

## **12 Keys to Spiritual Maturity: Unshakable Under Trial**

**Genesis 49:20–50:28**

By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)

Genesis 49 at verse 28:

All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to when he blessed them. He blessed them, everyone with the blessing, appropriate to him. Then he charged them and said to them, 'I am about to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham brought along with the field from Ephron to Hittite for a burial site. There they buried Abraham and his wife, Sarah, there they buried Isaac and his wife, Rebekah, and there I buried Leah — the field and the cave that is in it, purchased from the son of Heth.' When Jacob finished charging his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people. Then Joseph fell on his father's face, and wept over him and kissed him. And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm Israel. Now forty days were required for it, for such is the period required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days. And when the day of mourning for him were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, 'If now I have found favor in your sight, please speak to Pharaoh, saying, 'My father made me swear, saying, 'Behold, I am about to die; in my grave which is I dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me.' Now therefore, please let me go up and bury my father; then I will return.'" And Pharaoh, said, 'Go up and bury your father, as he made your swear.' So Joseph went up to bury his father, and with him went of all his servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household and all of the elders of the land of Egypt, and all the household of Joseph and his brother's and his father's household; they left only their little ones and their flocks and their herds in the land of Goshen. There also went up with him both chariots and horsemen; and it was a great company. When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, when is beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and sorrowful lamentations, and he observed seven days mourning for his father. Now when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning at the threshing floor of Atad, they said, 'This is a grievous mourning for the Egyptians.' Therefore, it was

named Abelmizraim, which is beyond the Jordan. And thus his sons did for him as he had charged them; for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him near Ephron, the Hittite. And after he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers, and all that had gone up with him to bury his father. When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph should bear a grudge against us and pay us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him.' So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, 'Your father charged before he died, saying, 'Thus you shall say to Joseph, 'Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.' And Joseph wept upon when they spoke to him, Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, 'Behold, we are your servants.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? 'And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to prepare many people alive. 'So, therefore, do not be afraid, I will provide for you and your little one.' So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. Now Joseph stayed in Egypt he and his father's household, and Joseph lived a hundred and ten years. And Joseph saw the third generation of Ephraim's sons, also the sons of Machir, the son of Manasseh, were born on Joseph's knees. And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you, and bring you up from this land to the land which he promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.' Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying 'God will surely take care of you, and shall carry my bones up from here.' So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Amen, may God bless to us the reading of His Holy and inerrant Word. Let's pray together.

Our Father as we turn now to the Scriptures, we pray that You would be our teacher, and that You would impress upon us those things that we so desperately need to learn, and help us afresh to be Your willing servants, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Now we are looking together at some of the keys of spiritual maturity. And tonight I want us to think about this important key of being unshakable under trial. I have in my hands a copy from *Time* magazine this week. I don't subscribe to *Time* magazine. I rarely read it. But here it is. There's an article in here this week called "When God Hides His Face." It's the story of a couple who attend Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Their names are David and Nancy Guthrie. They had a child born to them with a terrible disorder known as Zelwager syndrome. This little child whom they called Hope lived for 199 days. David received a vasectomy; his wife still became pregnant; he stood before the congregation and announced that they were about to give birth to yet another

child. And he announced to the congregation that this child also had this same disease. And this child also was going to die. Their new child was due on July 16, and will almost certainly be dead within a year. What do you say to folks like that? And that, of course, is just one example of many. I could have chosen an example from this congregation. And many, many of you have stories to tell of the strangeness of God's providence. Things happen in our lives that we don't want, that we never wish for, that we certainly never pray for, but we long would go away; that cause us stress and pain, and disorder and make us cry out to God, "Why?" Life can be hard. And it is no different indeed in some instances, it is more difficult for Christians, because being a believer in Jesus Christ does not eradicate the possibility that things like this can happen. Maintaining spiritual maturity then is vital.

