

# For Our Good

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## *Episode 1: The power of God's presence in my disappointment*

Happy Super Sunday! I want you to know that Mercy is a part of a network of churches in the US called the Summit Network. We plant gospel-centered, balanced churches that reproduce. Well, one of the first ones we planted just happened to be in Denver, CO. I saw their pastor last week at our network retreat. A small wager was placed. I'm not a gambling man, but I want you to know now that I'm so confident in the panthers I may have agreed to a friendly wager. And hopefully you'll never know my end of the wager.

I did send him this picture that somebody sent to me from north of the city.

(Denver / Charlotte miles Sign)

### **Introduction**

Over the next 6 weeks we are going to look at one of the greatest stories ever told. Outside of the life of Jesus, the life of Joseph is one of the most incredible stories every written. Not just among bible stories, but among ALL stories. Period. In this series we are going to read a story filled with wealth and poverty, rural Palestine meets urban

Egypt, famine and abundance, betrayal and faithfulness, prison dungeons and the kings court, multiple sex scandals, conspiracies, suffering, death and legacies. It is an incredible story and recognized as one of the greatest stories of antiquity. Which is awesome for me as a preacher because the stuff is just gold! Not every story covers God's view on everything from suffering to salvation to outcasts, to family, and of course...sex! This is gonna be fun.

The story of Joseph takes up ¼ of the book of Genesis, arguably the most important book in the whole bible. The story covers Joseph's life from age 17 to age 30. A very key time in anyone's life. And in Joseph's life, what we are going to see is that things just go wrong. One thing after another. Which is going to bring up a very important question: Why do bad things happen to Joseph? He's a good guy. Outside of some teenage brashness, you really don't see any character flaws in Joseph, which is rare for a central bible figure not named Jesus. One of the big questions that is going to connect Joseph's story to your story is "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Because that's what happens. *(This is not making a murderer. Where bad things happen to weird people that may or may not be psychos but have convinced me to never ever ever go to a salvage yard. Or to Manitowoc county. Or to the guy who cut's Stephen avery's hair. Struggles.)*. This is bad things happening to good people.

And this is probably the #1 reason people lose their faith. I know it tops the list in college. Disappointment. The idea

that “if there really is a God, bad stuff like this should never happen.” You ever felt that way before about something in your life? Then you will be able to relate to Joseph.

Think about it. The time period we are looking at in Joseph’s life is the time where you go to college, get into a certain career path...and make decisions that really set the course for the rest of your life. People often meet someone who is going to be a spouse that will shape your future family and really your legacy.

But what if one or more of those things don’t go right for you? What if you don’t get into the college you wanted? What if you don’t get the job or don’t know what job you should get? What if somebody betrays you? What if tragedy strikes your family? What are you going to do?

That’s what happened to Joseph. He went through a lot of disappointment. And almost all of you are going to go through disappointment in your life. The story of Joseph is going to show you where God is in the midst of the uncertainty and disappointment of life. It’s actually going to show you where he is in ALL of life. In the bad AND the good.

Today my goal is to show you a main overarching theme that will keep coming up in Joseph’s story. This theme I’m going to call the dual perspective every Christian can walk through the good and the bad. By dual perspective I mean that as a Christian God gives you a unique outlook others don’t have. Simultaneously God gives us two outlooks on

life. We’ll call them the “one-day” perspective, and the “today” perspective.

**The “one-day” perspective** is the long-range perspective. It’s the perspective we hear from Joseph at the end of his life. We named this series “For Our Good” because at the end of Joseph’s life, after all of the disappointment and hardship he went through, he looked back on the unbearable pain others put him through, he looked back on the crazy things that happened to him and said “what you meant for evil, God meant for good.” Listen, that is where we are going in this series. Developing a perspective that we can walk through life, even the darkest of days, saying “God is working this out for my good somehow.” And ya’ll that will create POWERFUL HOPE for your life. In fact, the new testament puts the weight of its hope on the “one-day” perspective. That one day Jesus is going to make all things right. He’s going to come back to earth and create a new kingdom where no more death or suffering exist. New heavens and new earth. And part of the perspective of a Christian is to say I know today is hard, but one day all will be made right.

