The Book of Genesis, then WHY didn't we read from The Book of Genesis?" Instead, we're

reading from The Book of Psalms and the last 8 sermons were ON the Psalms so let's get to Joseph and... we are.

As I've mentioned, The Psalms are *the poetic summary of the Old Testament* and that's exactly what we need today. I think it's a good transition from one series to the next. We need help here as we try to get back into the story of Abraham's family – we need a summary of Genesis and that's what we find in these HISTORICAL PSALMS (*there are a number of them in addition to the ones we printed*).

AND these Psalms show us HOW to USE this historical material *as something more than just history lessons or interesting stories* (and they ARE that!) but how are we supposed to benefit from these narratives? How can they be spiritually utilized to shape our character and change us?

So...all that... we hope to accomplish today – back into the story and explore a method for benefiting from the story in the next 8-10 weeks. #1) The Joseph Story in the BIG CONTEXT #2) The BIG OBSERVATIONS/LESSONS/TEACHINGS from the story that the Psalms capture and put to use #3) How this prepares us for what lies ahead (in 2 senses).

God came to a man in Babylon... a pagan, idol-worshiper named Abraham and God revealed Himself to this man. It wasn't because Abraham deserved it or because he was especially looking for God but because God had a plan for Abraham and his wife Sarah. He called them to "relocate" and become pilgrims.

And God made big promises to Abraham and Sarah – that they would have a new homeland but also that they would never be truly at home in this fallen world. They were an old, infertile couple and God promised them children...*from their own bodies*, a lineage and a family as numerous as the stars.

And then, in waiting for that promise to be fulfilled and in WAVERING...and doubting... Abraham gets a revelation from God. God brings him into the "valley of death"... Abraham is required to slaughter animals and to lay out their dismembered bodies with a pathway between them. They're symbols of death and it's an ancient covenant ceremony – God makes Abraham sit down and then a symbol of HIS OWN presence passes between the death. God is entering INTO our death...God is stepping into all that we have broken by our original disobedience and our rejection of His beautiful reign over our lives.

God passes through these ugly, un-natural looking symbols of all that's broken and twisted in us and in the world... And God is saying, "Normally in a covenant ceremony BOTH parties to the contract pass through the symbols of death as if to say, 'If I fail to keep my word may I be as these carcasses'. But in this covenant, Abraham, I ALONE will walk the path... you will remain passive and I will keep My word and I will suffer death for YOU not keeping YOUR WORD.

And then...Abraham and Sarah wait... sometimes impatient sometimes laughing at God and laughing at this whole thing...Soon after, *Sarah devises a surrogacy plan and USES her Egyptian maid, Hagar*, to carry Abraham's child... but it was clearly an attempt to manage and manipulate rather than trust God and wait.

And then Hagar, *the maid*, gives birth of Ishmael but Sarah burns with jealousy (not a big happy family).

Then, Abraham and Sarah have a baby and the child of promise arrives, Isaac ("Laughter"). And now an old man who's a new dad...and his two wives and their rival sons all living together in perfect *disharmony* and this family is REALLY messed up.

It ends disastrously with the cruel mistreatment of Hagar and Ishmael as Sarah plots their abandonment and it's a brutal display of hypocrisy by... God's chosen people.

And yet, from time to time God reminds them: this depends on MY faithfulness and my "hesed" (remember?) and not yours. It's a unilateral contract.

Well, Abraham looks on Isaac as the child of promise and...Isaac grows up and he has a son...twins in fact (Esau and Jacob) and he assumes that the first born (Esau) will be the one to carry on the family line and that the Messiah who would save the world would be born from Esau's lineage and therefore Isaac shows big favoritism to Esau... But God reveals to the mother that the "older will serve the younger" that Jacob's line (not Esau's) will be the line of the Messiah.

Then, there's a lot of deception – Jacob lies and steals to get the birthright (his name means "usurper" or "snatcher"). And then threats and rage: Jacob has to flee for his life...He goes to his mother's people up north and he falls in love with a woman named Rachel. He agrees to work for Rachel's father (Jacob's uncle, Laban) for seven years so he can have Rachel's hand in marriage. It goes by so quickly because he loves her so much.

Then the wedding day arrives... in the celebration he drinks too much wine. He goes to the honeymoon suite in the pitch-black darkness and sleeps with his bride. He wakes up and turns out Laban is a bigger usurper than Jacob...it's Rachel's older sister Leah in the bridal bed... "Yeah, I thought you knew that's the way we do it here", says Laban, "the older always marries first. I'd be happy to marry the younger to you also...for another seven year contract."

So...Jacob agrees and the con-man met his match...got "out conned" by his uncle. And it turns out that he's a swindler from a long line of swindlers! And THIS (I remind you)...is the family God has chosen to save the world...from which the Messiah would be born!

Then Jacob gets older and fine-tunes his fraudulent skills and uses them to have the last laugh on Uncle Laban. He returns to the place of his birth with his two wives and two concubines and his many children (eventually 12 sons) and God engineers a kind of reconciliation between Jacob

the swindler and his brother Esau. And then they settle into the land. And there's a terrible case of incest and rape and further deception and shame (which we talked about last year in another series called Scandals in the Line...which MAY be available online).

Point is... here's a family – the only family with which God entered into an agreement. God approached this man Abraham... NOT BECAUSE ABRAHAM was good or promising or had a lot of hidden potential and would be a good investment. It was a messed-up family, a broken family who didn't deserve the infinite honor God bestowed on them when He SWORE to them that He would rather die than lose them. That is the "hesed" of God – His covenant loyalty, His unilateral agreement, His lovingkindness, His amazing grace and unshakeable commitment.

