

The Story: From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh

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[0 : 00] So much of the first half of this message is just going to be a retelling of the story of Joseph. I'm sure many of you are familiar with it. It never hurts to hear a good story again. So we confess faith in a God of great love who cares for us and calls us his children.

We've been singing about that in almost every song this morning. But at the same time, we recognize that bad things can sometimes happen in each one of our lives. We or our loved ones may become sick. We may lose our jobs or graduate and can't find work. We have accidents. We experience financial difficulties.

We're rejected by those we thought were our friends. There are times in our lives when everything seems to go very smoothly. And there are times in our lives when everything seems to go wrong. And where is the God of love when that happens? Where is God when it seems like all our hopes and our dreams and all of our plans are crumbling around us?

[1 : 19] How can we confess a God of love when bad things happen to us and to those we love? Today we encounter the story of Joseph.

And just like us, good and bad things happen to Joseph. Like some of us, the bad things that happened to Joseph were severe.

His story, in fact, it's full of sharp ups and downs. It's the story of a dreamer in a fancy coat with visions of greatness.

It's the story of a very troubled family, torn apart by favoritism and jealousy and sibling rivalry. It's the story of treachery and betrayal. It's the story of sex and palace intrigue. It's the story of prison and of a miraculous rise to power.

[2 : 23] Well, from Joseph's perspective, life started happily enough. As the youngest son, he was his father's favorite.

And the proof of this was the fact that he strutted about in a stylish coat. A gift from his father, Jacob, which made his brother's garments appear rather plain in comparison.

And Joseph was favored. And he looked forward to a good life of happiness and privilege. And he could scarcely contain his excitement when he had two dreams, which implied that his older brothers and even his father and mother would one day bow down before him.

And after these dreams, he immediately rushed off to tell his brothers the good news. Brothers, gather around. Listen to this dream that I had.

We were all out in a field and we were binding sheaves of wheat. When suddenly, my sheaf stood up and your sheaves all bowed down to it.

[3 : 43] Isn't that wonderful? Well, his brothers hated him because of that dream. It didn't take much for them to interpret that one.

An indication that they would one day bow down and serve him. A short time later, Joseph had a second dream. Brothers, listen.

I've had another dream. And this time, the sun and the moon and eleven stars all bowed down to me.

Well, again, it wasn't very difficult for his brothers to get the gist of this dream. The brothers recognized that the sun and the moon represented their parents, the father and the mother, and that the eleven stars represented them, the eleven brothers of Joseph.

And now the whole family, parents and eleven brothers, are all bowing down to Joseph. Well, that was the beginning of the end of Joseph's comfortable existence.

[4 : 53] His brothers resented and even hated the spoiled brat. And these dreams were the last straw. And even though Joseph was still rather young and immature, they had no empathy for him.

So one day, Jacob the father sent Joseph out to his brothers in the field to check up on how they were doing. And when the brothers saw Joseph coming, they developed a scheme.

This is our chance, they said to one another. We can finally get rid of this dreamer. So they plotted to kill him. And they threw him into a pit.

And they were going to leave him there for dead. But just at that time, it just so happened that a caravan of slave traders were passing by.

And they were on their way to Egypt. So the brothers, at the last moment, changed their plan and decided they could get rid of Joseph without any blood on their hands.

[6 : 02] So they sold Joseph to the slave traders who promptly carried him off to Egypt. And then the brothers proceeded to deceive their father, Jacob, by taking this despised coat of Joseph's and dipping it in goat's blood.

And presenting it to their father, suggesting that Joseph must have been torn apart by wild animals. So in one fell swoop, Joseph lost his family.

And of course, he lost his freedom. Nonetheless, Joseph had seemed to believe that his dream came from God.

Perhaps he wasn't very wise in the way he broke the news to his brothers. But something in him seemed to be convinced that this was a dream from God. That God had spoken to him.

And that God had a plan in mind for him. But how could this now be since he was a slave? Who bows down to a slave?

[7 : 08] Well, in Egypt, Joseph was purchased from the slave traders by Potiphar. And Potiphar was the captain of Pharaoh's guard, Pharaoh's palace guard.

And slowly things started to look up for Joseph. He managed Potiphar's household very well. And Potiphar put him in charge of the entire household.

But then one day, everything went south. He was thrown into prison when Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of attempted rape.

When he actually turned down her sexual advances. And there in prison, Joseph languished for a long time.

Many times we can imagine Joseph saying, Where is God in all of this? Didn't God give me a dream of destiny?

[8 : 09] But now I've been rejected by my brothers. I've become a slave. And now my reward for doing what's right in God's eyes and resisting adultery.

