

Joseph in Egypt: Predestination and Responsible Living Genesis 37-42

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? (Romans 8:28-31)

One of the most frequent questions I try to answer about the Bible's claim that while God, for His purposes, predestines individuals to do and be certain things, yet He still holds them responsible for what they do or become. If I read my Bible rightly, apparently this work of God's predestining applies to our individual salvation and personal relationship with Himself, as well as any role we might be playing in God's larger plan for the history of the world.

The Apostle Paul wrote the ninth chapter of his letter to the Romans trying to explain this mysterious interweaving of God's will and our will, and people still don't understand it. So instead of trying to explain this dance between ours and God's plans for our life, I just turn to the story of Joseph and say, let me show you how it works.

If you take a serious look at the life of Joseph, you will see that for the purpose of accomplishing His plans for the as yet unformed nation of Israel, in accordance with His promises to Abraham, God has predestined that Joseph would be placed in some very specific and difficult circumstances at very specific times. And at those times Joseph would respond in necessarily specific ways to insure the success of God's plans. Yet you also see Joseph acting, apparently as a free but faithful agent in his relationship with God, thus being both blessed in those difficult circumstances while at the same fulfilling God's predestined plan for his life.

So Joseph is proof of the Scripture that: all things [do] work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Joseph was certainly loved God, and he was also one specifically "called according to God's purpose", so let us briefly review the history of his clan in order to see how intricate and necessary a role Joseph played in bringing about God's plans for the future of Israel.

First we need to remember that God chose and initially made a covenant with Abraham. This covenant said that if Abraham would trust God enough to go to and live in the promised land, God would give this land to his heirs and grow them into a great nation through whom the

whole world would be blessed (Gen 12:1-3). This covenant was then repeated almost verbatim to Abraham's son Isaac, and to his grandson Jacob.

But apparently Abraham alone, in one of his several conversations with God, was given some more specific information regarding the near future of his heirs:

the Lord said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ... And they shall come back here ..."
(Genesis 15:13-16).

Now, Abraham was given this prophetic promise some 200 years before his great-grandson Joseph was born, and more than 675 years before the former slave nation of Israel, under the leadership of Joshua, was finally able to cross over the Jordan to retake possession of the land that God had promised to them.

Meanwhile, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob just kept on living as a singular nomadic family in the promised land until the incident occurred of Joseph's being sold into slavery by his brothers. This set up circumstances that would eventually bring all of Jacob's family down to live in Egypt. There, over the next 400 years, they would then grow into the enslaved nation that Abraham had been told they would become. Isaac and Jacob must have passed down Abraham's warning about their future enslavement in some foreign land, but nobody in Joseph's day would have made the connection between that prophecy and their current savior Egypt...that is nobody except Joseph, and perhaps Jacob very late in life his life, but we will get to this later.

So some 200 years after the initial prophecy, Rachel, Jacob's most loved wife birthed Joseph, who, especially after Rachel's death, became Jacob's favorite child, much to the displeasure of his other 11 children and three not-so-loved wives.

Now an interesting aspect about the character of Joseph is that while Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had all been mixed bags of honorable and dishonorable traits, God had blessed and continued to bless them because they each, in turn, had kept their covenant with God to the best of their somewhat corrupted nature. However, Joseph was different.

Some scholars have tried to fault Joseph because of Jacob's favoritism; but that was hardly Joseph's fault. Others have said that his sharing of dreams with the family proved he was a braggart. But what 17 year old dreamer would not innocently do such a thing, not thinking of the possible consequences?

From what I read Joseph was a thoroughly honorable, transparent, faithful young man from birth to death. And this may be the real reason why his less-than-honorable brother's initially hated him.

What clues do I find to back this theory on Joseph's character?

1. Joseph the slave was a faithful, moral, and diligent worker, so much so that other's could easily see he had God's favor. Why would his character as a slave be any different from what it was as a son? Rather than suddenly changing to become a sterling person in slavery, it is more likely that this is the way Joseph had always been.
2. And Joseph, earning the hatred of his brothers by bringing back to Jacob a bad report of their work, may not have done so because he was a tattler. Rather, because Jacob knew that he could trust Joseph to tell the truth, Jacob may have often sent him out on such tasks : *'Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me (37:14).*
3. And finally, when Jacob called for Joseph to go on a long risky journey alone, finding his way to wherever his brothers were pasturing the flocks, his reply was *"here I am"* which is a response of complete and faithful submission to another's will (whether father, master, or God). Of the 24 times "here I am" was spoken in the Old Testament, the only time it was used deceptively was when Jacob was lying to his father Isaac.