- Suffering: Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.
- Death: [16] For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. [17] Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up

together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

- Friendship: [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.
- The end of the bible Rev 22.21: [20] He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! [21] The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

My hope is that in time you will lean the weight of your life on that hope. We only believe it because Jesus got out of the grave. It means victory and healing, not despair, is in store for you at the end of all days.

But there is no way we can arrive there today. So I need you to stick with us for the whole story. 6 weeks. And hopefully by the end you'll understand how God works in your life for your good. But that doesn't come until the end of the story because God wants you first see the other perspective, the "today," perspective that you can walk through life with.

The "**today**" perspective is how you deal with life in front of you right now. See there is a theme throughout Joseph's story where the author, presumably Moses, says "**And the Lord was with Joseph.**" We'll see the first one today in a moment when we look at the first episode of the saga. Joseph gets sold into slavery...God is with Joseph. Joseph falsely imprisoned...God was with Joseph...Joseph is

forgotten about in prison...God is with Joseph. And Joseph dealt with all of these hardships as if he was 100% confident that GOD was really with him! he reacts to every situation as if he's sure that God was with him. And by that I mean present with him, and I mean working "for him." That whatever was happening God was working it according to a perfect plan that Joseph couldn't see or understand. In whatever the situation was, Joseph was confident God had not forgotten him but instead was right there with him in the middle of it, working for Joseph's good. So here's the question I want to percolate in your mind these next six weeks: "**How would you respond to the events in your life if you were sure that God was with you?**"<sup>1</sup>

Btw – that's one to write down. I love you note-takers because you usually help out your community group leaders when you guys get in discussion. Your version of "amen" is when I see the top of your head because you are writing something down. For those of you who aren't note takers, you just react with me and then you can get the manuscript online tomorrow if you want it.

listen for too long I only had the "one-day" perspective. Which, if we are honest, seems to come up short when we are right in the middle of pain, suffering, disappointment or whatever. Our pain blinds us to the long-term and we kind of throw up our hands and go...I don't really care if "one-day" it all works out. Because today sucks. And Joseph's life

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<sup>1</sup> The phrasing of this question comes from Andy Stanley's sermon series

is filled with really sucky moments. And God doesn't just point to the 'one-day' with him. No what we see is a Joseph who finds his power to live through the moment is in the presence of God with him in the "today."

*This story is going to show you both perspectives, that God hasn't forgotten you or abandoned you in your disappointment but is instead right there with you today, and how for those who love God all things really do work together for our good.*

Let's get into the story. Now, because we are going to cover a whole chapter, I'm going to do some "filling in the gaps" to tell the whole story ok. You really gotta read this at home to make sure you get the whole thing.

### **Genesis 37**

[2] These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. [3] Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. [4] But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

Right here you need to see how messed up the situation was. Two generations & a few characters to introduce you

to. First **Jacob**, Joseph's dad, is playing favorites. And he's made Joseph, the youngest son, his favorite. And Jacob, of all people, should have known better. Jacob's dad Isaac had loved Jacob's brother Esau more than Jacob. And that stirred a whole bunch of trouble. But Jacob ends up committing the same sin as his father. And he loves Joseph more than his other sons. So to show his favor, Jacob gives Joseph a technicolored dreamcoat. Kidding. Gives him a coat of many colors. Which is only important because he gets one and his brothers do not.

Any of you have siblings? Listen, my brother and I used to sit at the counter at breakfast and eyeball measure the amount of cinnamon toast crunch each of us had to see if we were getting equal shares of squares. Because if one got more, we were ready to appeal to the supreme court! Can you imagine if I said "Dad, why did Matt get more than me?" and dad said "Oh that's because I love him more than I love you son." And he kept giving Matt stuff....I'd despise my dad and I'd really despise my brother. That's what's going on. They hate Joseph. When Moses repeats such a strong word 3 times, that's getting a point across. They hate him. so much they couldn't talk to him.

And Joseph isn't helping. He brings a "bad report" which basically means he's tattling on his brothers. Then he goes further...and we don't know if this was out of spite or because he just wasn't too socially aware but look what 17yr old Joseph does

[5] Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. [6] He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: [7] Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." [8] His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

Now, Joseph probably should have used some judgment. The best approach to his angry brothers maybe wasn't...Hey guys I dreamed we were all sheafs. And My sheaf grew legs & stood up. Yours bowed down. Hey you want to practice? Lets play sheaf bow down. I'll stand up here...

