

Providential Peril for Joseph, Jesus, and You

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the sovereignty of God over the lives of His people, using the story of Joseph in Genesis to illustrate how God brings His people into perilous situations to ultimately bring about their salvation and deliverance. It highlights the importance of recognizing God's hand in both the trials and triumphs of life, showing that what may seem like evil intentions from others are ultimately used by God for good purposes.

Scripture: Genesis 50:20, Psalms 105:16, Acts 4:27, Isaiah 53:10, Acts 14:22, Psalms 34:19

Topics: "God's Sovereignty", "Divine Purpose in Trials"

Description

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Transcript

Let's pray together. Father, as I unite my heart with these Bible study fellowship leaders from around the world, what a privilege. And I thank you for it.

And I ask that you would come upon me now as I speak, and upon them as they listen, so that the transaction would be built on truth, that the name of Jesus would be magnified, that your word would be honored, that we would rely upon the Holy Spirit and not upon ourselves, and that your mission through BSF would advance globally for the great glory of your name. This is what we long for, Lord. We exist to spread a passion for your supremacy in all things, for the joy of all people.

So come, cause that to happen. Now I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The testimonies of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.

The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The rules of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold. Sweeter also than honey and drippings from the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned, and in keeping them there is great reward.

Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent of hidden faults. Keep back your servant from presumptuous sins. Let them not have dominion over me.

Then I will be blameless and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. The reason I start with Psalm 19 is because I want you, BSF leaders, to feel your heart and my heart knit together in the preciousness and the deliciousness of God's Word.

This is what you're about, what I'm about. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold. Sweeter also than honey and drippings from the honeycomb.

I don't think it's an overstatement to say there may be nothing that I love to do more than to open God's Word, exult over it in the presence of people who share my estimate of this book, that it is more valuable and more sweet than anything this world can offer. It's like the Puritans used to say, take my house, take my books, take my job, take my health, take my life, but don't take my Bible. Oh, what a great Puritan sentiment, and I pray that it's embraced by thousands of you who teach people how to see glories in God's Word.

When I think of Bible study fellowship and the many people I have known over the last 40 years who have taught in Bible study fellowship, I think of people who live and die by what the Bible teaches. That's what I think of. People who see and write on their website this, God's truth to be studied, savored, and lived out.

That's the Bible. When I read that, I said, that's my word, savored. No, it's not my word.

It's God's Word, right? Sweeter than honey, or Psalm 119, 103, how sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth, savored. That's the right word when you come to the Bible, if your heart is in tune with the worth of scriptures. So I say all of that to let you know that I love what you do.

I love what BSF is about, and I counted a huge privilege to have a few minutes to encourage you to press on and to give yourself unstintingly to the glorious calling of teaching other people, not just what the Bible says, but how to see it right for themselves. So what I've been asked to do now in this message is to focus on the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis, which is what BSF is or will be studying along with other things. And I'm supposed to draw out of this story truths that will establish you and motivate you in your task of leading people into the discovery of God's Word.

And I have in my mind a particular result that I want. I want you to grow in your capacity to lead others into truth with the very joy and strength you have received from the truth. So that you're not just mechanically telling them how to go about this, but you've done it yourself, and out of the overflow, you are now leading them into the very skills that will enable them to have the same overflow.

That's the result I would love to see happen. There's no way that I could have survived, let alone flourished, in this pulpit. I'm in the pulpit right now that I preached in for, what, 33 years of my ministry.

There's no way that I could have flourished in those 33 years if I had not been eating the bread that I was serving. And that's what I want for you. I've said this before, and I'll say it again.

It sounds like an overstatement. Maybe it is. I'm not aware of it being an overstatement, but my memory is fallible.

I do not recall in 40 years stepping behind a pulpit to preach the word of God. I don't recall a single time when I was not thrilled with what I had to say, even when they were hard things. God has been so good to me to grant me to find strength for my soul, joy for my soul, in preparing the meal for other people.

And that's what I hope happens for you. I want you to experience the answer to the prayer in Psalm 119, verse 18. Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.

So you pray and I pray. God, open our eyes that when we look at the story of Joseph, we would see wonders that are really there. We don't make them up.

We don't bring them from outside the story. We find them there, these treasures, these wonders. That's what we do.

That's our job. So we want to be strengthened by what we find so that we can see and savor and then live out and show what we have seen and how to find it. So let's take a moment and just situate the story of Joseph.

That's chapters 37 to 50, the story of Joseph, about a third of the book of Genesis, almost. Situate it in the flow of the book. Here's the way I would do that.

