

Joseph – A Story of God’s Sovereign Goodness

Genesis 37:1-11

This morning we embark on a new sermon series that I’m becoming more and more excited about the further I get into it. About 3 years ago I did a series on Abraham where we looked at his life and applied what we learned to our own lives. I wanted to do that same kind of series again using other key Bible characters and felt like this would be a good time for the next one. So as we start this new year I’m starting a new series on the life of a man named Joseph.

Joseph isn’t just a character in a Bible story; he was a real man who lived on this earth and had a personal relationship with God. He grew up on a farm, had family problems, at least four different jobs, and major ups and downs in life. So he’s someone like us in a lot of ways – someone who’s story we can learn from. There are several themes and aspects of his story that are very relevant to our lives today and I believe will help and encourage us as we move forward into this new year. Today I want to introduce his story and the theme of the series.

To help us connect with where this story takes place in history, I think it’s helpful to remember that most of what is contained in the Old Testament takes place during a period of about 2,000 years before Jesus was born. Genesis 1-11 talks about what happened before that, but Genesis 12 and what follows takes place right around 2,000 B.C. and moves forward from there. The other thing to remember is that most of the Old Testament is the story of just one man and his family – Abraham and the Israelites. There was a whole bunch of stuff happening in the world, but the Bible focuses in on Abraham’s family and what took place over the course of about 2,000 years.

In about 2,000 B.C. Abraham came into the picture. He lived in Ur, which we know today as southern Iraq – just off the northwest coast of the Persian Gulf. While living there he was called by God in some kind of dream or vision to leave that area and travel west hundreds of miles to a new area called Canaan, which was off the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. When he came to Canaan, God promised Abraham that he would give that land to him and his descendants forever, so Abraham settled there and lived out his years. When he and his wife were old, they miraculously had a son named Isaac who grew up and got married and when he and his wife were old, they too miraculously had twin sons named Jacob and Esau. Jacob ended up having four wives through whom he had 12 sons

and one of those sons was a boy named Joseph. Joseph was the 11th born son – the first son of Jacob’s beloved wife Rachel. So Joseph was Abraham’s great, great grandson.

The story of Joseph begins when he was 17 years old. His mom had died while giving birth to his younger brother Benjamin, and Joseph became Jacob’s favorite son. Parents aren’t supposed to have favorites, but Jacob did and he wasn’t afraid to show it. Jacob was a farmer and herder and his sons took care of the family farm and livestock. So that gives us the setting, and now I want us to read the first part of his story, which will introduce the theme of this sermon series.

Read Genesis 37:1-4.

Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.

² These are the generations of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. ⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

One of the key factors in the beginning of Joseph’s story was his older brothers’ hatred of him. They hated him because he told their dad what they were doing and that got them in trouble. They hated him because their dad loved him more than any of them. And they hated him because their dad showed him favoritism by giving him special gifts and privileges. They hated him so much that verse 4 says they “could not speak peacefully to him.” According to my Study Bible, that meant that they refused to extend the customary peaceful greeting to him, which was a crucial element of ancient etiquette. They intentionally snubbed him as a demonstration of their hatred.

The story gives no indication of Joseph doing anything wrong to deserve this hatred. In fact, the fault seems to rest on their father’s head. Any father who shows that kind of favoritism is asking for bitter jealousy among his children. So the father was stirring up sinful thoughts and behaviors in the older brothers, and their hatred was stirred up even more by what happened next.

Read Genesis 37:5-8.

⁵ Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. ⁶ He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: ⁷ Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." ⁸ His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

At that point in the story they would have probably assumed that Joseph's dream was suggesting that because he was their father's favorite, he would be given control of the estate and come to rule over them – the right and inheritance that was supposed to go to the eldest son, not one of the youngest! So they hated him even more for his dream. And then he had another...

Read Genesis 37:9-11.

⁹ Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰ But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" ¹¹ And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

So these dreams were confusing to their father and filled his brothers with hatred and bitter jealousy. And that sets things up for what would happen next, which we will dig into next week. I want us to think about these dreams for a moment. These dreams play a part in building up the plot of the story – they certainly inflamed the brothers' jealous hatred – but I want us to see another, much more significant purpose than that.

These dreams are a critical part of this story to demonstrate that this is not just the story of things that randomly happened to a young man and his wicked brothers – it's the story of a great and sovereign God who has plans and purposes that he carries out in our lives in every situation we find ourselves in.

When a person comes to Christ in faith, they begin a relationship with God that they've never had before. Through Jesus' blood and his death on the cross, they've been reconciled to God and for the first time begin to have fellowship with him. It's no longer just about us and the decisions we make and the

circumstances we end up in. Now it's about us and a God who is with us every step of the way. What is God like? What does he want us to do? How much influence does he have in our lives? How involved does he want to get? Does he have anything to do with the good things that happen? Does he have anything to do with the bad things? How about the menial and mundane? We've been united with God in a personal relationship with him, but how far does that go, and what does that really mean?

