

“The Mysterious Working of God’s Good Providence”

Genesis 37-50 (Joseph)

September 8, 2024

Today we are setting the stage for a new series in the book of Exodus. However, Exodus 1 is not the beginning of the story of the Exodus. It’s actually the continuation of a longer story in which God is working out His plan to create a people for Himself through which He will display His glory to the world. The story actually begins in Genesis 1 where God creates mankind—and He creates them for Himself; to know Him, to love and serve Him, and to find their satisfaction in Him. We were made for God, not for ourselves, not for our plans but for God’s. And even when the human race sinned and rebelled against God, His plans were not thwarted.

This plan to establish a people for Himself takes more specific shape in Genesis 12 when God called a single person by the name of Abraham to follow Him. God promised Abraham that He would bless him and make his descendants into a great nation through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The first fulfillment of this blessing came when God opened the barren womb of Abram’s wife Sarah to conceive and give birth to their son Isaac. Isaac then had a son by the name of Jacob who was also called Israel. Jacob had 12 sons, and last 13 chapters of Genesis tell the story of story of Jacob’s 12 sons, with a particular focus on Joseph whom God would use as an instrument in His hand to advance His purpose of establishing a people for Himself.

The book of Exodus opens with Israel (the descendants of Abram, Isaac, and Jacob) living as slaves in the land of Egypt. So what I want to do today is survey of the last 13 chapters of Genesis—an overview of Joseph’s life—as background to the book of Exodus to explain why the Israelites are in Egypt in the first place and to introduce us to the mysterious working of God’s providence to accomplish His good purposes, even through His people’s adversity.

As we dive into this overview of the Joseph’s life, let me encourage you to keep three biblical principles in mind:

1. ***God’s purposes and plan will not be thwarted by man’s sin or Satan’s rebellion*** (Job 42:2). Job 42:2 – “I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.”
2. ***Any attempts to undermine God’s plan and purpose will be proven foolish and vain, and only result in advancing His purposes in the end*** (Nahum 1:9). Nahum 1:9 – “Whatever you devise against the Lord, He will make a complete end of it.”
3. ***We would be wise to walk in the fear and favor of the Lord by guarding our hearts against any evil that would put us in opposition to God’s sovereign plan*** (Job 28:28; Prov 4:23). Job 28:28 – “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.” Prov 4:23 – “Guard your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.”

Let’s see how these truths are illustrated in the life of Joseph.

[Gen 37:1-11] Joseph is his father’s favorite son. Jacob is not at all discreet about his favoritism toward Joseph. He makes him a special coat of many colors which only fuels the jealousy of his brothers toward him. Not only is Joseph favored by his father, but God also begins to reveal His favor and plan for Joseph’s life through these dreams in which Joseph’s brothers bow down to him. As a 17-year-old, Joseph lacked discretion and openly told his brothers about his dreams which only fueled their bitter jealousy toward him. Then one day, Jacob sends Joseph (who is at home with his father), out to check on his brothers who are tending flocks. **[Gen 37: 18-36]** So now we know how Joseph ends up in Egypt. He is betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery.

[39:1-6a] Joseph ends up being sold as a servant to a prominent Egyptian officer. It’s hard to imagine what Joseph must have been going through. He’s been trafficked to a foreign country, sold into servitude, probably never expecting to see his family again. Yet in the midst of his adversity, God was with him (vs 2). In fact God blessed Joseph with so much favor and success that Potiphar put him in charge of his entire estate. Yet trouble is brewing...

[6b-18] God’s blessing and favor in Joseph’s life did not make him immune to temptation. Potiphar’s wife is attracted to Joseph and pursues him, but

Joseph refuses her advances. His greatest concern was doing what is right in the eyes of the Lord. Joseph feared God. We know from vs. 9 that Joseph was not willing to betray his integrity to his master, but more importantly he was recognized that it would be a great wickedness to sin against God. And yet Joseph's obedience to God would prove costly...

[39: 19-23] At first appearance this seems to be another major setback for Joseph. First, he was sold into slavery and now he was falsely accused and imprisoned for being a man of integrity. Yet is this a setback? Or is this a steppingstone—an opportunity for God to work in his life? Joseph didn't go to Egypt alone and now he didn't go to prison alone either. God was with him! Oh, I'm sure there were times when Joseph felt very alone. Yet God was faithful and continued to give Joseph favor. And that favor was manifested in Joseph's integrity. The keeper of the prison soon discovered that Joseph didn't need to be supervised. Rather, he could be trusted! Notice that Joseph was a man of consistent character whether he was overseeing Potiphar's house or enduring prison. Don't miss the key to Joseph's success at the end of vs. 23: "...*the Lord* was with him. And whatever he did, *the Lord* made it successful." [4x's: 39:2, 3, 21, 23]

In the interest of time, let me summarize what happens in chapters 40-41. While Joseph is in prison, Pharaoh's cup bearer and baker also get thrown into prison. One night, they both have a troubling dream that they can't understand. But God enabled Joseph to correctly interpret their dreams. In three days the cup bearer would be restored to his position but on the same day the baker would be put to death. Three days later when the cup bearer was released from prison, Joseph asked him to put in a good word to Pharaoh for him, but the cup bearer promptly forgot about Joseph.