I pray that we will never become numb or insensitive or unamazed by the fact that the Bible begins with the staggering reality that once there was only God and nothing else, nothing but God. That's the reality that was, always was. And then he spoke and there was God plus universe.

That's a staggering way for a book to begin. And then God permitted, and his permissions are always done with foresight and wisdom and planning. He permitted his most amazing of all creatures, human beings, to become idiots, foolish, wicked, by elevating their own brains, their own wisdom above God's and making him look stupid.

That's treason. And God permitted it in chapter 3. And we have been living with the consequences ever since. And that's the third step.

God subjects the entire creation to futility and corruption, spiritual deadness, and every single human being that has come into being except one has been a child of corruption, a child of misery, a child of death, a child of wrath. Then comes the story of the flood, the Tower of Babel, both of which are designed to show the incorrigible depth of the sinfulness of the human heart. And then in chapter 12, God reaches down in sovereign grace and he freely chooses a man, Abram, a pagan, a moon worshiper with no merit of his own at all to warrant this election.

And God chooses him and makes him a promise, in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. A blessing, a blessing is going to come to this race of rebels. Yes, it is.

It's going to come through Abraham and his seed. And chapter 15 says he believed God and God counted that faith to him as righteousness. Chapter 15, verse 6, which according to the apostle Paul, lays the foundation for the way of salvation called justification by faith.

On the basis of a redeemer who would come 2,000 years later after Abraham. And then the rest of the book of Genesis is the story of God making clear again and again and again that his true children, true Israelites, his elect chosen ones come into being and are sustained in faithful being by a sovereign

miraculous work of God. For example, Abraham's son, Isaac, not Ishmael.

Why not Ishmael? Because he's born of the flesh. He's born of human effort. I'm going to get Hagar pregnant.

That's the way we can get an heir. That's the way we can fulfill the promise. No, it isn't.

The promise of God having a seed will happen by miracle or not at all. And so you get two people who are told to have babies. One of them is barren and they have a baby.

And that's the way it's been happening ever since. That's how children of God come into being. So it is with Isaac's son, Jacob.

Surely Esau is going to be the seed, right? He's the older. No, he's not. God's always going against the human odds.

The elder will serve the younger. Jacob will be the seed. And then Jacob has 12 sons, the 12 tribes of Israel.

Who are they? Paul says, they are Israelites to whom belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises, the patriarchs, the Christ who is overall blessed, God blessed forever. Amen. Romans 9, 4 and 5. In other words, through this people, Jacob's 12 tribes, especially the tribe of Judah, through this people, a divine Messiah would come, bear the sins of God's people.

It would break over the boundaries of Jewishness and Israel to all the nations of the world. God would gather a people from every people and they would be a new kind of race. And they would be the bride of the son of God.

And to them would be given a new creation and they would be with God forever and ever in his presence where there's fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. Which means that Jacob's 12 sons, those 12 tribes, if they were destroyed, God's purpose for the universe would fail. And the story of Joseph is a story to show how God did not and never will let that happen ever.

That's the point. It's a story of how God himself, and this is what makes it so provocative. It's not just a story of how God rescues a people from famine.

It's a story of how God himself brings his own people into life-threatening extinction. He brings them into life-threatening extinction, all the while planning an unimaginable rescue from his own calamity. That's the story of Joseph.

He brings his own promise to the brink of failure. He brings his own promise to the brink of failure only to show he's been in charge all along and he's been planning a God-exalting deliverance. So let's trace the story and see if I can show you these things so that you can see them for yourself and not just take my word for it.

The story begins in chapter 37. Joseph is 17 years old. He's a son, one of the 12 sons of Jacob.

He's 17 years old. His father loves him better. Not a good idea for dads to play favorite like that.

That's what he does. Therefore, his 11 brothers hate him. They hate him.

It says, because of this, verse 4, all his brothers hated him and could not speak peacefully to him. Then on top of everything, Joseph has a dream that sometime in the distant future, we know now it's 22 years, all those brothers and mom and dad are going to bow down to him. That did not endear him to his brothers at all.

And it says in verse 5, they hated him all the more. So one day they're out hitting the flock. They see him coming and their hatred and jealousy boils over.

They resolve to kill him. They throw him in a pit. Reuben tries to save him while Reuben is missing.

They sell him to the Midianites into slavery in Egypt. Joseph is bought there by Potiphar. And when his success as a faithful follower of Yahweh, when his success is at its peak and his righteousness is at its most faithful, Potiphar's wife slanders him as a rapist.

And Potiphar in fury throws him unjustly into jail. And again, his success, the blessing of God on him, his righteousness flourishes, his power to interpret dreams is exercised for the baker and the cup bearer of Pharaoh. The cup bearer goes back to Pharaoh just like Joseph predicted, and he totally forgets Joseph for two more years.

