

# The Providence of God

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Genesis 50:20

The entire life of Joseph is summarized in Genesis 50:20: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." The teenager we met at the beginning of the story is now over a hundred years old. His life has come full circle, and he is addressing his duplicitous brothers. Their actions, in selling him into slavery, had nothing but evil intent written all over it. Their malevolence can in no way be lessened by the knowledge that things did not turn out as they might have done. Truth is, God overruled their evil actions to accomplish a purpose that neither they nor Joseph could have fathomed. God brought good out of evil. In the words of the Westminster Confession, God in His providence "upholds, directs, disposes and governs all creatures, actions and things" to bring about a sovereignly pre-determined plan (5.1).

This, God had accomplished through a variety of actions. Joseph's descent into slavery, followed by a false accusation of rape resulting in a lengthy imprisonment, spelled his downward spiral to the bottom. His life could hardly have been much worse. Only now, from the vantage point of what God had, in fact, accomplished — ensuring that an heir of the covenant promises was in the most powerful position in Egypt at a time when famine engulfed Canaan to ensure the survival of the covenant family — could Joseph look back and see the hand of God. As the puritan John Flavel has been so frequently cited as saying, providence is best read like Hebrew, backwards! Only then is it possible to trace the divine hand on the tiller guiding the gospel ship into a safe harbor. No matter how dark things get, His hand is always in control. Or, as the poet William Cowper wrote in verse:

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense  
but trust him for his grace;

Behind a frowning providence  
he hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast;  
unfolding every hour.

The bud may have a bitter taste,  
but sweet will be the flower.

Providence has wider issues in mind than merely our personal comfort or gain. In answer to the oft-cited question in times of difficulty, "Why me?" the forthcoming answer is always,

“Them!” He allows us to suffer so that others may be blessed. Joseph suffered in order that his undeserving brothers might receive blessing. In their case, this meant being kept alive during a time of famine and having the covenant promises of their father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, reaffirmed before their eyes.

What do you think went through the minds of those disciples who carried the blood-soaked body of Stephen for his burial? Were they saying to themselves, “What a waste! Couldn’t God have spared this godly man so that he might be of use to the church in her time of need? Does God care about us at all?” In all these questions, they would have been showing the shortsightedness that is so much a part of unbelief. They would not have been reckoning on the purposes of God had they asked such questions. For there, at the feet of Stephen’s corpse, stood a man upon whom Stephen’s death had the most profound impact. In hearing the voice of Jesus speak to him and accuse him of persecuting God’s Messiah, Paul learned what is arguably his most characteristic feature: that every Christian is in such spiritual union with Christ that to persecute one of His little ones is to persecute Jesus Himself!

And what were the purposes behind Joseph’s suffering? At least two are forthcoming in the closing chapters of Genesis: the first on a microcosmic level and the second on a larger, macrocosmic level. Joseph learned first of all that whatever happened to him personally, he was part of a larger purpose in which God’s plan was being revealed. In that case, he could not hold grudges against his brothers, no matter how badly they had behaved. True, they must learn their sin and confess it, and this explains the lengthy way in which Joseph finally reveals himself to them as his brother after first of all making them think that they had stolen from a prince of Egypt. God had used him as an instrument in the spiritual growth of his brothers, and Joseph seems to sense that by his utter unwillingness to hold a grudge against them.

But secondly, and on a much larger platform, Joseph begins to learn the answer to the question, how will the promises made to Abraham be fulfilled? At one level, the final scene of Jacob’s burial in Canaan attended by a huge entourage of Egyptians seems a curious way to end the story of Joseph. But it is part and parcel of it. In the end, the Egyptians are paying homage to Joseph’s family! When Jacob says to his son, “Make sure that I am buried in the land of promise” (see Gen. 50:5), he is thinking of the promise that God had given to Abraham of a land — a land that at this time they did not possess apart from this burial plot! At the end of Genesis the people of God are nowhere near possessing Canaan. They are going to spend four hundred years in captivity in Egypt. But in Jacob’s burial there is a glimpse of things to come. God has not forgotten His promise. He never does.