

## **The Mystery of Providence**

**Genesis 50:20**

By [Dr. Sinclair Ferguson](#)

*Our heavenly Father, as we turn yet again to Your word we pray that it may come to us this evening with the same grace and power that it came first to those who experienced the realities of which we will speak. We thank You that You speak to us in so many different ways: in psalm and in letter; in apocalypse and prophecy; in biography and history. We bless You that every line in Scripture leads us together to our Lord Jesus Christ. And we pray then that as we appeal to You to send Your Spirit to us, that our eyes may be opened and our hearts may welcome the word of truth, and that it may bear much fruit and prevail. We pray that again we may hear the voice of Jesus Christ, the true Prophet and Priest and King in His church, addressing us through His infallible word. And this we pray together for His great name's sake. Amen.*

Well, turn with me this evening to the Old Testament Scriptures, to the Book of Genesis and then to the final chapter. You'll find our passage on page 66 of the pew Bible if you're using it... page 66 of the pew Bible. And I want to read there in these closing verses in Genesis, chapter 50, and we read from verse 15.

“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 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 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.”

Our subject this evening is “The Mystery of God's Providence.” I was not privileged to grow up in a Christian home, although my parents did later become believers in Jesus Christ. But they did give to me certain blessings. One of them, as I look back, although today it would be very politically incorrect, was that my mother taught me to read before I went to school. And the other was that although they did not attend church, my mother had kept her own mother's Bible. Looking back now, it is a source of great wonder that people in the past were able to read those Bibles—the print was so small, the covers

were so thick. But one of my pre-school delights—as, I suppose, a precocious little reader (and we had very few books in the house) – was in the morning when my parents had vacated their bed, with my grandmother's Bible I would then go into their bed (which was delightfully warm in comparison with mine), snuggle up with my grandmother's Bible, and look for one or other of my two favorite stories. One was Daniel, and he was not only down in the lions' den—for a little chap, he was very difficult to find so far along in the Old Testament Scriptures! And the other story I loved to read was the story of Joseph, and he was almost as difficult to find, because I could never quite remember which book Joseph was to be found in. I never realized that if I'd remembered he was at the left hand side of the book, I would have found him fairly easily. And so the story of Joseph over the decades now has meant a tremendous amount to me, not least because these words that bring the very story to its marvelous climax in many ways are actually the key. The answer in this case really is at the back of the book. They are the key to chapters 37 to 50 that preceded.

I think of these words as answering what I now call "the Joseph Question." And "the Joseph Question" is a very simple question. Every Christian at some time or another is bound to have asked it: What is God doing in my life? And Joseph certainly was a man, from the human point of view, who had every entitlement to ask that question, because as you remember from the very beginning of the story, God seemed to have worked in his life in an unusual way from his very early years, and given him an early indication that God intended to do something good and marvelous with him; that he was intended in some sense for a kind of greatness. He wasn't able to cope with that moment of illumination, and from the human point of view he badly messed up his own life. And yet, as on this very moving, tender, poignant occasion...his brothers come to him with their father's last message, he speaks these wonderful and memorable words. Looking at the whole of his own life, and especially the series of disasters that seemed to befall him—not least those disasters that seemed to befall him just when he was making his way out of the previous disaster. And he says, "As far as you were concerned, you meant things for evil, to harm me; but God meant it for good."

The story you know well enough, I'm sure—most of you, if not all of you. It's a very marvelous story, in a series of miniature dramas. He is given a dream and he foolishly tells the dream to his brothers and to his parents, and he finds himself hated as a result. He ends up sold as a prisoner, as a slave, and finds himself with the possibility of rising again. And Potiphar's wife begins to seek to seduce him, and in his faithfulness he discovers that there are times when faithfulness leads to immense loss. He is imprisoned because of deceit, and because of a lie. And again, he is raised up from prison to become the prime minister of all Egypt. And the story ends, as we all know, with the lengthy story of the engagement and disengagement that he has with his brothers, until the whole family is united again in Egypt, and he is able to teach them the lessons that he has first of all learned from God: that in his life it is true that what they meant for evil, God meant for good.

