

Title: Joseph and the Providence of God
Text: Genesis 50:19-21; Romans 8:28-30

I still love to hear that old story of how in 1874, members of the Methodist faith in Swan Quarter decided it was time to establish a permanent church building and abandon the temporary place where they had been holding services. The location of the church became a matter of concern. Benjamin Griffin Credle, leader and promoter, and his committee picked out a perfect site for a church in the heart of town, on its highest spot. They approached the owner of the lot, Sam Sadler, one-time clerk of Hyde County Superior Court, regarding the purchase of the land. Mr. Sadler would not sell it. The Methodists then accepted a gift of a lot offered by James W. Hayes, a thousand feet behind the present courthouse, and in a short time began building operations. When the church, a modest structure on brick piers, was barely finished, people began to worship in it. In September 1876 an interesting event took place. The story is told in an affidavit given by a Mrs. Lelia Brinn, an eyewitness, to P.G. Gallop in 1939. Mrs. Brinn was born and reared in Swan Quarter and lived into the 1950's. She said that on September 16, 1876, which was the eve of the dedication of the church, a storm broke out and began to brew. Rain fell and wind blew until on the morning of September 17, 1876, the wind had reached such a height and the tide had risen to such depth that the force of the water moved the little Methodist Church from its temporary location into the road--now called Oyster Creek Road. The church was floating down the road, and bumped into a general store owned by George V. Credle. The corner is now Oyster Creek Road and U.S. 264 Business. Then a curious thing happened! The building took a sharp right turn and headed down that road for about two city blocks until it reached the corner of what is now Church Street. Then it moved slightly off its straight course, took

another turn to the left, crossed the Carawan Canal directly in front of the place where the people desired the church to be, and settled exactly in the center of the Sam Sadler property, the prior site chosen by the church members, which had been refused. After seeing the mighty work of Providence and realizing there was a mightier power than humanity ruling the universe, Mr. Sadler set about to secure the title of the land for the church. When the church was dedicated years later, it was called "**Providence.**" **The thing that's really amazing about the life of Joseph, was the involvement of the Providence of God.** Have we ever imagined ourselves as being born into a different family, or living in a different part of the world? When life seems to be boring, we tend to day dream about different

possibilities. As I read of the difficulties that Joseph went through, I wondered if there wasn't a different way for this story to unfold. As I recalled how Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, I imagined how he would escape that first night from the Midianite caravan, and make his way back home. They would have had a big family fight, but they had many of them before. His father would have been so happy to have his favorite son home, that he would have soon forgotten the event, and they would have lived "happily ever after." We all like happy endings, yet I can't help but follow the story plot of the Bible down to the end. **I can't help but wonder if a short-lived happy ending would have altered the ultimate end of things.** If the story

ended, as I imagined, when the world famine came, there would have been no wise Joseph to be found, and there would have been no stored up grain, and Palestine and Egypt would have been wiped out by starvation, and the savage Hittites would have come down from the North, and would have wiped out those that the famine didn't devour, and civilization would have been set back by many centuries, and the history of the whole world would be different, **all because I wanted a short cut to a happy ending.** There's no story in history that better illustrates the overarching providence of God in the lives of individuals and nations. The life of Joseph is the greatest illustration that God has a plan and purpose for every life, and in spite of people and devils, accidents and incidents that work against that plan, if we keep surrendered to God, if we cooperate with Him, and love Him, and remain in His purposes, He will work in all things for our good and the good of others. In the most evil of circumstances, God's providence was working. Joseph was sold into slavery, in order to get him into Egypt. That's the place that God had to take His people. It was there that He grew His people, apart from the warring tribes of the day. **He took a family, and made a great nation out of them.** In Egypt, they could experience peace.