Be strong in the Lord, says the apostle, and that is something that we discover in the narrative of the life of Joseph. The whole story of Joseph can be summarized by what we might call an epitomizing text, namely verse 20 of chapter 50. Here is Joseph's life. Here is the summary of what his life is about. He says to his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." And that's the testimony isn't it? A faithful, mature man of God. These closing chapters of Genesis, of course, relate the story of a young man that we first encounter at the age of seventeen in Genesis 37, and in these closing verses he is one hundred and ten years old, and dying, and finally embalmed and put in a coffin in Egypt. He ranges from being a nobody, an obscure young man, somewhat arrogant and pretentious, looking after his father's home rather than being with the sheep and his brothers, rising to being the second most important man in all of Egypt. And the narrative of the life of Joseph is an example of the doctrine of providence.

But God upholds and directs and disposes and governs all creatures' actions and things. Well, that's how we say it theologically. That's how *The Westminster Confession of faith* would say it. But there's a sense in which that same precious truth is illustrated in the life of Joseph to a degree that so that you and I are enabled to read this story and to discern the fingerprints of almighty God all over his life. If you came with, I don't know what they use, you know those people who come in a crime scene and look for fingerprints. That dust, that talcum powder. I'm sure it's something much more fancy than that. But whatever it is, if you scattered that stuff all over the closing chapters of Genesis what you would see are the fingerprints of Almighty God. God moves in a mysterious way. Somebody, I won't name him, said he is getting tired of this hymn because, apparently, I am always quoting it, but it's such a wonderful, wonderful hymn. William Cooper said, "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform, He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm deep. In deep and unfathomable minds of never failing skill, He treasures up His bright designs and works His sovereign will."

## I. The perfect wisdom of God is manifested in a variety of experiences

Now that truth is declared for us in three ways here in the closing verses of the book of Genesis. The perfect wisdom of God is manifested for us, in the first place, in a variety of experiences. Now our time is somewhat at a premium so I am going to try and summarize, what is it? Thirteen or fourteen chapters in a minute or so. And try and remember the whole story of Joseph. I wish we had fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes to recount the whole narrative of the story of Joseph, but imagine for a second the story of the seventeen-year old pretentious upstart of a boy with his multi-colored jacket, mother's boy, pampered, left in a pit, sold into slavery in Egypt, and falsely accused of rape. Imagine that. Imagine that. And who is the one who says that the Bible isn't up to date? Locked in prison, given a glimmer of hope that he might be released and then forgotten for ten years. And then what an astonishing story it is. And then being the very man at the right time, and the right place, in the right circumstances, raised to the office of Prime Minister of Egypt. Who would have thought it?

But, you know they say, don't they that hindsight is 20-20. You know, I told you so. It's easy to look back and discern what you should have done and what you shouldn't have done, and discern this and that and the other, but at any one time in the life of Joseph could Joseph have said, "I understand what God is doing in my life." Of course not. When Job was languishing in prison with a thought that he was going to live the rest of his life with a false accusation of rape hanging over his neck, I don't think Joseph was sitting there in prison saying, "Lord, I understand absolutely what You are doing." It's only as he looks at the total picture. It's only as all of his life is before him in one clear focus that he now begins to be able to say, "I see it," because as he was passing through those various experiences, it wasn't in his power, it wasn't in his ability to discern the hand of God. It's only from the vantage point of a great distance that he can say what he says in verse 20 of chapter 50, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."

You see, as Joseph grew older, I think, and that was perhaps a part of it too, and with the onset of maturity and wisdom that comes with that, as he waited upon the Lord and brought his life under the microscope of the divine eye, Joseph begins to discern something which in the experience itself he perhaps could not have discerned - that God was in control; that God takes care of me.

One of the Puritans, John Flavel who wrote that wonderful little book, called *The Mystery of Providence*, put it like this, that "providence is like reading Hebrew. You read it backwards. And providence is best read backwards because it takes time." That's the key, that's the lesson. It takes time for God to accomplish His purposes. God isn't in a hurry.