One other thing of note here because it connects to our main theme today. This is the first dream in the bible where God doesn't speak. Dreams were a pretty standard form of God revealing his plan to his people in the OT. But usually he spoke. Not here It sets up a tone for the rest of the story where God is going to work behind the scenes. Which I want you to see because it connects with the "today" perspective. God is with you even when you don't see or hear him. When God is seemingly distant he's actually incredibly present. How would you respond to the events in your life if you were sure God was with you?

Back to the story:

Joseph dreams a similar dream (Dreams come in pairs throughout this story). So he goes and tells everyone again. And all it says is [11] And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

Family dysfunction all over the place. A dad playing favorites, a little brother showing off, and jealous rage brewing among 11 angry brothers. Let me summarize what happens when all that jealousy boils over....

The brothers are way out tending the sheep. Some 30+ miles away. Joseph comes and [19] They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. [20] Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams."

The jealousy has boiled over. They are seriously going to kill him. Reuben jumps in and says don't kill him. Throw him into the pit...he deserves that. But don't kill him. don't want that blood on your hands...Reuben was an opportunist. He was going to rescue Joseph and bring him to daddy. Maybe so daddy would finally like him, maybe because it was the right thing to do. Don't know. So Joseph arrives and they rip that robe off, and toss him into a pit.

But Reuben wanders off after that. I guess to get a sandwich. And Judah is in charge. Judah says...

[26] Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? [27] Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him,

for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him. [28] Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

Off goes Joseph. Chapter 37 ends with the brothers planting blood evidence on Joseph’s robe so that some hyena or something gets blamed for killing Joseph and the brothers are off the hook. Jacob goes into mourning. Joseph gets sold into the care of a guy named Potiphar.

But the story of course doesn’t end there. Chapter 38 is a really weird but important tangent we are going to talk about next week. But chapter 39 picks up with

[2] The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. [3] His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. [4] So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.

This is just the first episode in the literary epic that spans the last 13 chapters of Genesis. There are 3 things you

The Lord was WITH Joseph. This statement “the Lord was with Joseph” is as much a commentary about what had

already happened as what was presently happening to Joseph.

**Three observations from Chapter 37 that teaches us about God’s presence in our suffering:**

**Joseph never interprets his life, or how God feels about him, through his situation**– Remember that question I asked you at the outset?

**“How would you respond to the events in your life if you were sure that God was with you?”**

Think about Joseph in the pit. This is a guy who had been pretty privileged his entire life. And now he’s stuck in a pit waiting not sure if his brothers are going to kill him. Then, he gets completely betrayed when his brothers SELL him into slavery. Can you imagine the last look at your brothers as you are carted away in chains by complete strangers who view you solely as property and not as a person? What are the things we expect to see in Joseph? Defeat, despair, rage. And I imagine he went through some intense emotions. But that isn’t what the author dwells on when we see him in slavery. We see him confidently handling his situation.

His owner is a guy named Potiphar we’ll meet in a couple of weeks. Potiphar’s wife is going to frame Joseph because he won’t sleep with her. He runs right out of his shirt when she grabs it & out of the house...That shirt gets Joseph thrown into prison and Moses is going to say “The Lord was with

Joseph in the prison.” Then, while in prison he’s going to help a guy out and that guy is supposed to return the favor when he gets out. Guy gets out...and forgets Joseph...for 2 years...And “the lord was with Joseph.”

I mean, about this time I’d be saying

“Okay, God could you be with me a little less? God, could you go be with someone else? Maybe, go be with my brothers. Yea that would be great.” I don’t know if this is supposed to be humorous or not but it says in 39: God showed him kindness and gave him favor with the warden. I don’t know about you but I don’t want to know a prison warden. If God’s blessing is on me, I won’t know any wardens.

But Joseph doesn’t go there. He acts as anyone would if they were completely sure God is with him or her. If this were most of us we would have bailed on God by now. But Joseph doesn’t say “My life is too far gone for God to do anything now.” He doesn’t say “How could God love me and let all these bad things happen?” No, instead Joseph walks as if God is really still with him. Working for his good. Catch this: **He doesn’t define his life by what is happening around him.** The constant in Joseph’s life is a confidence and hope that comes from God being right there with him. He’s not despondent, he’s not bitter. He’s a functioning productive responsible guy that others look up to.

