

LESSON

12

WEEK OF
DECEMBER 11

The Providence of God

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As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today (Genesis 50:20).



DEVOTIONAL

Divine providence, though it was once spoken of reverently by people throughout Western culture, is today but an afterthought for the vast majority of people both inside and outside the church. Our society is dominated by naturalistic materialism; we are conditioned to think that we can explain everything by reference to fixed causes within a closed universe that is not subject to divine intervention. Though believers confess faith in a Creator who continues to work in His creation, we often end up living as practical atheists, failing to recognize the Lord's continual guidance and control of everything that happens. Scripture, however, cautions us never to ignore God's providential ordering of His creation. Biblically speaking, providence refers to several different activities of our Creator in this world. First, there is the sustaining providence of the Lord. God did not just create the universe and then walk away, leaving it to depend on itself for its own existence. Instead, the Lord continues to sustain all of creation. As we noted a few days ago, if our Creator were not actively sustaining that which He has created, it would simply cease to exist. God, through His Son and by His Spirit, upholds the world by "the word of his power" (Hebrews 1:3). That is the only reason why everything continues to exist. Providence also refers to divine concurrence, which is the Lord's working in and through His creation and His creatures to bring about what He has planned. Concurrence affirms that in all of our activities, God is working at the same time we are working. We may not have the same intent, but the Lord is acting through our actions and intentions to fulfill His plan for creation. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the story of Joseph, at the end of which we read that what Joseph's brothers meant for evil, God meant for good (Genesis 50:20). Joseph's brothers did not sell Joseph into slavery apart from the decree of the Lord. In fact, God's decree established that they would sell him into slavery and that the Lord would work through this decision to save many people. God's working in the situation was pure, for although the selling of Joseph into slavery was an evil, our Creator had a righteous intent in permitting it. Joseph's brothers truly intended to do him harm, and God let them do that so that He could put Joseph in a place to save the world from a horrible famine. Thus, we derive great comfort from God's providence. Because the Lord ordains whatsoever comes to pass, we can be sure that He is always working—even in the midst of evil—to bring about a marvelous good (Romans 8:28).

CORAM DEO (In the Presence of God)

Only if God ordains all things can we be confident that He is working all things together for our good. Because even evil is a part of the Lord's plan, we know that there is a reason for every bad thing that happens to us, even if we do not learn the reason on this side of heaven. God is not the author of sin; that

is, He is not morally responsible for it. But He uses sin and all other things to bring about our good and His ultimate glory.¹



OPEN IT

1. Are you a person who like things to be planned, or do you feel more comfortable when things are more spontaneous? Why?



READ IT

Genesis 50:15–26



EXPLORE IT

2. What concerned Joseph's brothers upon hearing of their father's death?
3. What do the brothers do to address this concern?
4. How did Joseph respond to his brothers?
5. How old was Joseph when he died?

APPLY IT



There are times when life feels like it is out of control. A shooting is reported on the news. One more person has cancer. Someone we love is diagnosed with debilitating disease. A long-term relationship crumbles. Someone we love dies suddenly. We lose a job. We face financial reversals. We are falsely accused. Or we have one of those periods where nothing seems to go as planned. At these times life seems unpredictable and arbitrary. And that's why the concluding chapter of Genesis is so important. In the words of Joseph, we gain insight to these difficult times of life. Joseph gives us insight into the Providence of God.²

6. When have you experienced a moment that from a human perspective didn't make any sense? What questions did this experience bring about?
7. How does the story of Joseph give you hope when the unexpected takes place?

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/providence-of-god/>

² Sermon by Bruce Goesttche "The Invisible Hand of Providence" found @ <http://www.unionchurch.com/archive/040900.html>

Because of the fears Joseph's brothers harbored, they came up with another scheme (Genesis 50:15–17). They concocted a letter that Jacob had supposedly left behind when he died, in which he pled for Joseph to forgive his brothers. You'll notice that the brothers did not take the letter to Joseph themselves. They sent a messenger with the letter, hoping to soften him up before they came and threw themselves down before him, saying, "We are your slaves" (v. 18). After all these years of living in blessing because of Joseph, they reverted to their old conniving ways when their father was gone. Old habits die hard. When Joseph got the concocted message from his brothers and then saw them lying on the ground before him offering to be his slaves, his emotions were deeply stirred.