So, lets summarize the prophetic, predetermined part of Joseph's life as follows:

In order for Jacob's family to move down to Egypt to grow into the enslaved nation of Abraham's prophecy, Joseph had to precede them first in 10 years of slavery. There, because of his moral character, he received very preferential, un-slave like treatment, in Potipher's house, while learning the language and customs necessary for him to communicate with Pharaoh when the appropriate time came.

And then, because of the deceit of Potipher's wife, he had to spend another three years in jail, where again, because of his moral character, he also received preferential treatment in order to be there at the right place to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh's baker and cup bearer. Again, this occurred at just the right time, so that the cupbearer could recommend him to interpret Pharaoh's dream. And then, when the ruler of all Egypt saw Jacob's integrity and his relationship with God for himself, *Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God? (41:38).*

Thus Jacob was made second in command of all Egypt and put in charge of the entire famine relief program. For the next seven years of abundance he collected 20% of all the harvested grain in preparation for the coming years of famine. And then through the seven years of famine he used the stored grain not only to save the lives of everyone in Egypt, but also, with the grain, he purchased all their livestock and all their land. At the end famine Pharaoh owned

all the land in Egypt and thereafter collected a 20% tithe of all harvests from all the people who now considered themselves all slaves of Pharaoh (47:20-26).

Think about this. With the interpretation of Pharaoh's dream and his faithful administration of the famine relief program, Joseph became the savior of all Egyptians, not just his own family. And Pharaoh knew the source of Joseph's wisdom and blessings. So when Jacob's family moved down to Egypt, in gratitude to Joseph, Pharaoh gave them the choicest land on which to live. And Joseph in his wisdom made sure that they were still distantly separated from Egyptian culture so that the children of Jacob could prosper and grow in peace as a unique people for perhaps another 200-300 years until *a new king* [probably an invading ruler] *arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph* (Exodus 1:8). By the time this new king arrived on the scene, the Israelites had grown into such a large independent tribe, that the Egyptians began to fear their numbers decided to truly enslave them.

And think about this. Because of his integrity, and faithfulness to God, with the exception of the sad but necessary events of his enslavement and later incarceration, Joseph the slave ruler of Egypt lived a far better life for the 22 years of his exile and thereafter than did his shepherd brothers back with the flocks in the Promised Land.

And that brings us again to this dance between God's predestined plans for Joseph's life and Joseph's own will in the matter. When you look at the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in fact the lives of all the people of Israel up until the coming of Jesus, everyone of these Hebrews, faithful or unfaithful, were playing a role—some larger some much smaller—but each one was a predestined actor in God's much larger plan for bringing to pass the birth of the Messiah in fulfillment of His promise to Abraham.

Yet, if you compare the predestined life that Jacob lived with the predestined life that Joseph lived, you will notice one distinct difference between these two.

Jacob, the schemer, the heel grabber, spent 20 long years learning integrity and humility and the value of hard work while having his own scheming ways handed back to him by his father-in-law Laban. And even after that, Jacob's life continued to be less than peaceful because of other choices he made. Not until, as a very old man when he moved down to Egypt under the protection of his son Joseph, was Jacob able to live the last 20 years of his life in peace.

And then there was **Joseph**, a spoiled but honorable son, who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Yet throughout his years of enslavement and later his years of incarceration, Joseph continued to live a blessed life because *the Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; [and] His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands* (Genesis 39: 2-4). Potipher, his master, saw this, as did the jailor, and also Pharaoh, then one day all of Egypt and finally even his brothers saw it as well.

