

Martin White. 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2009. Genesis 37.

## **God meant it for good – Joseph in Egypt**

I have been a Christian for 24 years and I moved to Birmingham to start the Crown 10 years ago; I have seen lots of exciting times, and have seen God move in lots of amazing ways. But I have never been as excited about what's happening as I am at the moment!

I believe that God is working very specifically on us as a Church at the moment and is getting us ready for the hugely exciting things He is calling us to.

I think that Summer Term 2008 was the 'best' term we have ever had as a church. It was the first time we broke through the "100" barrier – and actually we had 6 weeks through the term when we had between 110 and 140 people.

We saw a real increase in the number and clarity of healings, and I believe we saw more of God's Presence, heard more of His voice and experienced more of His blessing as a church than any time I can remember.

And then, just before the summer, I had a sense that God was speaking to me about wanting to work on our church DNA – in other words, He wants to do whatever is necessary in us to get us exactly right for Him to grow us the way He wants.

And if we would let Him, then he would reproduce us in the future.

When I felt that God saying this, I had a sense that it would involve some "major surgery"; but a lot more "fine tuning" of work that He had already begun in us. And I had a sense that numerically, we may get smaller for a time as God worked on us – and then we would see areas of growth that we haven't seen before.

And to some degree, I believe we have seen God begin to do this surgery since the summer.

So, as I mentioned last week, our challenge at the moment is to learn the lessons God is leading us through at the moment – building Community; honouring each other; allowing God to deal with any divisions; looking again at how we should relate and serve each other biblically and how to be and make disciples across and beyond cultures.

And I believe that God's Hand is with us – doing exactly this at the moment.

This doesn't mean that it's time for us to relax, or to stop reaching out and sharing the Gospel with our friends, but I think it is a time for us to be giving extra attention to how we are living and relating and worshipping together as a Church – to get the 'barn ready for the harvest that God will bring.'

So although we had a great term last summer as a church, I feel like it would be a backward step to go back to how things were – no matter how good it was.

I believe that at the moment we are just where God wants us to be. That's not the same as saying we're great or perfect. I simply mean that if God is the Surgeon working on our DNA, at the moment we're on the right operating table!

So the question is, if God is working on us at the moment, what should we be doing to respond and co-operate?

In the history of Israel there were lots of times when God got His People into exactly the right place for Him to work on them – maybe the most obvious being when God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of the Egypt, through the desert and into the Promised Land.

And actually, I believe that there is a lot in this story about how God led, dealt with and taught the Israelites that I think is very relevant and prophetic for us as a church at the moment.

So for the next few weeks I want to look at this process – mainly from the Book of Exodus and look at some of the tests and challenges and blessings we may be facing – and what they all tell us about God.

But, as background for the next few weeks I want to start a bit further back and tell the story of Joseph and how the Israelites came to be in Egypt in the first place.

So if you have a Bible, you can follow this story through from Genesis chapter 37, although, because of time I won't be reading the whole story.

Joseph is an amazing man from the Bible in that, other than Jesus, he is the only main character who didn't mess up. His whole life is marked by integrity and godliness and forgiveness, and he finishes his life well.

But he is also someone who went through huge betrayals, setbacks and injustices.

His father was Jacob, who had 12 sons from his 2 wives and 2 servants. Joseph was the 11<sup>th</sup> son, but the first born to Jacob's favourite wife, Rachel.

So Joseph became his father's favourite, and was given a special robe to wear.

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. (Gen 37:2-4 NIV)

There's a lot of dispute about exactly what this robe was about – it seems to have been a robe, with sleeves that extended to the wrists and ankles that may have been 'dazzling' with golden thread. It would have been difficult to do manual work in a robe like this, and similar robes were marks of royalty or high favour. And I think this was the point of it.

Joseph was the one son who Jacob had that was reliably good and honourable and trustworthy, in amongst the others who at times were unruly, lustful, not dependable and deceitful.

That, coupled with the fact he had been born from Jacob's favourite wife, in his old age, made Joseph the clear favourite of their father...and the other brothers hated him for it.

Added to that, Joseph had been gifted by God with the prophetic ability to have and interpret dreams – and several of these, which he possibly unwisely shared with his family, were of them all bowing down to him.

