

Joseph's Part in God's Story  
Pastor Ashley Brown  
Wasilla Bible Church  
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We are going to be continuing on in the story of God's grace today. And in particular, well, first of all call it the Story of God's Grace because, quite honestly, from you know, perspective of the Bible from beginning to end, God is the protagonist. He is the major player. He is the main character. He is it—it's all about Him. Everyone else is supporting cast. So today we are going to be looking at the Story of God's Grace—the Joseph Episode. Ok? Tune in this week. And we're going to see about Joseph. In particular, we're going to be looking at Genesis chapters 37 through 50. That's basically where this takes place.

In order to get there what we'll do is we'll start off by just rehashing the story, the plot line so-to-speak, up to this point. The Bible starts off, and it makes it clear that God created the world. He created everything that exists other than Himself. He created everything that exists by His word. He just...He said 'Let it be,' and it was. Now, the Bible also tells us that when that happened He looked at it and He said, 'It's good; it's very good.' He was very well pleased with it. And He created man and woman in Adam and Eve. And the problem was that they chose to use the free will which He gave them to turn away from—reject, rebel—against God. And as a result things started going downhill very quickly. Within a generation we had the first murder, and it just went down from there. It was not a good thing; it was a pretty ugly sight. So much so that before too long, relatively speaking, God looks at the world and He says, 'People are so evil, and their hearts are so twisted consistently, across the board, that I'm just going to wipe 'em out and start over again with just Noah and his family.' And so He sends the flood. This is kind of a low point in the story up to this point in the plot.

After that it begins unfolding pretty quickly. Just things advance, and God identifies a certain man named Abram—later called Abraham. And He identifies him and makes him a promise that 'through you I'm going to make your descendants number like the stars, and through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.' Well, what happens at that point is He makes...through Abraham's life there are a series of conversations and promises that God makes to Abraham. And what happens is, among other things, He promises Abraham that there will one day be a nation of his descendants. And not only that, but they will possess the land that God has given them. And as it goes, up to this point in the story it looks like that is unfolding very well, especially if you're not familiar with the whole... If this was the first time you'd been hearing it, what you would look at is you would say, 'Things are going well. They're gonna hit the nation, they're gonna do the...things are just gonna keep getting better and better and better for them. Why? Because God made good on his promise to Abraham. He had a son, Isaac. Same thing with Isaac—he had Jacob. Jacob comes along, he has twelve sons. And these twelve sons end up almost like having their own clans starting to form, their own tribes. And they are actually becoming a fledgling nation in the land that God promised that they would possess. So if you were reading this for the first time, you would expect that the plot line trajectory things would just keep getting better and better and better.

Well, what we're going to do is we'll kind of look at how that unfolds next week. Today we're going to look in particular at this point in the story right here. It's when Jacob has twelve sons and his eleventh son, Joseph, is his favorite son. Ok? And we're going to look at Joseph and his part in God's story, and how it fits in. Here's the reason that I'm...or objective that I'm wanting to accomplish here. One—I hope that you'll see how Joseph's life fits into God's story, and you'll see how God is working through this in order to keep His promises to Abraham. But second thing is this—I hope that you will see in Joseph's life a reflection of your own life and understand how your own life also fits into God's story in one way or another. Ok? So that's what we're going to do today.

In order to do that I'm going to quickly trace Joseph's plot line, so-to-speak. It's his part in God's story. So you might almost say that this was like the plot line for his episode. It starts off, and he's doing pretty well, in Genesis chapter 37, verses 1 through 11. He's riding along, and he is Jacob's favorite son. This is a good thing, because he is the favorite son of the man who has been blessed by God, who has promised to become a nation. And Joseph—he knows it. Not only that, but his brothers know it. And Joseph makes sure his brothers know it. He flaunts his favored status; he is the golden child and makes sure that everybody knows it. This does not work out so well for him, because before long what happens in the tail end of chapter 37 of Genesis—his brothers get enough of it. They're fed up; they beat him up, throw him in a well, and when some slave traders are passin' by they say, 'Hey! Let's make some cash off this kid.' So they go ahead and sell him into slavery. Things are not looking so well for Joseph at this point. He is now sold into slavery; his dad thinks he's dead; his brothers are rejoicing because they no longer have the little brat around just irritating them. And so he's sold into slavery.

