

# God Meant It for Good

by John Piper

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*God's ways are not our ways, and he can prosper us in different ways, sometimes with great success and sometimes with great suffering.*

**Topics:** "Sovereign Providence", "Faithfulness Of God"

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## Description

John Piper preaches on the lives of Joseph and John the Baptist, drawing parallels between their miraculous births, missions as forerunners, righteousness, and unjust imprisonments. He highlights the ultimate dissimilarity in their endings - Joseph was released to rule Egypt while John was tragically beheaded. Piper emphasizes that God's faithfulness is evident in both men's lives, regardless of their different outcomes, teaching that God's plans are sovereign and purposeful, even in the midst of tragedy and suffering.

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## Transcript

The Lives of Joseph and John the Baptist

November 8, 1981

The Lives of Joseph and John the Baptist

Except for Saturdays our family sits down for breakfast at about 7:15 a.m. After our cereal and juice we open the Bible and I read the morning Scripture. Then we pray and the boys head off to school. We are reading through Genesis now and are in the middle of that great story of Joseph. As I was reading about Joseph's unjust imprisonment the other day I was struck all of a sudden with the similarity and contrast between Joseph and John the Baptist. The more I thought about it the more it gripped me. The main effect the comparison has had on me is comfort. It has been a lifting up of my spirit so much so that I felt I should interrupt our study of Luke to share the good news that came to me.

Here is what we will do. 1) I'll try to put the two stories before your mind by mentioning about ten similarities I've noticed between Joseph and John. 2) Then I will note the key dissimilarity that struck me in a new way. 3) Then we will draw out the lessons implied for us.

Both Joseph and John the Baptist were born when their fathers were very old. Luke 1:7 tells us: "Both (Zechariah and Elizabeth) were advanced in years." Genesis 37:3, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age." These were two very special children.

Not only because their fathers were old, but also because both their mothers were barren. Genesis 29:31 says, "When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren." And Luke 1:7 says that Zechariah and Elizabeth "had no children because Elizabeth was barren." These two children were deeply desired by their parents, and when godly people desire something deeply, they pray for it earnestly to the God for whom nothing is impossible. And so the third similarity between Joseph and John is that both were born in answer to prayer. Genesis 30:22 says, "Then God remembered Rachel and God hearkened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, 'God has taken away my reproach'; and she called his name Joseph" (which means "he adds") "saying, 'May the Lord add to me another son.'" And in Luke 1:13 the angel says to Zechariah, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John." When the angel reported to Mary that Elizabeth was pregnant, the explanation he gave was, "For with God nothing will be impossible" (Luke 1:37). So the births of Joseph and John are the fruit of God's omnipotence. They are proof that God can bless where it looks humanly impossible and that he does this in answer to prayer. In retrospect I think we can say that the miraculous births of Joseph and John are like banners over their lives saying: "Nothing is impossible for God; he will accomplish all his purpose" (Isaiah 46:10).

Before the true greatness of each of these men appeared God revealed what was in store. He predicted that each would be great. The angel said to Zechariah, John's father, "Many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great before the Lord" (Luke 1:14,15). It was a little different with Joseph. He was 17 years old and God sent him dreams. For example, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed: behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf" (Genesis 37:6,7). God revealed that Joseph was one day going to be exalted over his brothers and they would bow down to him.

I think God often revealed his purposes before accomplishing it because, when it finally did come to pass, it would be clear that God did it. But there seems to be another purpose for these dreams as well. They helped produce their fulfillment. They made Joseph's brothers so angry that they sold him to some Midianite traders on their way to Egypt. The irony here is terrific: by sending Joseph to Egypt to get rid of the vain dreamer, they set in motion the very events that fulfilled the dream. That's the way it is every time we try to resist the purposes of God. We always wind up fulfilling them--even when we do it like Judas.

So the 17-year-old Joseph is sent away to Egypt and his aged father is told that the boy was eaten by a wild animal. Jacob rips his garments and weeps for days and refuses to be comforted by his family. It's one of those scenes where you want to break into the story and say, "Jacob, trust God! It's not as bad as it seems! Believe God! No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. Jacob, it will turn out for your good! Hope in God!" But he can't hear you and it will be 20 years--20 long years--before Jacob sees the mercy of God in it all.

Another similarity between John and Joseph is that both are sent by God as forerunners or way-preparers. Of John, Jesus said, "This is the one of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee'" (Luke 7:27). He was to make ready for the Lord a people prepared (Luke 1:17). Joseph's trip to Egypt, even though forced upon him as a slave, was also a way-preparing mission. He says at the end to his brothers, "God sent me before you to preserve life ... God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors" (Genesis 45:5,7). At least this much is similar in the missions of Joseph to Egypt and John to Israel: the real significance of both was not in themselves but in what came after them. As a result of Joseph's mission to

Egypt God's people were delivered from famine. On the heels of John's mission, the Deliverer Himself came to save God's people.

Both Joseph and John gained the reputation of being trustworthy and righteous men. Mark 6:20 says, "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe." And Genesis 39:2 tells how the Lord was with Joseph; he was bought by Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, and proved himself so upright and reliable that Potiphar put him in charge of his whole house (Gen. 39:4). Part of this stand for righteousness was that both John and Joseph resisted sexual evil. They opposed adultery uncompromisingly. John cried out in public against the unlawful marriage of Herod to Herodias, his brother's wife. He resisted adultery in public and in principle. Joseph, on the other hand, was trapped by Potiphar's wife in an empty house and she tried to seduce him: "Lie with me!" (Genesis 39:7). But Joseph resisted her and fled. What John did publicly and in principle, Joseph did privately and in his own private behavior.

