

Old Testament Survey - Part 10

by Dick Woodward

The story of Joseph illustrates God's sovereignty and providence in our lives, even in the midst of adversity, and shows how God can take things that are intended for evil and turn them around to get good out of them.

Duration: 27:12

Scripture: Romans 8:28

Topics: "Joseph's Faith", "God's Providence"

Description

This sermon delves into the character sketch of Joseph in the book of Genesis, highlighting his purity and exceptional faith amidst challenging circumstances. It emphasizes Joseph's understanding of God's providence and grace in his life, showcasing how God can turn evil intentions into good outcomes. The sermon also explores the historical perspective leading from Genesis to Exodus, focusing on the development of the special people of Israel and the deliverance from slavery as depicted in the allegory of Exodus.

Transcript

As we continue to survey the book of Genesis, and as we conclude our survey of the book of Genesis, we want to look at the third of the character sketches that are found in the second half of the book of Genesis. A great deal of space is given in the book of Genesis to these character sketches. We have quite a few chapters describing the character Abraham, which is telling us about faith.

Then we have quite a few chapters describing Jacob, which is describing to us, as we said, our personal identity crisis, or how we can know God's will for our life. And then there are 14 chapters, the last 14 chapters in the book of Genesis, which tell us the story of Joseph. Joseph is one of the purest characters in the scripture.

Most of these characters in the scripture have their plus and their minus, and sooner or later their humanity turns up, and we see their minus side as well as their plus side. Joseph seems to be an exception to this. Joseph and Daniel seem to be exceptions to this.

Joseph is one of the pure characters of scripture. The birth of Joseph seemed to be the catalyst that moved Jacob to have his showdown with his uncle Laban and decide to become his own man. It was when Jacob had Joseph born from Rachel.

This was the first child that was born from Rachel, the wife that he loved so very much, frankly, more than he loved Leah and the slave from whom he had some children. As soon as Rachel had this child, Joseph, it seems that Jacob is now concerned that he should be his own man, and so he goes to Uncle Laban and determines that he should have what's coming to him, and he makes his break with Uncle Laban, who had him under a sort of a tyranny. Because Joseph was the firstborn of Rachel, Jacob frankly showed partiality to Joseph.

Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob. This caused the brothers of Joseph to hate him, to contemplate his murder, and then finally, as an alternate plan, to sell him to some slave traders who were going down into Egypt. They sold him to be a slave to these people who were heading by caravan down into Egypt.

Through circumstances that were beyond his control, Joseph found himself in Egypt, first as a slave and then as a prisoner, but then through these extraordinary providential circumstances of God, Joseph found himself a Prime Minister of all of Egypt, second in power only to the Pharaoh himself. He lived a very extraordinary life in Egypt, and there was no doubt in Joseph's mind that it was God who strategically placed him in Egypt, because God knew with his foreknowledge and his providence that the famine was coming that would have wiped out this unique people that are being put together on the face of the earth, the chosen people through whom God is going to come into the world in the form of the Messiah and bring us salvation. For this reason, the book of Genesis, when it gets to the story of Joseph, is really telling us a story about the providence of God.

Fourteen chapters of scripture are given to tell us this extraordinary story about Joseph. Why does the Bible give us 14 chapters of scripture to tell us a man's story? Well, there has to be a message in the story of that man. The message in the story of Joseph's life seems to be summed up in one verse in the New Testament, Romans 8, verse 28, which says in the King James, And we know that all things work together for good to those that love God, to them who are the called according to his purposes.

This verse has been a consolation and a blessing to many of God's people over the centuries. The Living Bible paraphrase puts it this way, And we know that all that happens to us is working for our good, if we love God and are fitting into his plans. That's the story of Joseph, and I believe that's the message that comes to us through the story of Joseph.

Another important aspect of the message that we get through the story of Joseph is summed up in that one word, grace. We said the story of Jacob also illustrated to us this one word, grace. Grace means the favor and blessing of God that we do not deserve or attain or achieve.