Joseph's predestined life had been divinely guided for the purpose of saving not only the lives of countless Egyptians, but also his family, through a region-wide devastating famine, while at the same time forwarding God's promise of growing Abraham's heirs into a world blessing nation. But I truly believe that **Joseph's blessed life** was because he was a righteous man who fled from sin, who loved God, and who knew that his life had always been in God's hands. Listen to what he first told his brothers, that second year of the famine when they were forced to come to Egypt for food and he finally revealed himself to them:

now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.
(Genesis 45:5-8).

Then again, 20 years later, following Jacob's death, when his brother's fearing that Joseph might now seek revenge, made up a story of Jacob pleading with Joseph for their forgiveness. The Bible records that "*Joseph wept when they spoke to him,*" probably because you don't lie to a prophet. He knew that their fears and this story was nothing more than projection of their own broken lives.

Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. Genesis 50:17-21

Because Joseph was an honorable and faithful man, trusting God all along, he knew God had placed him there to protect and grow Jacob's family no matter how they had tried to harm him earlier.

And as for Joseph's dreams that originally got him in trouble, of himself being lifted up and his brothers bowing down: Joseph was indeed raised up as the head of an entire nation, and his father and brothers, indeed all his family, did bow down to him not as their better but as their savior.

How did Abraham's warning of future enslavement affect Jacob and Joseph's decision to bring their family down to Egypt?

The Bible records that the brother's returned to Jacob and informed him that Joseph was alive and beckoning them all to come live in Egypt. This probably worried Jacob, both because of that ancient warning, and because the last time God had spoken to him personally, God had

only said: *Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you.*' (Genesis 31:3). So Jacob first traveled back to Beer-sheba the home site of both Abraham and Isaac, where God again spoke to him in a dream saying, *'I am God, the God of your fathers; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again'* (Gen 46:1-4).

Similarly Joseph at the end of his life told his brothers, *'I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.*' So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, *'When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here.'* And Joseph died, being one hundred and ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt. (Genesis 50: 24-26)

Now that's a wonderful story you say. Good for Joseph and the Egyptians and the people of Israel, but how does any of that help me live the life I am living today?

Good question. I started today's message by quoting the Apostle Paul: *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.* But notice that there are two different types of people, who are not necessarily the same, yet both will have *"all things work together for their good"*:

1. There are those who love God
2. and there are those who are called according to His purpose

Now, sometimes one person can be in both these groups, people like Joseph and Abraham, Debra and Ruth.

And sometimes they can be one or the other:

- Like Laban was blessed as a result of God blessing Jacob.
- Or all of Egypt who were saved from the famine because God, as promised, was growing Abraham's heirs into a nation.

And while we most likely will never know if we are playing some role in God's larger plans (Pharaoh certainly didn't know), yet if we love God and live honorable and faithful lives for Him, we too can claim this promise that all things, even the bad things in our lives, (like Jacob's enslavement or imprisonment) can be used by God to bring about good for us and for others.

This is the lesson we need to take home today. If we would but love and honor God, living our lives according to His revealed purpose for our lives (which purpose is revealed for all of us in Scripture), then like Joseph, we can trust God to keep His promise to work everything out for our good. Everything.

That is certainly true for us on the individual level. But if you would permit me on this Memorial Day weekend some personal speculation, I wonder if it is still true for America at the national level.

There is no denying that nationally, with perhaps the exception of the Civil War where we paid for our sin of enslaving others, the United States of America has been a most God blessed and prospered nation... and only God knows why.

As far as I can tell, the U.S. play's no specific part in God's timeline for history—nothing at least that has been revealed about us in our Bibles.

Some would say that we have been blessed because we were founded on Godly principles—even if at times those were poorly held. And perhaps this is so.

Or perhaps, like Egypt of Joseph's day, we were blessed because God wanted to bless a particular people living in our midst or under our protection. Perhaps there is also truth in that as well. But we don't know that, just as Egypt never knew they were being blessed because of God's concern for Jacob's family.

However, I do know that God promises to bless those who love him.

And I do know that in times of national trial, God has called for His people to humble themselves and pray for restoration. And that he will hear such prayers and heal the land. And I do know that since we are now part of God's people, this promise also applies to us.

So I urge you, please be praying for this country, and for your neighbors, and for your families, and for yourself, that we all might live honorably and faithfully before God.

Now more than ever, we need more people with the faith of Joseph.

Let's pray about that.