My reward is to be thrown into this prison cell. Days went by. And then weeks. And then weeks became months.

And then months became years. It speaks a word, I think, already to us.

We can sometimes suffer for a long time. I think we live in an age of some impatience. Of some instant gratification.

It's good to remember Joseph languished year after year after year in this prison. At one point, his hopes briefly revived. He got his hopes up high.

[9 : 12] When he interpreted the dream for the king's cup bearer. Who was also in prison at the time. And the cup bearer promised to put a good word in for Joseph.

Upon his release from prison. But he forgot. Once he was free, he completely forgot about prison. He probably wanted to forget every memory of the place.

And two more long years went by for Joseph. After the cup bearer was released. Until one day, Pharaoh himself.

So the leader of all Egypt. Also had two dreams. Just like Joseph had his two dreams. Pharaoh had two dreams. Dreams which no one could interpret.

And it was only then that Pharaoh's cup bearer remembered his promise. And he said to Pharaoh, When I was in prison, there was a Hebrew there. And he interpreted my dream and he interpreted it correctly.

[10 : 17] Who knows? Send for him. Perhaps he can help to interpret your dreams. So Pharaoh called for Joseph. He summoned him out of his jail cell. And he shared his two dreams with him.

In the first dream, Pharaoh saw seven sleek and fat, well-fed cows come out of the Nile River. But then they were followed out of the same river by seven ugly scrawny cows.

And the scrawny cows quickly ate up the fat cows. And then Pharaoh told Joseph his second dream.

And in this dream, he saw seven healthy grains of wheat on a stalk. Immediately after that, he saw seven dried up shriveled heads of grain.

And the dried shriveled heads of grain swallowed up the healthy heads of grain. And Joseph told Pharaoh that both dreams signified the exact same thing.

[11 : 33] And that they meant that Egypt would have seven years of bountiful harvest. In which the cows would grow fat. And there would be all kinds of heads of grain throughout the nation.

But that these seven good years would be immediately followed by seven years of extremely severe famine. And that the bad years would eat up all the produce of the good years. Pharaoh was very pleased with Joseph's interpretation. And he rewarded Joseph by elevating him to second in command over the entire nation of Egypt.

And that included placing Joseph in charge of food storage. That was Joseph's advice in these seven years. Build grain bins and make sure you store up the abundance of the harvest. So we can distribute it during the seven bad years. And Joseph was also in charge of the food distribution during the famine. So in a very ironic twist, Joseph's brothers at this point enter back into the story.

[12 : 42] Their father Jacob, the famine had also spread to their land right next to Egypt. And their father Jacob had said to them, My sons, we're all going to die here. I send you to Egypt.

See if you can go there and secure some grain for us so that we can live. So to make a long story a little bit shorter, the brothers appear before Joseph and they don't recognize him at all. He's probably wearing the Egyptian dress and then totally out of context for them. And they bow down to Joseph.

Just as Joseph had seen long ago in his dream. But again, they don't recognize him. But Joseph certainly recognizes them. And their lives are now in Joseph's hands. Here's the perfect moment to take vengeance, to seek retribution, to pay his brothers back. Will he treat them as they treated him?

[13 : 53] The words Joseph spoke on this occasion mark the climax of the entire Joseph narrative. There's so many ways we could preach about this story.

We could talk about dysfunctional families. We could talk about the power of dreams. We could speak about resisting sexual temptation. We could speak about gross injustice.

And I think we could get a good message from all of those. But everything is leading up to this moment. How will Joseph deal with his backstabbing brothers?

His brothers had spun his life totally out of control. This was the perfect opportunity for payback. But Joseph had matured greatly through his ordeal.

From everything that he suffered. His suffering actually transformed him. Instead of avenging himself, Joseph does the opposite.

[14 : 55] He actually comforts his brothers. And these are the words he said to them. And these words are at the very center of the story. Don't be distressed and angry with yourselves for selling me here.

Because God sent me here. In order to save lives. This famine's already lasted two years. It's going to endure five more. Therefore, God sent me here.

Ahead of you. To save your lives. To preserve for you a remnant on earth. So then, it was not you who sent me here.

But God. Joseph has a remarkable vision in this story. How difficult it is to come to that place. Right? There's suggesting that there are two levels at which we can see things in life.

There's a level of everyday, ordinary circumstances. Of things that happen to us. Can we see anything under that? Anything deeper? Any way in which God might be stirring?

[16 : 03] It's a remarkable confession of faith on Joseph's behalf. He says, in effect, you tried to spin my life one way. And my life certainly seemed to spin out of control.