Two years later (chapter 41) Pharaoh had a troubling dream that none of his magicians could interpret. This prompted the cupbearer to remember Joseph and how God enabled him to interpret dreams correctly. So Pharaoh summoned Joseph to explain the meaning of his dream in which 7 plump cows came up out of the Nile and then 7 skinny cows came up out of the Nile and ate the 7 plump cows. Then he dreamed of 7 good ears of corn that withered, sprouted, and were swallowed up by 7 good ears corn.

Joseph correctly interpreted the dream to mean that there would be 7 years of great swallows followed by 7 years of severe famine. Then Joseph went on to urge the king to appoint someone to store up one-fifth of the produce during the 7 years of plenty so that there would be enough for the 7 years of famine.

[41:37-40, 42a] Once again God has blessed Joseph with tremendous favor. By giving Joseph his signet ring, the king of Egypt has just given Joseph authority over the entire kingdom. The only person who can say no to Joseph is the king himself!

Don't miss the big picture here. For 13 years Joseph has been going through ups and downs; experiencing apparent setbacks in his life that God has been using as steppingstones to work in Joseph's life, to get him to where he wants him to be, to give him experience as a leader, and to make him an instrument in the hand of God to save many people from death. God has used adversity in Joseph's life to display his mercy to many.

Consider God's providence in these events:

- Would Joseph have been available to interpret Pharaoh's dreams had he not been in prison where he met the cup bearer?
- Would he have been in prison had it not been for the false accusations of Potiphar's wife?
- Would he have been susceptible to her schemes had he not been purchased as a servant by Potiphar?
- Would he have become the steward of Potiphar's house had he not been carried to Egypt by the Ishmaelites?
- Would he have been sold as a slave to the Ishmaelites had he not been betrayed by his brother?
- And would he have been sold into slavery by his brothers apart from his father's favoritism that provoked his brothers' jealousy?

Through all these experiences that Joseph would have never chosen for himself, God has been working to strengthen Joseph's character, integrity, maturity, and his confidence to trust God in every situation. Growth and maturity are developed in our life through adversity when we are willing to trust God with our lives and our circumstances.

As we come to Genesis 42, the famine that Joseph predicted has been in full swing for 2 years. It is so vast and severe that Joseph's family back in Canaan had run out of food as well. But they have heard that Egypt has grain for sale. So Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy grain, all except Benjamin who Jacob keeps at home for fear that something might happen to him.

When Jacob's sons arrive in Egypt they bow before the governor not knowing that it is actually Joseph. This is the first of four times that Joseph's dream as a 17-year-old will be fulfilled as his brothers bow down to him. But rather than revealing himself to his brothers, Joseph decided to test them. So he interrogates them: where are they from, is their father still living? Are they any other brothers? They tell him that their father is still alive, that their youngest brother is at home with him, and that their only other brother is dead.

Then Joseph agrees to sell them grain but there's a catch. They have to leave one brother behind (Simeon). Then they need to go home and bring Benjamin to Joseph to prove their story in order to have Simeon released.

The brothers—not knowing that Joseph could understand Hebrew—turned to one another and acknowledged that this must be God's reckoning for what they did to Joseph. **[42: 21-22]** *Listen! You can't outlive or outrun a guilty conscience without getting right with God. Oh, you might be able to sear your conscience, but a seared conscience is not a cleared conscience.*

As the sacks of grain are being filled for the brothers, Joseph secretly has their money put back in the sacks of grain. When they got down the road and discovered that they still had their money, vs. 28 says, "their hearts sank and they turned trembling to one another, saying, *"What is this that God has done to us?"* [spies/brother/money]

In chapter 43 & 44, Joseph's brothers return a second time to Egypt to buy grain. They brought back the money that Joseph had put in their sacks, and they brought along Benjamin, knowing that this was the only possible way to clear their name with the governor of Egypt and get Simeon back. Again, they bow to Joseph and after Joseph invites them to eat with him (in a sense returning good for evil), Joseph plants a silver cup in the Benjamin's sack of grain. Then after there are down the road a ways, he sends after them and accuses them of stealing the silver cup—this is a set up to test them. Again,

the brothers bow before Joseph and when to their surprise they find the cup in Benjamin's sack, Judah steps forward and offers to take Benjamin's place for the sake of his father. **[44:32-33]**

At this point, Joseph could no longer contain his emotions. And he said to them, *"I am Joseph...I am your brother Joseph."* Can you imagine the shock and the terror in the hearts of these men when they realized that the brother they had betrayed, sold into slavery, and regarded as dead is now one of the most powerful men in the world and they were at his mercy! What would Joseph do? Would he have mercy on them or would he exact vengeance? What we are about to see is one of the most astounding, God-centered responses in all of Scripture: **[45:5-8]**

Notice two things about Joseph's response:

1. **Joseph recognized that God had a good plan that superseded his brothers' evil plan.** Joseph recognizes that even though his brothers have acted sinfully/treacherously against him, God was working out His providence in Joseph's life for good! Joseph had learned to look beyond men and circumstances to see the hand of God at work in his life. Three times Joseph says, "God sent me..." (5, 7, 8).
Life Principle: The only way for us to experience peace in times of adversity or conflict is to trust in the providence of God who reigns sovereignly over the circumstances and people in our lives.
2. **Joseph overcomes evil with good.** What a man of honor! Rather than exacting vengeance, Joseph extends mercy and provides for his brothers and their families. He tells them to go and get their father, their families, and all they have and move to Egypt where Joseph will make provision for them.