Let's notice two things about his reaction. Joseph cried when he heard his brothers' message (v. 17). He cried because he realized that his brothers had never truly believed him or accepted his forgiveness. The reality of it broke Joseph's heart. It's interesting that their scheme didn't make Joseph indignant or stir him to anger or resentment. He was an amazing person. A lesser man might have become sick of the whole lot of them and decided it was time for revenge after all. Joseph realized that the motives behind his efforts at reconciliation and his expressions of kindness toward his brothers and their families had been completely misunderstood and his sincerity doubted. This must have hurt him deeply.³

8. What causes us to think that when someone says we are forgiven, that we aren't?

9. What happens when a Christian takes the same posture regarding forgiveness with Jesus as the brothers did with Joseph?

10. What truths do the following verses give us regarding God's forgiveness?

1 John 1:9 — *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

Isaiah 43:25 — *I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.*

Isaiah 1:18 — *"Come now, let us settle the matter," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."*

Numbers 14:19–20 — *"In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now." The LORD replied, "I have forgiven them, as you asked."*

Micah 7:18–19 — *Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.*

11. What things should have given Joseph's brothers security when it came to their standing with him? What things has God given us that should give us an assurance of his forgiveness and love?

³ Alistair Begg. *The Hand of God: Finding His Care in All Circumstances* (p. 190). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

12. Joseph articulates the same truths about his care for his brothers as he did the moment he disclosed who he was many years before (Genesis 45). What does this tell us about sticking to our forgiveness even when "new offenses" come about?

Providence

Joseph gives us insight into the providence of God. That term may be unfamiliar to you. The word providence means literally to "see beforehand." It teaches that God sees the end or the purpose for what happens in life. He sees (and ordained) the final goal. . . so God is actively involved moving creation toward that goal. R.C. Sproul states it succinctly,

The central point of the doctrine of providence is the stress on God's government of the universe. He rules His creation with absolute sovereignty and authority. He governs everything that comes to pass, from the greatest to the least. Nothing ever happens beyond the scope of His sovereign providential government. He makes the rain to fall and the sun to shine. He raises up kingdoms and brings them down. He numbers the hairs on our head and the days of our life. [Essential Truths p. 62]⁴

13. If someone doesn't believe in the providence of God, what things are left for them to hold on to? How is this view flawed?
14. How can understanding the providence of God serve us well both in times of triumph and tragedy?

God is working ALL things for Good in the life of the believer

One of the most quoted verses in the Bible is Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purposes." This verse about God's providence teaches us vital truths for our lives.

Paul **does not** say that God uses pleasant things for good. He doesn't say that God uses **some things** for good. **God is at work in ALL things for the good of the one who is called by Him.** I believe that means before conversion and after our conversion. EVERYTHING is filtered through the hands of our loving Father . . . everything!

The Wedgwood Baptist Church suffered the horror of a gunman by the name of Larry Ashbrook coming into their church on a Wednesday night in September of 1999 while a See You at the Pole rally was taking place. He began shooting. . . killing seven young people. It was a horrible situation. Months afterward the church looks back and sees a number of ways God has used this painful time. All the victims were believers. The memorial service at the football stadium of Texas Christian University was attended by 15,000 people and was broadcast on CNN and because Kim Jones's parents live and work in Saudi Arabia, that country, which is closed to the gospel, allowed portions of the service to be broadcast there. In response to a question by Al Gore, Pastor Meredith was able to present the gospel clearly on "Larry King Live" and was in the days following able to pray with President Clinton and Texas Governor George W. Bush. A DJ at a local Christian radio station was able to lead a caller to Christ. He said he wanted what the church members had. The only people who were killed were believers who were ushered into the presence of the Almighty.

These are just a few of the evidences of God's providence in this circumstance. There are certainly other things we will not learn about until we are in Heaven. God was at work even in the horror and madness of this situation. Have you ever thought about what the disciples were thinking as Jesus was crucified?

⁴ Sermon by Bruce Goesttche "The Invisible Hand of Providence" found @ <http://www.unionchurch.com/archive/040900.html>

Certainly, they thought God had forgotten them. What a travesty of justice. Where was God? But later they understood. Without the cross there could be no forgiveness. Without the cross there was no salvation. Without the cross there can be no resurrection. God was at work even in the cruelest event of history.

God is at work in your life, too. He is involved in the big things. . . and the little things of your life. Stay open. Keep listening. Learn the lessons He is trying to teach you.⁵

15. How can God be sovereign over everything and yet not be responsible for evil?

16. When have you seen something that man used for evil be turned around by God for good?

The Death of a Great Man (Genesis 50:22–26)

These verses that sum up the life of this truly successful man are striking for what they include as well as for what they omit. They include mention of his family, that he lived to see his great grandchildren. Surprisingly, they exclude any mention of Joseph's career and position of power in Egypt. They also include Joseph's final words of faith and hope that he left with his brothers.

