

FAITH MOVES MOUNTAINS - DOUBT CREATES THEM!

SNATCHING VICTORY FROM THE JAWS OF DEFEAT

The inscrutable workings of God in human lives to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat and to bring holy ends from the most unlikely of beginnings are summed up in the term divine providence. It is the outcome of God's sovereignty interacting with our freedom, and there is very little I can tell you about how it works. It is genuinely mysterious. But there is no more emphatic Biblical study in God's providence than the life of Joseph.

A seventeen-year-old boy was snatched from his father's house, terrorized by his brothers, sold into slavery, carried off to Egypt, falsely accused of attempted rape, and sentenced to prison. Thirteen years after the horrible ordeal began, he was dramatically and abruptly elevated to the position of Grand Vizier of Egypt. Second only to the Pharaoh, Joseph effectively ran that country's internal affairs for at least the next fourteen years. He was God's instrument to save not only Egypt's economy and people but the covenant community God had begun with Abraham.

The experiences of Joseph make the following words from Paul meaningful: **"That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good" (Romans 8:28, The Message).** His story also gives hope to people who read it that the same God who rescued him from his situation can also rescue them from theirs.

From Prison To Palace

The turning point of Joseph's life came when he was thirty years old. Having spent the previous thirteen years in slavery and jail, he was elevated by a sovereign God to the position for which he had been groomed through adversity. It would be the one time in his life to date when the improvement of his personal circumstances did not end in tragedy. The dreams God had given him in his boyhood about a high position of authority in which even his own family would bow to him had come true on God's timetable and in a most roundabout way.

While Joseph was in jail, two of Pharaoh's household servants – his baker and his cupbearer – had been thrown into prison with him. They had dreams, and Joseph interpreted them. The baker was executed, and the cupbearer was returned to his master's favor. **"The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him" (40:23)**. Two full years after this happened; Pharaoh himself had a disturbing dream. Only then did the cupbearer think about Joseph and tell the king about him.

The interpretation given Pharaoh's dream through Joseph was that Egypt would experience seven years of great productivity and abundance followed immediately by seven exhausting years of famine (41:17-32). The Lord not only interpreted the dream through Joseph but also led him to advise the Egyptian ruler to **"look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt" (41:33)**. His duties would be to oversee the collection and storage of twenty percent of the abundant harvests during the seven years of plenty as preparation for the famine that would surely come (41:34-36).

Pharaoh accepted both the interpretation and counsel about how to get ready for what lay ahead. In a stroke of insight – likely tied as well to the superstition of the polytheistic monarch – he discerned that Joseph should be the man in charge of preparing Egypt for the famine that lay ahead. He saw him as "one in whom is the spirit of God" (41:37-40). For the next seven years, Joseph was second in authority only to Pharaoh and oversaw the storage of huge amounts of grain against the coming famine.

In his personal life, two sons were born during that seven-year period (41:50). Each was given a name that reflected the sentiment of Joseph at the time of his birth. The first was Manasseh (i.e., forgetting); in his new role, Joseph could close the door on the painful part of his past – though not on his link with God's covenant promises (41:51). The second was Ephraim (i.e., fruitfulness); he acknowledged that the Lord had made him fruitful in his new environment (41:52).

Then the seven years of plenty ended, and Joseph was put in charge of all issues related to the distribution of the stored surplus (41:53-55). That the famine reached beyond Egypt to the surrounding countries (41:56-57) would set the stage for a dramatic reunion with his family.

"God Sent Me Ahead Of You"

The terrible famine brought Joseph's brothers into Egypt to purchase grain. Through a long series of intrigues, he recognized them and brought them into his presence. When Joseph told them his true identity, the brothers were speechless with fear (45:3). They must have quaked at the notions of what so powerful a man could do to them for their past sins against him. But Joseph immediately took the role of a supplicant himself and begged them not to fear him. Now that the pieces had come together for him as to what had been accomplished in the providence of God, he attempted to explain it to them. **"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"** (45:5).

In one of the great affirmations of the providence of God found anywhere, Joseph said, **"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God"** (45:8a). He didn't excuse what they had done. He didn't make God responsible for their sin. But he forgave them and echoed the faith that had sustained him all these years: God is going to use all these terrible things for some good purpose. I just know he will!

No person of faith can read the Joseph story without being struck by the grandeur of God's sovereign power to bring about His purposes from the most unpromising of circumstances. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

This text does not say that everything that happens in human experience is good. We know better! Neither does it say that everything that happens comes about because God wills it. Who would want to lay the jealousy, hatred, and evil deeds of Joseph's brothers at God's feet? To attribute their deeds to God's will would be to turn morality on its head (i.e., things the brothers did with evil intent were actually holy because God willed them) and to make our Holy God the source not only of good but of evil as well.

The biblical claim is that God uses all things – the bad ones as well as the good ones – to carry out His purposes. Some tragic events are the wicked deeds of violent, satan-serving humans (cf. Luke 13:1-2). Other tragedies have no explanation, for they

are simply incidents in nature (cf. Luke 13:4). Thus there are muggings and rapes, murders and wars; there are also traffic accidents and hurricanes, construction accidents and crib deaths. **Regardless of what happens in the life of anyone who is a believer, God has the power to overrule it to some end that achieves His purpose.**

And that is perhaps the final thing that people fail to notice in Romans 8:28. The grand promise of the providence of God is not operative in the life of everyone. It applies to "those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." In other words, this is a covenant promise to Christians. It is an affirmation of God's ability to create light in the darkness of our confusion, sin, and disarray.

Our Present Crisis

Our nation and world face a critical set of circumstances today that no one under the sound of my voice would have chosen. We didn't set them in motion. But they are upon us, and we must decide what to do with this time given to us. With soldiers still fighting in the Middle East, what shall we do?

