

## **The Hidden God (Truth and Justice)**

**Note: cf page 10 for the end of Robert's sermon not captured in the video recording.**

### **Introduction**

A long time ago in a country far, far away, a young man named Joseph dreamt that his father and his brothers would one day bow down to him. Joseph's father Jacob and brothers took ill to his presumption, and his brothers schemed evilly to remove Joseph from their presence. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, while they deceitfully told their father that Joseph had been killed by wild animals. In Egypt Joseph was bought by a man named Potiphar, who made Joseph his attendant. Joseph prospered under Potiphar, and God blessed him and his household. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph. When Joseph escaped, Potiphar's wife made false allegations against him. Joseph was arrested and put in prison. In prison, the Lord was with Joseph, and the warder put Joseph in charge of the prison. In prison Joseph used his skill at interpreting dreams to first help some fellow-prisoners, and then help Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh put Joseph in charge not only the whole palace, but of Egypt itself. Through his wise rule, he saved Egypt, and the whole world, from famine.

## God works his purposes out

Things are going well for Joseph. He is in charge of the whole of Egypt, and has nearly unlimited power. He has gone from the bottom of a pit, to being the second-most powerful man in the world. Not bad! The Joseph story could finish here. But our writer (and God) have other ideas. Not least, what about those dreams that Joseph had? Will they come to pass? (Gen 42:1 NIV):

1 When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, 'Why do you just keep looking at each other?' 2 He continued, 'I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die.' 3 Then ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt. 4 But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with the others, because he was afraid that harm might come to him. 5 So Israel's sons were among those who went to buy grain, for there was famine in the land of Canaan also. 6 Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the person who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph's brothers arrived, ***they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.***

Now, we've heard that phrase before, somewhere. Back in chapter 37, to be precise (Gen. 37:7):

We were binding sheaves of corn out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered round mine and **bowed down to it**.

(Gen. 37:9):

I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were **bowing down to me**.

(Gen. 37:10):

When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, 'What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and ***bow down to the ground before you?***

Despite the protestations of Joseph's father and brothers, Joseph's dreams came true, to the letter. This is the mystery of God's providence. Joseph's brothers tried their level best to make sure that these dreams would not come to pass, by first putting Joseph in a pit, and then selling him to slave-traders. You certainly can't fault them for effort. And yet, despite this God's plan happened anyway. His brothers were bowing down to Joseph.

What can we take from this? The first thing we can take is that God's will overrules. There's nothing we can do to stop it. Now, at one level this is scary: there really is a great big God out there who controls events, and whom no one can stop.

But the other side of this is that there's nothing we can do, ultimately, to mess up God's plan. When Joseph was in the deepest pit, he must have wondered, well, what about all those dreams, God?! It would have been extremely tempting to lose hope, to lose faith, to think that his brothers had ruined everything for him.

When we look out on our lives, or on the world, and see everything apparently going wrong, apparently being sent in exactly the opposite direction from what we know God wills for the world, we can take comfort from this story, that God is able to bring his will ultimately to pass, regardless of what the current circumstances might be.

### **through, rather than despite, our sin**

And this is true, not just in spite of our own sin, but through our own sin. What Joseph's brothers did was sinful. Now, in fairness, they hadn't had the ten commandments yet. But they know enough to know that the way they have acted has not been exactly what God wanted, (42:14 NIV):

14 They said to one another, 'Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come on us.'

Their consciences testify against them.

And it's not only Joseph's brothers who are the guilty ones here. In fact, despite their incredibly strong pedigree in deception and general skulduggery, in this particular story they do actually tell the truth! It is rather Joseph, who is deceiving, or at the very least holding back from telling his brothers the truth about who he really is (42:7-8).

7 As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, ***he recognised them, but he pretended to be a stranger*** and spoke harshly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he asked. 'From the land of Canaan,' they replied, 'to buy food.' 8 ***And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognise him.***

Now is it right in this context that Joseph deceives his brothers in this way? To be honest, I'm not sure.

Biblical literature doesn't work in the way we are expecting, and in particular, in the way that sermons tend to be preached. We are taught to communicate with a few clear and memorable points. But Biblical literature is designed to be meditated on. It often defies easy simplification and explication.

