

**Is God really in Control of my Life?**  
**Genesis 50:15 – 26**  
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church  
September 25, 2016

**Spiritual Lessons from the Life of Joseph**

A customer asked a shopkeeper, "What makes this set of china so much more expensive than that set over there? To me, they look almost the same." The shopkeeper replied, "Oh, the answer is simple. The costlier china has had more done to it. It was put through the kiln several times. On the fine china the flowers are yellow. On the less expensive china they are white. The more that is done to bring perfection, the costlier the end product."

I wonder if the shopkeeper's observation regarding fine china is true spiritually? Is it possible that the more that is done to you, the greater the detail, the more work, leads therefore to greater value? Why do some people seem to suffer more than others? They face repeated setbacks, suffering, trials and difficulty. Why does the master of the universe repeatedly send them back into the fire? Is it possible that it is to bring perfection?

We have looked at Joseph's story over the last weeks. He is sold into slavery at about age seventeen. For the next thirteen years he is repeatedly thrust back into the refiner's fire: he is betrayed by his brothers; he is carried to Egypt as a slave; falsely accused of attempted rape; thrown into an Egyptian prison where his kindness towards others inmates is forgotten: this is Joseph's life story as a young man. Then, by remarkable providence, Joseph provides an important service to the Egyptian Pharaoh. As a consequence, he is promoted to the position of being second in command of Egypt. More years go by. As a result of a famine, Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt in search of food. Joseph recognizes his brothers. But Joseph has become an Egyptian. His brothers do not recognize Joseph. Now it is the brother's turn to be tested in the refiner's fire.

As an aside, let me encourage you, should you have opportunity, to see Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat" to do so. It is a pleasant modern retelling of Joseph's story. It is fun. For example, when Pharaoh tells Joseph his dream he does so as an Elvis-interpreter.

God is at work in the life of Joseph. Now, after the death of Jacob, and again at the end of Joseph's life, we hear a reaffirmation that what has unfolded has done so under the providential purposes of God almighty. Let us see what we can learn from Joseph's story. First, give less weight to the circumstances you encounter in life.

**Give less weight to circumstances you encounter – Genesis 39:21**

<sup>21</sup> But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.

It was one of the saddest encounters I have had as a pastor. I accompanied another pastor on a late night hospital call, visiting the bed of a young man who had just been paralyzed from the neck down from a diving accident. He and some friends had acquired some beer – they were underage – and had been drinking it. The young man felt an urgency to confess. Did the diving accident mean that God was punishing him?

We believe that life must have some meaning and purpose behind it. It is natural, and very common, to think that 1) if bad things happen to us, it is because of the bad things we have done; or 2) if we are blessed and good things happen to us it is because we are somehow deserving and superior. This is a very common human belief. But is it a true and correct belief?

One message of the story of Joseph is that we must resist the temptation to judge the spiritual state of our lives by the outward realities of our circumstances. Spiritual reality and material circumstance are two very different things. Joseph had a spiritual problem as a young man: as his father's favorite he was spoiled, believing in his own superiority. In a word, he was a jerk. However, being a jerk did not mean that he *deserved* to be betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery.

Meeting with the young paralyzed man in the hospital, the pastor and I sought to assure him that his accident did not indicate that God had judged him or abandoned him. It was terrible, to be sure. But, we told him, God would be at work in his life, even in the challenging and terrible days that lay ahead.

Joseph's story teaches us that in seeking to understand our lives, to place less weight on life circumstances. And, conversely, to give more weight to the right choices we make.

### **Give more weight to right choices you make – Genesis 50:15**

<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him."

The modern world is absolutely upside down in its celebration of human "choice" as an absolute value while, for the most part, refusing to declare that some choices are better than others. Early in the story, Joseph's brother's made their choice to lay hands on their brother and to sell him into slavery. They made their choice. Some even celebrated it. But as time goes by, doubts arise. Surprisingly, while it was Joseph's older brother Judah who proposed the idea of selling Joseph into slavery, it was also brother Judah who was first afflicted with a sense of guilt over the act. Shortly after the betrayal of Joseph, Judah pulls back from the family, separating himself. He leaves the community of his family, the covenant community, in order to live instead among the Canaanites, the unbelievers.