And it's so obvious, because in a way this is the Old Testament's version of the great words of Paul in Romans 8, that "God works everything together for the good of those

who love Him, who are called according to His purpose." It's so obvious that these words appear at the end of the Book of Genesis not merely as a personal testimony, but as a testimony on the part of one of God's servants who has seen everything that is intended to be understood by every child of God: that whatever befalls us for evil, **God is working out His purposes of good.**

"He plants His footsteps in the sea..." as we were singing, "...and rides upon the storm." But the problem we all face—and doubtless Joseph himself faced it...and William Cowper certainly faced it—was that when God plants His footsteps in the sea, as the psalmist says, those footprints become virtually impossible to trace. And we're always asking, therefore, the question—and we ask it especially in difficulties—we're always asking the question, "How is it, and where is it, and when is it that God is working everything together, not least those things that seem to have befallen for evil...how, in the midst of footprints that are planted in the sea, can I trust in the providence of God? And of a sense of the kind of things that God is doing?"

And I want to try in the few minutes we have together this evening, from this wonderful story we have of the life of Joseph, to point you to some of the keys that help us to open the lock of providence in our lives; to help us to believe with Joseph that we, too, will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

### **I. The first of them is this, and it's so clear in the story of Joseph, that God is always working together a variety of circumstances.**

The problem that we face ordinarily in our Christian lives in interpreting the providence of God is that we don't see all the variety of circumstances; and sometimes foolishly we insist, when we only have a small part of the picture of what God is doing, that He tell us here and now what He is doing—when, if He did tell us what He was doing, we would never be able to understand it!

I don't know if in American television shows, quiz shows...which I never watch...I don't know whether they have the kind of question that they often have in British quiz shows...that also I happen never to watch, but I know they have this kind of question! Where they will show you perhaps part of a photograph of some famous person—a nose, or an eyebrow, a chin—and you're supposed to guess who it is. And then, if you fail you get another piece, but fewer points. And then, if you fail again, another piece but fewer points, and then when the final piece is in place you think, 'Why didn't I see that when the first [piece] was put down?' And it's precisely the same oftentimes with the providence of God.

God is not doing isolated things in the world, occasionally dropping down and doing things that are utterly disconnected from one another. He is working out a marvelous unified pattern of His gracious purposes, and when we have only one piece of the jigsaw puzzle and are tempted to cry out to Him, 'O God, what are You doing?!' Could Joseph ever have dreamt that it was absolutely essential, if he were going to be prime minister of Egypt, and in some sense the savior of the ancient Near East, could he ever

have imagined that it was necessary for him to be betrayed by his brothers, and sold into slavery? That Potiphar's wife should need to seek to seduce him, so that he would find himself in prison; that he should be left there over a period of two years before he would be raised up to become the prime minister? He never could have imagined it! But yet, as he looks back on the whole of his life, he sees that one of God's workings in his life has led to another, and led to another, and there has been a whole pattern of God's purpose. God, who in His wisdom has seen the end from the beginning; God, who has seen the whole picture and therefore in every detail of His working, has been working together for Joseph's good, and for the blessing as Joseph himself says, of many others.

There's a marvelous little illustration of this in the life of the Apostle Paul in Acts 16, you remember, when they're anxious to preach the gospel. And they try to go in one direction and the door is closed; and they try to go in another direction, and the door is closed. And it's only because these two doors are closed that a third door, the door into Europe, the door of the gospel to our kind of people, the door of the gospel that eventually would bring the gospel to this land mass—isn't it something to think that in the economy of God it has been the frustration of the Apostle Paul in one direction that first of all led to the gospel, as it were, sweeping through Europe? And this is how God characteristically works. And sometimes in our lives we need to understand what I sometimes call the 'cul de sac principle', the 'dead end principle' that God uses, where He shunts some of the choicest of His people up a dead end into frustration, sometimes wondering if there can be any future for them, until the place in the traffic for which God really intends them has come into place, and then He slides them in and moves them on, and they begin to realize that God has known all the time what He is doing.