Two years he waits, and now 13 years has gone by. He's 30 years old. Every time he thought he was under the blessing of God, doing what God wanted him to do, things got worse, not better.

Pharaoh has a dream. The cup bearer remembers, there's the man in prison who can interpret dreams. He interpreted mine.

Go get him. Joseph says to Pharaoh, it is not in me. God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.

Chapter 41, verse 16. The dream is this. There's going to be seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of famine.

Pharaoh is so impressed by Joseph's wisdom that he makes him, what, vice president in charge of making sure that during those seven prosperous years there's enough grain for the seven lean years. And the writer of this story, Moses, makes very clear three times that this prosperity and this famine are the work of God. Let me read those to you.

Genesis 41, 25. God has revealed to Pharaoh, Joseph says, what he is about to do. Verse 28 of chapter 41.

God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. Verse 32, Joseph to Pharaoh. The doubling of Pharaoh's dream means the thing is fixed by God and God will shortly bring it about.

So God is bringing on Egypt and the entire region, including where Joseph's brothers live, he's bringing a famine which is going to threaten the existence of God's chosen people, all the while laying a 22-year plan to rescue those people through the very sin of selling Joseph into slavery. The reason I say 22 years is this. It's pretty easy to compute.

Thirteen years have gone by when he is, since he's sold into slavery, when he enters into Pharaoh's service, it says he was 30 years old, 17, 30, 13 years have gone by when he enters as prime minister. Seven years of prosperity is now 20 years have gone by. And then it says in chapter 45, verse 6, that two years into the famine, the brothers come seeking rescue from the famine.

22 years. Now leaving out the details that you'll certainly deal with in your BSF study of how he was revealed to his brothers, just leaving them out, he reveals himself to the brothers. They sin for their father and the 12 tribes of Israel that God had chosen, and they all move 70-plus people to Egypt.

It's been 22 years, and now, only now, think of it, only now can Joseph see what in the world God was doing for 22 years. The loss, the slander, the loneliness, the affliction, the injustice, the seemingly pointless righteousness, now he sees what that was about. That's a long time to keep your faithful servant in the dark, isn't it? I don't doubt that many of you are somewhere in that 22-year spectrum, hated by a family member or members, thrown into a pit, sold into slavery, accused of what you did not do, thrown into prison, forgotten by the very ones you blessed, keeping your integrity the whole time, never becoming embittered against God or throwing away his word.

And you, I would guess, just like Joseph, are at times utterly perplexed. You may be about to discover what God's been up to for the last 22 years or the last year. You may be in the middle, 11 years into the 22 years, and not know for another 11 years what God's doing in your life.

You may never know until heaven, which is why we live by faith. We don't get the details of the explanation always in this life. One of the main points, therefore, of this story is this.

God brings his people into life-threatening peril, all the while preparing in and through that peril a God-glorifying deliverance from the peril. Now, I want to make sure that you see that, because this writer is at pains that we see it. Three times.

Number one. In Genesis 37, 5 to 11, Joseph has a dream. The dream is that his brothers and his parents are going to bow down to him.

That's going to happen in 22 years. We know from the way this story reads, God uses dreams to declare what God is about to do. That's a plan.

Twenty-two years before it happened, this is the plan. Number two. Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, and when he does, this is now 22 years later after the dream, when he does reveal himself to his brothers, he says this in Genesis 45, 7, and 8, God sent me before you.

Let that sink in. God sent me before you to preserve for you a on the earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here.

That's amazing. It was not you who sent me here. What can that mean? It was God.

It can mean this. Who was decisive? God was decisive. This is stunning.

So, what he's saying is this. The brothers' sinful, hateful, jealous selling of Joseph into slavery was, in fact, God's sending of Joseph to rescue the very brothers who sold him into peril that God was designing that there would be a great God-glorifying deliverance. How high are his ways, unsearchable his judgments.

It's unmistakable that this inspired author wants us to see this. God is sovereign over dreams. God is sovereign over sinful actions of brothers.

God is sovereign over prosperous years. God is sovereign over destructive famines. God is sovereign over slanderous enemies like Potiphar's wife.

God is sovereign over forgetful butlers. Nothing is happening randomly in this story. Number three, third evidence in this story that the author wants us to see this, that God brings people, his own people, into life-threatening peril, all the while preparing through that very peril to deliver them from the peril.

That's what he wants us to see. This is the most famous verse in the story, and I would dare say that Genesis 50, verse 20, is one of the most important verses in the Bible if you understand how it relates to all of sinful human activity from the fall to the consummation. Joseph says to his brothers after his father's death, and they're terrified, that he's now going to wreak vengeance on them, he says this in verse 20 of chapter 50, Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 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.