It's just bestowed upon us, it's just given to us. Jacob illustrates this because Jacob finally decided, he finally learned, that he was blessed of God by the grace of God, and that was why he had the blessings that he had, spiritual and material. Jacob thought for a long time that he had the blessings, spiritual and material, that he had because of his cleverness and his cunning and his manipulating and his scheming.

I think one of the greatest illustrations of that is in the story of Jacob and his Uncle Laban. When Uncle Laban decided to pay Jacob wages in terms of how the flocks were breeding, Uncle Laban said to Jacob, they made this agreement that all of the lambs and all of the animals that bore spotted or speckled or striped livestock would be Jacob's, and all the others would be Uncle Laban's. Once they made that deal together, Jacob went to where the animals were breeding and he took these fences and he scraped off the bark and he made the fences speckled and striped and spotted, because he believed that that would cause these animals to breed spotted and striped and speckled.

He had never gone to our technical colleges, he never had a course in animal husbandry, and he probably really believed that that would cause that to happen. That's just so typical of Jacob. He believes that his scheming and conniving produces the blessings that he has.

But God finally gets through to him and shows him, Jacob, it's just because of my grace. Finally when Jacob has his showdown with his brother Esau, we see that he's learned this because he says, God has dealt graciously with me, that's why when I crossed this river I had nothing but a staff, and now the Lord has made me a troop. God has dealt graciously with me.

Grace means, in the case of Jacob, that God gave him all these blessings that he did not achieve or accomplish through his cunning and his scheming. Joseph illustrates the same truth, but another way. What Joseph is illustrating to us is this.

Joseph finds himself in very difficult circumstances. He's a slave, he's in a dungeon, he's going through very difficult problems and circumstances, and again, not because he deserved them, not because he earned them or merited them in some way, just so that God could be glorified. By the grace of God, God blessed Jacob, and by the grace of God, God called Joseph to live a very hard life.

But it was because God was strategically placing him in such a way and preparing him and training him through experiences in such a way that when he was called upon to be the Savior of this unique people, the one who would save them from starvation and extinction, he was prepared and he was in place to do it. It's very obvious at the end of the story of Joseph that that's the perspective Joseph has on all of his circumstances. Now as we consider the devotional application to this story of Joseph to our own lives, as we consider the relationship that Joseph had to his father and to his brothers, it's far from a model relationship.

We all know that we're not supposed to show partiality toward our children. So as Jacob makes Joseph the favorite son and shows all this partiality, he's clearly a delinquent father. This isn't fair to Joseph's brothers, and this isn't fair to Joseph, because of all the hatred that stirs up toward Joseph on the part of his brothers, and all the hardship and heartache that brings into his life.

I think the message by application to this part of the story of Joseph is simply this. None of us have had perfect parents. We come into this world with a set of parents.

We didn't choose them. We come into this world with parents and siblings, and we're tremendously influenced by these parents and siblings who shape our lives. Many of us have a lot of broken wings, or we have a lot of heartache or hardship in our life, because our parents or siblings were delinquent.

I believe the message in the story of Joseph is this. Even though these parents aren't perfect, perhaps they are delinquent out of ignorance or out of malice. In either case, so often you have to pray like Jesus did from the cross, Father, forgive them, they didn't know what they were doing.

But even if your parents have contributed to a lot of your broken wings, and your brothers and sisters have, I believe the message of Joseph is this. God is sovereign in the circumstances of your life, including the parents you have when you come into this world, and brothers and sisters. God can use the influence of these parents, even when the parents are delinquent, and he can use the influence of these brothers and sisters, even when they are delinquent, and especially your response to them to shape your life in such a way that one day, somewhere, you will fit into his plans somewhere in this world.

I believe God is sovereign in the dynamics of our lives. That's what the psychologists call those things, your own personal dynamics. He's sovereign in the circumstances of our lives, and especially if we will respond to these circumstances by his grace and with the help that he gives us.