We never make choices in isolation. We never make a choice that affects ourselves alone. Every choice we make has impact upon those around us, especially upon those who are related to us by blood or marriage – our families. Judah proposes to the brothers to sell Joseph into slavery; and the sense of guilt from that choice leads Judah away from those who know and love him the most – his family. Conversely, another key choice is told in the story of Joseph: Joseph’s refusal to be seduced by Potiphar’s wife. In his refusal, Joseph acts rightly. Yet the consequence of acting rightly is that he is thrown into Pharaoh’s prison. His good deed is punished. Yet it is that good deed, and its punishment, that sets the stage for Joseph to later meet the Pharaoh’s cup bearer.

The modern world wants to celebrate choice: but does not ask, “What are, or might be, the consequences of the choice I make?” Judah is the first of the brothers to bear the weight of the choice to betray Joseph, but eventually all the rest will face the same weight of that choice. The brothers and their families settle in Egypt. Time goes by. The Patriarch Jacob dies. Then we read (Genesis 50:15), “When Joseph's brothers saw that Jacob [their father] was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph holds a grudge against us....'” It is a valid question. The consequence of their choice of an evil act – the betrayal of their brother so many years earlier – comes back to them again. What if...? The modern world celebrates choice: but rarely asks, “What are the consequences of this choice?” You may have read the news this past week that the nation of Belgium, euthanized, a fancy word for *killed*, a seventeen-year-old young person. The world celebrates choice, while the culture of death continues to spread.

That said, there is a tremendous irony in the attitude of the modern world. On the one hand, it genuflects repeatedly before the god of “Choice;” while on the other hand, it believes and teaches that the things that are *done to us* are more important and long lasting than the things we *choose to do*. The modern popular culture world is positively schizophrenic. Ask the modern world: “What is wrong with the world?” It will answer: sexism, racism, poverty, Euro-centralism, classism, the glass ceiling, marriage “equality,” heterosexism, ableism, speciesism, -- sadly, I could go on. Note the use of the passive voice in the things I have just listed. The emphasis is upon not what I choose; but upon what I have received, inherited. The common element in each is the belief that my problems are not my own. And, accompanying it, the belief that the solution to my problems lies outside of myself.

I believe that the biblical teaching, illustrated nicely in the story of Joseph, is precisely the reverse of the popular culture of the modern world. On one hand, we must give less weight to the circumstances of our lives; and on the other, we must place greater emphasis upon moral choices that we make.

There is value in choosing rightly and acting rightly. I read once the story of two Buddhist monks who, in the discipline of their faith, had taken a severe vow of celibacy. Their order would not even touch a woman. Journeying together from one temple to another, they came upon a bridge that had been washed out. And, on their same side of the stream, was a lovely woman, unable to cross due to the flowing

water. One monk offered to lift her into his arms and carry her safely and dryly across the stream bed. He did so. The second monk, surprised, looked on. They journeyed on. As they finally approached their destination, the temple, the one monk reproached the first. "How could you violate your vows and have contact with that woman?" The first monk looked at his companion and asked, "I left that woman back at the river's edge miles ago. Are you still carrying her?" What matters is to make the right choice, whatever the circumstances. In doing so, there is great freedom. For Joseph's brothers, it has been decades since their choice, their sin. And, because it was sin, they still carried the burden of it. Guilt casts a long shadow. Wrong choices can have a long life span. Wrong choices that produce guilt act like handles on our back. Guilt permits others to turn and guide us in order to cover our guilt.

Joseph's story teaches us to give less weight to the circumstances of our lives and to be diligent in seeking to make right and wise choices. His story also teaches us to keep a weather eye for God's providence.

### **Keep a weather eye for God's providence – Genesis 40:4, 23, 41:23**

<sup>4</sup>The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them,

<sup>23</sup>Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

<sup>14</sup>Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh.

Joseph's story teaches that even bad and evil circumstances can reflect God's providence in our lives. If Joseph had not been in prison, he would not have met the Pharaoh's baker and the cup-bearer. The circumstance of prison, far from being a negative judgement upon Joseph's life, was instead a severe step in the providence of God.

It is remarkable to consider and ask the question: "How many great men have been changed by their experience of prison?" If Chuck Colson had not been in prison, he would not have met the inmate from West Virginia that led to his decision to found Prison Ministry. If Alexander Solzhenitsyn had not been in the Gulag's hospital ward suffering from stomach cancer, he would never have heard the witness of the Jewish doctor who had recently converted to Christianity. I can go on with examples. Lois Ann and I know a man named Behnan who spent time in a Turkish prison for publishing Bibles. In addition to these others we might name would be: Armando Valladares; Lien Chen, Robert the Bruce, Paul the Apostle, John Bunyan, Ignatius Loyola, Hugh Lattimore, Thomas Cranmer, and so on. From these we learn that difficulties can be the fire that burns our dross to reveal the gold within us. Evil circumstances may be reflective of the hand of God in our life. Some flowers, such as the rose, must be crushed to release their full fragrance. Some fruits, such as the sycamore, must be bruised to attain ripeness and sweetness. Some metals, such as gold, must be heated in the furnace to become pure. There is no question that the attainment of godliness, requires special handling, suffering, trouble, adversity, trial and sometimes even temptation. As you face the realities of adversity, ask yourself, "Where is God in the midst of this? How is God at work? What is God saying to me?"