Potiphar's purchase of Joseph, kept him one step away from Pharaoh. The injustice of the accusation of Potiphar's wife, put him into the royal prison, where they kept the prisoners of the king. Here he interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's staff, and ultimately Pharaoh himself. **Joseph spent much of his life preparing for this time of leadership.** The timing was perfect. Joseph lived through 13 years of evil, hate, suffering, pain, injustice and human failures. The thirteen seems to stand for unlucky. If we would've been there, in our enthusiasm to help, we would've interfered, and made it come out with a much happier ending, or at least that's what we think. **Let us keep our hands off the providence of God.** Let us be careful about interfering with the way He wants to work things out for us, when the going gets rough. I remember a Christian gentleman that I met in Alabama, many years ago. He had attended a small United Methodist Church for most of his life. He shared with me about a meeting that was called in the church, with the sole purpose of moving their present pastor to another church. As he arrived for the meeting, he said that the first words out of the leader's lips were, "All in favor of getting rid of this preacher raise a hand." Before this action went any further, he told me that he stood to his feet and said, "My

dear brother, don't you think we should pause and ask God's will to be done before we take any action?" The man paused for a moment, and then looked at this august body of people and said, "**All in favor of the Lord's will, raise your hands!**" Simon Peter tried that. He said to Jesus himself, "Lord, there will be no cross for You." What if Peter had been able to keep Jesus off of the cross? **God is able to work out His purposes through the crimes, sins, failures, blunders, accidents and incidents of human history.** There's nothing so accidental or incidental, nothing so evil or foolish, that God cannot use it as grist in His mill of life. **He always works out His great purposes.** I love a sentence that Martin Luther spoke on this theme. He said, "God knows how to carve even the rotten wood, and how to ride even the lame horse." The favorite theme in the Old Testament is that **God is always in control, that He has never lost charge of the situation. He is even Lord of the church.** In the case of Joseph, God was working behind the scenes, carrying out His plans and purposes through people who weren't at all aware of the fact. Isaiah speaks of King Cyrus as if God is using him, though he doesn't seem to know it. Isaiah said, "(As God would say) I gird you, though you didn't know it." Jeremiah spoke of Nebuchadnezzar

as if he were, "God's servant." Alexander McLaren commented on all of this, when he said, "It's like a coral reef, not knowing at all the plan of the reef. Those little animals just go on, not knowing that someday it will be a beautiful piece of coral hanging about a lovely ladies neck, or an ornament in a home, or a beautiful Coral Island. They simply build the reef from materials supplied by the ocean, blindly, not knowing the beautiful result." **Evil doers and proud people are unknowingly carrying out God's purposes**, even sin itself is made to become the dark channel through which the river of life can flow. There is a philosophy of history that could change our lives if we would take it to heart, and build it into the fabric of our daily lives. Joseph said to his brothers, **"You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."** That could change our lives, if we really believed it. Does this mean some sort of fatalism? Does it mean "Resignation to the evils we deplore?" No! **We see Joseph every step of the way with clean hands and a pure heart.** Joseph always cooperates and has a right spirit in the providences of God. God works for good with those who love Him, with those who in their lives work with Him, so He can work out His great plans as the grand architect. This kept Joseph in the mainstream of God's will and purpose. Why is pain

and suffering a part of the purposes of God? We live in a “paradise lost world.” The sins of humanity have spoiled God's original plan for us. Because of our nature, we often have to settle for His permissive and conditional will. We cannot push history back before the fall.

Don't live in a dream paradise world, where God's will comes about easily and naturally. In reality, it comes about with great difficulty and sometimes supernaturally. It is worked out only with the materials that are made available to God and His children. Some say, "Surely God does not need our sins, mistakes and blunders to work out His good intentions." Do we give Him better materials than that? Thus, the chief materials God has to work with are pain and suffering. The most dramatic moment in the play, "**Green Pastures**," is when God and the angels were looking down, and Jesus was beginning the way to the cross. The angels turned to one another and God, and say "Not Him! Does He have to do it that way?" **Even when the Son of God, entered our history, He had to take it on our terms (Sin and suffering).** He who knew no sin, became sin for us. He ended up on a cross. God used the materials available to make a cross, to build a bridge between Himself and humanity. All the suffering in our lives can be traced to sin or imperfections. There is a mystery in what we