He will use these circumstances to shape us up for the ministry he wants us to have some day. Have you ever come to a place, especially in your more mature years, where God opened the door of opportunity for you, and you went into that opportunity with this conviction? I believe God has been preparing me for this opportunity from the day I was born. I believe my whole life has been a preparation for this particular opportunity.

Many people experience this. I hear many people say this. I believe that's the message of the story of Joseph, that sometimes what we call adversity, circumstances beyond our control that are very, very difficult, problems, and we wonder, why me, why did I have these problems? I believe the Scripture is saying to us through Joseph, God is sovereign in those things, and when God gives you the grace to respond to these circumstances in the way that he would have you respond, you'll discover that these very circumstances and problems, these problem people that have been in your life from the time you've come into this world, are the dynamics that God is using to shape your life.

These are the tools that God is using to shape your life in such a way that you will one day be called according to his purposes and fulfill your destiny. When Joseph is reunited with his brothers, and I'm assuming you've read this story now because we've assigned that to you, when Joseph is reunited with his brothers, it's very obvious that he has this perspective on the whole episode. In Genesis 50, verses 19 and 20, the brothers are afraid of Joseph.

Once the father has died, they think that Joseph is going to take vengeance upon them. Joseph says this, "Don't be afraid of me. As far as I'm concerned, God turned into good what you meant for evil, for he brought me to this high position I have today, so that I could save the lives of many people." This is in the Living Bible prayer phrase of Genesis 50, verses 19 and 20.

You see the perspective of Joseph? "As far as I'm concerned, you meant it to me for evil, but God made it work for good." I love that truth. If you ask the question, and this is the kind of question a child likes to ask, what does God do all day? There are many answers to that question, if your child asks you. One of them is, he loves.

God just loves all day long. I think another answer to the question, what does God do all day, might be this. God takes things that are evil, even meant for evil, and he turns them around and he gets good out of them.

God just does that all day long. This is a great consolation, this truth, to many people. For instance, I spent a year visiting once a week in a home for unwed mothers, back before the abortion legislation, when a home for unwed mothers might have 45 girls resident at one time.

As we shared the scriptures with these girls, this was a verse that often meant a great deal to them. What began perhaps as an evil thing, or what the Bible would call a sinful thing, God could take that and make it work for good. As a pastor, I was able to place many of the babies that were born in that home for unwed mothers in the homes of loving Christian parents from whom God had withheld children.

I was fascinated as a social worker with the economy of this. There were many children in this world, I discovered, that had no parents, and there were many parents in this world who had no children. Very often there was no physical explanation, the doctors couldn't find any reason why those parents couldn't have children, and I discovered that very often those parents who were childless were extraordinary parents.

It seemed to me that the solution to that problem was very obvious. Get those children that have no parents and those parents that have no children together. We arranged many adoptions.

I was able to tell those girls about some of the adoptions that I had arranged as a social worker before I became a pastor. After telling them the story of the homes in which many of those babies were growing up and finding happy, fulfilled lives, I was able to say to them, it might have started out as an evil thing, but God made it work for good, because of all the fulfillment he brought into the lives of those parents who couldn't have children. They didn't intend this, these girls or the people involved, didn't intend this to be an evil thing.

It just was what the Bible would call a sinful thing, not according to God's will or God's plan. If God could take that which is intended as evil and make it work for good, he certainly can take our mistakes and our failures and get good out of them. Joseph puts it this way to his brothers in chapter 45 of Genesis, and notice how completely convinced Joseph is of the sovereignty of God in all of his circumstances.

In verse 5 of chapter 45 of Genesis, Joseph puts it this way, And now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here. For God sent me before you to preserve life. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

Now therefore it was not you who sent me here, but God. And he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and Lord of his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry, and go up to my father and say to him, Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me Lord of all Egypt.

Come down to me, do not delay, and you shall live in the land of Goshen. You shall live in the land of Egypt. You see, there is no mistake in Joseph's mind.

