



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
Dr. Mark E. Gaskins, *Senior Pastor*
The Lord's Day, August 6, 2017

www.templebaptist.us

© 2017

Joseph: A Portrait of God's Providence
Genesis 37:1-20

I remember it well. It was an obvious understatement when not long after his wife had died following a lengthy battle with cancer, Dr. John Eddins told our systematic theology class, "None of us ever lives under completely ideal circumstances."

No, we don't, do we? Once in a while you see someone who seems to be living a charmed life, but sooner or later, the tough times will come to that person too. It did with Joseph, a young man with as much advantage and as promising a future as you could ask for in the ancient world.

For us as followers of Christ, the issue isn't *whether* we'll face difficulties, but *how* we'll face them, and whether we can discern God's providence and trace his hand in it all.

Joseph's story is a story about God's providence—his benevolent guidance of circumstances to accomplish his purpose.

Joseph's story—and ours

Genesis is a book about *beginnings*—the beginning of the universe, of God's covenant ways, and of his dealings with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and his sons.

Jacob comes on the scene in Genesis 25. He and his twin brother Esau took sibling rivalry to a whole new level, to the point that Jacob had to leave home to escape Esau's wrath—Esau's anger was understandable, since Jacob not only conned him out of his birthright but stole his blessing from their father as well.

It's a long story, but the short of it is that in a culture where polygamy was accepted, Jacob came back home to Canaan with his wives and children, among whom were twelve sons. Among those sons was one named *Joseph*.

Now Joseph was not Jacob's firstborn son; in fact, he was far down the line in the birth order. But he was the first son that his wife Rachel bore. Rachel was the one Jacob wanted to marry in the beginning, but her father Laban was as shrewd as Jacob, and tricked him into marrying her older sister Leah first, then Rachel. Because Rachel finally bore Joseph when Jacob was older, he was Jacob's favorite son.

You'd think that Jacob would have seen the problems that parents' playing favorites causes. He'd been Rachel's favorite, and Esau had been Jacob's. It appears that a good bit of their conflict stemmed from their parents' favoritism.

But he didn't. In fact, he put *his* favoritism *on display*! It was already obvious to everyone, but it was almost too much for the other boys to bear when Jacob gave Joseph a very special robe that showed his special status. The KJV called it ***a coat of many colors*** (37:3); the NRSV translates it ***a long robe with sleeves***; and the NIV ***a richly ornamented robe*** (1984 edition) or ***an ornate robe*** (2011 edition). It spoke volumes to his brothers, to the point that ***they hated him and could not***

Speak a kind word to him (37:4).¹

Joseph was *seventeen years old* when all this happened.

And it didn't help matters any that when the other boys were out tending the flock, Joseph would tattle to their father if they weren't doing like they should.

But the straw that broke the camel's back was when Joseph started having big dreams.

I mean, think about it. You're one of twelve brothers, and you know that the next-to-youngest is your father's favorite. And then one morning this wet-behind-the-ears 17-year-old tells you that he had a dream last night that you were all binding sheaves of grain in the field, and all of a sudden his sheaf stood straight up and your and your brothers' sheaves all gathered and bowed down to his.

But it doesn't stop there, because the next morning, he tells you he's had another dream—this time the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to him! Even his father gently rebuked him for that one: “What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?” (37:10).

So we can understand why Joseph's brothers were angry and jealous, can't we?

But they went too far with it. One day they were out grazing their father's flocks, and he sent Joseph to go check on them. When they saw him from a distance, they began plotting to kill him. They said,

“Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a fierce animal devoured him. Then we'll see what will become of his dreams” (37:19-20).

Reuben, the oldest, talked them out of killing Joseph. But they still stripped his prized robe off of him and threw him into an empty water cistern in the ground.

Apparently Reuben had to leave for a while, and when he came back, they had sold Joseph to some Ishmaelites in a Midianite caravan going down to trade in Egypt. They took the robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in its blood. They took it to Jacob and let him assume that Joseph had been killed and eaten by some wild animal. He mourned for Joseph and refused to be comforted.

And in the meantime, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to be betrayed like this by those who are supposed to love you, those you're supposed to be able to trust? We haven't experienced it to the degree Joseph did, but there are probably a lot of us here this morning who have experienced a heartbreaking betrayal by someone we were once close to, some kin or friend. It's one of the most emotionally painful experiences you can go through.

So there's Joseph in Egypt, a slave in the house of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. It could have been a devastating experience for Joseph. But Scripture says in 39:2-6 that ***the LORD was with him*** so that he prospered as he served in Potiphar's house, so Potiphar put him in charge of things, entrusting everything he owned to Joseph's care.

But then Joseph faced another problem. Potiphar's wife wanted him, and when he continually refused her because he refused to sin against God, she accused him of trying to force her. Potiphar believed her, and put Joseph in prison. So now he was being punished for doing what was right!

