

Joseph: God's Sovereignty in Our Trials

Scripture: Genesis 39:20; Genesis 50:19–21

Code: B140526

With the fear and uncertainty generated by the current COVID-19 pandemic, we consider this series by John MacArthur to be even more timely now than when it was first run six years ago. The following blog post was originally published on May 26, 2014. —ed.

Eleven grim faces stared anxiously at the floor. With eyes on the ground, all their attention was focused on the man at the front of the room. Huddled in tense silence, the eleven knelt before one of the most powerful rulers in the land, knowing he had the authority to execute them.

Dressed in royal garb fitting his office and flanked by guards and servants, the prime minister looked down on these herdsmen as they stooped before him. His long history with these men included vivid memories of pain and rejection.

In the past they had wronged him in unthinkable ways. Now the tables were turned. With a word, he could enact severe retribution on those who betrayed him.

Is that the action Joseph would take against his brothers? Their father Jacob was dead and buried. Now they bowed before their brother, fearful that he might finally seek revenge for their severe cruelty decades earlier.

Minutes felt like hours in the somber anticipation of Joseph's decision. The brothers braced themselves for the worst. Reuben, the oldest, had long blamed himself for what had happened to Joseph. Judah, too, felt the sting of guilt; he was the one who initially suggested selling Joseph into slavery. But all the brothers—except Benjamin, the youngest—had been involved in that treacherous act. They were all guilty. Was this the day their crimes had finally caught up with them?

When the silence broke, it was not with a voice of angry threats or harsh punishment. Instead, it was the unexpected sound of weeping. Struggling to maintain his composure, Joseph collected himself long enough to release the compassion that was in his heart. The Genesis account records his words:

“Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, *but* God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:19–21)

The Right Perspective

Unlike those who breed a seething hatred and desire for vengeance, Joseph treated his brothers with undeserved favor. But how are kindness and love cultivated in the heart of one so wickedly mistreated? The answer is found in Joseph's theology—he had a clear understanding of God's

providence. In that moment, with his trials behind him and his brothers before him, Joseph articulated the perspective that summarized the story of his life: *God is in control and we can trust Him for the outcome.*

As New Testament believers looking back on Joseph's example, we can see the principle of Romans 8:28 fleshed out in his life: "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." As Joseph himself articulated, God intended the trials of his life for the good of his people. Joseph's suffering was not a punishment for sin, but the means through which God would prepare Joseph for a specific role in His divine plan to save sinners.

God's Divine Purposes

Joseph couldn't see it at the time, but there was purpose in his suffering. Betrayed by his brothers, he had the joys of home and the security of his father's love violently ripped away from him. Without warning, he had become a victim of human trafficking. Surely he wondered why God permitted this to happen. How did this fit with the dreams God had given him?

Joseph was taken down to Egypt, where he was sold as a slave to Potiphar, a chief servant of Pharaoh. However, in the purposes of God and through Joseph's faithfulness, he quickly rose to a position of prominence in Potiphar's house. Joseph was so capable and trustworthy that his master gladly put all his possessions in Joseph's care.

It was God's providence that placed Joseph in Potiphar's house. Potiphar served in Pharaoh's court, which exposed Joseph to royalty and the noble customs of Egypt. Such knowledge would later prove essential. Joseph was also given a unique opportunity to develop his leadership qualities. As a boy he merely reported on his brothers' activities, but now he was directly managing his master's resources. That administrative experience would likewise prove invaluable for Joseph's future. In addition to his exposure and experience, Joseph's placement in Potiphar's house ensured that, if he were ever found guilty of a crime, he would be sent to the same place where Pharaoh's own prisoners were confined (cf. Genesis 39:20). That, too, was crucial to the divine plan.

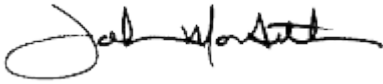
A False Accusation

Potiphar's wife began to take an illicit interest in her husband's Hebrew slave. Scorned by his refusal as he fled from her advances, her sensual desires for Joseph immediately turned into vicious animosity as she grabbed onto his clothing. Her fury raged against Joseph, and she shouted to the other servants in the house. When they found her, she accused Joseph of attempted rape, holding up his garment as proof. For the second time in his life, he was stripped of his clothing. Years before, when his brothers grabbed his robe, he was thrown into a pit. This time, his garment in the hands of Potiphar's wife would result in his being thrown into prison.

Joseph *must* have wondered how all these things could be happening to him when he had done nothing to deserve such treatment. In spite of what must have been great temptation to grumble, complain, and get angry, he continually responded by honoring the Lord and doing what was right. While he couldn't have understood why, Joseph was content that sitting in that prison was exactly where God wanted him.

What About You?

As you look at your life—in both good times and bad—can you see how the Lord has prepared you for certain tasks and responsibilities—how He has used circumstances to accomplish His purposes in your life?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joel Osteen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from [*Twelve Unlikely Heroes*](#).)

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