He understands completely that God was sovereign in all this, because he is saying to his brothers, It isn't that you sent me to Egypt. You thought you did, you even meant it as an evil thing, but it was not you who sent me to Egypt, it was God who sent me to Egypt. This means that the book of Genesis ends with the special people in the land of Egypt.

This leads us into the second book of the Bible, the book of Exodus. I would now like to begin to survey the book of Exodus, and what we have seen in the life and circumstances of Joseph gives us our historical perspective on the book of Exodus. In the book of Genesis, a very unique people is born and named and saved from extinction or starvation.

Remember we said in our introduction to the Bible that the Bible is all about these people. The first 11 chapters of the Bible tell us about the history of the universe and the earth and so many things, but by the time you get to the end of Genesis 11 and the beginning of Genesis 12, you hear about this unique man, Abraham, and it's well within the mark to say that the other 1,178 chapters of the Bible are all about Abraham and his progeny, especially that one descendant of his through whom all the nations of the earth were blessed. The Bible is all about Israel, that's what we're saying.

Why is Israel so important? Well, it's because when God decided that he was going to come into this world, he didn't come as a black man or a white man or a yellow man or a red man. Instead, God created a special people for the purpose of him coming into the world, and those special people are the Hebrew people. If anybody has the right to be proud of their heritage, it's the Jewish people, because God created the Jewish people just for this purpose.

I'm going to become a man, and I want to create a people who will provide me with the historical context through which I can become a man and come into the world. That makes the Hebrew people very special. So as we study the Bible, and especially as we survey the Old Testament, we want to consider the development of this very special people.

These people are born in the book of Genesis through Abraham. Abraham fathers them, Jacob gives them their name, Israel, and Joseph saves them. He's a picture of the Savior in the sense that he saves them from starvation and extinction.

That's the way the book of Genesis ends, with Joseph saying, Tell my father to come down here into Egypt, because you're going to live here in Goshen with me. At this point the nation is only just twelve families. Jacob has had twelve family members, and these twelve sons form the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The nation is just beginning to take shape, it's just twelve tribes when Genesis ends, and these twelve tribes are in Egypt. Between the book of Genesis and the book of Exodus, 400 years transpire. That's a lot of time.

The United States of America is only 200 years old. That means twice the amount of time that our nation has been in existence passed between the end of the book of Genesis and the beginning of the book of Exodus. When the book of Exodus begins, in Exodus 1, you read that these twelve tribes have become a multitude.

You hear the word multitude many times in Exodus 1. These people have multiplied so rapidly that they have become a threat to the Pharaoh, and the Pharaoh has decided to enslave them. So when the book of Exodus opens, 400 years after the book of Genesis closes, this nation, this people who are becoming a nation, are just a multitude of slaves, just a great mob of slaves. They're not a nation yet.

God wants them to be a unique nation, and in the book of Exodus they will become a nation. God will shape them up into a nation. There are several things he has to do before he can make them a nation, but those things will happen in the book of Exodus.

It's very important in the book of Exodus, as we come to it, to realize the importance of the history or the development of these special people. I'd like to give a very quick overview of the development of these special people as we have it described in the book of Exodus and in the book of Genesis. The beginning of this people and the source of this people is God.

This is one of the great messages of Old Testament Hebrew history. God is the source of this special people. God is creating this special people, bringing them into the world to fulfill his purposes, which will be many, but his primary purpose will be that through this unique people he will come into the world in the form of the Messiah.

These people have their ultimate source in God. They also come into the world through Adam. That's where Genesis begins in Genesis 1 through 3. We see that Adam is the source through which these people come.

Now we're still in the book of Genesis. This nation further develops through the patriarchs. You'll hear an expression again and again in the New Testament and in the Old Testament, I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, because that's the way the nation started.

God never wants them to forget that that's the way it started. The three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So as the nation continues to develop, we see it developing in the form of the patriarchs.