I had a rather amusing experience last week. I was teaching at Reformed Seminary in Orlando. I drew up in a set of traffic lights. I'd come to the automobile that was beside me. I was absolutely sure in the automobile was somebody I knew, and so I wound down the window. It was my friend John Muether, the librarian. I thought to myself, what are the chances of the two of us in Orlando landing in the same set of traffic lights at exactly the same time? I asked him the obvious question: I said, "Do you have any Grey Poupon™?" If you ever think you'll meet me at a set of traffic lights, make sure you've got the Grey Poupon!

But I thought to myself, this isn't a coincidence. This is one of those little divine touches to lift my spirit, that's what it is. I don't know what else it might mean to him, but that is what it means to me. It lifted my spirit to think that God was sovereignly in control of his life, and God was sovereignly in control of my life, and in His sweet providence He had brought us together for a totally unexpected moment. And I reflected again on this passage, and reminded myself that God works in all the details of life. Even when we cannot see His footprints as they place themselves in the sea, we know that He understands the big picture. He knows the end from the beginning. He knows where He is going, and I therefore, in His grace, am able to trust Him.

You see, sometimes we demand God to know what His will is, when the more important

question in a sense is, what His timing is. Not just what His will is, but what His timing is. And this is why the Bible is full of the exhortation to wait for the Lord. And it's clear one of the great lessons that Joseph himself was learning in those days was precisely that: to wait for the Lord in the confidence that He knows the end from the beginning. He knows His timing. And He can be absolutely trusted.

**II. But then there's a second key here. God is always working together a variety of circumstances, but then secondly, God is always working in a variety of people.**

He's always working in a variety of people, and this is a great and important lesson for me to learn, because my instinct is to say, 'O God, what are You doing in my life?' when, if I could hear Him, He would say, 'Let's hear less about your life. Let's see you giving your life to Me in order that your life may be employed for the blessing and benefit of others' lives.' And it's very interesting, in the two places in Genesis where Jesus says almost exactly the same thing as He says here in verse 20, that's one of the great emphases. He's come to understand that what God was doing in his life was not actually for him. It was because He wanted to employ him, to pick him up into the heart of his purposes and employ him in the lives of others.

I sometimes think in this context of the expedience of Naomi in the Book of Ruth, and all the suffering that woman went through: the bereavements she experienced in loss of husband and sons. I often wonder if she was left there in Moab asking herself the question, 'Does God have anything to do with this? Does God have any purpose in this?' And by the end of the book you've come to understand that God had a glorious purpose in this, because this was the route He was taking in order to bring King David into the world. And then when you turn to the New Testament it becomes clear this was the route God was taking in order to bring the Lord Jesus into the world, in this family tree. And so **the great thing is not to become obsessed with what God is doing in my life, but so to yield to His purposes in my life that He may use my life, fit my life into purposes of blessing and grace for others.**

I was profoundly moved last month at a memorial service for the daughter of one of my colleagues, Richard Gaffin. Lisle Gaffin, his daughter, had struggled with cancer for several years, and now had gone to be with the Lord. And in the course of the memorial sermon her minister said how she had spoken to him at the church door one day, huddled in her blanket to keep her now-emaciated body warm, and she said to her pastor these words that obviously stuck deeply into his soul. She said, "I see it now, I think. It's not really about me, is it? It's not really about me, is it?" And we're all conscious that we live in such a frenetically individualized me-obsessed world that we need to be turned outside in, as it were, to take account of the fact that I am not God's only interest. And God's kingdom is not being built in order that it may be subservient to me, but my life is being employed in order that it may be subservient in His kingdom.