And that's how this family, 70 people known as the people of Israel, find themselves find themselves in Egypt *by the hand of God*. This is really important because when we get to Exodus 1 next week we're going to find the Israelites 400 years later, no longer a family of 70 people but millions of people who are enduring severe hardship in Egypt—but *not apart from*

God's hand. There is an important little episode that happens in chapter 46 that confirms God's hand of Providence in all that's to come. As Jacob and his family are on their way to Egypt, God speaks to Jacob and says, "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. *I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes*" (46:3-4).

Just before Jacob dies, he gives his blessing to Joseph and in that blessing he acknowledges that God is the one to be credited with Joseph's perseverance and success. [49:22-25a] Joseph is a good example, but God is the hero!

After Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers fear that *now* perhaps he will seek to settle the score with them. [50:15-21]

Take note of several aspects of Joseph's response:

1. **God has been working out His sovereign plan in his life, even through adversity.** Vs. 20 - "*You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...*" In other words, Joseph's brothers are responsible for the evil intent of their hearts and their evil actions against Joseph, but God is the only one who can work out His good and holy purposes even through the sinful actions of others. This is precisely what God did through the cross of Jesus.
2. **Joseph demonstrates a heart of forgiveness by forfeiting personal vengeance to leave final justice in the hands of God.** Vs. 19 - "Am I in God's place?"

What is God's place? God's place is to have the final determination of where mercy should be extended and where judgment, vengeance, and retribution should be exacted.

Romans 12:19—"**Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. But if your enemy is Hungry feed him...**" (Rom 12:19).

This does not mean that we should not seek justice where evil has been committed. Yet personal vengeance is always a dangerous

proposition because we can so easily get blinded by our pain or offenses.

James 2:13 - "**Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment**" (James 2:13).

3. **Joseph overcomes evil with good.** Vs 21—"*do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones. So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.*" Instead of returning evil for evil, Joseph blesses them instead (1Pet 3:9).
4. **Joseph has the heart of a peacemaker.** Notice that *he was not the offending party.* So often we want to put all of the responsibility of peacemaking solely on the party that we think needs to repent. *Joseph was the offended party.* But Joseph had the power to initiate reconciliation by extending mercy and forgiveness, by serving and blessing those who had wronged him, and seeking to do what was right and honorable in the sight of the Lord. Remember, Joseph's perspective is ultimately determined, not by his brothers' sinful actions, but by God's sovereign working. The heart of a peacemaker is one of *faith* that trusts God to work out His sovereign plan in our lives despite the hurts and offenses of others.

Joseph's life models for us several insights to help us resist bitterness and maintain a tender heart in the midst of conflict and adversity:

1. **Remember that God is *with* you.** Just as the Lord was with Joseph in Egypt in Potipher's house and in prison, so the Lord is with you and even working by His providence through your adversity. Ask the Lord to help you respond with faith—to trust that God is working out His greater good purposes that you cannot see in the moment.
2. **Recognize that God is working *in* you so He can work *through* you.** Don't become so preoccupied with trying to resist your adversity that you fail to see your trials as incredible steppingstones (opportunities) to build your character, refine your integrity, advance your maturity, and strengthen your faith in God.
3. **Be a peacemaker—be quick to forgive.** Forgiveness is the antibiotic that overcomes bitterness. Where do you begin? By recounting the massive debt of sin that God has forgiven you when you least deserved it.

4. **Overcome evil with good.** In your personal relationships, instead of coming at others with the law, offer them the gospel of grace. There's a beautiful picture of the gospel back in Gen 45:20 where Joseph says to his undeserving brothers, "Have no concern for your goods, *for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours.*" Isn't this what God offers us in Christ? We don't deserve God's mercy and yet He offers us the best of all that He has—Himself—because Christ paid the debt of our sin. Not because we were deserving. But because He is merciful!

As we will see next week, God was not just working in Joseph's life. He was working out a bigger plan to preserve and establish a people for Himself—a people through which He would display His glory to the world. Yet don't miss the very practical and personal message of hope through the life of Joseph...

God is with us in our adversity, working mysteriously by His providence to accomplish His good plan and purpose, even through those who sin against us.

At the beginning of my message I suggested that we keep three biblical principles in mind. Let's see if they were validated in the life of Joseph:

- Will God's plans and purposes be ultimately thwarted by man's sin? No!
- Will any attempts to undermine God's plan be proven foolish and vain, only resulting in advancing His purposes in the end. Yes!
- Would we be wise to walk in the fear of the Lord and the favor of the Lord by guarding our hearts against any evil that would put us in opposition to God's sovereign plan? Yes!

And these truths will be validated again as we turn to the book of Exodus next week.