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Genesis 36-38

"The Providence of God"

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Genesis 1-36 includes, among other things, the story of Creation, Noah and The Flood, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the span of time is approximately a few thousand years. In Genesis 37-50, which makes up a little more than 25% of the book, time slows down and the focus of these chapters is the life of Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons. In fact, more is written about Joseph than any other person in Genesis.

Joseph is quite a bit unlike his father and forefathers, in that he is a model of godliness, integrity, humility and purity. He's also an incredible example of faithfulness in the midst of adversity, and forgiveness in the face of mistreatment. His life introduces us in a profound way to the Doctrine of Providence.

Part of understanding the story of Joseph's life is understanding that in God's providence, he works in two ways: by the visible and the invisible. The visible hand of God performs acts or miracles, including Creation, the Exodus, and many other examples in the first 36 chapters of this book. The invisible hand of God works behind the scenes to accomplish his purposes, in ways we cannot see.

The unseen hand of God is just as awesome as his seen hand, but we are usually drawn to the visible miracles to the point that we often don't appreciate his incredible workings behind the scenes. God is ever about the business of orchestrating events and weaving our lives in a pattern that is nothing short of miraculous.

There are two views of God's working in the affairs of man. The first, fatalism, suggests that God orchestrates everything, which means that individuals have no choice in anything. The second view embraces God's passive involvement with

mankind. The adherents of this viewpoint believe that God set things in motion, sort of like winding a clock, and then he completely removed himself from the equation.

The truth is that providence is a combination of the hand of God working with the will of man. Throughout the Bible we see God's involvement in the lives of individuals, as well as nations, and for that matter, creation, as he sees fit. God does not deny a person's will, but he works through and around their will to accomplish his purposes.

Joseph's Story

1. When the account of Joseph's life starts in Genesis 37, we read that he is 17 years old, *"well-built and handsome."* ([Genesis 39:6b](#))
2. He is the epitome of the type of man every parent hopes his or her daughter will marry!
3. Joseph is not only good looking on the outside; on the inside he's pure, honest, decent, moral, and godly.
4. He isn't perfect, but his life is one every young person would do well to emulate.
 - a. [1 Timothy 4:12](#) - *"Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity."*
5. Joseph's life is a great example of the fact that you *can* live a life that is sold out for the Lord!
6. We shouldn't be fooled into thinking that Joseph became a godly young man because of the influence of his parents and his upbringing.
 - a. As we have seen in our studies in the book of Genesis, it's not hard to see that Joseph came from what is known today as a dysfunctional family!
 - b. Consider the family dynamics:
 - i. Jacob is guilty of the sin of favoritism, just like his parents.
 1. Isaac favored Esau and Rebekah favored Jacob.
 - ii. [Genesis 37:3a](#) - *"Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age..."*
 - iii. The evidence for Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph can be seen by everyone, in that he made *"a richly ornamented robe for [Joseph]."*¹

¹ The Hebrew suggests that the robe sleeves extended to the wrists and all the way down to the ankles, plus it was a magnificent coat of many colors.

iv. In [Genesis 37:12-14](#), we read that the favorite son is not even out serving with his brothers, he's at home with Dad!

7. One sin led to another when Jacob's sons became jealous of Joseph.
 - a. [Genesis 37:4](#) - *"When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him."*
8. Joseph is a snitch!
 - a. [Genesis 37:2](#) - *"Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them."*
9. Joseph is a bit of a braggart!
 - a. He had two dreams from God that showed God's providential hand on his life, and when he told the details of his dreams to his brothers, *"they hated him all the more."* ([Genesis 37:5-8](#))
 - b. He didn't stop when he saw how much they hated him; he proceeded to tell them how his mother, father and all of his brothers would one day bow down to him! ([Genesis 37:9-11](#))
 - i. It's true that God's hand was upon Joseph and that one day God was going to use him to rescue his family, thus preserving the Jewish nation, and these dreams did come true, but without knowing that, it was hard for his family to hear these things without thinking that Joseph had an ego the size of Texas!
10. Jealousy leads to a murderous plot! ([Genesis 37:14-18](#))