Now I want you to see the difference between Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph’s brothers are characterized through all of chapter 37 as angry & jealous. They HATED Joseph. Why? Because Joseph had the love of their father. And most of us are like “That’s understandable!” After all, they have been wronged by their father and embarrassed by their brother.

**The jealous rage of Joseph’s brothers came from interpreting their lives based on what happened to them.**

The brothers may seem extreme, but they show you a picture of your own heart when you interpret God’s love for you through your circumstances. The jealousy of the brothers is really just a symptom of a deeper problem in their hearts. And that deeper problem is the insecurity that comes from a lack of love from their father.

And this happens all the time in our lives. We are jealous of other people. They’ve got a bigger house, better truck, their kids don’t seem to destroy every public establishment they enter, I should have gotten that promotion not her, If only I was in that friend group. Their marriage is better than mine....Or, they are married and I’m staring down the barrel of single forever. Or like the whole world feels...if only our team was as good as the panthers! if I only had their life. Anybody ever thought that?

See that jealousy, that longing for what you don’t have...that’s a symptom of a deeper problem in your heart.

It's a gospel problem. A mentor explained it to me like smoke from a fire. Jealousy is just smoke that comes from a fire of insecurity.

See when you understand the gospel, you understand that your deepest need for love and acceptance have been met in God the father. You need love? God says he loved you so much he sent his son to DIE for you to bring you back to him. Your longing for the life others have...your bitterness from what others have done to you...that fire will never be put out without the gospel. That jealousy, that bitterness, will begin to eat away at you until it consumes you entirely. Revenge won't satisfy you. Nothing will.

The gospel says...your need for love and acceptance and security is all met in Jesus. And you can let go of your need for vengeance. You can let go of your pain. Jesus says you can give him that burden and he will carry it.

Here's why understanding what God is saying to you through Joseph & his brothers is so big:

At some point you are going to be tempted to interpret how God feels about you through your circumstances.

- You are going to look at some mistakes you've made and think you are too messed up for God to use you in any way. I know plenty of people who think the bad stuff in my life now is some form of cosmic justice for the sins I've committed in my past.
- Or you are going to be hurting from what someone else did to you and you are going to say 'my life will

never be what it was supposed to be because of them.'

What if you responded to those moments as if God was right there with you? To which you might understandably say "how do I know God is with me?"

Great question. Which leads us to the key to understanding Joseph's entire story. **Joseph and his brothers point to Jesus.**

Joseph's life is pointing out a need in all of us. A need for the presence of God to be with us.

Like Joseph, Jesus would be betrayed by his brothers. And through that betrayal Jesus would bring about our salvation. What we meant for evil (Crucifying him on the cross), God meant for good. The bible says that "God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were still sinners...still far off...still betraying him...Christ died for us."<sup>2</sup>

When you receive the salvation he promises you...the bible says he comes into your life and he is now WITH you. The bible says every believer has God's spirit inside of them. When Jesus was going into heaven the last thing he said to his disciples was "I am WITH YOU" always to the end of the age. That wasn't just sentimental language. That was a

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 5.8



factual statement about the Holy Spirit. And you can know that God is working for your good in every circumstance because he worked for your good in the darkest day in history. The crucifixion of Christ

Yet still you say...I understand that, but it doesn't make sense. Look at all the bad things that have happened in my life...how can you say God is "with me?"

Remember Joseph? You might say he was the victim of so many random unkind circumstances. : One of the commentators I read said that there are so many random, unlucky things that seem to happen to Joseph. For example, when Joseph went to find his brothers on that fateful day, his brothers happened to be in a place very far away where Joseph could be sold and no one would know about it. Reuben happened to be there so that he wouldn't be killed but he happened not to be there to save him from being sold into slavery. Joseph's robe happened to come off when he was running from Potiphar's wife leaving the smoking gun Potiphar's wife needed to frame him. He happened to be put in a prison cell with Pharaoh's butler. That same butler happened to overhear Pharaoh's new dream and on and on...

But in all these things *God* was working, whether random chance or the wicked act of others, God was with Joseph working things out. You say...How? Hard to describe. Here's an analogy: Ever played a strategy game with someone who was waaaay better at it than you? I recently learned how to play Settlers of Catan. My friend Eric taught me. I thought

the game was figuring out how to win. I quickly learned it was a "which way will I lose this time?" game. He was so much better he was 20 moves ahead of me orchestrating my demise no matter what I did. God is the ultimate settler of Catan. Maybe first time that's ever been said. He orchestrates the events in your life in ways you cannot possibly understand.

