

Message #4  
Joseph

Kurt Hedlund  
9/8/2024

## JOSEPH AND THE PROVIDENTIAL CARE OF GOD GENESIS 37:12-36

### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Apart from the election coverage the big news this week centered upon another school shooting and the ongoing conflict in Gaza and the Middle East. The horrible discovery in Gaza was that six hostages had been shot at point blank range by Hamas militants just before the Israeli Defense Force was about to get to them in the tunnels under Gaza. One of the victims was an American citizen. Hersh Goldberg-Polin was originally from California. He was at the music festival which was attacked by Hamas. He lost part of an arm in a grenade blast. A video taken in April showed that he was still alive. Such is the evil which Israel is dealing with in Gaza.

It does not get much coverage in our news media, but there also have been horrible things going on in Nigeria. According to the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law between 2010 and 2023 52,250 Christians have been murdered by Islamic militants in that country. Eighteen thousand church buildings have also been burned, and 2,200 schools have been destroyed. One month ago today Islamic herdsmen entered a mostly Christian village in Nigeria and killed at least 74 residents. One week after that Islamic militants kidnapped 20 medical students who were on their way to a Catholic medical conference in Nigeria.

For religious people--- or at least for people who think about religious questions--- the problem has been to square these things with the idea of a good God. If God is good, why is there so much evil in the world? Is God really there? Maybe He is there, but He is not really all-powerful. Maybe He just wound up this universe in the beginning and let it go. Or maybe He is there, and maybe He is all-powerful, but maybe He really is not that good.

The Bible says that God is there. He is involved in our world. He is all-powerful, and He is good. The Bible teaches that God is benevolently guiding what comes to pass in the world around us. The term that theologians use to describe this aspect of God's activity is the "providence of God." As is true of the term "trinity," the word "providence" does not appear in the Bible. But the truth that the word describes is present in the Scriptures. God is actively involved in what happens in our world, and there is ultimately a benevolent purpose to it all. That is nowhere better illustrated than in the passage before us this morning.

We have seen thus far in our study of Joseph that this young man came from a family background that was difficult. He grew up with four mothers in the house. His parents and his brothers operated on the basis of the principle that the end justifies the means. In difficult situations they were prone to use deceit to accomplish their desired goals.

Joseph overcame that background. He chose to take responsibility for his own actions and to trust in a gracious God.

But last week we saw that Jacob's blatant favoritism, his sons' poor character, a strange dream, and Joseph's lack of wisdom combined to create jealousy and anger in the brothers directed toward Joseph. The young man was set up for a fall. Today we are going to examine that fall.

I.

First, in vv. 12-14 of Genesis #37 we are going to find that GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE EXTENDS TO MAN'S CHOICES. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE EXTENDS...) We learned in v. 2 of #37 that Joseph was 17 years old at the time of this story. He was the second youngest boy in the family and the oldest son of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel. The family was living in Hebron, and the older brothers had gone off to find pasture for the flock in Shechem. (HEBRON SHECHEM MAP)

Shechem was the town where sister Dinah had been raped a couple of years earlier. The older brothers had taken revenge for that act by killing all of the men of the town. The brothers were perhaps returning to the area because they were familiar with the territory and knew that Shechem was likely to have grass for feeding their flocks. They perhaps also still owned some land there which they had previously purchased during their stay by Shechem.

After what had happened at Shechem a couple of years earlier, Jacob was perhaps concerned that Canaanites in the area might have it in for Jacob's family. The sons had been away from home with the flocks for such a length of time that dad was concerned about their well being. Joseph was a reliable young man. He could be trusted. So Jacob sent him up north to find out what was going on.

Jacob was oblivious to the deep hatred that the other sons had toward Joseph and to the danger that was awaiting his favorite son. Joseph himself seemed not to be worried about a mission to check on his brothers. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This commission from Jacob to Joseph was seemingly a free act of man's will. Jacob made a choice to send his son to check out the other boys. Joseph, in turn, chose to accept this mission. But these seemingly independent decisions by Jacob and Joseph were central to the plan of God. God was actively involved in it. For this became the initial step in a whole chain of events that would culminate in the formation of a nation in Egypt that would develop among the descendants of Jacob. This would lead to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to make of his descendants a great nation.

George Whitefield as a young man in the 1700s worked as a bartender in an English inn. His brother was also involved in the business. George had difficulty getting along with his brother's wife. So one day George made a seemingly free choice to leave his job and look for something else to do. He went to Bristol and then decided to go to

college at Oxford. There he became acquainted with some evangelical Christians and was converted to Christ.

