



A few years ago a movie came out called, *A River Runs Through It*. It was the story of the Maclean family who lived in Montana in the early 1900s. The father was a Presbyterian minister, a stern but loving man. The mother was more nurturing by nature. They had two sons: Norman, the oldest, and Paul. The two boys are very different. Norman is cautious and studious. He eventually goes to college and becomes a writer. Paul, the younger son, is a reckless boy, a daredevil, a ladies man with a quick wit.

These are the main characters in the movie, but the real subject of the movie is the river running through their part of Montana. That river is the focal point of the family's life. It was the place the father forged a relationship with the boys on Sunday afternoons as they walked its banks, fished its deep pools, and talked about the God who made it all. It was to the river the boys ran after their studies, and their sibling rivalry and brotherly affection flourished at the same time. It was on the river Paul made a name for himself as the finest fly fisherman in the area. And it was there Norman returned after college searching for his roots.

The Maclean family knew failure, success, laughter, fighting and even tragic death, but the river was always there as a defining force and center of their lives. Montana would have just been a wilderness and their individual lives just chaos if not for the river running through it all.

I've always seen that river as a metaphor for something else that runs through each of our lives and that's the purpose of God. The psalmist proclaimed, *"I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me"* (Psalm 57:2 ESV). Job said to God, *"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted"* (Job 42:2 (ESV)). Paul wrote that God *"works out everything in conformity to the purpose of his will"* (Eph. 1:11).

Do you ever wonder if that's really true? Let's face it, sometimes it's hard to believe that in the face of all that's going on in the world—beheadings in the Middle East, thousands randomly dying of Ebola virus in West Africa, not to mention our own personal tragedies. One of my daughters is a nurse in the oncology unit at Lucille Packard Children's Hospital. Just take in a few of those stories and you have to wonder if what the Heidelberg Catechism says is true, that everything come to us, not by chance but by his fatherly hand. That sounds good in a theology class, but can we really believe God's purpose runs through everything?

Whenever I'm struggling with these questions I think of Joseph, whose story we're looking at today. If anyone could have questioned the purpose of God in everything, it was he.

As we continue in our journey through the big story of the Bible, we come to the story of Joseph. Genesis 12–50 concerns four great men: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Of all four, Joseph gets the most ink, which is surprising when you consider he wasn't even in the royal line through which the eventual King and Messiah would be born. Why does Joseph get so much coverage? It's because Joseph is the hinge connecting Genesis with Exodus. Exodus tells the story of how God delivered his people from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Joseph's story explains how they got there in the first place. After all, the Promised Land to which God sent Abraham wasn't Egypt, it was Canaan. That's where we last left Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So how and why did they end up in Egypt? Joseph's story answers that question.

### Joseph is Sold into Slavery by His Jealous Brothers

It seems Joseph was cursed from the start. He was Jacob's favorite son, which earned him the deep resentment of his eleven brothers. But Joseph added to his brothers' hatred by flaunting his most favored status. He literally "wore it on his sleeve." The multicolored coat he wore was a long-sleeved garment with stripes on the sleeves to show his higher rank. He wore it to parade his own importance and put his brothers down.

Joseph made things worse by sharing with the whole family about his wild dreams. On one occasion he said to them, *"Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it"* (37:6–7). How would you expect your brothers to react to that? I had an older brother. If I told him I had that dream, I would have been pounded! No wonder it says, *"And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said"* (37:8).

No doubt Joseph had some growing up to do. If God was ever going to use him in a significant way, he'd have to whittle him down to size. Oswald Chambers once said, "God's preparation is definite, drastic and destructive." The making of Joseph was all of that.

It wasn't long before his brothers had an opportunity to act on their jealous hatred. They were out shepherding their father's flocks far from home. Joseph had stayed home, but he was sent by his father to check on them. As they saw him coming from a distance, they plotted a way to kill him. They'd throw him into a nearby pit and tell their father he'd been mauled by a wild animal. Reuben, the oldest, tried to intervene and save his brother, but while he was gone Judah talked them into selling him to a

caravan of traders who were heading down to Egypt. Listen to what happened next.

Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."

He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."

Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave." So his father wept for him.

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard (Gen. 37:31–36).

### **Joseph is Put into Prison While in Egypt**

Joseph is sold as a slave to an Egyptian administrator named Potiphar who sees his talents and puts him in charge of his household. Potiphar's title literally translates as "chief butcher," which was a military function. In other words, this was a guy you didn't mess with. But Joseph captures his respect. The writer of Genesis attributed this to the Lord (read 39:2–4). These were good times for Joseph, but they didn't last long.

Joseph also had the unfortunate blessing of being "*well built and handsome*" (39:6b). He caught the eye of Potiphar's wife and she tried to seduce him. It says, "*And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her*" (39:10). Obviously, that's a wise decision on his part, but it got him into trouble. She's so offended she frames him for attempted rape and Potiphar has no choice but to send him to prison. It's worth noting if Potiphar really believed his wife, there's no doubt he would have had Joseph executed, but instead he sent him to a place where political prisoners were held, and this would set the stage for the next chapter in Joseph's life.

It's worth pausing for a moment and reflecting on how all this must have felt to Joseph. Like bricks tumbling out of a dump truck, Joseph is rocked by one calamity after another. I'm sure Joseph never thought his life would go like this. Whatever happened to those dreams he had? They didn't include either a pit or a prison. Just like in our own lives, there are things we never could foresee: deep disappointment over what might have been, unrelieved heartache over a child gone astray, unfaithful spouses and friends, piercing sorrow over lost loved ones, lonely dark seasons where God seems to hide his face. Some of you have been there; some of you are in a pit or prison of sorts right now.

But God continues to move with purpose in Joseph's life. Again, we're told "*the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and*

*granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden*" (39:21). The warden puts him in charge of all the prisoners. Then Joseph meets two former officials who were in prison because they'd somehow gotten in trouble with Pharaoh. One had been Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and the other his chief baker. One night both of these men had disturbing dreams and they didn't know what they meant. Dreams were considered a portent of future events and so they're desperate to know what this meant for them. When Joseph saw they were upset, he said, "*Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams*" (40:8b). Joseph has a Ph.D. in dreams, right? So he goes on and interprets their dreams. He tells the baker he'd soon have his head cut off while the cupbearer would be restored to his position in the palace. Joseph is so sure of his interpretation he says to the cupbearer, "*When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon*" (40:14–15).

You can see how Joseph felt about his plight. "Life's not fair," he'd remind us. "I've done nothing to deserve this." And he really hadn't. But his attempt here for the cupbearer to take up his cause failed. The cupbearer **was** restored to the palace, but he forgot all about Joseph. We don't know how much longer Joseph stayed in prison, but it had to feel like an eternity and he had to feel just like we feel in those times, forgotten by God.

### **Joseph is Promoted to Deputy Pharaoh in Egypt**

Then Pharaoh himself had two troubling dreams none of his wise men could interpret. The cupbearer finally remembered Joseph, who was brought into the palace and successfully interpreted Pharaoh's dreams. The dreams both indicated seven years of abundance would be followed by seven years of famine. This warning would allow Pharaoh to prepare for the famine and who better to lead the efforts than Joseph? Pharaoh says, "*Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you*" (41:39–40). Things are good again for Joseph. He gets married, has a couple of kids, buys a house, leases a BMW. And he uses his extraordinary gifts of leadership and administration to prepare for the famine by storing grain and carefully doling it out.