But God is ultimately in control. And he applied a counter spin. And God's spin is a lot more powerful than human spin. It's important to stress that Joseph came to this conclusion after he was safely through that prolonged season of despair.

As he looked back, he could see God's hand in his life. Even when he was betrayed. Even when he was sold as a slave and imprisoned and suffered unjustly.

What did Joseph think during his struggles? The story is not clear on that. I suspect that Joseph reacted as a normal human being would react in such situations with a mixture of deep questions and seasons of doubt and probably also some faith.

When he was in prison, he did not know how things would turn out. Just like all of us when we're going through hard times. We don't know where things are going. He couldn't imagine that the suffering caused by his brother's actions would be the very pathway to salvation for his family. [17 : 33] And indeed for his whole people. In the midst of his darkest moments, all he had to cling to were these dreams that he had been given long ago.

What if they were just dreams? I can imagine him asking, Did they really come from God? How can it be? I've been here in prison for so long. Well, Joseph's experience has been paralleled by many Christians, many churches throughout history.

We go through hard times, and it seems like God is absent. And in the midst of the hard times, we just have no idea how things can get any better.

And our hopes and dreams are crushed, and our faith may waver. But does that mean that everything is lost? Or might that actually be the very beginning of new life?

The very way in which God wants to transform our lives. This much we do know. The main teaching of the Joseph story is that God remains fully in control of this world, and even fully in control of the circumstances of our lives, no matter how those circumstances look to us.

[18 : 53] The story teaches us that God can redeem suffering to bring about something very beautiful. When sinister forces swirl in our lives and threaten to swallow us, God is still there, holding us in his hand.

And God takes the hurt and suffering and is able to make something beautiful out of it. As Joseph later said to his brothers, God turned into good what you intended for evil.

And that's the God revealed in the story of Joseph. The God who transforms our suffering into the surprising wonder of new life.

And the new life that Joseph received didn't only rest with him. It spilled over into countless others, including his brothers.

Joseph didn't seek revenge on them. He forgave them. At the end, he wept on them for joy at reconciliation. It's a wonderful picture of how Joseph's sufferings transformed him.

[20 : 05] And he became someone that God could work through. And again, it's this great reminder that our lives function on two levels.

The level of everyday circumstances when we are often obtuse and have no clue what's going on and cry out to God, what's happening? If you're good, how can this happen? Only to discover later that God's been at work through it all.

This teaching is sometimes referred to by the word providence. It comes from the word provide. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign, that God is in control of all creation.

It teaches that God provides for us, even as God works out God's good and perfect purposes. The teaching is not that God causes evil or bad things to happen.

Rather, the teaching is that God is able to work through them and to overrule them and to bring good out of evil. And this teaching is meant to encourage us when we go through hard times.

[21 : 12] I think the Joseph story resonates the most with those who are in the midst of their own suffering. The Apostle Paul spelled it out in his letter to the church at Rome, saying, We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.

What a sweeping promise. All things work together for good. You mean my financial hardships? You mean my stress with my children? I say that because I've got some stress.

Or you mean my stress at work? Good is going to come out of this? Paul says, All things work together for good for those who love God.

It doesn't mean that all things are good. It doesn't mean that the things that happen to us are good. But God brings good out of them. What do you make of that? Do you believe that?

Do all things really work together for good for Jesus' disciples? It would be wonderful if it were true. It's easier to believe that when things are going well, of course.

[22 : 18] But when we're in the midst of our own suffering and trials, we often have great difficulty discerning God's hand in any of it. Then, like Joseph, all we have to go on is a word from God, including the word that Paul spoke.

All things work together for good. Because we can't see into the future, we have to decide whether or not we will put our faith in God's word, in God's promise, in God's goodness and love.

We have to decide whether or not we believe, as many people do, that life is more or less simply a random series of events. Are we in the grip of blind forces, like fortune, or chance, or just luck?

Or are we in the grip of a great and powerful and loving God, who one day will reveal to us how he's brought something beautiful out of the mess that we often find our lives to be, just as he did with Joseph.

If we fast forward to the New Testament, we see that Jesus had a lot to say about this question. The same Jesus who was descended from the people Joseph saved from famine.

[23 : 44] Joseph's story is part of a great overarching story. I'm sure as part of the series you've heard of the promise made to Abraham that he would be a father of a great nation and that through his descendants, all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Well, if Joseph's family starved to death, that promise is gone. By keeping Joseph alive, the promise stays alive, promise to bless people of all nations. And in the New Testament, we learn that Jesus is the chief descendant of Abraham, through whom all the nations of the earth are blessed. Joseph had absolutely no idea, I'm sure, when he was in prison that his suffering would lead to the coming of Jesus. And Jesus taught us, he taught his followers, that we can face any danger, any situation, in the full confidence that God is aware and that God is involved.