Later George Whitefield took up preaching and became as well known in England as John Wesley. He made seven trips to America and helped to fan the flames of what became known as the First Great Awakening. On one of those trips he had a meeting in Rhode Island where a sixteen year old boy was converted to Christ. This young man later felt the call to ministry.

He eventually made his way along the Connecticut coast where he started a Baptist church in 1751. Over the years that church started several other churches which in turn started other churches. In 1987 a young man became pastor there. He stayed longer than any other pastor in the church's history. In 2003 he became pastor here. So was that decision by George Whitefield to leave his job as a bartender an independent, free choice of his will, or was the providential care of God at work to accomplish bigger purposes?

II.

Notice next from vv. 15-17 of #37 that GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE EXTENDS TO SEEMING COINCIDENCES. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE...) When Joseph arrived in Shechem after a sixty mile trip, he could not find his brothers. They had not left any messages. No e-mails. No voice mails. Verse 15 says that Joseph was wandering around in a field. Perhaps it was on the land that his father had purchased years earlier.

It seems that a particular man just **happened** to be around on this particular day, and he just **happened** to notice Joseph looking around. And it just **happened** that he decided to find out what Joseph was doing. And it just **happened** that he knew Joseph's brothers. And it just **happened** that he had overheard them say where they were going next. (HEBRON SHECHEM MAP) He heard them say that they were going to Dothan, which was north of Shechem. So that is where Joseph headed.

If Joseph had not happened to encounter this man, who happened to know his brothers and happened to hear where they were going, perhaps Joseph would have returned to Hebron, and the course of events might have been different. But the providential care of God extends to the seeming coincidences of life. (PROJECTOR OFF)

By October 9, 1492, Christopher Columbus and his fellow sailors had been at sea for over a month. The sailors were becoming concerned that they would soon reach the point of no return. If they did not head back to Spain soon, they would not have enough food for the return trip. They demanded a meeting with Columbus. He reluctantly agreed that they would turn back if they did not sight land in three days. After that meeting on that day the freshest, most consistent winds of the whole trip came up. For three days they were blown rapidly westward. On the third night, just before the three day deadline, a lookout spotted moonlight shining off of distant cliffs. Was it just a coincidence that

those winds sprang up and they sighted land on the third day, or was it the providential care of God?

One day toward the end of WWII a B-29 bomber took off from Guam for Japan. Its mission was to bomb Kokura, Japan. But when the bomber arrived over its target, the city was covered with clouds that had rolled in from the sea. After circling for almost an hour the pilot was forced to turn west to his secondary target. And it was there--- over Nagasaki--- that the second atom bomb, nicknamed "Fat Man," was dropped, killing 40,000 people. Sometime later it was discovered that thousands of Allied POWs had been moved to Kokura one week prior to the B-29's mission. When those POWs learned what happened, do you think that they chalked those clouds up to mere coincidence, or did they see it as the providential care of God?

There are no coincidences in the plan of God. The providential hand of God extends to even the seemingly chance encounters of life. But if there are no coincidences, how do we explain the presence of evil in the world? If God is ultimately involved in some way in everything that happens, if He is both loving and all-powerful, how do we explain evil?

### III. A.

(III. GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE EXTENDS TO MAN'S EVIL.) In vv. 18-36 of #37 we find that GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE EXTENDS TO MAN'S EVIL. In vv. 18-22 we find that GOD RESTRAINS EVIL. (III. GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE... A. GOD RESTRAINS EVIL) Back in v. 17 the man in the field told Joseph that his brothers had gone to Dothan. Dothan was about 24 miles north of Shechem. According to v. 18, **"They [the brothers] saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him."**

With Joseph wearing his distinctive robe, the brothers were able to spot him when he was still a long ways off. So they had time to talk and to plan to take care of little brother. The blatant favoritism of a father, parents who operated on the basis of the philosophy that the end justifies the means, a home where little attention was given to spiritual and moral instruction, the unwise description by Joseph of two prophetic dreams, an encounter with the brothers far away from home, and perhaps a wicked thought planted by Satan in receptive minds combined to produce a situation where Joseph was in great danger. If Joseph could be killed, the promise of God to Joseph that he would eventually have authority over his family would be thwarted. God's plan would not be accomplished.