### **Joseph is Reunited With and Forgives His Brothers**

And this was quite a famine. It was so great it was felt all the way in the land of Canaan where Joseph's brothers and father still lived. When Jacob hears there's grain in Egypt, he sends his sons to buy some food so his family can survive. So Joseph's brothers come to Egypt. They're brought before Joseph and, yes, they bow down to him just as Joseph's dream so many years ago had said. It's been so many years and they don't recognize him. Of course

he'd taken on Egyptian hair and dress. He **did** recognize them, but instead of revealing his identity, he played this little game of cat and mouse (chapters 42–44). What's clear is Joseph is testing them. He wants to see if they've changed their ways since they sold him in Egypt, especially in regard to his little brother Benjamin. Then comes the big reveal.

**Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.**

**Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.**

**Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.**

**"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt" (Gen. 45:1–8).**

What a moving scene! There's an important phrase Joseph uses here three times: "God sent me ahead of you..." God did that to preserve the lives of his chosen people. He did that because he was committed to fulfilling the promises he'd made to Joseph's great grandfather, Abraham. Since Joseph could see everything that had happened to him had a purpose, he was able to forgive and embrace his brothers.

We talk about the upper story and the lower story. The upper story is God's story where he's fulfilling his purposes. The lower story is the human characters' story with all the complexities and details of life. The lower story is Joseph's story and our story. Our lower story is often full of tragedy and pain. We don't always get to see how the lower story ties in with the upper story, but it always does and here Joseph is allowed to see how it all fits together.

This comes out again years later after Jacob had died. Joseph's brothers are afraid with the death of their father that Joseph will finally take revenge on them for what they did to him. So the brothers tell Joseph that before their father died he told them Joseph should forgive them. That was a lie, but a guilty conscience is hard to shake. They even tell Joseph, "We'll just be your slaves." Joseph says to them.

**But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm**

**me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:19–20).**

It's all about purpose. God is able to take even the evil that people do and use it for his good purpose. This story is a living example of Romans 8:28, "*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*" It doesn't say God causes all things. He isn't the author of evil; he allows it but he doesn't cause it. Nor does it say all the things that happen to us are good. There are many things that happen to all of us that aren't good at all. What it says is God causes all things to work together for good. It's in the interplay of all things God accomplishes his purpose.

Here, God's purpose was to save, preserve, and ultimately bless his people. In being brought to Egypt, they were saved from the famine. Not only that, Egypt was a perfect place for his people to incubate for the next 400 years. It was a world power where Israel could safely grow to over a million people. Not only that, in Canaan Jacob's sons were starting to conform with and assimilate into the corruption and idolatry of Canaanite culture, often through intermarriage. If you doubt that, just read chapter 38. It was necessary to extract them from there and Egypt was the perfect place. And the Israelites were shepherds. The Egyptians considered shepherding an abomination and they'd never consider intermarriage with a Hebrew.

God had another purpose in all of this. He was molding and shaping Joseph from a brash and ego-centered young man into a genuine servant of God. He died when he was 110. He lived to see his great, great grandchildren! Think of it this way: He had 21 years of hardship, but 71 years of blessing and productivity. Jacob even gave Joseph's two sons a double inheritance before he died. I have no doubt he never would have become the person he was apart from his trials.

### **Even When We Don't Understand What's Going On, We can Trust in a Sovereign God**

You see, even when we don't understand what's going on, we can trust in a sovereign God. Corrie Ten Boom used to say as life unfolds in real time, it's like viewing the backside of a tapestry. It appears to be nothing more than a jumble of thread—tangled, frayed, occasionally knotted, and seemingly random. Nothing really makes sense, but things aren't always what they seem. It's only when you turn a tapestry over that you see the art: the rich colors, the texture, and the patterns of astonishing beauty. Likewise, occasionally God gives us a glimpse at what he's weaving into the fabric of our lives. That momentary peek at glory gives us the courage to soldier on, knowing that nothing happens by accident. No thread of experience, good or bad, is wasted. When it appears to be that way, we just have to remind ourselves that we're simply looking at the backside of a tapestry, and the One weaving it together knows what he's doing.