Now, don't make the mistake that I have heard made so many times by translating it differently or paraphrasing it differently than what actually stands in the text. It does not say, you meant evil against me, and God used it for good. It's not what it says, and it's not what it means.

It says, you meant evil against me, and God meant it for good. And the word meant is exactly the same Hebrew word in both cases, as is the word it the same reality. You meant it.

You intended it. You planned it. Namely, my being sold to the Midianites, which was evil of you.

That's what you meant. That's what you intended. That's what you planned.

That's what you did, and it was evil. And God meant it, intended it, planned it, my being sold to the Midianites for our good. God doesn't get surprised by the sins of his people scratching his head, oh no, didn't see that coming.

That makes a muck of my plan. What am I going to do now? I'll use it. I'll figure out a way to use it.

That never is the way God thinks, and this story is designed to get that thought out of our heads. He was in charge of everything in this story, from the beginning, planning it way before he gave the dream, 22 years earlier. He planned it.

He predicted it. He superintended. He finished the rescue of his people.

Glorious salvation. Glorious sovereignty. Unless we think that the other writers of the Bible somehow missed the point of this story, listen to Psalm 105, verse 16.

When God summoned a famine, on the land, and broke all the supply of bread, he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. His feet were in fetters. His neck was put in a collar of iron.

Until what he had said came to pass, the word of the Lord tested him. So the suffering of Joseph, being sent from his family as a slave, was God's doing. Sold into slavery.

The regional suffering of the entire area, seven years of famine, God's doing. He summoned that famine that imperiled his own people's existence. And so, the general point of the story, God brings his people into life-threatening peril, tests them, and plans and performs their salvation through the very peril that he brings.

That's the story of Joseph. That's the story of the Bible. That's the story of every child of God.

So let me try to illustrate. When I say every child of God, that's our story. I'll use my experience, and then we'll close with the experience of Jesus, which is a million times more important than mine.

When I say that the story of Joseph is the story of your life as a Christian, what I mean is something like this. It comes in answering the question, why do we so often pray, say at the beginning of the day, that such and such won't happen? Breakdown of a car, getting sick with the disease, that some bad thing won't happen. Why do we so often pray that some bad thing won't happen, and then in the afternoon it happens? And as it happens, we see that in the very way it is happening, the hand of God, the good hand of God.

In other words, it seems to me that pre-normal Christian experience is that God answers prayers inside non-answers. That make sense? Here's the big non-answer. I didn't want this to happen this afternoon.

I ask you that it would not happen. It happened, and as it happens, I see your hand all over it for good and for grace. How many times have you heard people talk like this? Maybe it's just because I'm a pastor that I've heard it so often.

Pray for safety in the morning. Pray that some terrible accident won't happen. Well, the accident happens in the afternoon, and as I hear them telling me this story, they say things like, if his head had been a millimeter to the right, he'd be dead, and God didn't let it happen.

The woman walking by on the sidewalk was a nurse. The ambulance came just like that. It was like three minutes.

In the hospital, they had an ample supply of his unusual blood type. Never before would they have such a supply. You hear that, right? What in the world? What in the world is that? Because if I didn't know the story of Joseph, I would be inclined to say, if God's sovereign hand is all over this, why didn't he just prevent it? Why the big non-answer? And then, inside the non-answer, all these glorious answers.

Why didn't God prevent Joseph from being sold into Egypt? Why didn't he prevent the slander of Potiphar's wife? Why didn't he prevent the cot-bearer from forgetting Joseph for two more years? Answer. This is the Bible's answer, because God's way is to bring his people into peril for his wise purposes, all the while planning through the peril their God-exalting rescue. So, about 30 years ago, I had four kids at that time.

I have five now. One of them was nine years old. We were hurrying to make a very special occasion in South Carolina with my father, driving between Minneapolis and South Carolina, about 1,100 miles, and on the freeway on Sunday morning, my car dies with four kids and a wife.

It's hot, and it's Sunday. Nothing's open. I look under the hood like every man does, like, what do I know at all about these tangle of wires? Nothing.

I'm just looking at it. I've got four kids, and I don't know what to do. This is before cell phones, and those of you who are old enough know the humiliating feeling that I don't think anybody's going to stop unless I get on my knees or wave a flag or look desperate.

They think we're just doing a bathroom break for these four boys. My son, the nine-year-old, says, after my pacing back and forth and doing nothing helpful, Daddy, maybe we should pray. My first thought was, I did pray.