First, let's pray continually. Pray for America. Pray for our President, Secretary of State, and our other national leaders. Pray for other nations. Pray for soldiers and their families. Pray for civilians in harm's way. Pray for God to show a path to authentic global peace in a time that heralds war.

Here is a prayer I am already praying, and you are welcome to join it or to adapt it for yourself: **Heavenly Father, deliver our world from war, bloodshed, and terror! Turn hearts ruled by hatred from their evil intentions and let justice roll down like waters. Bless our president, his advisors, and the leaders of other nations to find a path to peace in part of our world. If there can be no peace except by the defeat of evil powers, grant courage, strength, and swift victory. We plead for compassion to aid the suffering, to rescue the refugees, and to find a way to peace with people who today are our enemies. We beseech you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Second, let's do something concrete, useful, and sacrificial for people we know whose lives have been interrupted during this 'financial crisis.'

Many of these needs are as practical as housing, groceries, clothes and medicine. I haven't heard as clear a call for national and personal sacrifice from Washington as I would have liked, so it time for people in the 'Body of Christ' to step up to the plate.

God Meant This for Good

Joseph could look at the terrible ordeal through which he had come and say, "I know you guys weren't trying to do me any favor that day thirteen years ago when you sold me to slave traders! But God is bigger than your intentions, surpasses my most painful hours and utterly brilliant in His power to turn suffering into joy. He turned all these terrible things on their heads for the sake of doing good to us all." Joseph believed that about his life. And I believe that about your life. My life. This tense time in history.

Don't ask me to explain how some painful event in your life today will lead to a higher end, how a war can serve the ends of peace, or how you can rise above some tragedy that will hit your family. Do you think Joseph knew where his ordeals were headed? Faith does not mean having all the answers in times of crisis; rather, it means continuing in obedience to God when answers are not forthcoming.

Perhaps I can illustrate this wonderful text by reminding you of your last trip by airplane. Every part of a 727 is subject to gravity and will fall to the earth if left to itself. The heavy jet engines, the wings, your seat – all will plummet straight to the ground if dropped from 35,000 feet. But when all those parts are fitted together and pointed toward the sky under a skilled captain's hand, they fly! And they take passengers to their desired destinations! The same thing may be said of the events of my life. Some have been painful and many more have been happy. But when God fits them all together and guides the course of my life, I soar! And God has promised me a happy landing at my desired destination!

God Works in Human Lives

I believe with my whole heart that the same God who tracked the events of Joseph's life to bring him to the place where he would serve nobly in Egypt is at work in my life today. And I believe the same thing about your life too.

It is easy enough for me to read Joseph's story and feel no panic when his brothers plot against him and Potiphar's wife lies about him. I know it's going to turn out all right because I know the end of the story. But Joseph didn't know how all these things would be overruled to serve God's purpose. He didn't know the end from the beginning. Only God knew and the virtue of Joseph during the ordeal is that he trusted the Lord in circumstances he did not choose but in which he did not curse and abandon Him.

In the meanwhile, Joseph tried to make the best possible use of each situation. If he could not be a son in Jacob's house, he would be a trustworthy slave in Potiphar's. When he could no longer be a slave in an important man's house, he would be a model prisoner in Pharaoh's jail. He seems to have accepted each confusing turn in his life path without murmuring. His goal was simply to honor his God and be faithful in every situation. **"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much" (Luke 16:10).**

John Wesley was traveling to a preaching appointment one day, and his carriage got stuck in the mud following a rain. The delay disturbed him greatly because he had a commitment to preach in the town ahead. While he and some helpers were trying to get the vehicle moving again, a man happened by the scene. Wesley spoke with him for only a moment but perceived that he was deeply troubled about something. Daring to ask about his anguished appearance, Wesley learned that the farmer was practically destitute and in danger of losing his home because of crop failure. "The landlord is ready to turn us out," he said, "and I don't know where to go with my wife and children."

"How much do you owe?" asked Wesley. When told that twenty shillings would clear his debt, the preacher pulled that amount from his wallet. "Well," he said, "I believe we can handle that. The Lord evidently wanted me to meet you today." Turning to the people who had been helping him with his carriage stuck in the mud, he exclaimed, "Now I see why our carriage had to get stuck in the mud. Our steps were halted so that we might help that needy family."

Conclusion

When an artist begins a new canvas, he may first put down several broad strokes of basic colors. Someone watching him with an untrained eye might be confused and see no meaning at all to such a beginning. He might even walk away, convinced that nothing of beauty could come of so awkward a start. As the artist works carefully to blend the colors and to introduce an occasional new one from his palette, however, what had originally seemed to be meaningless confusion begins to emerge into a beautiful painting.

The workings of our God are sometimes of the same order. He does this and allows that in His world. It might appear that in a given instance there is no possible good that could come from a situation. Then, as a skillful artist, he brings first this and then another influence to bear until something purposeful begins to emerge and some good work is done to His glory. This is the biblical doctrine of the providence of God.

God is at work on the canvas of human history. We must not presume to know what He is attempting to achieve in particular cases. Neither are we wise enough to be critical of His methods. His workings in our lives are beyond our ability to discern, and we may not understand them until we look back from eternity.

Beauty from chaos, victory from defeat, and life from death! God has a track record of doing it time and again. So don't despair that you cannot see His resolution to your present crisis. Just continue to be trustworthy in whatever situation you find yourself. Make the best possible use you can of it.

Trust God to put all the pieces together in His own good time for His holy purposes. He has proved Himself faithful again and again in the lives of His people. You can be sure that He will not fail you.