I remember 33 years ago I was finishing my internship at PBC and looking for my first job as a pastor. I heard about this little church in Foster City and this pastor named Steve Farrar who was looking to hire a second guy. I was so excited. I came up here and interviewed and thought it would be a perfect match. But I didn't get the job, and I was crushed. "God, what are you doing?" But I look back on that now and I see not only did God use that to humble me but he eventually led us to Denver. By that time we were dealing with some issues of infertility as we tried to have a second child. We were getting nowhere with our doctors here, but when we got to Colorado someone told us about this doctor and he was able to figure out the problem and Lynn got pregnant. And then, after six years had gone by, I got a call from the same church in Foster City and this time, six years later, they hired me. God knows what he's doing!

The challenge we have is when we're in the middle of our story, and all we can see is the backside, how do we survive? I think Joseph can help us here. Some people become stoics; they deny the pain of life. Joseph didn't do that. Several times in this narrative he breaks down and weeps uncontrollably. He felt the sting of pain and rejection. Nor did he minimize the evil done to him. He said to his brothers, "You meant it for harm." He doesn't go soft on what they did. He calls it what it was; they did him wrong. Nor does he passively accept his circumstances. He made every effort to get out of prison.

### **Maintain your faith in God**

So, what did he do? How can we learn from Joseph's story to survive when all we can see is the backside of the tapestry? The first thing about Joseph is he really did maintain his faith in God, even though he didn't know the outcome of his situation. When Pharaoh asked him if he could interpret his dream, Joseph said, "***I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires***" (41:16). When he sent his brothers back to fetch his father and bring him to Egypt, he sent them with a message, "***God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay***" (45:9). Even in naming his sons, he acknowledged God. Manasseh—"***God has made me forget all of my trouble.***" Ephraim—"***God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering***" (41:51-52).

This is the most fundamental thing for us. At times we'll feel like giving up. Sometimes it feels like we're clinging to the last thread of our faith, but we have to hang on to him. It helps a lot if you can stay in the Word, and if you can stay in close fellowship with other believers. You won't want to do either of those things, or even to pray, but where else do you go? It's like Peter said to Jesus, "***Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life***" (John 6:68).

### **Refuse to give in to temptation**

Second, he refused to give in to temptation. When Potiphar's wife tempted him, do you know what he said to her? He said, "***How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?***" (39:9). It wasn't just his fear of Potiphar, it was his fear of God! So not only did he maintain his faith in God, he refused to give into compromise and temptation.

Whenever we face a difficulty, usually there's a way of dealing with it that's absolutely wrong. Potiphar's wife presented to him a kind of escape, but he refused to disobey God. I can't help but think of Jesus in the wilderness. It was at his point of greatest need Satan tempted him. In those times we can only see the backside of the tapestry. Temptation will come, and we have to resist it.

### **Make the most of every situation you're in**

Another thing about Joseph is he made the most of every situation he was in, and God blessed him in that. He refused to focus on himself. I mentioned Joseph was gifted in leadership and administration and in both Potiphar's house and Pharaoh's prison he put his gifts and talents to work and made both better in the process. He gave himself tirelessly to any work that was to be done. He took an active interest in other people. Even in jail, he got involved in the life of the cupbearer and baker. He could have just given up, become bitter or passive, but instead he became an asset and source of blessing to others. It's such an overused cliché that I hate to even use it, but it's true: Bloom wherever you're planted. God has given you gifts and talents. Wherever you are, God put you there for a purpose and you can put those to use.

The only way we can do this is trust in a sovereign God, even when we don't understand what's going on. God always has a redemptive purpose in mind. We may not get to see it as clearly as Joseph did, but it's there. This is a theme we see throughout God's story. Think of another man like Joseph, falsely accused, made to suffer, but ultimately this resulted in the salvation of many. Peter said of Jesus, he "***was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs...***" And then he says, "***This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross...***" (Acts 2:22-24). What God did in Joseph's and Jesus's life he will do in ours. There's a river that runs through our lives, and that river is the purpose of God.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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