But the providential care of God is often at work in restraining evil. Things are often not as bad as they could be. Reuben spoke up and urged his brothers not to kill Joseph. In one sense Reuben was an unlikely candidate to stop the evil plan of his brothers. He was the oldest son in the family. By virtue of this the birthright should have been his. It had been promised by Jacob to Joseph instead. For Reuben had fallen out of favor when he had earlier committed incest with one of his father's concubines.

Perhaps Reuben was afraid that his father would hold him responsible if Joseph was killed. There was always the danger that the true story would get back to Jacob some day, and as the oldest son Reuben might become the primary object of his father's wrath. Perhaps Reuben did have a more active conscience than his brothers had. Whatever his motive, the last part of v. 22 indicates that his desire was to restore Joseph to his father. But to do that, of course, he was going to use the traditional family technique of deceit. He was going to rescue Joseph when the other brothers were not around. He was not going to take a public stand now against the evil plan of his brothers.

Reuben convinced his brothers to throw Joseph into a pit, or cistern. (CISTERN) Throughout much of Israel there are cisterns scattered around grazing and agricultural areas. Many of them have been carved out of the soft limestone rock by hand. Most of them are not as large as this one. Perhaps you can see the man at the bottom left of the picture. These cisterns fill up with rain during the winter rainy season. Then in the drier months they were, and still are, used to provide water. Sometimes they develop cracks and no longer retain water. Probably this was true of the cistern in which Joseph was placed at Reuben's suggestion.

(CISTERN AND SHEEP) Cisterns are still used by Bedouins in the eastern and southern part of Israel. Typically a pail is lowered into the cistern and water is poured out into some kind of receptacle nearby.

God's providential hand was at work in restraining evil directed toward Joseph. They did not kill him as they originally intended. (PROJECTOR OFF) The Lord is often involved in our world and in our lives in restraining evil in ways that we may never realize this side of heaven. Seemingly bad things happen to us, but often they could be much worse.

Englishman William Cowper at 32 years of age was extremely depressed. He decided to kill himself. So he bought some poison. But he just could not bring himself to take it. He took a cab to the Thames River in London, and he tried to work up the courage to jump off of a bridge. He just could not do it. The next morning he bought a large knife but was afraid to plunge it into his heart. He decided to hang himself, but the rope broke. Finally William Cowper was committed to an asylum for the mentally disturbed.

During his stay at the asylum Cowper's brother came to see him. He shared the gospel with William, and it made sense to him. So he trusted in Jesus. Eventually he became a hymn writer. He became a close friend of John Newton, the pastor and author of "Amazing Grace." We are probably most familiar with Cowper for his hymn "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood," which we sang at the beginning of our service. In another one of his hymns he wrote, "**God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform...**" The Lord had indeed restrained evil in his life.

There is evidence that the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is involved in restraining evil in our world. A central feature of the time period described in the Book of

Revelation as the Tribulation is the flourishing of evil upon the earth. Second Thessalonians appears to refer to that coming time. (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 THESSALONIANS 2:7) In #2 v. 7 of that book we have this statement: **“For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way.”** Many interpreters understand this to be a reference to the Holy Spirit.

When this restrainer is removed, life on earth will truly become difficult, and all the world will be able to see what unrestrained evil looks like. In the meantime we can be confident that God is involved in our present age in restraining evil in our world. Things may seem bad, but they are not as bad as they could be without God’s restraining influence.

B.

Nevertheless God does allow sin and evil to manifest themselves. In vv. 23-28 of our chapter we find that GOD PERMITS EVIL. (III. A. B. GOD PERMITS EVIL.) Though the brothers of Joseph were restrained from killing the teenager, they did commit a terrible sin. When Joseph arrived, they ripped off his special robe, and they threw him into this pit. Then they sat down to eat a meal. Apparently their appetites were not even bothered by what they did.

Several chapters and several years later the brothers will remark to one another, **“Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen...”** (Genesis 42:21) So as they were eating their sack lunches, Joseph may well have been begging for mercy. But it was to no avail.

(TEL DOTHAN) The remains of Dothan have been discovered by archaeologists. There was a major road to the north of Dothan and one to the east. It was thus not surprising that a caravan happened to be passing near where the men were. The camels in the group were bringing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh from Gilead, which was east of the Sea of Galilee, to Egypt. These products were used by the Egyptians for medicine and embalming ointment. (OVERHEAD OFF)

So Judah suggests that the brothers sell Joseph to these travelers as a slave. He, too, has some qualms about killing his brother. By selling him to these traders they will both make some money and be rid of Joseph.

