

# The Providence of God: Lessons from the Life of Joseph

## Week 1—Genesis 37:12-29

This week we're beginning a 5 week study of the life of Joseph. Before we jump in, think on this question:

1) What do you think about when you hear the phrase, "the providence of God?" How would you describe or define God's providence?

***God's "providence" is his sovereign reign and rule over all of the created order. It speaks of the fact that he orders, ordains, decrees and controls everything that comes to pass (including everything in my life and in yours) and that he does so with a predetermined plan or outcome in mind.***

2) Look up the following verses in your bible and make a list of all of the things that that God, in his providence, rules over (Note: this is just a small sampling): Proverbs 16:1, Proverbs 16:9, Proverbs 16:33, Proverbs 19:21, Proverbs 21:1, Proverbs 21:30, Ps. 103:19, Matt 5:45, Ps. 66:7, Gal. 1:15, Luke 1:52, Ps. 4:8, 1 Sam. 2:9, Acts 17:28, Gen. 28:15, Mt. 10:29-31, Luke 21:18, 1 Cor. 10:13, 1 Pet. 3:12, Hebrews 11:1, Col. 1:17, Mt. 28:18-20, Acts 2:36, Eph. 1:20-23

3) If God really is in control of all things, and if he's loving and good and all of the other wonderful traits that the scriptures ascribe to him, then why do we often find ourselves facing tragic, or difficult, or even wicked circumstances?

**Background on Joseph:** The story of Joseph begins in Genesis 37 and runs all the way through Genesis 50. It is one of the longest narratives regarding a given biblical character in the bible. But this is not just the story of *Joseph*. It is also the story of *Judah*, Joseph's older brother. Keep your eye on him, and you'll see how that plays out as we move through this study in the weeks to come.

Joseph was the 11th of 12 sons born to Jacob (also called "Israel"), but he was the firstborn son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. If you know the story, Jacob had two wives: Leah and Rachel. He also had two concubines, which were kind of like wives, but didn't have the status that his true wives had. As you may recall, Leah and Rachel were sisters. Leah was unattractive and Rachel was attractive. Jacob had no love for Leah whatsoever and was deceived into marrying her by the girls' father. He later married Rachel. The only catch was that Leah could bear children and Rachel couldn't. In fact, Leah gave birth to 6 of Jacob's sons and his only daughter. Jacob's two concubines also gave birth to two sons apiece (4 total). During all of this time, Rachel, the only one of the group that Jacob actually loved, suffered as a barren woman (and her sister Leah rubbed that in her face every chance she had). Finally, God heard Rachel's cry and she gave birth to Joseph (again, the 11th of 12 boys - she later also gave birth to Benjamin - but the firstborn son of the only woman that Jacob every really desired to marry) and Jacob was so thrilled that he violated all of the conventions of his day and made Joseph his primary heir and governor of his house! He then visibly demonstrated this by giving Joseph a multi-colored tunic that he wore everywhere he went. As you might imagine, his brothers (and everyone other than Rachel) hated this, and their resentment festered.

As the story goes, Joseph's brothers apparently were involved in some misdeeds and Joseph told his father about it, which didn't help his relationship with his brothers. *Then* he had not one but *two* dreams (visions, really) from God in which his brothers (and father and mother in the second dream) all bowed down to him. He shared this with his brothers, and they hated him even more, for now it appeared that God, too, favored Joseph over them. Interestingly, Moses, who is writing this story, uses language that parallels the story of Cain and Abel in order to cause the careful reader to recall that story in which Cain murders his brother Abel and then refuses to repent. When God comes and asks him where his brother is, Cain gives the famous reply: "I do not know? Am I my brother's keeper?" Hang on to that thought! Moses is clearly comparing Joseph's brothers to Cain, who was marked as an unbeliever and sent to live in the land of Nod (lit., the land of wandering). These guys are bad guys! But, in God's providence, unlike Cain, they will repent eventually and will change. Anyway, this is where we pick up the story today.

**Genesis 37:12-14** <sup>12</sup>Then his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem. <sup>13</sup>Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them." And he said to him, "I will go." <sup>14</sup>Then he said to him, "Go now and see about the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the flock, and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem.

Jacob sends his favorite son, Joseph, to a foreign country (Shechem) to find his brothers. Watch that theme!

4) Read Genesis 34 - Why might Jacob have had reason to be concerned about his sons?

5) Why do you think that Jacob didn't send Joseph with his brothers in the first place? Might he already mistrust them?

While in Shechem, Joseph gets lost.

6) Why does Moses include this seemingly meaningless detail in this story? Are there any meaningless details for any of us in life? Can you give an example of a seemingly meaningless event in your life that you are now able to discern the meaning of?

**Genesis 37:15-20**--<sup>15</sup>A man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, "What are you looking for?" <sup>16</sup>He said, "I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are pasturing the flock." <sup>17</sup>Then the man said, "They have moved from here; for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. <sup>18</sup>When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. <sup>19</sup>They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer!" <sup>20</sup>"Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!"

It's ironic that Joseph would be safer in the hands of a man of Shechem than in the hands of his own brothers. It is also a play on the Cain and Abel story. Cain said, "I don't know where my brother is. Am I my brother's keeper?" Joseph goes looking for his brothers. He's very different from Cain, whom Moses here clearly compares to Joseph's brothers. There is a major moral difference between Joseph and his brothers at play in this story. Moreover, if you're following along, then you may have noticed that the uniquely favored son of the father, sent to a foreign land to seek out his brothers, was met with envy, anger and hostility by his brothers, who stripped him naked of his special robe and threw him into an empty pit. Sound familiar?

Joseph's brothers identify Joseph by means of their resentment ("here comes this dreamer"). What they resent most is the plan of God in which they are bowing to Joseph. They then seek here to subvert the plans of God via wickedness.

7) Can the plans of God can ever be subverted via wickedness or any other instrumentality? Why or why not?

**Genesis 37:19-24**--<sup>19</sup>They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer!" <sup>20</sup>"Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!" <sup>21</sup>But Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands and said, "Let us not take his life." <sup>22</sup>Reuben further said to them, "Shed no blood. Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay hands on him"--that he might rescue him out of their hands, to restore him to his father. <sup>23</sup>So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; <sup>24</sup>and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it.

8) He who would have his brothers bow down at his feet was now literally under their feet. How do you think Joseph felt about his dreams at this point in the story? Have you ever found yourself in a position in which you could not possibly imagine any way that God could keep his promises to you?

**Genesis 37:25-29**--<sup>25</sup>Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup>Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood?" <sup>27</sup>"Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. <sup>28</sup>Then some Midianite traders passed

**by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt. <sup>29</sup> Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments.**

Do you now see how Joseph's seemingly meaningless wandering around in Shechem was actually hugely important? God ordained that he get lost in order to delay his arrival so that the Ishmaelites would come along at the very moment his brothers were deciding his fate. But for that delay, Joseph's brothers likely would've *killed* him, and his dreams (and all of redemptive history) would never have come to pass. But, as we'll see, *they did!*

9) Read the account of Jacob's deception of his father Isaac in which he, as the younger son, steals the blessing that rightly belonged to his brother, Esau in Genesis 27:1-37. Do you see any irony involved here between the manner in which Jacob had deceived his father and the way in which he, as a father, was later deceived by his sons?

This chapter ends in a place where nothing makes sense to Joseph (he's now a slave in Egypt) and nothing makes sense to Jacob (who thinks he's lost his son). However, as we'll see, it all makes perfect sense to God. In his eyes, things are all moving along according to plan.

10) Why do you suppose that God doesn't share his plans with us (or with Joseph) so that we (and he) can simply relax? What is it that he's trying to engender in us?

11) What parallels, if any, do you see between Joseph and Jesus in this story?

***Spend some time in prayer. In your own words, ask God to help you understand the story of Joseph in light of God's redemptive story—the way he, in his PROVIDENCE, is restoring his creation, including you and me, to perfect peace and fellowship with him. Ask God to help you see how his plan is being worked out in your life and experiences to accomplish his work of redemption as well. This can be hard, especially when you've been "thrown in a hole," but praise God for the things you see him doing in and through your life. Name them specifically.***

***Have a great week!***