Well, he gets into Egypt in the first ten verses of Genesis chapter 39. He ends up becoming a servant to Potiphar. Ok? Potiphar is the captain of the pharaoh's guard. He is...if you imagine like the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or say like the head of the secret service, he's someone who is very trusted and is right there with the pharaoh. And Joseph becomes his most trusted servant, his right-hand-man. Potiphar says, 'Hey, it's all yours.' Problem is, Potiphar has a wife who has an eye for Joseph. Ok? She ends up trying to seduce him; he rejects her advances; and as a result—there's the saying "Hell has no fury as a woman scorned"—well, she's going to make sure he pays. So she falsely accuses him of trying to do things to her. And Potiphar isn't too happy, and so all of a sudden Joseph finds himself in jail. Ok? Now not only is he a slave, but he is a slave in a foreign land in a dungeon. Things are not looking good for him. It just keeps getting worse and worse. He gets a leg up and then it gets worse. He gets a leg up, it gets worse.

Well, he's there for a few...for a while. It doesn't say exactly how long he is here before this next turn in the plot, but it's probably a few years, let's put it that way. In Genesis 39 it talks about that. But then there are two people who end up coming and being thrown in jail with Joseph, a cupbearer and a baker. They are both people who work for the pharaoh. This is in Genesis chapter 40, verse 1 through 22. The cupbearer...they both have dreams. Joseph interprets those dreams. In particular, the cupbearer...he's the man who brings pharaoh his meals all the time, tests it, tastes it, makes sure there's no poison, very trusted position, has the ear of the pharaoh. Why? Because you'd better trust the man who is bringing you your food if you're afraid of being poisoned all the time. You should probably trust him, 'cause he could poison your food. So that's the cupbearer.

Well, Joseph looks at him and interprets his dream, and says, 'In three days Pharaoh is going to restore you to your position. You will once again have the ear of the king.' And so Joseph tells him, 'Listen, when you get there remember me. I'm wrongfully imprisoned, trumped up charges, kangaroo court, it's all wrong. Just put in a good word for me; let me get out of here, 'cause I want freedom.' And so of course the cupbearer is very happy about this news and so what does he do? He's released in three days and he's working with the Pharaoh again. He totally forgets all about Joseph. Ok? That's what happens.

So a couple more years go by. At this point Joseph is probably at the lowest point in his life. Not only is he a slave in a dungeon, but he's been totally forgotten even by the person who he has most helped recently. Until, all of a sudden, Pharaoh has a dream, and nobody can tell him what this dream means. And all of a sudden the cupbearer remembers Joseph. This is a couple years after the fact, remember. And he says, 'Oh yeah! I remember this slave—he helped me out in a situation like this. He's in the dungeon. Maybe you can help him out, if he's still around. You know, maybe he can tell you your dream.' So Pharaoh has Joseph come. He comes out, and he interprets the pharaoh's dream. In fact, what he tells the pharaoh is 'there is going to be a few years here where we have bumper crops. It's just plentiful, it's amazing awesome harvest. But then there will be seven years of famine. And you have to prepare now for those seven years of famine.' And he outlines a plan to the pharaoh of how the pharaoh could do that. The pharaoh is so impressed with Joseph that he says, 'You are now my number one man.' He says, 'You're the prime minister. The only person over you is me. Ok? Whatever you say, it happens. Whatever you say, it goes.' And so now, think about this. Joseph is now the second most powerful man in probably the most powerful nation on earth at that time. Ok? So that's basically Joseph's plot line. And that wraps up by the tail end of Genesis chapter 41.

Now what we're going to do is we're going to look at this and see how it fits into the big picture. Why did God bring Joseph all the way through all these crazy valleys and everything else just to make him the prime minister of Egypt? How does it fit into the overall plot line of God's story? Well, what we see is it follows up Joseph becoming prime minister, just a verse or two later, with this statement...or just a few verses later with this statement, in Genesis chapter 42 verse 2. Jacob is looking at it. The famine has come now. And Jacob looks at the situation around and he says, 'You know what? We're gonna die. We're runnin' out of food. We need to do something about this.' So he looks at his ten oldest sons. He's not gonna send Benjamin, the youngest, because he was Joseph's little brother and now that Joseph is gone Benjamin is the favorite. And so you already lost your favorite, you can't lose your second favorite. So he sends the older ten sons and he says, 'You boys go down there to Egypt. Get us some grain, 'cause if you don't we will die. We're gonna starve.'