The people in this caravan are first called Ishmaelites. In v. 28 they are called Midianites. Probably the first term was a broad designation used to describe everyone who was involved in this trading and transportation business, whereas the term “Midianite” referred to their specific ethnic background. Joseph was sold to these traders for twenty shekels of silver, two to each brother, and carried on down to Egypt.

Archaeologists know from the laws of Hammurabi and transactions recorded in another kingdom called Mari that this was the right price for slaves in the nineteenth century BC.

A few centuries earlier the going price was ten shekels. A couple of centuries later it was thirty shekels and higher. The significance of this for us is that liberal critics of the Old Testament claim that Genesis was written many centuries after the events which it claims to describe. The problem for them is that a thousand or more years later when they claim that Genesis was written, there is no way that the authors would have known what the price of slaves was at this early time.

The Lord allowed the brothers to carry out Judah's variation of their evil plan. God permitted evil to happen to the good guy. Every evil act happens only with God's permission. Yet at the same time the Lord is not directly responsible. He is not the blameworthy cause for sin. Judah and his brothers are the ones who would be held accountable. They are the blameworthy agents of evil.

The Lord allows natural disasters and accidents and acts of terrorism and school shootings. He allowed the events of 9/11 and October 7 to happen. He allowed a Communist dictatorship to hold sway in the Soviet Union for 70 years. He allowed a cruel dictator to hold power in Nazi Germany. He allowed an evil Russian ruler to do bad things to Ukraine. He allowed a shooter this past week to kill four people at a Georgia public school. He has allowed Muslim militants to kill thousands of Christians in Nigeria. He allowed Hamas terrorists to execute four Jewish hostages. It does not always make sense to us.

C.

God restrains some evil and permits other evil. But as we shall see in vv. 29-36, GOD ultimately USES EVIL TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. A. B. C. GOD USES EVIL TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL.) He is sovereign over all.

For some reason Reuben was away when Joseph was sold to the Midianites. When he returns, he is upset to discover that Joseph is gone. As was typical in their family, the brothers then concocted a plan to deceive their father and to cover up their sin. They dipped Joseph's robe in goat's blood and set out to tell their dad that Joseph had been devoured by a wild beast. Ironically it had been Jacob years earlier who had used the skin of goats to deceive his father and take the special blessing away from his brother. Now the deception will come back to haunt him.

So the sons returned home to Hebron, and they proceeded with their deception. Jacob recognized the robe as belonging to Joseph, and he assumed the worse. In vv. 34 & 35 we read, **"Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.' Thus his father wept for him."**

To outward appearances this was a new low point in the life of Jacob's family. The patriarch was distraught at the loss of his favorite son. The other family members were upset for Jacob. I suspect that at least some of the brothers felt guilt about their actions.

Other people in the clan were also sad about Jacob's loss, probably not knowing the truth about what had happened. And Joseph was on his way to Egypt as a slave.

The situation was indeed sad. It was the result of man's sin. But it was also entirely within the plan of God. For God uses even evil to accomplish His will. In v. 36 we are given the brief note that Joseph had been sold to the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard. He is in just the place that God intended him to be. For he is in the position that will lead him eventually to become the number two official in all of Egypt. From there he will bring his family to Egypt and see them grow to become a nation.

God uses even evil to accomplish His will. There is another Joseph who learned this lesson more recently. Josef Tson (JOSEPH TSON) escaped Communist Romania several decades ago. He went to Oxford University where he earned a Master of Divinity degree. Against the advice of many he returned to Romania, where he became the pastor of a large church. He was motivated to write and publish a book called *The Christian Manifesto*, which criticized the Communist government in Romania. He was quickly arrested.

The arrest was not unexpected, but it was still evil. The Lord sometimes permits evil things to happen to good people. He also restrains evil. Josef Tson was interrogated every day by the police from 8 AM to 4 PM. But on evenings and weekends he was allowed to return home, and he was even permitted to preach.