When the book of Genesis ends, you have twelve tribes, and that's about as far as the development goes in the book of Genesis. The three patriarchs have become twelve tribes, and the twelve tribes are in Egypt. That's where the book of Genesis ends.

When the book of Exodus opens, this group of people that have not yet become a nation have multiplied from twelve tribes to a multitude. You hear that word again and again, just a multitude, a multitude of people. But they're not a nation.

A nation is not a multitude of slaves. So they're not a nation yet, they're a multitude in Exodus 1. But in the book of Exodus, if God is going to develop them into a nation, one of the first things they need is a leader. The book of Exodus is going to tell us about one of the greatest leaders in all the history of God's people.

Moses is going to be commissioned and he's going to be called to become the great leader of these people. Now this mob, or this great multitude of slaves, will have a leader, as we see this man Moses commission in the book of Exodus, and at least that's a step in the right direction of becoming a unique nation. One of the big problems that Moses will have as he becomes the leader of this multitude of slaves is the fact that there is no law, there are no rules, there is no structure within which he can govern these people.

So three times he will go up on Mount Sinai and spend 40 days in prayer and fasting because he is saying to God, God, I've got to have some rules if I'm going to lead these people. Just imagine what it was like to lead these people, somewhere between 2 and 3 million people, and there are absolutely no rules, no laws. How would you like to lead between 2 and 3 million people, and you've got no laws by which to lead them or govern them? So this circle here around the multitude is representing the structure within which this great man Moses is able to lead the people.

That's what we see as we make the transition from the book of Genesis to the book of Exodus. The people, that's the first thing upon which we should focus as we come to the book of Exodus, because that's what the history part of the Old Testament wants to tell us. It wants to tell us about the development of this unique people for whom God is going to come into the world.

In the book of Exodus you also have a problem, and the book of Exodus in the very first chapters will focus upon that problem. The problem with which the book of Exodus deals is, these people are in the wrong place. These people are in Egypt, and these people are slaves.

God does not want people to be slaves, he does not want his people to be slaves, and so the big problem with which the book of Exodus will deal is, how can these people be delivered from their slavery? The word Exodus, which is the name of this book, means the way out, or just way out. It sounds like a very

contemporary word, way out. But it doesn't mean way out in the sense of far out, it just means the way out.

What is the way out of this awful problem of slavery? In this sense, the book of Exodus, in addition to being history, is allegory. Throughout the scripture you'll see the book of Exodus and the story of how this problem is solved applied to a problem that we have. In the New Testament, for instance, Jesus will preach for several chapters in the gospel of John.

When he gets to the gospel of John 8, it will say that when he spoke these words, many people believed in him. And Jesus turned to these people who had just expressed faith in him, and he said to them, And now, if you continue in my word, you will know the truth. You'll be my disciples indeed, my apprentices, and you'll come to know the truth.

And when you know the truth, the truth will set you free. They responded, some of them did, by saying, What do you mean free? We're not slaves. And Jesus said, Oh, yes you are.

Anybody who sins continuously is a slave. Anybody who continuously sins is not doing what he wants to do, he's doing what he has to do, and he's not free. But when I set you free, and now we know that he's saying that he's the truth they're going to come to know by relationship and not just some propositional theology, he says, When I set you free, you're going to be free indeed.

This emancipation that we can experience from the bondage and the slavery of sin is pictured allegorically in the book of Exodus. Literally in the book of Exodus you have the historical solution to the problem of God's people, the problem of slavery, and how God solves that problem. What was the way out of Egypt? What was the way out of that slavery? But the devotional application will be, What is the way out of your sin and mine? How can we be delivered from sin? In the book of Exodus you will find principles of deliverance, the principles of deliverance by which the people of God were delivered from Egypt.

Those same principles of deliverance, when we apply them to our life today, will show us how we can find deliverance from the bondage and tyranny of sin, how we can know the truth that can set us free.

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