Now think about this for a second. In the whole plot line, if the nation in its fledgling stages dies out, that doesn't work so well for God keeping His promises to fulfill a nation and a land. Correct? Yeah. Well, so what did God do? About twenty years prior to the famine even coming, He took Joseph and He split him away from his family. He did that and He took him through the lowest points in his life so that he would be in exactly the right time, at exactly the right place, so that he could effect the change that is needed. Joseph, when he's looking back on this period of time in his life, in chapter 50, verse 20 of Genesis, he's talking to his brothers and, of course, in this point in time his father has just died. And his brothers say, 'Oh boy, we're in trouble because now Dad isn't around to

kind of keep Joseph in check. And he's gonna have all our heads on a platter because we sold him into slavery. Joseph looks at them and he says, 'Listen, as for you, brothers, you meant selling me into slavery...you meant that for evil. It was wrong. It was evil—no ifs, ands, or buts. And that's the way you meant it to be. But God—He took it, He purposed it, He meant it for good. God meant this, He knew it was going to happen, and He meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, that many people would be saved. God meant it so that I would be in the right place at the right time in order to change and to affect His story line where He needed it most at that point in time.'

The thing that's neat to me about that is Joseph...he looks at it, and a few verses later it records what he says on his death bed. And in Genesis chapter 50, verses 24 through 25, he calls in his family as he's on his death bed, and he tells them, 'Listen, I'm about to die. But here's the deal...God keeps His promises. He surely will be good to you. And so He has promised to take you into this land and He has promised to give you a land. And so I don't belong here. I'm about to die, but you take me with you when you go. I know that God will bring you out of this land. After I die, don't leave me here. Take me with you.' He was absolutely confident in God's goodness and that God would work His purpose and He would keep His promises that He's made. It's pretty amazing, given the life that he's led—slavery, dungeons, false accusations...very few people, at least in here, I'm suspecting, have been through that sort of life plot line sort of a thing.

Well, here's what we're going to do at this point. We're going to turn a little bit more pastoral, ok, in terms of we're going to step away from Joseph's story and we're going to turn and look at how does this fit into our own stories. How do we make sense of this in our own lives? What do we learn from it? Ok? And there's four life truths, four truths about our lives that we need to understand. They're truths about our part in God's story, and we have to understand them and hold onto them tightly if we are going to be able to walk through life as Joseph did, where we can look at it at the tail end of it and still have the faith that 'You know what? God is good, and He will make good on His promises.' So we're going to look at this briefly.

The first truth is this—our part in God's story, and I think of this with Paul Tripp...he hits on this sort of a thing various times...but our part in God's story is often...often it's not the one we would write for ourselves. It's not! It's not the story that I would write for myself. It's not the plotline I would give for myself. Joseph's story was not the story that he would have written for himself. In fact, Joseph, in Genesis chapter 41, verses 51 through 52, he describes Egypt as his 'land of affliction.' This is after he's already become the prime minister and he's had some years of good living as a prime minister. He still describes Egypt as the land of his affliction. I think...I see this in my own life. I definitely, I'm absolutely confident that my story, if I were to write my story it would look very different than what it has looked and what it looks now. For instance, if I were to write my own story, my own plot line, what my life looked like, I really...I would have plenty of money where I could buy whatever I wanted whenever I wanted it. Why? Because that's always a nice thing. At least I think it is; I've never been there yet. So I can imagine it's a nice thing. I would go ahead and I would probably have multiple cars. I would have everything from a nice, sporty little compact, sporty car that I could drive really fast along something like, you know, Fishhook, something like that where I'm all over the place, all the way up to a nice rig that I could go way back off-road anywhere I wanted to go. I'd have a whole range. I would probably be something like...I don't know, I'd have it be something like at least ten or fifteen best sellers on, you know, the New York Times best sellers list, something like that. And anywhere I went people would just hush and be quiet and listen to me in awe, because I was so funny and I was like, just, you know, I had just fountains of wisdom just spewing forth from me.