Trying to understand that can be difficult and troubling at times. It's not so bad when things are going well, or even if things are going bad because of something we've done. But when things go south and there's no apparent reason, it gets to be pretty confusing. "If God is with me and I'm forgiven and God can do anything he wants, then why are bad things happening in my life? Does this mean that God doesn't care or is uninvolved? Does it mean that he can't do anything about it or isn't in control? Does it mean that he doesn't love me?"

The story of Joseph's life has been recorded in such a way that brings answers to these questions, and it begins with these two little dreams.

Where do you think those dreams came from? It doesn't say, but if we look at the book of Genesis as a whole, you will see that dreams and visions and revelations like these were not uncommon among God's people. Dreams were one of the ways God spoke during those times, and even now. So the assumption in this passage is that the reader will understand that these dreams came from God.

What's the interpretation of these dreams? This is something we don't need to wonder about because the fulfillment of them is written about later on in the story. World-changing events were about to unfold and Joseph would be right in the middle of them. He would eventually become the second most powerful person in that whole region of the world and everyone would bow down to him, including his very own brothers.

So these dreams were a revelation of events that would come to take place – events that God had planned long before and would bring about by his sovereign power. God revealed the end of the story right at the very beginning through these dreams and one of the reasons he does so is to show us that all the details of Joseph's story are not happenstance, they are part of God's sovereign plan.

God was working all things out to accomplish his good purposes – the good, bad, and mundane.

I want to point out a few details from Joseph's story to show us how God was carrying out his plan. The first is the timing of Joseph's birth. His mother Rachel was deeply troubled because she couldn't get pregnant. Jacob's other three wives were having babies, but she wasn't. It wasn't until all the other sons were born that God opened her womb and she had Joseph. But because of that, Gen. 37:3 says that Joseph became his father's favorite. That's a key detail that led to the fulfillment of God's purposes.

Another detail is that Jacob's favoritism led to his brother's jealous hatred of Joseph. Their hatred, as bad as it was, was necessary for God's plan to unfold. It was what led Joseph's brothers to capture him and sell him as a slave in Egypt. That terrible thing had to happen for God's good purposes to come to pass.

On the day that Joseph was captured he was wandering around in the wilderness looking for his brothers because they had moved to a different location. That wandering delayed him from finding them earlier and because of that the slave traders were passing by at just the right time and Joseph was sold as a slave rather than being killed or sent back to his father. So even Joseph getting lost was part of God's plan and how he would carry out his good purposes.

These are just a few of the things that happened and they weren't coincidence – they were part of a plan that God was carrying out to accomplish his good purposes. And notice, a lot of these details were bad things – infertility, parental favoritism, jealousy, hatred, getting lost, slavery... From our perspective, these things would look pretty terrible. They might make us feel like God doesn't care or is uninvolved. They might make us think that he's incapable of bringing about good things in our lives, or that he doesn't really love us. They would be very confusing. But Joseph's story shows us that that none of those things are true. It shows us that the promise given in Romans 8:28 is true, that "all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

This is the main theme of Joseph's story, and at the end of his life, he could see it. When he spoke to his brothers after all the evil things they did to him, he told them this in Genesis 50:20 *"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant*

it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

Now I want to ask you, if God had purpose in all the things that happened in Joseph’s life – the good, the mundane, and even the bad – do you think he has purpose in the things that are happening in your life? I think he does. And I think that’s what the story of Joseph is all about. It reveals to us a God who’s in control, a God who is able, a God who is wise and good, and a God who can be trusted in the good times and bad times and everything in between.

2020 was a difficult year for me. Difficult things were happening that I had no ability to control and I didn’t like it. There were many times where I was faced with doubt and uncertainty and I felt despair. But through it all I can now see that God was faithful. He was in control. He was working things out for good that I could have never seen coming and I know I can trust him for the future. I know that the way will not always be easy. There will be suffering and pain. But God will always be faithful. He is carrying things out to accomplish his good purposes and I can trust him.

That’s where I want to start this new year as a church family – looking to God and trusting in him. He’s proven himself over and over and will continue to do so in all that life brings. Let’s not embark on this new year having hope in just the flip of a calendar year – in this world nothing has changed – things will get better at times, but then they’ll get worse and there’s no assurance that 2021 will be better than 2020. But there is hope if we look to our God and fully entrust ourselves to him.

I encourage you take time every day to come before the Lord in prayer, to cast all your cares upon him, to look to him for peace and contentment in good times and bad. And to watch as he strengthens your faith and dependence on him.