We prayed as a family this morning that this wouldn't happen. Of course, I didn't say that. I said, you're right.

What am I thinking? He and I, this nine-year-old, he and I go behind the car. We bow our heads, and we ask God to put it in somebody's heart to help us. When we lift up our eyes, a pickup truck has stopped in front of us.

The driver of the pickup truck, I kid you not, is a mechanic. He looks under the hood and diagnoses that our water pump needs to be replaced. He says he lives down the freeway, has a shop, and would I like to drive with him to town, get a water pump, and he would put it in the car for us right there on the side of the freeway.

And as I drive with him, I tell him about what just happened with the prayer, and I share the gospel with him. What do you make of that? What do you make of that? I had prayed in the morning that God would protect us from harm and trouble, and the car died in the middle of nowhere, as far as I could tell. My interpretation is that this is a parable of the story of Joseph.

God did not answer my prayer that we would not have trouble. What did he do? He humbled a proud father, number one. He showed his prayer-answering power to a nine-year-old in an absolutely stunning way.

He got the gospel into the mind and heart of a mechanic, and we were on our way in, I don't know, four or five hours with a new water pump without having to go to a store. This is the way God works. He brings his people into trouble while planning for their good.

Suppose Satan was involved in our little event. He broke the water pump, which he can do, I think, because he meant to make us miserable, and he meant that we would lose faith in the goodness of God and his prayer-answering power. If that were true, which it may well have been, what would you say to Satan? If you know the story of Joseph, what would you say? I know what you would say.

This is what you want your students to say when you're done with the story. Satan, you meant it for evil. My God, who loves me, meant it for good.

That's what you'd say, which is why I say that sentence, chapter 50, verse 20, is like a banner over the entire history of redemption, and at any given point where evil strikes God's people, you can say that sentence truly. You meant it for evil. God meant it for good.

So let me end with the experience of Jesus, which is vastly more important than mine. I think the life of Joseph is the life of Jesus, or the life of Jesus is the life of Joseph in a very profound sense. Let me tell you why this is important for me to say right now as we close.

UBSF leaders are going to discover that there are thousands of people around the world who do not want to hear what I have just said. They don't like it. They don't want to believe that God governs the actions of sinful men, like the brothers, jealousy and hatred.

God governs the actions of sinful men. They're not going to want to hear this, that the Bible teaches that the sinful selling of Joseph into slavery was the sending by God of Joseph into saving work. So what you're going to need to show them to help them, because not everybody submits to the Bible, you're going to have to help them see that if they follow the logic of rejecting the sovereignty of God over the sinful

actions of humans, they are going to reject the saving work of God in Jesus.

That's what you have to show them. That's pretty serious. They're not going to want to go there, probably.

That's true, you know. If God does not, cannot govern the sinful actions of people in crucifying his son, there is no gospel. Let me read you the key text.

This is Acts chapter 4, verses 27 to 28. The saints are praying, truly in this city, Jerusalem, they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, Herod, Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. Herod's mockery, the purple robe, Pilate's cowing to the crowds, Gentile soldiers pushing a crown of thorns down on Jesus' head and smacking him and mocking him, the crowds crying, crucifying, crucifying, all of it doing what God had planned and predestined for your salvation.

The gospel of our salvation was accomplished through the evil of sinful men as they killed the Son of God. Random evil saves nobody. Are you with me? Sinful men killed Jesus.

Random evil saves nobody. This was not random. 700 years before Isaiah, 700 years before Jesus, Isaiah said, it was the will of the Lord to crush him.

He has put him to grief. Isaiah 53, verse 10. This is not random evil.

This is planned. Otherwise, we wouldn't be saved. There's no gospel.

There's no salvation if God cannot in perfect holiness govern the acts of sinful brothers of Joseph or Herod or Pilate or the Gentile soldiers or the crowds crying, crucify him, crucify him. The message of Genesis, the whole book, and the message of the story of Joseph and the message of the whole Bible is that God reigns in sovereign love over his people, bringing us into peril again and again and again, all the while turning that peril into the means by which he will save us to be with him forever. Acts chapter 14, verse 22.

Through many afflictions, we must enter the kingdom of God. But take heart from Psalm 34, 19. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord brings him out of them all forever.

You meant it for evil, Satan. Brothers of Joseph, you meant it for evil. My God, my loving, kind, purposeful, wise, sovereign God meant it for good.

Let's pray. Father, these BSF leaders have a great calling. Oh, that the world would see what you have put in your word, that they would see it for themselves, not just have information move from one head to another head, but skills imparted for seeing glory, truth that is totally revolutionary to the way we live.

I pray this in Jesus' name.

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