And you see that marvelously here in the story of Joseph, how all that happened to him, for example, was one of the ways in which God was wanting to work in the life of his father Jacob. The whole situation of Joseph's life goes back to Jacob making the same,

the precise mistake his own father had made, of favoritism between the children, and how like his own father he himself was deceived when the boys brought the multicolored long-sleeved coat back. It was Jacob himself who was deceived! Joseph was not dead, and the brothers in that instance didn't say he was dead. They simply sent the cloak back, and he was deceived by the evidence of his hands. And in an amazing way [he] had to be willing to lose Benjamin in order to be restored to integrity. And in this amazing way God takes away for a season his son Joseph, in order that as He works in His mysterious ways He brings together not only Joseph with his father, but his father with his brothers, and together they are most marvelously reconciled together.

And then, of course there are the brothers. The opening verses of the Joseph narrative tell us about their jealousy and hatred of him, and some of it you might think Joseph richly deserved. But they had twisted hearts, these boys, and great hatred. And of course, when that seizes us things get out of control, and their hatred became a mercenary selling of their brother, and that led to lies and to deceit, and as the story goes on you begin to see...particularly when they arrive in Egypt and Joseph begins in an amazingly wise way to deal with them...he has learned, in a sense, to be able to do this—as he begins to deal with them, they become conscious of their sin and conscious of their guilt, and several times in the course of the narrative—read it through again for yourself—they are confessing their sin, they are confessing that they are under the judgment of God, and they are being brought ultimately again to reconciliation with their brother and to an appreciation of what God has done for them through him.

And then there is Joseph— Joseph, to whom God gives dreams of greatness that turn his head. It is one of the great mysteries to me. I can't understand it in Joseph, and I frankly have not been able to understand it in other individuals that I've seen, that God sometimes seems to give us things that we cope with very badly. And instead of keeping it to himself, instead of keeping it to himself, he blurts it out at breakfast time. Breakfast time, of all times! The foolish young man, the foolish young man...but God begins to grind down the folly until even a pagan king recognizes that in this young man, now about 30 years old, there is the wisdom of the gods. And you see in the way in which he handles his brothers that God has done something quite amazing in changing this young man's folly into a maturity of witness that is really quite amazing.

And the God who is working together a variety of circumstances is always working together in a variety of people. And the answer to the question, 'O God, why is this happening in my life?' may not be in the first instance 'my life', but somebody else's life— somebody who's watching you, somebody who is connected to you. It may be *that* life. And so the providences of God are simultaneously a summons to me to bow my life before God and say 'Take my life and everything with it and use it as pleases You, for Your glory. But dear Father in heaven, please use it for Your glory in ways that I may not see in this world, but by Your grace I will be able to see in the world to come.'

There's another wonderful illustration of this, isn't there, in the life of the Apostle Paul when he is stuck in a prison? And as word gets out, some of the Christians are panicking, and of course they're panicking. They're thinking, 'If that's what happens to

our greatest missionary, what's the point?' And Paul says, 'I want you to understand that because I've been here in prison the gospel has run like wildfire among those in the praetorian guard. It's reached places it would never have reached.' It's almost as though he understands if these people won't come to the street corner, the synagogue, to hear the Apostle Paul preaching, then God will send the Apostle Paul to where they are, so that they have no place of escape from the Apostle Paul preaching. And as a result, he says, many of the brethren (this is in Philippians 1), many of the brethren themselves are becoming encouraged, and they're bold to preach the gospel as God is doing things in Paul's life with a view to others.

And so this is for Joseph, for us, a summons to bow ourselves before His sovereign will and say, 'Use me when and where and how You will.' So God is always working together a variety of circumstances, always working simultaneously in a variety of people, and

### **III. God is always working towards a variety of goals.**

In the life of Jacob, to bring him joy and restoration; in the lives of the brothers, to bring them grace in their reconciliation; and in the life of Joseph—notice this—in the life of Joseph, not only to bring him to the right place at the right time, but to bring him to the right place at the right time as the right man. As the right man.