God's Providential Will

11. Joseph's family shows the signs of many sins, including favoritism, jealousy, mistreatment, cruelty, betrayal, deception, and lying, but through all of this God's Providential Hand was at work behind the scenes.
12. It's important to answer a few questions about all that's Joseph will go through in the months and years to come.
 - a. Did God will for Joseph to be mistreated and betrayed by his family? No!
 - b. Did God will for Jacob to suffer through the pains of grief for 22 years thinking that his son was dead? No!
 - c. Did God will the other terrible things that were done to Joseph? No!

13. God knows that sinful people will do sinful things, which moves him to step in and redirect things with the purpose of bringing good out of tragedy.
14. How is it that good is supposed to come out of our tragedies?
 - a. Remember, the last chapter has oftentimes not been written.
 - b. In order to believe in the proper perspective concerning God's Providential Will, it's important to know that God is good and, even though we live in a fallen world, God will use both good and bad situations to accomplish his good purpose.
15. **James 1:13-15** - *"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."*
 - a. God does not *will* people to sin.
 - b. God does not *cause* people to wrong or be wronged.
16. Tragic and terrible things happen *because* we live in a fallen world, but it is God who scoops up the broken pieces of people's lives and says, "Now, let me bring something good out of all of this."
17. Things that are out of balance now, and the things that are uneven now, will be made straight and smooth at his Coming!
 - a. **Luke 3:5-6** - *"Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation."*
18. Why doesn't God prevent or stop certain things from happening?
 - a. It may sound trite, but when God does this, it will be called Heaven, and we're not there yet!
 - b. Things just don't work themselves out; it is God who works things out for our good.
 - c. **Romans 8:28** - *"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."*

Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read **Genesis 37** to provide an overview for this study.

3. Spend time talking about personal experiences or the experiences of people you know who have been on the “wrong end” of favoritism.
 - a. Did the sin of favoritism lead to other sin(s)?
 - i. How did jealousy factor in the situation?
4. Read and discuss this quote by Pastor Gary: “The truth is that providence is a combination of the hand of God working with the will of man.”
5. How have you seen the visible and the invisible hand of God at work in your life?
 - a. Share the details of events that led up to: the moment you were saved, the time you met your spouse or the one you love, getting the job you have or the home you live in.
 - b. How was the Lord arranging and rearranging things on your behalf for his good purpose?
6. Spend time talking about the two viewpoints regarding God’s providence (fatalism/passive).
 - a. Read and discuss the comments Pastor Gary made concerning the things Joseph experienced. (See #12 above)
7. Read and discuss [Romans 8:28](#). (See #14 above)
8. Have there been times in your life when tragedy shook your faith in God?
9. How have you coped with the fact that we don’t always have the answers to the “Why” questions?
10. Who is God when we are in the midst of suffering or grieving in the times of the unexplained sorrows of life?
 - a. How do you answer questions like these?
 - i. Doesn’t he care?
 - ii. Does he love us?
 - iii. Is he too busy?
 - iv. Is he not powerful enough to do anything?
 - v. Is he punishing us for something we’ve done in the past?
11. Are you willing to trust the Lord, even when there is no explanation and you’ve come to the conclusion that you just don’t know why things happened the way they did?
12. Read and discuss [Philippians 4:7](#).

13. Allow the people in your group to share their experiences about times when the Lord was their strength, and his grace was sufficient.
14. Have you found that a proper understanding of God's providence has led you to be filled with more trust, gratitude, patience, and hope in the Lord?
15. Close your time in prayer by asking the Holy Spirit to help each person: know the peace that passes all understanding (have someone ready to read [Philippians 4:7](#) so you can "pray the Scripture"); patiently wait, with the certain hope that the Lord will work things out for their good and his glory; trust the Lord, even when the circumstances of life don't make sense;

* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New International Version (NIV 1984).