And it was a broken, damaged, wrecked and ruined family and it was God's plan that He determined from all eternity... before the Fall or creation... and we're just beginning our study! Next week we drop in on these sweet people and their little sibling rivalry that gets a little carried away...and it's all God's plan and it's how grace is going to come into the world...How God is going to come into our death and make all things NEW!

Now, when the ancient, inspired song-writers thought about these events, it wasn't just to pass a history test in "synagogue school" and it wasn't to bolster a sense of national pride (like, "look at the great and courageous founding fathers of our country"... because they weren't so great! And they didn't leave many examples that we would want our kids to follow – these are NOT morality tales!) but the Psalmists did have a very definite use for these stories...

They saw...past the human frailty and deceit and violence and badness to the Invisible Hand at work in these DEEPLY flawed, ruined, wrecked families and people.

We call this "behind the scenes" work of God, the way He works out His plans to fix everything and make them better than they were at the start – we call this "the providence of God" It doesn't simply mean God's "providing" but His governing all His creations and all of their movements. It means that God is the Unseen Mover... guiding everything to the end that He decreed from eternity past. God working out in time and space what He wants to happen...and all that for an end that is unimaginably good and beautiful and true: the providence of God.

And the Psalmists look back on history and they see (because hindsight is 20/20!) they SEE one particular aspect of God's providence and they use on themselves to bring their lives back together when they're falling apart. They look at this wreck of a family...they look at how it could ONLY be explained by the direct intervention of God and by the God of grace – they muse and meditate on the church, the people of Abraham, who live by grace through faith...and that reminds them and vividly demonstrates to them, "Ah! There is a God, a Creator and a Redeemer...He has stepped into our world through this family...THAT'S HOW I KNOW HE CAN BE TRUSTED". This is how I know there's a Grand Design and a design for my life too!

The way our forefathers put it was like this “As, in general, the providence of God reaches to all creatures, so, in a very special way, it cares for his church and disposes all things for its good.” (WCF, 5.7) In other words, God has a special plan for the people of grace. We don’t always see it. Often it looks like things are just completely chaotic and horrible... but the people of grace, the “anointed ones” (105.15) are being cared for in ways they will never fathom.

The writer (Asaph) of Psalm 77 was deeply disturbed about something. His life was insanely tumultuous and he had so many questions, so many conflicts and concerns that he just couldn’t sleep. He began to think that God had forgotten him. He was so stressed out and just at wits end and he even began to conclude, “I think God forgot about grace...I think God has changed.”

And then... he remembered...he determined to remember...he meditated ...he mused about God piercing the darkness and coming to this broken world and claiming Abraham and Sarah and moving their lives (even though it must’ve been weird!) and God guaranteeing that He would save the world... would step RIGHT INTO OUR DEATH... And that historical happening brought this writer BACK from the edge and brought him from inner turmoil to a place of gratitude and joy and renewed vitality.

I will meditate on all Your work and muse on Your deeds. Your way, O God, is holy; what god is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders; You have made known Your strength among the peoples. You have by Your power redeemed Your people, the sons of Jacob and Joseph.

And again in Psalm 105.15: *“(You said of old) Do not touch My anointed ones, and do My prophets no harm. And He called for a famine upon the land; He broke the whole staff of bread. He sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave.*

It’s the very thing we do when we preach to ourselves; we counsel ourselves – “You, O Lord, not only symbolized for Abraham that You were willing to walk through the valley of death for us...But we have seen it in a way even Abraham did not. “You took our death – You became a carcass for us... and You have **IN THE LIFE, DEATH and RESURRECTION of Jesus Christ... YOU HAVE DEALT A DEATHBLOW to death itself...** a historical event changes everything.”

When I think of it...muse on that historical moment that ignited an international MOVEMENT of YOUR ANOINTED ONES...people of the Messiah coming from every tribe, nation and tongue...the children of Abraham...and as numerous as the stars...when I meditate on how You bring infinite healing OUT of a hopeless, broken family...THEN...it is well with my soul!

That’s what the Psalmists did with their history... and that is what we can do with it: a bold reminder that God has a plan...and IS working it out even when we can’t see the rhyme or reason in the present moment.

Now, how can this prepares us for what lies ahead? Two “take-aways”: 1) For Life and 2) For this coming teaching series on The Joseph Story:

1) In life we may have...will have... these moments like Asaph. There are disorienting, painful and tumultuous moments of doubt. It could be brought on by something identifiable (like a conflict, illness, a loss, a death, unemployment). You can't sleep at night. You cry out to friends and no one "gets it" and you cry out to God and... no answer.

You doubt. You wonder if you have this thing about Christianity and the Gospel wrong...Maybe God has changed...maybe we invented Him.

Then you counsel yourself. You think of creation – it cannot be an accident. There's more order and deliberated beauty in a simple leaf. Then you move from creation to PROVIDENCE...and to that special providence in the Church – God appealing to Abraham and making a people, the Israelites from whom came the Messiah...who took our death and rose again...and then to individual providence ...God has found me out and convinced ME of this...and as you muse on it...these historical events become much more than an interesting history lesson but a life-line to sanity and purpose and joy.

2) Let's see this providence acted out in Joseph's life and the sons of Jacob. Next week we meet them.

But together we get to soak in this providence of God...we get to bring general providence down into our own lives. As God worked out His will in this broken family we may find new hope for our own broken families and our own lives.

So...tune in next week.