And as the story ends with Joseph as the prime minister of Egypt, the amazing thing that you see in the way in which he takes the dream that Pharaoh has and begins to meditate on it, is that this boy who had been overeager to say to his brothers and to his parents, 'God is going to do something great in my life, and you'll all come and bow down before me'; this boy who was so radically impatient he couldn't keep it in, is now a man who has the wisdom to develop a seven-year plan, and to be patient and to be careful, and to be self-disciplined in a marvelous way in his leadership. And this haughty young man who, in his youthful pride, strutted the privileges that God was intimating he would receive, God has marvelously humbled, not only in the way he shows grace to his brothers, but in the way in which he says to them in very telling words, 'My dear brothers, I am not God. God alone is God.'

And I suppose of all the lessons that God teaches us in providence that is what lies at the very heart of each and every one of them. He is teaching us that we are not sovereign. He is teaching us that we are not the creator. He is teaching us that we do not have the wisdom to plan the best things in the best way for our own lives, but He alone is God. And He alone, at the end of the day, is to be absolutely trusted. And all of this in Joseph's life shaped by pain. Shaped by pain.

The Apostle Paul, again...you remember, now in II Corinthians 1 he says, 'We almost despaired of life itself, but out of that experience of great pain and agony we have been comforted with the comfort of God.' And as he writes to the Corinthians he says, 'I've come to see that I've been comforted with the comfort of God in order that I may express to you in your need and affliction the comfort that God gives those who are

afflicted.’

Many of you are able to look at incidents in your life—moments of experience, difficulties that have come into your own life or your family life, or the life of the church with which you've been connected, and only later on have you begun to understand that this has been an amazing, wise, divine investment to prepare you to serve and to minister, and to do good, and to bring you blessing in some situation for which you would have been totally unprepared and totally unfit were it not for the investment that God had made in your life.

Brothers and sisters, our God is in the business of long-term investments with long-term dividends, and we can trust Him. And the reason we can trust Him is because not only has He done this in the life of Joseph, but He has planted at the very center of history the guarantee that He is able to do this, does do this, and will do this.

As the Apostle Peter trumpeted on the Day of Pentecost, “He was taken by the hands of wicked men intending to do evil and crucify Him, but our God meant it for good, for the salvation of many.” The Joseph Question is answered by the Joseph principle, and the Joseph principle is actually the Jesus principle: that **what man means for evil to destroy God's purposes, God irreversibly means and uses for good, in order to get us like our Lord Jesus to the right place at the right time, in the right way, for the right people, as the right man or woman.**

And so, in his own little way, Joseph was really pointing to Jesus, that we might in Jesus see that “God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform. He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm. Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan His work in vain....” Even the angels were perplexed by what was happening, scanning His work in vain. “God is His own interpreter,” and if you will but wait three days, “He will make it plain.”

The ‘Joseph Question’ and the ‘Jesus Answer’. He is working everything together for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose. How do I know? **Because He did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all; and if He has done that, then He will freely give us all things. So trust Him, because He is more trustworthy than you are.**

*Our heavenly Father, thank You again this evening that Your word is written in such large letters that we all can read. Thank You that the story of Joseph that has meant so much to so many of us, in all its exquisite beauty speaks to us of Your exquisite wisdom, and we pray for grace not only to rejoice when we are delivered from difficulties in Your providence, but to rejoice in those providences as those who are yielded to You, knowing that You are working many things together for good, knowing that You are working in many different people for good, knowing that You are working towards a most glorious end: the good of those who love You. We ask this, our dear Father, in Jesus our Savior's name. Amen.*



Now please stand and receive the benediction of the Lord.

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our heavenly Father, the help of the Holy Spirit, strengthener and comforter, be with you all this night and forevermore.  
Amen.*

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