But what I do know is that it in this case, in a sense it doesn't actually matter: regardless of whether it's right or wrong, God can (and we shall see, will) use Joseph's actions to bring about what he is doing. And what is God doing (Gen. 50:20). Much later, at the end of this story, Joseph says this to his brothers:

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

And actually, this sentence fits equally well at the end of the book, as it does here, in chapter 42. In the immediate context of chapter 42, not only is the whole world being saved, but the lives of Joseph's family are also saved (Gen. 42:25):

Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to put each man's silver back in his sack, and give them provisions for their journey. After this was done for them, they loaded their grain on their donkeys and left.

God actively uses whatever the circumstances are, in this case brought about first by Joseph's brothers' sin, then by Potiphar's wife's sin, to put Joseph in the position that he had, to put Joseph in a position to save the whole world. And he is using Joseph's deception to bring about his ultimate plan for them, which is their salvation, and the salvation of the world.

Sometimes we are so worried about messing things up, that it can stop us from acting. We fear that our own sin and fallenness is too great, and that we might somehow ultimately let the side down. But the message of this story is that nothing, not even selling your brother into slavery (although definitely not advised), can stop God.

### **even if we can't see him working**

And this is true even if we cannot see him working. We (and Joseph) can see that the events of this passage are the fulfilment of his dreams. But at this point in time, Joseph's brothers cannot see this (42:7-9a NIV):

7 As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognised them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he asked. 'From the land of Canaan,' they replied, 'to buy food.' 8 ***And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.*** 9a And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them.

The writer really hammers this point home. Joseph actively hides his identity from his brothers. He knows who they are, but they do not know who he is. He knows that the dreams he had are being fulfilled, but they do not know this. To them, Joseph is just an Egyptian border official, out to make their lives difficult at the border by alleging they are spies---without any evidence.

Life can be confusing. Frequently things happen either to us personally, or in the world as a whole---I'm sure we can all think of examples of things that are happening right now in the world that are in this category---that we cannot explain, and that we cannot see how an all-powerful good God could tolerate and allow to happen. Sometimes we even experience moments of exceptional clarity and revelation, when everything seems to make sense, only for us to be plunged immediately into a period of difficulty and uncertainty.

Now this isn't necessarily the God we would choose to invent. We would probably invent a God who makes himself clear, who writes everything up in the sky so that there is no uncertainty. But this sadly, but perhaps also marvellously, is not the God that we read about in the Genesis.

**God works his purposes out *in Jesus* through, rather than despite, our sin, even though we can't see him working**

In fact, not only is this the God that we read about in Genesis, but it is also the God we read about in the New Testament, about Jesus, himself. At the end of Luke's gospel says this (Luke 24:25-27 NIV):

25 He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' 27 **And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.**



Notice first what Jesus has to say about how the Bible relates to himself. He is saying that the **whole** Bible is about him. Now there are many ways in which this could be said to be true. There are direct prophecies, many of which we read at Christmas. But most of what we call the Old Testament is not like this. As we have been seeing in Genesis, a considerable part of the Old Testament consists of stories.

Jesus has to be saying here that, ultimately, the Joseph story is all about him. How can we see this? One analogy that I came across while preparing for this (through *The Bible Project*), is that of a photomosaic. You can see the Bible as consisting of lots and lots of little pictures of Jesus' story, all adding up to the big picture of Jesus, his death on the cross his resurrection, and our salvation.

Now in our story, we have several little pre-echoes of Jesus' life. Notice, firstly, what comes before the little section of the story I just gave:

13 Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem.  
14 They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. 15 As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; 16 **but they were kept from recognising him.** [...] 25 He said to them, 'How foolish you are...

In the story itself, we have some interesting little hints of the Gospel story. So far, we haven't spoken about Joseph's brothers' little spell in prison (Gen. 42:14-19 NIV):

14 Joseph said to them, "It is just as I told you: You are spies! 15 And this is how you will be tested: As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. 16 Send one of your number to get your brother; the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth. If you are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies! 17 And he put them all in custody for three days. 18 **On the third day**, Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: 19 If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households."

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In other words, Joseph puts his brothers in prison for three days, before (most of) them go free on the third day. Jesus descended to the dead for three days, before being raised to life on the third day. We have here a little picture, albeit partial, of Jesus' own death and wonderful resurrection.

Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' 27 **And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.**