And maybe that's where you are tonight in the midst of some horrendous problem and somehow there is difficulty in your life and in your family and

something has happened, something has come into your life that you would wish and long would go away. And you can't see it. You can't understand it. It doesn't make sense. And you want the answer now. And it took Joseph the best part of his entire life before he was able to say, without equivocation, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." You know, that's at least one reason why the Psalmist says again and again in the Psalms, "Wait on the Lord," because the unfolding of God's providential purposes sometimes takes time. And part of the problem of our spiritual immaturity is that we are not willing to wait upon God, to unfold His purposes and His plans.

I wonder how many of you could testify tonight to a moment in your life that you wished would go away, but now from the vantage point of fifteen years or twenty years, or thirty years, or forty years, or fifty years, you can begin to see a glimpse of the purpose that lay behind it.

Now don't misunderstand me. Sometimes we never understand the purpose. Sometimes the purposes of God are so mysterious that we can never understand them. Sometimes all that we can do is trust God in the dark when the lights go out. God doesn't promise that He will always explain in detail what He does. But He does ask us to trust Him. And through a variety of experiences in Joseph's life, Joseph discerns something of the hand of providence.

## **II. The wisdom of God is manifested in a variety of people**

But in the second place, the perfect wisdom of God is manifested, not only in a variety of experiences, but in a variety of people, in a variety of people. Turn back in the book of Genesis to chapter 42 and verse 36. This is Jacob speaking, Joseph's father, and it is particularly enlightening. This is the moment when the brothers come back to father Jacob and the message that they have is that "the Egyptians now want Benjamin." They already have Simeon. As far as Jacob is concerned, Joseph is already dead. And now they want Benjamin as well. And notice what Jacob says in verse 36, "You have bereaved me of my children. Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and you would take Benjamin. All these things are against me. All these things are against me." And isn't it an instinctive things that we do, you and I, when we find ourselves in trouble? We do precisely what Jacob does here. We ask the question, "Why is this happening to me? What about me?"

And so long as we only ask that question, so long as we only ask that question, we are never going to see what God is doing, because God may be doing something in our lives that is going to effect someone else. Turn back to our text. Chapter 50 and verse 20. Look at what Joseph says again, "And 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." What is God doing? He is doing something for others. That's Joseph's answer. He is doing it in order that others

may be saved and rescued. Now that's a particularly hard lesson, I think, to learn when we pass through difficulties, because we instinctively ask, "Why me? Why is this happening to me? Why is it happening now? Why is it happening in this way? Why is it happening with such severity? But why is it happening to me? And so long as we make ourselves the center of the universe, we will never understand what God is doing in His providence, because what God is doing in His providence may well be for the benefit of others.

You remember that little boy in John, chapter 9; he was born blind. And the disciples go up to Jesus and they ask Jesus a question, "Who sinned. Was it the boy or was it his parents?" And Jesus said, "Neither, but that the works of God may be manifest in him." And Jesus heals him and restores his sight so that what happens to that little boy had the effect of glorifying God to others who witnessed that miracle. So long as they only ask the narrow question, they never could understand what God is doing in His providence. That I think is a really important lesson to learn, because otherwise so long as we only put ourselves in the center of the picture, we are blinded to the glory that God is doing and manifesting in His extraordinary providence.

One of things, and it's just one of the things that God is doing I think in the life of Joseph, was undoing the knots, undoing the knots that had accrued in his father. And almost by a kind of divine providence, God was untwisting that twisted man's life. I sometimes think, when those early Christians took up the body of Stephen after his martyrdom, after they had thrown stones at him and one had hit the side of his face in his temple and blood began to flow. And he fell to the ground, and then another, and then another, and then another, until finally his life was extinguished, and as they lifted that body of Stephen and carried him to his burial place, I often think they must have been asking, "Why? What a terrible, terrible waste. What a terrible, terrible waste." And standing there was at least a part of the explanation, because standing there was Saul of Tarsus. And the death of Stephen effected Saul of Tarsus so much that for the rest of his apostolic life, Paul was almost obsessed by the doctrine of union with Christ. Because when he heard the voice that said from heaven, "Why do you persecute Me?" Not, "Why do you persecute Stephen, but why do you persecute Me?" And it was at that very moment that Saul of Tarsus learned a lesson that was to abide with him for the rest of his life.