Joseph must have felt at this point like we sometimes feel—that we take two steps forward, then three back. You know what I mean. We try to do what’s right but everything goes wrong. Sometimes we’re misunderstood, sometimes we’re falsely accused, or sometimes our efforts to move in a positive direction are rebuffed or sabotaged. And sometimes it seems like one bad thing after another keeps coming at us.

While Joseph was in prison, Pharaoh became angry with his chief cupbearer and his chief baker, and threw both in prison. After they’d been there for a while, each of them had a significant dream on the same night. Their dreams troubled them because they knew they meant something, but they didn’t know what that something was. So they told Joseph about their dreams, and he interpreted them for them. The cupbearer’s dream meant he would be restored to his position, while the baker’s meant he would be executed. And both dreams came to pass in three days, just as Joseph had said they would. He had asked the cupbearer to remember him. But he didn’t, and Joseph was still in prison.

And then *Pharaoh* had two dreams.

In his first dream, he saw seven healthy looking cows come up out of the waters of the Nile River to graze. And then seven ugly, gaunt cows came out of the water and ate the other cows.

In the second, Pharaoh saw seven healthy heads of grain growing on one stalk, then seven thin and scorched heads springing up and swallowing the seven healthy, full heads.

Needless to say, these dreams troubled him, and he called for his magicians and wise men and told them his dreams. But none of them could interpret them.

Then the chief cupbearer remembered how Joseph had interpreted his dream and told Pharaoh about him. Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and after he had cleaned himself up, he came to him. When Pharaoh told Joseph that others said he could interpret dreams, he told Pharaoh, ***“I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires”*** (41:16).

When Joseph heard the dreams, he discerned that they were about the same thing—seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. He urged Pharaoh to find ***a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt*** (41:33), and to collect twenty percent of all the grain harvest during the seven years of abundance to prepare for the famine.

So guess whom Pharaoh chose . . . that’s right, Joseph! Joseph executed the plan perfectly, and when the famine came, there was food in Egypt.

Meanwhile, back in Canaan, Jacob and his family were getting hungry. He’d heard there was food in Egypt, so he sent all his sons *except* Benjamin, the youngest and the only surviving son of Rachel—so he thought.

These ten sons, the same ten who had sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites, now came before him to buy grain. They had no idea that this governor of Egypt that they had to come before was actually their dreaming little brother Joseph. When they came before him, ***they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground*** (42:6). And though they didn’t know him, Joseph recognized them, and he remembered his dreams.

To test them, he questioned them thoroughly and accused them of being spies. Then he held Simeon while they went back to Canaan, and told them not to come back without their youngest brother they had told him about. Without their knowledge, he had their money pouches put in their grain bags. When they found them there, that *really* blew their minds.

At first, Jacob wouldn’t agree for Benjamin to go back with them. But finally, food was in such short supply that he gave in and let him go. They took double the money with them to pay

for the earlier grain, as well as some other gifts from Canaan.

When they came before Joseph this time, they again *bowed down* to him. When he saw Benjamin, he had to leave the room before he lost his composure. Finally he regained it and returned. He had a meal served for them from his table, and had them served from the oldest to the youngest, giving Benjamin a portion five times greater than anybody else's.

Joseph instructed the steward to put their silver back in their grain bags again, and this time to put his silver cup in Benjamin's bag. After they left, he sent and had Benjamin arrested for stealing his cup. They all came back, knowing they couldn't face Jacob without Benjamin. Judah pleaded their case and offered to remain as a slave in Benjamin's place, because he knew it would kill Jacob to lose Benjamin too.

Joseph couldn't stand it any longer. He had everyone leave except his brothers. He broke down and wept, and said to his brothers, "***I am Joseph! Is my father still living?***" (45:3). They were so terrified they couldn't answer. He called them closer, reminded them of what they had done, but then said to them,

"And now do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God" (45:5, 8).

Joseph saw how God used his trials and setbacks to work his providential purpose.

God's providence in our lives

I've often heard my pastor friend Wayne Wike say that we can usually see providence much more clearly in the rear view mirror. There's a lot of truth to that! Sometimes it's so hard to see God's hand at work in the midst of our crises and suffering. But somehow, after we get to the other side of it, we can look back and see how God was working through it all to accomplish his purpose.

After all, what was true in Joseph's story is true in ours as well. *God works through all the circumstances of our lives to accomplish his providential purpose.* We may not be able to see it, but he's done it, is doing it, and will do it! The Apostle Paul bore witness to it over and over in his life and in his letters, and if we'll look through eyes of faith, we can see it in our own lives as well.

And nowhere is God's way of doing this more evident than in his Son Jesus Christ. As Peter preached Jesus to the Jews in Jerusalem in the early chapters of the book of Acts, he often pointed out how it was through their evil rejection and the crucifixion of Jesus and God's vindication of Jesus in his resurrection that God has brought us salvation.

Now we often don't understand God's ways. *But God does.* And we can trust him that even in our most difficult times and our worst setbacks as individual disciples and as a congregation he is working out his providential purpose.

The question is, *will we trust him?*

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition).