

The Providence of God: Lessons from the Life of Joseph

Week 2—Genesis 38:1-39:20

Last week we saw that God just create everything and then wind it up like a clock, allowing things to play out however they may (to let “nature take its course” without His guiding hand). Rather, God started with the picture in mind. *It is his picture!* And His creative activity still continues! Now he sovereignly (as King and Rightful Ruler of all things) orders, governs over, and directs everything toward the creation of his picture.

What does that mean for you? It means your life is a tiny but precious piece in the giant jigsaw puzzle (picture) that God is creating. Therefore, your life can only be properly understood within the context of God's great big beautiful picture. Imagine if all you had was one tiny puzzle-piece from a giant jigsaw puzzle. You could spend the rest of your life hypothesizing about what it might be, but you would never really know until you saw how it fit within the whole. So it is with us! The challenge is to trust this God who has revealed himself to us most definitively and profoundly in the person of Jesus Christ and to believe him when he says that he's working on something bigger than our individual lives in ways that will make sense of everything that happens inside the edges of our lives in ways that will make all things beautiful and good. Someday we'll see that, but today we are called simply to trust.

With all that in mind, let's continue with our study of the life of Joseph who, as you may recall from last week, was born into a dysfunction and even wicked family; was the favorite son of his father and, as a result, hated by his evil brothers (whom Moses linguistically compared to Cain from Genesis 4); was sent by his father to a foreign land to find his wayward brothers (a picture of Jesus); only (like Jesus) to be met with their hostility, stripped of his clothes, and thrown into an unused pit, who then sat down to enjoy a meal while Joseph cried out for his life; and then, who was sold for silver at the prompting of his brother, Judah (who's name in the Greek is "Judas") to some spice traders headed for Egypt, where he was sold to a wealthy and powerful Egyptian named Potiphar. His brothers, on the other hand, headed home and, on the way, took Joseph's uniquely special tunic and dipped it in the blood of a goat and then presented it to their father (possibly under the continued leadership of Judah) saying (and this is important): "*Please examine and see whether this is your son's tunic or not.*" Please remember that language! Jacob, Joseph's father, then assumed that his favorite son had been devoured by wild beasts and, in a sense, he was! And nothing inside the edges of Joseph's little puzzle-piece life made any sense, except to God!

We pick up our study this week in Genesis 38, which focuses on Judah (a HUGELY important character), and his response to sexual temptation in the land of Canaan. We will also cover Genesis 39, in which Moses contrasts Judah with Joseph and with Joseph's response to sexual temptation in the house of Potiphar.

Read Genesis 38:1-2 (NASB)

¹And it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. ²Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and went in to her.

The word "departed" in verse 1 should actually be translated "went down." It's not simply a description of what is happening in Judah's life geographically. It is also a statement of what is happening in his life spiritually. That is to say, he's not just headed down into Canaanite country physically. He's also headed there spiritually. Please keep in mind that the Canaanites were under the curse of Noah. They were a forbidden people from the perspective of Judah's family. Judah forsakes all of that and not only shares the table with a Canaanite (Hirah), which, in the ancient near east, was a sign of his oneness with that man, but he marries one! He sees and takes a forbidden woman!

1) Can you think of a time in your life when you "went down" spiritually? What happened or came of that time in your life?

Read Genesis 3:6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

2) Do you see any similarities between the verbs in Genesis 3:6 and Genesis 38:2 (specifically, the words "saw" and "took")? What do you think that Moses, the author of both stories, might be saying about Judah here?

Read Genesis 38:3-11

³So she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er.

⁴Then she conceived again and bore a son and named him Onan.

⁵She bore still another son and named him Shelah; and it was at Chezib that she bore him.

⁶Now Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.

⁷But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life.

⁸Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother."

⁹Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother.

¹⁰But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also.

¹¹Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"; for he thought, "I am afraid that he too may die like his brothers." So Tamar went and lived in her father's house.

In the ancient near east, when a son died and left a widow behind, the next oldest brother was obligated to marry the widow and have children (specifically, a son) with her who would, in a sense, take the place of her dead husband and would also assume the dead husband's inheritance. This is why Onan didn't want to impregnate Tamar. He knew that it would cut into his own inheritance. He was willing to use her for sex, but that's it. Moses continues to paint a rather unflattering picture of Judah. Two of his sons are so wicked that God kills them and Judah is so spiritually insensitive that

he superstitiously blames Tamar (the heroine of this tale). He then lies to Tamar in order to spare his youngest and only son from what he assumes would be a similar fate as that of his two older boys. Judah is legally obligated to give his youngest son to Tamar and she is legally entitled, as the widow of the oldest son of Judah, to carry on the line of Judah. He has no intention of doing living up to his end of the deal!

3) Can you identify with Judah here in any respect? Have you left any clear obligations unfulfilled? What have been the consequences?

Read Genesis 38:12-18

¹²Now after a considerable time Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died; and when the time of mourning was ended, Judah went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite.

¹³It was told to Tamar, "Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep."

¹⁴So she removed her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in the gateway of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah had grown up, and she had not been given to him as a wife.

¹⁵When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, for she had covered her face.

¹⁶So he turned aside to her by the road, and said, "Here now, let me come in to you"; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?"

¹⁷He said, therefore, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." She said, moreover, "Will you give a pledge until you send it?"

¹⁸He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" And she said, "Your seal and your cord, and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him.

Wow! What's happening here? What's happening is that Tamar is taking, via trickery, what Judah has wrongfully denied her: the right to carry on the line of Judah. Judah, who deceived his father with Joseph's blood-covered tunic and with the words: "*Please examine and see* whether this is your son's tunic or not" has now, himself, been deceived. Moreover, like the highly unique and personal tunic of Joseph, which represented Joseph's position and authority in the family, Judah's seal and cord and staff were also highly unique and personalized items. They bore his name and represented him and his authority.

4) What do you think of the actions of Tamar here? Why do you think that this Canaanite woman was later considered a heroine in Israel? Why also do you think that Tamar finds herself, as a result of this pregnancy, in the lineage of Jesus Christ?

Read Genesis 38:19-30

¹⁹Then she arose and departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow's garments.

²⁰When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite, to receive the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her.

²¹He asked the men of her place, saying, "Where is the temple prostitute who was by the road at Enaim?" But they said, "There has been no temple prostitute here."

²²So he returned to Judah, and said, "I did not find her; and furthermore, the men of the place said, 'There has been no temple prostitute here.'"

²³Then Judah said, "Let her keep them, otherwise we will become a laughingstock. After all, I sent this young goat, but you did not find her."

²⁴Now it was about three months later that Judah was informed, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry." Then Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!"

²⁵It was while she was being brought out that she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "I am with child by the man to whom these things belong." And she said, "Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?"

²⁶Judah recognized them, and said, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not have relations with her again.

²⁷It came about at the time she was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb.

²⁸Moreover, it took place while she was giving birth, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, "This one came out first."

²⁹But it came about as he drew back his hand, that behold, his brother came out. Then she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" So he was named Perez.

³⁰Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah.

While Tamar is being brought out to be burned by this HUGE hypocrite named Judah, she sends out his highly unique and personalized items as belonging to the man who was the father of what turns out to be two children (this confirms Judah's primacy over his brothers - he gives birth to twins, much like his father was a twin, and the younger takes preference over the older, much like Jacob did with his brother, Esau). Notice the language that, in God's providence, she uses: "Please examine and see whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?" It's the very same language that Judah and his brothers had used with their father! And notice Judah's reaction. He confesses his unrighteousness. As we continue in future weeks you will see how Judah becomes the hero of this story and the clearest picture of Jesus in the entire text. He, not Joseph, will be given authority over the family by Jacob and he, not Joseph, will become the father of the tribe through whom Jesus will one day be born.

5) Why do you think that God, through Moses, paints such an unflattering picture (at least at the beginning of this story) of the man through whom Jesus would eventually be born? What hope does the story, and particularly, the transformation, of Judah offer?

We now move into the comparison text of Genesis 39.

Read Genesis 39:1-6

¹Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there.

²The LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

³Now his master saw that the LORD was with him and how the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand.

⁴So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge.

⁵It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; thus the LORD'S blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field.

⁶So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.

6) Please notice that verse 2 says that the Lord was with Joseph in the midst of all of this. Have you ever experienced a difficulty in your life in which you felt like the Lord was not with you, even though, in his word, he promises that he is? What might you learn from Joseph?

7) Also, please notice that verse 2 also says that the Lord made Joseph "a successful man." What does this say about the the successes that we enjoy in life?

Read Genesis 39:7-9

⁷It came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, Lie with me."

⁸But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge.

⁹There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?"

What's so amazing about Joseph's response to this sexual temptation (again, compare Judah!) is not simply the fact that Joseph is 17, far from home, away from dad, and that this woman, as the wife of a high ranking Egyptian official, is undoubtedly beautiful. What's amazing is that Joseph is faithful to God even during this season of his life in which, at least within the edges of his little puzzle-piece life, it looked like God had been unfaithful to him.

8) Have you ever used the circumstances of your life to excuse or justify a sin or pattern of sinful behavior? What might you learn from the story of the life of Joseph in that regard?

Read Genesis 39:10-20

¹⁰As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her.

¹¹Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside.

¹²She caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside.

¹³When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside,

¹⁴she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed.

¹⁵"When he heard that I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled and went outside."

¹⁶So she left his garment beside her until his master came home.

¹⁷Then she spoke to him with these words, "The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me;

¹⁸and as I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside."

Joseph Imprisoned

¹⁹Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your slave did to me," his anger burned.

²⁰So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail.

Did you notice the way temptation works (verse 10)? It just keeps coming! Day after day after.... Did you notice also that Joseph's clothes were once again used to propagate a falsehood against him. Watch the clothes of Joseph all through this narrative. Every time his situation changes (either for good or bad) it is preceded by a change of clothes. Also, the word "jail" in the Hebrew language actually means "pit." In other words, Joseph once again, finds himself in a pit! And, as with before, he's seemingly punished for doing the right thing! However, unlike the last "pit" he was in, he will not be in this one for only a few hours. He will be in this one for years.

9) Can you sympathize with Joseph here? Has there been a time in your life when you feel like you were punished for doing the right thing?

We'll pick up the story again next week, and we'll get to see in Joseph's life the very thing that we often wish we could see in ours. We'll see how God has worked outside of the edges of the little puzzle-piece of his life to make sense of all of this! Even this is beautiful as it finds its place within the big picture of God. So it is with you as well. Your job is to trust!