One day the colonel in charge said to Pastor Tson, **“Don't you realize that I have the power to kill you?”** Tson replied, **“Yes, I realize that. But do you realize that I have the power to die?... You can kill me, but then my blood will cover my tapes, my messages, and all the books I have written. And my Christian witness will be ten times more effective.”**

Copies of Tson's *Christian Manifesto* eventually reached the West, where they were translated into English. It just so happened that some of these copies made their way to Washington at the time when Romanian President Nicolai Ceausescu just happened to be visiting and seeking to get most favored nation trading status for his country. American officials just happened to give Ceausescu the book and to encourage him to clean up his human rights abuses. Josef Tson was quickly released.

In 1981 Pastor Tson came to the US and began broadcasting sermons into Romania. It is estimated that between seven and ten million Romanians listened to him regularly. When the Romanians finally forced Ceausescu and the Communists out of office, it was a relatively bloodless revolution. My suspicion is that Josef Tson and the providence of God had something to do with that. For, you see, God uses even evil to accomplish His will.

The practical value of the doctrine of the providence of God is this: In all of the happenings of life we can have confidence that God is present. Nothing happens outside of His eternal plan--- not even evil. Our plans may be foiled, but God's plan are

not. Joseph did not have a field trip to Egypt scheduled on his calendar for that day. But God did. Reuben planned to rescue his brother out of the cistern. His plans were foiled, but God's plans were not. Jacob planned to have Joseph bring back a report about his other sons. His plans were foiled, but God's were not. The wicked brothers planned to get rid of Joseph once and for all. Their plans were also ultimately foiled, but God's plans were not. Eventually Joseph would tell his brothers to their faces, "**You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.**" Such was Joseph's understanding of the providence of God.

My responsibility and your responsibility is to be faithful to God. What will help us to do that is to remember that the providential hand of God is always present with us. Bad things may happen to us. Bad things may happen in our church or our family or our country. Our plans may be foiled. But God is always present, and His sovereign plans will be accomplished.

Those plans will be accomplished even when we are unfaithful. But we will be held accountable by the Lord for our unfaithfulness. God's plans were accomplished with Jacob and his sons. But they were responsible for the evil that they committed, and they suffered pain and grief and turmoil because of it.

God will also accomplish His plans with us. But we will have more joy and more peace and more blessing and more eternal rewards if we will cooperate with Him and do that which He has commanded us to do. Our responsibility is not to figure out and follow the hidden, unrevealed plan of God for this world and for our lives. Our responsibility is to follow that part of God's will which He has revealed to us in the Bible. In the midst of adversity or turmoil or evil, will we determine to trust the sovereign God who is there?

One last story--- Howard was a Jewish guy who lived in our community in Connecticut. He was a nice guy but something of a social misfit. A black family from our church, who lived next door to Howard, invited him to a couple of church socials. Some of us got to know him a little bit. I visited him and gave him a Bible.

Howard was an exterminator. One day his truck slipped out of gear when he was working behind it. It rolled over him, and he was dragged a couple of hundred feet and pinned underneath it. The rescue people did not think that he would live. His hip was badly injured, and he had burns over much of his body.

Howard spent months in the hospital, much of the time in the burn unit. His company was not real helpful. He lost his job. He racked up hospital bills, and the family finances took a dive. People from his synagogue were not especially helpful. The rabbi never came to visit him. Bad things happened to Howard.

But God uses even bad things to accomplish His purposes. People from our church sent cards. Some sent over meals to his family. I saw him in the hospital. When Howard got out, there was a male nurse who came by regularly to check his burns and his hip. It just so happened that this nurse was a part time evangelical minister. He told Howard

about Jesus. After the nurse's term of duty was up, a physical therapist was sent to his house to help him with the recovery. It just coincidentally happened that this therapist was a Christian who also told Howard about how he could come into a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus. Howard was outgunned. Sometime later I had the privilege of baptizing Howard. God uses bad things and evil things to accomplish His will.

It is possible that there are some here today or watching online who have never entered into a personal relationship with the God who is really there. Perhaps you have had bad things and evil things happen in your life that have raised doubts in your mind about God. Perhaps you can relate to the difficult experience of Howard and Joseph in our story. But perhaps you also recognize that the Lord is trying to get your attention, that He wants to have a relationship with you.

Your responsibility is very simple. You need to acknowledge that you are a sinner who is separated from a holy God by your sin. You need to believe that Jesus was God who became man, that He lived a sinless life, that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins and that He rose again from the dead. Then you need to put your trust in Jesus as your Savior. One way to express this trust is through prayer. I am going to close with a prayer that includes these ideas. If you would like to begin a relationship with God through faith in Jesus, then I would invite you to pray along with me silently in your hearts...