But that's not reality. Ok? That's just...that's not the way my story is. It's not. Instead I look at it and if I look at my story...I was the son of a person in the ministry. My dad was in the ministry, and the last thing that I ever would have written into my story was that I would be a pastor, much less a pastor...I think about the only less likely thing than what I'm doing is what Joel is doing, because musical ability...not so much. So that's about the only thing that would be less likely when I first started writing my own story. But yet here I am. Last night I'm hanging out, for instance, with sixty to seventy middle-schoolers in a bowling alley. That's not the way I would have planned it! It's not! But at the same time I look at it and there's been all kinds of grace, and it's something that I actually enjoy much more than I ever would have imagined enjoying.

On the flip side there's also the element where, you know, I wouldn't have written into my story a few years back when Sarah was expecting Liam, our second child, and I spent about six months without a paycheck because I couldn't find a job. You know, have a house payment to make, and got a kid on the way...being born in the middle of this time, and I mean, I'm talkin' like I'm trying to get a job as a server, trying to stock shelves at WalMart, managerial position at a business...I could not find a job, much less I couldn't even get somebody to call me back and to actually talk to me about anything. That definitely would not have been a part of my story if I was writing my own story. But God took me through a course of events that I would have never charted for myself. So that's the

first truth—we have to come and understand that. Why? Because it's not about us, it's about God. It's God's story, it's not mine. So I have to come to terms with the fact that I don't get to write it.

Well, here's the second truth. It's this, and it ties to it. It's the simple fact that our part... oftentimes our part only makes sense in retrospect—when we can look at it in hindsight, when we are kind of on the other side looking back on it. It only makes sense when we can look back on it and see the whole, big picture. Oftentimes that's the way it is. For Joseph we see an element of this; and what I draw from this is that kind of the other implication there is that when we're in the midst of things we often don't understand what's going on and why. All we know is we're here, we're hurting, we're suffering, we can't quite make sense of it, we don't understand why God has us where He has us. For Joseph, in Genesis chapter 15, he looks at it and he's speaking with the cupbearer. After he says, 'Listen, you're about to get released to go see Pharaoh; put in a good word for me,' he's telling him 'I'm here, it's wrong, I didn't do anything, I'm innocent, and yet I'm here—put in a good word for me.' Joseph doesn't understand why he's in prison. He just knows that he didn't do anything that he saw was deserving of being a slave in a dungeon in a foreign land. It doesn't make sense to him.

Makes me think of a truth that I learned in the military. And if you've been in the army you can make all kinds of jokes about 'you can't spell 'lost' without 'Lt' or things like... 'Lt.' is the abbreviation for lieutenant...so yeah. Guys will give officers a hard time, especially young ones, for getting lost in the woods all the time. Well, here's something that I came to realize very much so. It takes a lot of practice to be able to make sense of the woods, of nature, of the wilderness. And you can be flying over a vast expanse of area in a helicopter and look down on it and say, 'Man, no problem! Get from there to there...all I have to do is go this way.' 'Course, once you get down on the ground, especially if you don't have a map, it's a whole lot harder to find your way from point A to point B once you're in the scrub brush that's way over your head and you got trees all over the place. You can't quite see the mountaintops or whatever else. And not only that, but you have rivers or streams, that sort of thing between you and there, mountains, all kinds of things. It starts getting confusing. In the same way, when we're in the middle of our lives, in the middle of the circumstances, the situation, oftentimes it's kind of like being dropped out in the middle of the wilderness. And we look at it and we say, 'I don't understand exactly all that is going on. I don't understand the big picture, and I can't even figure out where it is. I know where I wanna go, but apparently I'm havin' a hard time figuring that out.' It's the same way in our lives. Oftentimes a certain situation or circumstance doesn't make sense when we're in the middle of it. It only makes sense once we have enough distance from it that we can look back on it and see the whole big picture.