call, "natural evil." (Tornadoes, storms, earthquakes) According to Romans 8, Paul even links these with the entrance of sin into the world. Thus, even nature is imperfect and fallen, and groans with us in travail, until the Son of God releases us all. If our heart attitude is similar to Joseph's, God will use suffering, not to break us, but to make us persons who will conform into the image and pattern of Jesus. **Patience and timing are key elements in the life of Joseph. We need to get ourselves on God's schedule.** It took Joseph 13 long, painful years to get the timing right. As Joseph waited, he matured. God was seasoning him. He was tempering Joseph from spiritual iron into steel. **Moments of silent suffering must be met equally with persevering patience.** One of Queen Victoria's wisest diplomats said that he never allowed any opinion on any subject to crystalize until it became necessary to arrive at a practical working decision. It was at this point that he was sure he had the answer. If we give God time, He will work in split seconds. God has not forgotten us. We are very much on His mind. We are dear to His heart. **Suffering and waiting are key words to growth in God's Providence. Two other terms are crucial, and they are "forgiving and forgetting."** Remember the chains that Joseph wore

to Egypt? What about Potiphar's wife? And don't forget the prison. Do we think there was a need for forgiving and forgetting in the life of Joseph? Do we think this came easy for him? If we do, then we are shallow students of human nature. It took a supernatural work in the heart of Joseph to make it right. Joseph named his first born son **Manasseh, which means "God has made me forget all my hardship and forgive all of my Father's household." God healed Joseph from the inside out. It is hard for many to believe in the providence of God, because we need to forgive others in our past, which will allow us to forget hard times.** Joseph found the grace to forgive, which gave him the privilege of comforting the ones who harmed him. **In his forgiveness, he was able to see a broader spectrum of purpose than the simple evil acts of other human beings.** Victor Frankel, the great psychiatrist, who came out of the terrible concentration camps of Germany, said, "The only ones who survived were those, who in spite of the hell of the concentration camp, could somehow see purpose and meaning." February 9, 1709, was a pivotal day in the life of Methodism. It involved a fire at the parsonage in Epworth, England, burning John Wesley's home to the ground. It all happened in the span of 15 minutes. Sparks fell from the roof of the rectory, landing upon one of the children's feet. She immediately ran through the house awakening her sleeping family.

Most of the narrative descriptions of the fire emphasize the providential deliverance of all 19 children. In time, however, the focus of the story began to center on John, who at the time was 5 years old. He escaped, with the help of some neighbors, through the upstairs window. John Wesley wrote years later that he was like "a brand plucked from the burning." Wesley's father described the saving of John Wesley as "almost a miracle." Wesley quoted a neighboring Clergyman, who described John's escape from the fire as **"an account of a very remarkable Providence." We can stand any "what," if we can see the "why" in it.** Faith believes that God can take any earthly materials and use them for good. Faith believes that God can bring purpose out of accidents, and goodness out of badness. Faith doesn't deny evil, suffering or pain. Joseph said to his brothers, "You did evil against me, but God can work it out." The only real evil in this world is found in our inward unbelieving and resentful attitudes. **God is not the author of everything, but He is the master of everything.** No evil can defeat His ultimate purposes in our lives or in history. When we finally see God's involvement, we need to learn how to be grateful for that fact. We don't necessarily rejoice in the things we have to deal with, but we are thankful that God has Lordship over those things. **One saint put it this way, "Nothing can come to me that cannot be used by the grace of God, for the glory of God, the blessing of others, and the growth of my own soul."** I commend to you the life of Joseph, by suffering,

waiting, maturing, forgiving, forgetting, trusting, believing and praising, Joseph came out triumphant. Best of all, he served God and others. His great statement of providence was, **"You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."** **IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**