The book of Genesis, which begins with the majestic words, "In the beginning God. . ." and with the description of man and woman enjoying the beauty of the paradise God placed them in, ends with the rather unsettling words that Joseph was "placed in a coffin in Egypt." It reminds us that any correct definition of success has to take into account the fact of death.⁶

17. What things does our world say make a person successful? What things made Joseph a success?

In summing up the life of this great man who had fame and fortune, who saved a whole nation from starvation, Moses only mentions the rather simple fact that he lived to see his great-grandsons. *The phrase to be "born on Joseph's knees" here is probably a way of picturing this old man joyously holding his newborn great-grandsons on his lap. In this somewhat subtle way, Moses underscores the fact that no matter how successful a man may be, the family is one of God's greatest blessings. As someone has said, no one ever gets to the end of his life and says, "I wish I had spent more time on my career."⁷

18. Whether we are married or single, young or old, all of us are connected to a family. What are some ways families miss the blessing that God intended for them to be?

As Joseph was about to die, he left his family the greatest inheritance any man can leave—not money, but faith and hope in God's promises: "'I am about to die, but God will surely take care of [or, visit] 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 you shall carry my bones up from here'" (50:24–25).⁸

⁵ ibid

⁶ Sermon by Steve Cole entitled Epitaph of a Truly Successful Man found @ <http://media.sermonaudio.com/mediapdf/99225162257501.pdf>

*ESV translates "was counted as Joseph's own"

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

19. What type of legacy are you leaving behind for your family and friends? What can you do in the days to come to point those you leave behind to the promises of God found in the gospel?

Two little words in verse 24 reveal Joseph's faith. They are words that almost always reveal faith—"but God." Jacob, from his deathbed, had said the same thing to Joseph over 50 years before: "I am about to die, but God will be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers" (48:21).

Joseph could have thought, "That wasn't true. God didn't bring me back, as my father said." But rather than doubting God's promise, which is not always fulfilled in our timetable, Joseph, from his deathbed, by faith assured his family, "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you [the Hebrew is emphatic], and bring you up from this land to the land which he promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob."

As a proof of that faith, Joseph gave the unusual instructions that he was not to be put into one of the pyramids or some Egyptian tomb. But instead, his body was to be kept accessible enough that when Israel went back to Canaan, they were to carry Joseph's bones with them! Bible scholars are divided on the chronology, but it was between 200 to 400 years later when Moses finally led Israel out of Egypt.

They had to leave in haste, two million people heading out through the desert with all their belongings and livestock. Yet in all that confusion, after all those years, we read in Exodus 13:19 that Moses took the bones of Joseph with him. During all those years of slavery and oppression in Egypt, Joseph's bones stood as a witness of faith in God's promises to Israel: "We're not going to stay in Egypt forever. Remember Joseph's bones!"⁹

20. Why is it so important for us to continually rehearse the promises of God? How can meditating on His promises of the future speak to us in the turbulence of the present?

The book of Genesis ends on this note of hope, that God will surely visit His people. He did, as the book of Exodus makes clear. But that wasn't a final visitation.

The Old Testament ends with the Lord giving the hope of the coming of "Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord." (Mal. 4:5-6). But then there were 400 more silent years, when God's people languished under the oppression of foreign rule, with no word from God. Then Zecharias, the father of that second Elijah, John the Baptist, prophesied, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people" (Luke 1:68). Zecharias was prophesying of Jesus Christ, born in fulfillment of God's promises that had gone unfulfilled for almost 2,000 years. Jesus Christ provided salvation from God's judgment for all who will accept His death on the cross as God's free gift. But after His death and resurrection, He did not remain to set up His kingdom on this earth, but returned to heaven. As He ascended, the angel told the apostles, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). And so, the final book of the Bible ends by looking forward in hope to that great event: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming quickly.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

And now, almost 2,000 years later, we know that His return is near. We are to be looking for His coming in holy conduct and godliness, with expectant hope (see 2 Peter 3:3-13).¹⁰

21. Take some time to close out this study by praying as a group, using the truths of Joseph's life as your guide, praising and thanking God for His continued visitation upon His people throughout the ages and in every circumstance.

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

SMALL GROUP SURVEY

As we finish up our first semester of Small Groups we want to take some time to hear from you. Please take some time to go online to villagebible.org/groupsurvey. There you will find the following questions that will help us in making the VBC Small Group experience even better.

1. What have been your general impressions regarding your small group experience?
2. What benefits and blessings have come from your participation in small groups?
3. How can your small group be more effective in the upcoming spring semester?
4. What feedback would you give regarding the leadership of your group? What things are working well and what could use improvement?
5. What feedback would you give regarding our study of *Joseph: Seeing the Good in God's Detours*?
6. How has your small group experience impacted your walk with God and others?