

The Hidden Work of Providence
Genesis 45: 1-9
January 27, 2019

I couldn't leave Genesis without bringing the Joseph story into our conversation. The authors of this foundational book in our bibles have carefully crafted the stories of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob take up twenty-four chapters. The Joseph story occupies thirteen chapters, the longest devoted to any of these foundational figures. (slide1)

He is the favourite of Jacob, his youngest. We probably know him best by a number of key moments in his life. His brothers hate him, probably first, because he is shown favouritism by Jacob, but also because his dreams seem to imply that the brothers will bow down to him in life. When just a teenager Joseph told his brother of his dream. In it the sheaves in the field all bowed down to the one standing up. They asked: *are we indeed going to bow down to you?* So they hated him even more! Then he told them of another dream in which the sun, moon and eleven stars were bowing down to Joseph. But at this even his father is aghast and rebukes Joseph. But his brothers are jealous of him. (Slide 2 & 3)

At the first opportunity they plot to get rid of him. But Reuben stops them from murder and agrees to sell him to a caravan of traders who are on their way south. So Joseph ends up in Egypt.

From a pit in the field to a dark prison in Egypt Joseph's life looks like it is not going as he had dreamed. He ends up in prison through Potiphar's wife's treachery. But as you probably know through his gift of dream interpretation Joseph finds himself at Pharaoh's side as Prime minister of Egypt. He moves from the dungeon to the power behind the throne of Egypt.

What we notice in this story, unlike any of the other Patriarchal stories, is that there is no overt presence or voice of God. Joseph is never asked to have radical trust in his God. Indeed, in this Joseph story the narrator has a different voice. God steps much more into the background music of the piece. The story of Joseph tells us that God is working in the background to bring about God's purposes on earth,

even within the greatest empires. The story captures the mysterious ways of God's providence. God is at work behind the scene. We are told that the Lord is with Joseph. Not much more than this. This is enough to tell us that God is working on behalf of Joseph in this story.

Have you ever thought about God's providence in your life? What do we mean by this biblical term? Scripture speaks of it as God's Intervention in the universe. In Reformed thinking it speaks of God's will being done in the earth, whether quietly behind the scenes or overtly in dramatic action. Remember that we pray each week: "your will be done on earth as in heaven". Paul uses this language in Romans that we read today: *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28) (Slide 4)* Does this mean all of my life?

Does God really move in our lives in a mysterious way, often silently, moving us forward, back, sideways and yet ever on? Does his providence cover all my waywardness, my wrong choices, my accidents, and my sins? Are you telling me that God is involved in our lives, even when I have no sense of this presence? In Joseph's case it is the playing out of a dream that lands him in Egypt. It is the Spirit's insight that enables Joseph to rise from prison to a powerful position in Egypt's state. Through dreams God silently moves Joseph's life forward, unknown to Joseph. Yes, Joseph is able to know more than the power of empire because God enables him to interpret dreams. Pharaoh knows how to build, kill, order and rule. But he doesn't know everything. He can't discern his dream.

I wonder if we could stop for a moment and reflect on our lives. Think about the rhythm of your life, its twists and turns, its successes and disappointments, its highs and lows. Do you have any sense that silently, hidden, and mysteriously, God has been involved in your life all along? Think about this for a moment!

I wonder sometimes about how life would be different for me had certain things not happened the way they did. My father died a young man (55) and that tragic event opened a different door for me. My mother encouraged emigration to Canada. So off I went to join my brother in Canada. That journey brought me to a place in my life

where the Gospel of Jesus was opened for me in ways that probably wouldn't have happened had a remained in Scotland.

This unexpected shift of the plates of my life reminds me of the movie **Amadeus**. Salieri, a contemporary of Mozart , wants to be a musician. But his father is scornful of that choice. Salieri promises God that he will remain faithful if the door will be opened for him to a music career. At the dinner table one day the family are enjoying their meal of chicken in the garden when suddenly the father chokes on the chicken bone and dies. The son is overjoyed and takes the death of his father as a sign that God has accepted his vow. He does in fact become the court composer to the emperor in Vienna. He will become know in history as Mozart's jealous rival. (slide 5)

How about you? Has God in his providence been working in your life?

There is a severe famine in the land and Jacob sends his sons down to Egypt for grain. Joseph is brought to tears when he sees his brothers for the first time in over ten years. They don't recognize him. Through Joseph's intrigue he forces them to bring their youngest brother down to Egypt. Finally he reveals himself to them. You can imagine their astonishment and fear.

God has been at work behind the scenes all along. Gen 45 tells us that. Joseph probably didn't realize this truth all through the years. Certainly not when he lay in that dark hole in the ground his brother pushed him into. Not when he found himself for years in a prison when he was innocent. Not when his hoped for release didn't happen. The cupbearer forgot Joseph. Perhaps not even when Joseph reached the top of empire did he remember the dreams of ruling over his family. He went about his business of empire like any efficient CEO would do. He marries, has children, does his work, and becomes ambitious, successful, somewhat cold, calculating and aloof in the process. Seeing his brothers after all those years, however, triggers something in Joseph. Perhaps now he realizes why he has been brought to this place at such a time as this.

He tells his brothers not to be distressed by their guilt for sending him to Egypt. He says to them: **for 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. So it was not you who sent me here, but God (Gen 45:5ff) (slide 6)

Still not persuaded of Joseph's mercy the brothers worry that retribution will still happen. So Joseph says: ***Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today (50:20)***

Here is the centre of the story of Joseph. Here is the theological epicenter of the story. This is what it has all been moving us toward. God is working in, through, and with, and sometimes without human agency's knowledge, to accomplish God's purposes. And these purposes are bigger than Joseph or Jacob. For out of Egypt will come a people five hundred years later who will give us the Exodus and the nation of Israel.

Remember this phrase from Proverbs: *Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.* Or these words:
A man's mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps
Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established.

Amen