No one can snatch my sheep out of my hand, said Jesus. Jesus never promised his followers that God would spare them from suffering.

He never promised that he would spare any of us from trial or danger, from questions. But he did promise that God would not let them come to any ultimate harm.

[25 : 12] On one occasion, Jesus used this teaching of God's providence, God's providential care, both to challenge and comfort his disciples. Before he sent them out, and he said this, I'm sending you out as sheep among wolves.

And then he said this, don't be afraid of those who want to kill you. They can only kill your body. Yikes. But that's all.

Don't be afraid of them. They can't touch your soul. Fear only God who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Not even a sparrow worth only half a penny can fall to the ground apart from the will of your father.

And the very hairs of your head are all numbered. And it's easier to count some of our hairs than others. Depending how bald we're getting. But don't be afraid.

You're more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows. Here it is again, this time from Jesus. The entirety of your lives are in God's hands.

[26 : 16] And God sees you and knows you and takes care of you. And Jesus' point is that we have nothing to be afraid of ultimately. Nothing at all. The troubles and difficulties in our lives can't ultimately harm us.

People can hurt our bodies, of course. But there is no need to fear because they cannot touch the core of our being. And that's because God cares deeply for us to the point that God knows the number of hairs on our head.

And our all-powerful God sees when even the songbirds fall. And again, this is comforting teaching that ultimately all will be well.

Ultimately, the storms will pass and all will be well. And we wish it to be true. If we could embrace this teaching fully, how would we live differently?

it would help to calm our fears and insecurities. Is it true? Are we safe and secure in the hands of our great and caring God?

[27 : 25] God at work to redeem our suffering just like he did for Joseph? Is God at work to transform our trials into the beauty of reconciliation and new life to transform even us?

If it were true, imagine what new life it would breathe into us if we could go through life not being anxious, not being worried, not being afraid. if God is ultimately in control, then happy surprises are possible and we're encouraged even in the midst of suffering to wait, to wait with patience.

When Joseph was in prison for all those years, he may well have wondered if he would ever be a free man again. But then God did a new thing and his story certainly opens the door to the possibility that God can do a new thing in your life and in my life.

Is it true? The Bible absolutely says yes. The Bible affirms in every way that God brings good from evil.

The ultimate example of that is the resurrection of Jesus when the grievous darkness of Good Friday was followed by the splendid glory of Easter morning.

[28 : 46] In God's greatest surprise, life came from death. His disciples could not have imagined it in those few days between Good Friday and Easter.

Even when they couldn't see it, though they'd spent many days with Jesus and God surprised them and the whole world just as God surprised Joseph. The implications of Easter, of course, are enormous.

Life is stronger than death. Love is stronger than hate. and hope is stronger than despair.

Therefore, what is there to fear?

If God can raise the dead, can't God breathe new life into us? If God can raise the dead, can't God redeem our suffering?

Can't God bring life from the seemingly dead parts of our lives? In fact, could it be that the pattern of death and resurrection is actually the intended pattern of our Christian lives?

[29 : 51] Unless the seed falls into the ground and dies, it cannot bear new life. It's over and over in the biblical story it's through our suffering and our confusion and our questions and our turmoil that we ourselves mature and grow and that Christ is formed in us.

Far from being against God's plan, it seems to be the way that God delights to work in us. If Jesus as God's son had to suffer before God reversed the situation, and the same with Joseph, and if good came into the world through Joseph's suffering and Jesus' suffering, should we then be surprised that God might choose to work the same way through us as the followers of Jesus?

And if that's the case, doesn't it teach us to look at our suffering and trials in an entirely different way with a new set of eyes? And doesn't it teach us and encourage us to wait with hope for God to deliver us?

May God give us eyes to see. So, when you find yourself in a dark place, hang in there. God's got this and God's got you.

I want to conclude by reading the words of an old hymn. We used to sing it back in the Baptist Church of my childhood. I don't know if you sing it here or not. It's not in our Mennonite hymn book, I don't think, but it's a beautiful hymn. Be not dismayed, whate'er be tried, God will take care of you.

[31 : 24] Beneath his wings of love abide, God will take care of you. through days of toil, when heart doth fail, God will take care of you.

When dangers fierce, your path assail, God will take care of you. All you may need, he will provide. God will take care of you.

Nothing you ask will be denied. God will take care of you. No matter what may be the test. God will take care of you.

Lean, weary one, upon his breast. Excellent advice. God will take care of you. God will take care of you through every day or all the way.

He will take care of you. God will take care of you. Amen.