Then both cases they wound up in jail because the women they reprovved were enraged. Mark 6:17 says, "Herod sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because he had married her." Herodias could not endure the continuing prosperity of a righteous man who make her sins stand out in scarlet. Neither could Potiphar's wife: she cried out to the servants and fabricated a story which made Joseph the seducer and herself the victim. This made Potiphar angry and he threw Joseph into the Pharaoh's prison. So now both Joseph and John are in prison for the sake of righteousness, and there is one other similarity: both are about 30 years old. Genesis 41:46 says Joseph was 30 years old when he got out of prison (which was about two years after he went in according to Genesis 41:1). And we know John was six months older than Jesus and Luke 3:23 says "Jesus was about 30 when he began his ministry." Not long after that John was arrested. Keep that in mind: these were young men, five years younger than I am. I think this is why the similarity grabbed me at the breakfast table a few days ago. These men are like me!

That is about the end of the similarities between Joseph and John. Now comes one decisive dissimilarity. And it shocks us all the more because of the many similarities. Joseph was released to rule Egypt. John was beheaded. Genesis 39:21-23 describes how God worked for Joseph in prison:

The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love, and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prisons; and whatever was done there he was the doer of it; the keeper of the prison paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.

Indeed, he prospered him all the way to Pharaoh's right hand man because of the wisdom God gave him. It was an amazing turn of affairs.

The turn of affairs for John were also amazing. It was late one night, probably in Tiberias on the sea of Galilee where Herod ruled over that province. In John's dungeon cell he could barely hear the sound of flutes and lyres and tambourines and every now and then the raucous cheers of Herod's cronies as they watched Salome dance before them. Herod was probably drunk when she finished. He was so excited by the approval of his guests that he promised Salome whatever she wanted, up to half his kingdom. Her mother stands in the doorway with her eyes flashing and her wicked heart bursting with vicious delight. "What shall I ask for, mother?" "Ask for the head of John the Baptist!" Salome runs back in and with a bow

and a sinister grin says, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter" (Mark 6:25). Herod tries to conceal his shock. But the drunken guests look on with approval: this will be great sport. Yes, on with the party, Herod. So the king sends a soldier for John's head.

Now remember: John is 30 years old. He spent the early part of his life in the wilderness in devotion to the Lord and preparation for his mission; when he was about 29 he came like a whirlwind of righteousness through Israel and within a year or so he is in prison. Twenty-nine years of preparation; one year, just one year in the ministry!

The door of his cell opens. He looks up, "What is it?" "The king orders us to bring your head on a platter." "What! Why? What happened? What have I done?" "You didn't do anything. They liked the way Salome danced." They probably didn't give John time to state the problem, let alone find its solution. The righteous and holy of the great Messiah, after only one year of faithful service, beheaded on the whim of a king and a sexy kitten! Did he cry out in rage: "So much for serving the living God! He takes a man from his mother's arms, drives him to the wilderness and after a moment's service, flings him away on the trash heap of the world!" Or did he summon all his wavering faith, bow in submission and hand over his agony and his life to the one who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23)? We don't know.

But the more pressing question before us is this: was God only with Joseph and not with John? Did God show steadfast love to Joseph but abandon John? No, I don't think so. When John was in prison, Jesus paid him an amazing tribute: he said that John was a prophet and more than a prophet: "among those born of women none is greater than John" (Luke 7:26,28). When Jesus heard that John has been killed, Matthew says, "he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart" (14:13). But the main reason I think God was faithful to John even through that seemingly meaningless death is that Hebrews 11 teaches that men of faith sometimes have Joseph's experience and sometimes have John's experience. Notice Hebrews 11:34: by faith men and women have "escaped the edge of the sword." That is, God has prospered them like Joseph and caused their enemies' hearts to be turned. But Hebrews 11:37 says that other men and women with just as much faith "were killed with the sword." That is, God chose not to intervene, but instead to take them out of the world. It is precisely the fact that Joseph and John are both righteous men of faith that their different destinies are so helpful to us.

Now here are the lessons I draw from these two lives in comparison and contrast. First, do not assume you will have a long life. Both John and Jesus died in their early thirties, and none of us is as obedient as they. Joseph lived to be 110 (Genesis 50:22). Second, God is the ultimate giver and taker of life (as Job said, Job 1:21) and he gives it as long as our mission yet remains and he takes it when our mission is done. John's mission as the forerunner was done. "He must increase, I must decrease" was a more swift and decisive turn than John expected. God will keep us alive precisely as long as it is good for us and the church. When our mission is done, he will take us.

Third, those who love God and are called according to his purpose should never believe that a wrenching and painful turn of affairs is a sign that God is against you. On the contrary, it is God's left hand at work for you. There are three things that make this hard to believe but which these stories enable us to overcome. First, it is hard to believe God is for us in our tragedies if they last for 20 years. Who could have ever convinced Jacob that the loss of Joseph was for his good and the good of the world? It was 20 years before God showed him that this was so. Second, it is hard to believe God is for us in our tragedies if several of them come in a row. Just when we are getting over a previous one, another strikes. But look at Joseph. At first the apple of his father's eye, but then sold as a 17 year-old into slavery far from home.

Then he prospers in Potiphar's house, but just when things look bright he is cheated and thrown into jail. How easy it would have been for Joseph to throw in the towel and quit trusting God. But how foolish that would have been since in every setback God was moving him toward the greatest position on Egypt. In every setback God is moving you to glory. Third, it is hard to believe God is working for our good when our setback does not give us life, but, as with John the Baptist, leads us into death. But I believe with all my heart that Genesis 50:20 is just as true for John the Baptist and Herod as it was for Joseph and his brothers: "As for you, you meant it for evil against me; but God meant it for good." Herodias meant it for evil; but God meant it for good. There is no greater comfort than to know that no matter how absurd and irrational circumstances may seem, God is in control and means it for good. Let's always trust in him.

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