I heard a lecture from one of my favorite authors, Peter Kreeft, who referred to Joseph's life when talking about God working in seemingly evil circumstances to orchestrate his good plan:

*At times it would appear that God's plan to save mankind was hanging on by a thread. Literally. If Joseph's shawl had not unraveled because it was cheaply made when Potiphar's wife took hold of it there would have been no evidence that Joseph "tried to seduce her." He would not have gone to prison, he would not have met Pharaoh's ex-butler whose dream he interpreted, and who was later reinstated with Pharaoh. That same butler would not have remembered him 2 years later (he had a.d.d.) and brought him up from prison to interpret Pharaoh's dream. He would not have become ruler of Egypt where he could have saved all the rest of Jacob's sons, the only 70 remaining Jews in the world at the time, by letting them live in Egypt during the famine. They would not have become a great nation of millions that Moses would eventually lead out of Egypt. There would have been no more Jews, no more chosen people, and no Jesus who would*

*have come from them to die for our sins. We owe our salvation to a cheap Egyptian tailor!*<sup>3</sup>

**Genesis 45:5** *Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here... 7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 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.*<sup>4</sup>

I don't want to make it sound as if God was the one doing those things to you, or delighting in the fact that they happened. But He had a purpose, and you can hang onto it. You say, "I don't understand how God could use that." Take the worst event of history... the crucifixion... if there were ever a time where it seemed like God was not in control, and wicked people were prevailing... it was at the Crucifixion. Yet, through the cross, God brought the salvation of the world. In the same way, God is in your pain, bringing His plan out of it.

I know Joseph's story ends with him on top. 2<sup>nd</sup> in command of all of Egypt. Which may make you say "well sure, it was worth it for him." But that's not the point of Joseph's story. The point isn't "endure and it will all work out." The point is: Joseph's life was pointing to Jesus. And

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<sup>3</sup> From Peter Kreeft's talk "10 uncommon insights into Evil from the Lord of the Rings" given at the MacLaurin Institute on 4.4.2003. Available at [http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/04\\_insights-into-evil.htm](http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/04_insights-into-evil.htm).

because Jesus died for you, you can rest in him EVEN if your situation ends in the dungeon and not in the king's court.

When you don't get into that school...when your spouse gets cancer...when you get fired. Will you respond like Joseph's brothers? In bitterness and anger because you didn't get what you deserve?

Or will you look at your life from these 2 perspectives. From God's vantage point he is doing something in your life you can't see yet. And maybe you never will. And even if you never understand it in this life, you can still find rest for your soul because he has promised that if you are a Christian **he is with you**. His name is Emmanuel, God with us! Jesus is still alive and still with believers! And his presence with you gives you the power to walk through whatever storm you are in.

How would you respond to the events in your life now, if you were sure that God were with you?

Personal: I've told some of you Courtney and I lost a baby in miscarriage a few years ago. It was in February so we always remember it. When I think back on that, I don't think "Oh, I see the good plan God had." Nope. I don't. when it comes to God's plan, We cling to romans 8.18 - That our present sufferings are somehow not worthy to be compared to the glory that will be revealed in us. We will never feel good about losing our baby. We will always mourn that. You know what got us through that? It was

right there knowing that God hadn't left us. As I screamed and cried and screamed until I lost my voice. After I'd run out of tears, I had complete assurance God was with us. That comes from the gospel. God watched his child die. In fact he *sent* him to die. So that I could be reconciled to him. That love is the only thing that allowed me, that still allows me, to mourn with hope. If I ever doubted his love, and I did some during those days, I only needed to look at the cross. Some of you need to finally see the cross that way. That no matter the depth of your pain, the cross tells you God has not forgotten you, has not abandoned you, and is not punishing you. He punished his son for your sins which means no punishment comes on you. ***So, listen to me, your pain is not his punishment.*** It's the painful reality of a broken world that isn't the way it is supposed to be.

And you need to run to him. Over this series we are going to look more at this mystery of God working for our Good. The "one day" perspective. Again, I don't expect you to get it all right now because its such a divine mystery. But in this series we are going to dive so deep into the gospel. And the anthem of our church is that this gospel changes everything.