### **III. The wisdom of God is manifested in a variety of purposes**

But then in the third place, the perfect wisdom of God is manifested not only in a variety of experiences, and not only in a variety of people, but in a variety of purposes. There are, in fact, in these closing verses of the book of Genesis two stories, aren't there? We read a fairly lengthy reading. The first one was all about Jacob, all about the death of Jacob. This extraordinary portrayal of Jacob's body being carried from Egypt back to this plot of land that had been purchased where

he insisted on being buried. And the writer of the book of Genesis, Moses, wants us to see both a big picture and a little picture. The big picture in the book of Genesis asks the question, "How is the promise that God had given to Abraham, how is that promise going to be fulfilled?" And at the close of the book of Genesis you are given a little glimpse of it, when Jacob says, "I want to be buried, not in Egypt, I want to be buried in Canaan. I want to be buried in that land that had been promised to Abraham." That land that they are yet to occupy. I know Jacob's last words were, "I believe the promise that God gave to our fathers Abraham." That's the big picture, that God is going to fulfill His word, that His promise cannot be broken. And in this extraordinary description of the burial and the Egyptians, and I think Moses must have been chuckling as he described this. That the Egyptians are coming to bid farewell to Father Jacob, and in so doing fulfilling a promise that God had given to Abraham. That's the big picture. But there's a little picture.

There's also a little purpose to this unfolding. And that little purpose had to do with Joseph himself, because I think Joseph himself needed to learn a lesson. When you first come across Joseph when he's seventeen, there is something so precocious about him. And now in these closing verses, when the brothers come up here and they connive the story, because they are frightened now that the Father is dead. They don't want Joseph is going to do with them. And they concoct this story that Jacob, before he died, had insisted that they say these things to Joseph. And Joseph says, "Look, I forgive you." And tears, Moses says, tears came down his cheeks. I forgive you. And you know how hard it is to say that. And Joseph is being taught a personal lesson to the unfolding of God's providence in his life. And you know what that lesson is? It's the lesson of appreciating that the will of God is the most ultimate thing in all the world. That I'm not the most ultimate thing. And that my well being or comfort zone is not the most important thing in this world. And my acquisition of things is not the most important thing in this world. But the most important thing in this world is the sovereign will of Almighty God. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

I know what you are thinking. I can hear what you are thinking. Now, it's easy perhaps. It's easy for Joseph. Joseph was Prime Minister. You know, Joseph's end was really glorious one. He went back to Egypt, and he had 'The Life of Reilly.' He was in palaces and eating fine food and all the rest of it. But sometimes God asks us to believe what Joseph is saying here when the lights go out, when it's dark, when you're in a tunnel, when you can't see the good.

We had that marvelous, marvelous sermon this morning from Romans chapter eight. And I wish we had another thirty minutes, because he needed to go on and give some more which we will get next week. "God works all things together for the good of those that love Him. And how shall He not also along with Him give us all things?" In many ways this narrative of Joseph dove tails for that. You've got to believe it. And sometimes the only ground for believing it is that he has given us Jesus as our Savior. And if he has given us Jesus as our Savior, if He

has given us the very best that He has, there is no doubting that He will add all the finishing touches to bring about what he plans and what He purposes and what He designs. Will you trust in Him? Will you trust Him in the dark? Let's pray together.

*Our Father in Heaven, Your sovereign ways with us are sometimes dark and often mysterious and more often than not we fail to comprehend them. But we pray that we might take Your hand, and that when You lead us through the valley of the shadow of death that we might fear no evil because You are with us, and Your rod and Your staff, they do comfort us. And bless us we pray, for Jesus sake, Amen.*

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