The witness of Joseph teaches us to de-emphasize the circumstances of our lives. His story teaches us to place proper importance upon the choices we take. Joseph teaches us to look for God's providence, even in adversity. And, relatedly, to search for and trust in God's purposes in our lives.

**Search for, and trust, God's purposes in your life – Genesis 50:20 – 21**

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Here is one of the most powerful poems of the Belle of Amherst, Emily Dickenson.

Those -- dying then,  
Knew where they went --  
They went to God's Right Hand --  
That Hand is amputated now  
And God cannot be found --

The abdication of Belief  
Makes the Behavior small --  
Better an ignis fatuus  
Than no illume at all --

*The abdication of belief, makes the behavior small.* Jacob has died. Joseph's brother's live in fear that he will now take his revenge upon them. But he does not. Revenge is the natural way of the world: an eye for an eye. Revenge is the small path. But it is not the path Joseph takes. *The abdication of belief, makes the behavior small.* Joseph finds the spiritual strength not to act in a small revengeful way because of his faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.

This is another arena where Joseph's example profoundly teaches those who will learn from him. Joseph understood the importance of living life before God's face, under the canopy of God's grace, within the reality of his purposes. In the modern world, the sense of meaning and purpose to life is shrinking and becoming harder to identify and determine. Francis Schaeffer wrote of the "closing of the universe." He meant that the modern world sees only the material world. The unseen, spiritual world, the world where meaning and purpose is to be found, is no longer available to many. Many modern men and women man seek to live life without God. People whom I know, people whom I love, I would describe spiritually as a *decent godless people*. The sociologist Peter Berger has written about the shrinking sacred canopy. The institutions of life that give meaning and purpose to us – the church – is losing ground, losing impact. There once was a time when the church was the largest, most

significant building in a community. The church building was at the center of town, sharing it with city hall, business and the bank.

Mankind was created for God. Our hearts are restless till we rest in God. We possess eternity in our hearts. For our lives to have significance and meaning, we must be tied to that which is greater than ourselves: committed to the Lord; and committed to meaningful great ideals. However, as Emily Dickenson's poem tells us, the ties of belief have been cut. The transcendent connection to God is severed.

The promise of the modern world was this: that the result of finally breaking free from religion and superstition would be freedom, liberation and the dawning of a new day. When I was a young man many of my friends seriously hoped and believed that we were seeing the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Emily Dickenson knew better. The abdication of Belief Makes the Behavior small.

What is needed? We need a restoration of a sense of purpose to life, a renewal of belief in the transcendent. In Chaim Potok's novel, *The Gift of Asher Lev*, there is a sort of refrain asked again and again, "Is there a purpose?" Does God have a plan?

We answer saying, God does have a plan. He has a plan for you, a purpose and place for you – just as he had a plan and purpose for Joseph. God will use your gifts, the gifts he has given and entrusted to you and you will take your place of cooperation with God in the unfolding purposes for our world. We believe the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Joseph reminds us not to give too much weight to the circumstances of our lives. That we should at the same time be very careful and wise in the choices we make. He teaches us to look for God's providence in the circumstances of life. And, relatedly, to trust that God's purposes are unfolding in our lives. Lastly, Joseph teaches us to trust God for our future, after death.

### **Trust God for your future, after death – Genesis 50:24 – 25**

<sup>24</sup> And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." <sup>25</sup> Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here."

In previous sermons I have made the case Judah is the most important of the twelve sons of Jacob. It is by Judah's line that the kings of Israel will be determined. More importantly, it is through Judah's lineage that the Messiah will be born. Judah's is the preeminent role.

What of Joseph? Will Joseph continue as a member of the covenant community following the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It would be understandable if he did not. Joseph had been sold into slavery into Egypt. In Egypt he thrived, obtaining wealth, power and influence. He assimilated into Egyptian culture. When his brothers first met him again in Egypt, Joseph was so thoroughly Egyptian, none of his brothers

had a clue as to his real identity. Before them stood a Prince of Egypt. As the story unfolds, it is a question: "Is Joseph a man of the covenant? Or a man of Egypt?"