Then there's the third truth here that we're gonna look at, and it ties directly to this. It's the idea that it may take a very long time before you get enough distance, enough perspective, that you can understand your part, or that circumstance, that situation. Why do I say this and pull this from Joseph's story? Well, for one thing, Genesis chapter 50, verse 20, it says "*As for you...*" He's talking to his brothers. "*As for you, you meant this for evil.*" "You meant evil against me. You sold me into slavery. But God, He purposed it for good. Why? So that...He had this purpose...so that many would be preserved, which is the present result; so that people's lives would be spared, including your own, the people to whom He's made a promise." Here's the interesting thing—it was at least thirty-seven (37) years after he had first been sold into slavery that Joseph made this statement. It was at least thirty-seven years. Where do I get that? Well, Joseph was sold into slavery at the age of seventeen; he became prime minister at the age of thirty, ok? So that's thirteen years right there, time span. Then there was another seven years or so before...after he became prime minister before the famine started. So that's seven years; that's twenty years. Ok? If Jacob went ahead and he ended up coming to Egypt that very first year of the famine and moving there, then that would start the time. And when Jacob died...it says he lived in Egypt for seventeen years. So the sum total of that is thirty-seven years. Ok? Perhaps longer. It was at least thirty-seven years after the fact that Joseph was able to look at this and say, 'This is what happened. This was an evil thing in my life. It hurt, it caused pain, it brought me to this land of affliction; but I can look back on it at this point and I understand the big picture, and I understand why God had it happen.'

There may be things in your life that you may be experiencing right now, or perhaps you've experienced in the past, that you look at and you say, 'I don't understand how this fits into the big picture. I don't understand why God would let this happen.' Joseph would be right there with you. It wasn't until at least thirty-seven years after the fact that he was able to look at it and make this statement about why it happened. It may be decades before you ever understand what God was doing in your life, or in the life of someone that you love, in a certain circumstance or situation. And to tell you the truth, just doing the basic math, if it may take decades then to tell you the truth, you may not ever see it in this life. It may be that you don't ever gain that perspective until you are face-to-face with God and you are a part of the great cloud of witnesses looking back and cheering on those who are still running for the faith. It may be that it finally takes that distance to understand what God was doing in a certain point in time.

And given that reality, that's why the fourth truth that I look at here, that I hold onto, is just so important. And it's actually probably the most encouraging one to me. And it's this—that God is in control, and He intends your part to be for good. If you are a follower of Christ, He intends your part for good. He's going to weave everyone together. He even took Pharaoh, who did not at all acknowledge His authority, and wove him into the story. But He intends, if you are a follower of Christ, He intends your part for good. Joseph, as he looks as he's on his deathbed, he looks at it and he is absolutely certain that God is in control. Not only that, but God is in control, and He is faithful and good, even though He may have taken him through some very low valleys in his life. He looks at it and says, 'God is in control; He is faithful, He is good, He has promised that He will take you back. He will take our people, our family, back to the Promised Land, to the land that He has promised and given, and he will give it to you. And I'm about to die. So when you go, don't leave me here. You pick up my bones and carry 'em with you, and you bury me there—because I don't belong here! This is not my land; this is not where my heart is. My heart is in the Promised Land. This is the land of my affliction. You take me with you!'

And I get great comfort from that. I get great hope from that. Why? Because I look at it and I realize that as a believer, as a follower of Christ, I realize that I can't earn my way to the Promised Land, so-to-speak, to God's presence, to dwell in His presence. I can't earn my way. I'll never be good enough. But Jesus Christ came, and He died, and He died for me so that my sins could be forgiven. And because I've trusted Him with that, because I've said, 'I trust that; forgive my sins', and He has promised that He has done so, and will do so, and He will one day take me home, I am absolutely confident that though, unless if Jesus returns, I will die in this—this fallen, sinful world, this land of my affliction. Though I will die here, God has promised that He will take me home to where I belong. And so I can look at it and I can say, 'God, I know that I'm in the land of my affliction right now, but I know that You are in control, and You're faithful and You're good. And so God, Father, Jesus—take me with You. Take me with You. I know that You will make good on Your promise. I'm Yours--take me with You.' And I am absolutely confident that that is the truth, and that that will happen and one day that will happen.

Genesis ends basically on this note. It ends with a promise of deliverance, that God will make good on His promises to those who love Him, to those who are called according to His purposes. And that is something that I look at that and I am determined to hold onto to make sense of my life as I go through all the strange, weird twists and turns that I never would have written.

So as we get ready to go we're going to join in singing, as a congregation. And this is a prayer that we're singing and praying together as a congregation and individually, that we will have confidence to share the reality of Jesus Christ with other people in our lives. As we look at our lives and we're trying to make sense of how it all goes, but we see and we understand where God is at work in our lives, we pray and we are asking God for confidence that He will help us to speak in truth of Jesus Christ, the only One who has the power to save us and deliver us from our land of affliction. Let's stand.

[Congregation sings the prayer song]

Go in grace.