Although this was proved to be an accurate, prophetic picture from God; again, this didn't win him favour with his brothers, who started plotting a way to get rid of him – possibly by killing him.

So they came up with a plan to kill him, but then through negotiation from Reuben, they changed it to shoving him down a well, and then selling him to “Midianite” traders as a slave.

Joseph is taken away to Egypt, aged 17, and sold as a slave to a high ranking official called Potiphar.

He serves Potiphar faithfully – although he doesn't deserve to be a slave and has just been betrayed by his own family and has gone overnight from being favoured son to slave.

Potiphar sees something in Joseph and promotes him to be head of his household – but Potiphar's wife also notices him and tries to seduce him.

Joseph passes the test of this temptation and again acts with integrity and godliness, but is accused falsely and thrown into jail for this crime that he was accused of.

And then he is in prison – possibly for several years in horrible conditions; doing forced labour, with every right to be seething at the injustice. But he seems to react differently and the Bible says this:

But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did. (Genesis 39:20-23 NIV)

Then a God-given; God-planned break happens for Joseph when 2 prisoners – Pharaoh's cup-bearer and his baker both have prophetic dreams from God on the same night. They don't understand them, but Joseph, because of the Gift

God has given him, has exactly the answer that's needed. He interprets both dreams, accurately saying that in 3 days one (the baker) would be executed, and the other (the cupbearer) would be restored to his position.

3 days later, both these things happen just as Joseph predicted, and the cupbearer, overjoyed, promises to get Joseph released.

And then it goes on:

The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.

When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream:

(Genesis 40:23-41:1 NIV)

Then, after the 2 years, Pharaoh himself has a dream and the cupbearer remembers Joseph, who interprets the dream and says that there will be 7 years of amazing harvests and surplus crops, followed by 7 years of famine.

Then Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of the whole of Egypt – the superpower of the day; meaning that in a day he goes from disgraced prisoner, to the second most powerful man in the world.

So then there are the 7 years of blessing and plenty, followed by famine.

And then, as the famine starts to bite, Joseph's brothers come to beg for food, and without recognizing him, they bow down before Joseph – just like the dream he had had – possibly 17 years before. They go to get Jacob, and he comes too and the family is reunited.

At the point Joseph reveals who he is to his brothers, he says something amazing:

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. (Genesis 45:4-8 NIV)

And then he repeats this to them after the death of Jacob:  
His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:18-21 NIV)

This echoes Romans 8:28

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 NIV)

God's Purposes had been achieved – the World could be fed, because of what had happened to Joseph – even although a lot of the things that had happened to him were bad, unjust and ungodly

But also, in Joseph's life, God's Kingdom had come.

I think that his response to his brothers is one of the amazing passages in the Bible.

There was reality – "You intended me harm"

But there was also humility before God and an amazing understanding of God's big plan.

And even though there had been betrayals and lies and imprisonments and hardships, Joseph is content to go God's route.

Next week we're going to scroll forward 430 years to a time when several generations had gone and a godless Pharaoh had put the Israelites into slavery. And we'll look at how God called His People out of Egypt under Moses.

But when we do, the truth of God's 'big plan' will be just the same.

And I want to close today on this subject.

**I heard someone sharing a picture last year (which I have mentioned in Church before)**

**Someone is adrift on a sea of circumstances, clinging to a little piece of driftwood which is faith in God.**

**Then the picture switched – and the piece of driftwood was actually shown to be our circumstances – as we can see them; and the vast, immeasurably deep ocean is actually God’s big, unstoppable, wonderful, sovereign plan**

For us as a Church – I think we need to know that we are in the middle of God’s big plan – and I think that at the start of this year, that’s a good thing to remind ourselves of and to fix our eyes on.

His plan doesn’t rely on us – and whatever we do or don’t do isn’t going to sway or dent His plans.

But in His Grace, He has made us part of his plans

And for us individually, I think it’s good to be reminded of His Hand on us.

I believe that holding on to this is what got Joseph through all his trials.

And for us, I think this is a really important thing to remember.

Especially in the times we are living through.

- Some people have lost jobs
- Some more will through this year
- Financial tests
- Opposition
- Disappointments
- Delays
- Times when we can’t understand what’s happening

This needs to be our foundation: God is sovereign and He has a big plan!