We like books, stories, movies, or thrillers, that have a surprise ending. We follow the story and, at the end, we realize that something else has been unfolding all along. We are watching one movie. Then we realize we have seen something else altogether. We like surprise endings, to realize that things may not always be as they seem; that life can deliver more than we expect. Thrillers satisfy our sense, our hope, that the story of our lives, the significance of our living, may have some meaning to be revealed in the final act. Certainly Joseph's brothers saw this. They had lived through a thriller. It began with an early act of treachery. Years later the significance of that act came back to haunt them. They are surprised to learn that the Egyptian leader is their long-ago-betrayed brother. This plot reversal helps assure them, and us, that God is in fact in control. But then comes one more surprise: Joseph's request to be buried, not in Egypt, but in the Promised Land. Joseph is a man who has everything according to material standards: family, success, wealth and power. On a human level, he has it all. But on a spiritual level, Joseph knows that more is needed. His loyalty is with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The request to be buried in Canaan is a reflection of that his heart is still loyal to the God of his fathers.

Once, while living in Turkey, I met a banker who was very anxious for me to sit down and drink coffee with him in his private office. During the interview, he affirmed to me his secret faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Outwardly, everyone at the bank believed he was a Muslim, as they were. Outwardly, he was Joseph, the Egyptian prince. But inwardly, my banker friend was a believer. His heart was with Christ. I realized that it was important for the banker to tell me his faith, to confess his belief. Joseph, outwardly the Egyptian, comes near the end of his life, and he insists his family promise that they will one day carry his bones back to Canaan. In contrast to the outward success of Egypt, Joseph is a man of the covenant. He follows the God of Abraham, Isaac, and his father Jacob.

## **Close**

An important message of the story of Joseph is to give encouragement as we face difficulty in life. How Does God Guide us through difficult times? We learn from Joseph to give less weight to our outward circumstances and to give more weight to our right and wise choices in life. We must make room for God's providence, even surprising providence as our lives unfold. We should search for God's purpose in our life. And we must trust God for our future.

A few moments ago I was speaking about the surprising twists and turns at the close of the story of Joseph. But Joseph's is not the most surprising story in the Bible. The prize for the surprise ending in the biblical story is that of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus, the only man who ever lived who was not guilty of sinful disobedience of God's law, is unjustly put to death by a corrupt government, false witnesses and weak followers. It is a story that should not have happened if there was justice in the world. But it was a

story that did happen. Jesus was whipped, beaten, crucified, died and buried: end of story, fade to black.

But of course, that is not what happened. On the third day Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus' resurrection is the most important event in human history. It is the biggest surprise ending. It tells us that something unique happened in Jesus' death. His death was unlike any other. His death was substitutionary. Jesus did not die for himself. He died for others. He died for you. He died as your substitute.

I invite you to turn to Jesus today in believing faith. Turn, believe, and be saved!

Say "Amen" Somebody.



This is no time for fear  
This is the time for faith and determination  
Don't lose the vision here carried away by the motion  
Hold on to all that you hide in your heart  
There is one thing that has always been true  
It holds the world together

God is in control  
We believe that His children will not be forsaken  
God is in control  
We will choose to remember and never be shaken  
There is no power above or beside Him, we know  
Oh, God is in control, oh God is in control

History marches on  
There is a bottom line drawn across the ages  
Culture can make its plan oh, but the line never changes  
No matter how the deception may fly  
There is one thing that has always been true  
It will be true forever

God is in control  
We believe that His children will not be forsaken  
God is in control  
We will choose to remember and never be shaken  
There is no power above or beside Him, we know  
Oh, God is in control, oh God is in control

He has never let you down  
Why start to worry now?  
Why start to worry now?  
He is still the Lord of all we see  
And He is still the loving Father  
Watching over you and me

Watching over you, watching over me  
Watching over every thing  
Watching over you, watching over me  
Every little sparrow, every little thing  
Oh, every little thing, oh

God is in control  
We believe that His children will not be forsaken  
God is in control  
We will choose to remember and never be shaken

Read more: [Twila Paris - God Is In Control Lyrics | MetroLyrics](#)

## Genesis 50:15 – 26

<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." <sup>16</sup> So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: <sup>17</sup> 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you." ' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup> His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

### **The Death of Joseph**

<sup>22</sup> So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house. Joseph lived 110 years. <sup>23</sup> And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph's own. <sup>24</sup> And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." <sup>25</sup> Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." <sup>26</sup> So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.