LESSON 13

Living with Providence and Forgiveness

The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt, but God was with him and rescued him out of all his troubles.

— Acts 7:9–10

God never once speaks to Joseph, yet by the end of his life Joseph can see God's hand in the worst thing ever done to him, and that sight is what sets him free to forgive.

Introduction

THIRTEEN WEEKS AGO, JOSEPH WAS SEVENTEEN AND FOR SALE. He's been dead a long time now. His father lies in a cave in Canaan. He lies in a box in Egypt. The brothers who sold him grew old eating at his table, and Genesis closed its last page on a coffin.

There's no new chapter this week. We step back and look at all fourteen at once.

That's harder than it sounds. A story walked one Sunday at a time gets lived the way Joseph lived it, in pieces, without any idea what the next piece would bring. Read whole, it turns into something else. The pit and the prison shrink to a few lines. The cupbearer's two years of forgetting pass in a sentence. Years that felt endless to the man inside them become a step on the road to Pharaoh's court.

That's what providence looks like from the far end. It almost never looks that way from inside.

Count how many times God is named in Genesis 37. None. Thirty-six verses, and nobody mentions him. Now count Genesis 50. Five times, and every one is in somebody's mouth: once in the brothers' borrowed message (50:17), twice in Joseph's answer (50:19–20), and twice more on Joseph's deathbed (50:24–25).[192]

Something changed between those two chapters. God had been in chapter 37 the whole time. What changed is that a man learned to see him there and say so.

That leaves two questions. What was God doing the whole time? And what does that ask of you?

Ninety-Three Years in Two Minutes (Acts 7:9–16)

Stephen tells Joseph's whole life in eight verses.

He's on trial for his life in Acts 7, walking the council back through Israel's history, and when he reaches Joseph he barely slows down. *The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt, but God was with him and rescued him out of all his troubles.* A famine. Two trips for grain. *Jacob went down to Egypt.* A tomb at Shechem. Done.

Borthwick suggests reading those verses aloud with somebody holding a watch. It takes less than two minutes, and they cover more than a century.[193] Joseph's own part runs from seventeen at the pit (37:2) to 110 at the coffin (50:26). That's ninety-three years. Thirteen of them he spent as a slave and a prisoner, and Stephen gives all thirteen a single phrase: *all his troubles.*

That's what the whole view does. It's true, and it's merciless to the man living through it.

All quarter we've watched five threads. From here you can see where every one of them ends.

The garments started with a robe stripped off a boy and dipped in goat's blood. The last time Joseph handles clothes, he's giving them away to the men who stripped him (45:22). The dreams came in pairs, and the last pair was Pharaoh's. The bowing he dreamed about at seventeen happened five times in Egypt, and the last time, at 50:18, his brothers knew exactly whose feet they were at. The family went *down*, Jacob first, in his grief, toward Sheol (37:35). It ends with a dying man promising that God *will bring you up* (50:24). And Joseph doesn't shed a tear in the five chapters before his brothers walk back into his life. After that, he weeps seven times.

You can't see any of that from chapter 37. Nobody sees the pattern from inside one square of the quilt.

Who Says God Did It (39:2–50:24)

Make a list of every time somebody in these fourteen chapters says God did something, and write down who said it.

Start with the one voice that's missing. God never says a word to Joseph. Abraham and Isaac heard his voice, and Jacob heard it more than once. He hears it again at Beersheba on the way down to Egypt (46:2–4). That night is the only time in fourteen chapters God speaks out loud, and he speaks to the father. Joseph gets two dreams at seventeen with no voice attached and nobody to explain them, and then nothing at all for the rest of his life.[194]

Now the list.

Joseph says it more than everyone else put together, and he starts in prison. *Don't interpretations belong to God?* (40:8). In front of Pharaoh: *It is God who will give Pharaoh a favorable answer* (41:16), and three more times before the audience is over (41:25, 28, 32). He names both his sons for what God did (41:51–52). He says it four times in one speech to his brothers (45:5–9). He says it at the end, in the sentence we waited all quarter to hear, and again on his deathbed.

Two Egyptians say it. Pharaoh: *Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one as discerning and wise as you are* (41:39). And Joseph's steward, of all people, covering for his master's game with the silver: *Your God and the God of your father must have put treasure in your bags* (43:23). He's spinning a story, and he happens to be right.

Jacob says it late. Over the bloody robe in chapter 37 he grieves without a word about God. Thirty-nine years later, with Joseph's sons on his knees, he can't stop: *God has even let me see your offspring* (48:11), *the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day* (48:15).

And the brothers say it twice. Look at both.

Silver turns up in a sack, and their hearts sink. *What has God done to us?* (42:28). A cup turns up in Benjamin's bag, and Judah says, *God has exposed your servants' iniquity* (44:16). The first time they're trembling, the second they've torn their clothes, and both times God is the one who's caught them. In

fourteen chapters the brothers never once say God did them good. Even in 50:17, when they finally ask for mercy, it's *the God of your father*, and they're scared to death.[195]

Same God, same events. The man in the pit learned to see God's hand as kindness. The men who put him there could only feel it closing on them.

Learning to Say It (41:51–52; 45:5–8; 50:20)

Joseph didn't start out saying Genesis 50:20. Trace his words across nearly thirty years and you can watch him learn it.

At twenty-eight, in prison, he gives God the credit for the gift. He's just as quick to tell the cupbearer how unfair it all is: *I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should put me in the dungeon* (40:15). Both things are true. He hasn't put them together yet.

A few years later he's married, with a baby boy, and he names him Manasseh. *God has made me forget all my hardship and my whole family* (41:51).

Read that one again. He thanks God for helping him forget his family. Hughes hears gratitude in it, a man whose ache for home has finally eased, and that's fair.[196] But it also tells you exactly where Joseph is. The first time he puts God's name on his suffering, all he can say is that God has helped him stop thinking about it. The second son's name gets closer: *God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction* (41:52). The affliction is still there. He's just found fruit inside it.

Then ten men walk into his hall and bow. *Joseph remembered his dreams about them* (42:9). The boy named Forget is still small, and his father remembers everything.

At thirty-nine, standing in front of them with his face wet: *God sent me ahead of you to preserve life* (45:5). That's new. A few years ago he thanked God for helping him forget. Now he says God put him there.

At fifty-six, after the funeral: *You planned evil against me; God planned it for good. Sent* was about where Joseph ended up. *Planned* reaches all the way back to Dothan, to the morning ten men made a plan in a field, and says God had one too.

From Manasseh to the funeral is roughly twenty years. From the pit, thirty-nine. If Genesis 50:20 took Joseph that long, you shouldn't be ashamed that it's taking you longer than a week.

What Providence Doesn't Do (42:21; 50:15–20)

This story won't hand you a tidy moral.

It doesn't teach that the evil was secretly good. Joseph still calls it *evil* (50:20), and the same word stands behind the suffering they admit they caused him (50:15). Genesis never says God made the brothers hate him or put the idea of the sale in Judah's head. They planned. God planned. Two plans, one event, and the guilt stays where it belongs (James 1:13).

It doesn't shorten the wait. Thirteen years, and two of them only because a man forgot (40:23).

It doesn't come with miracles. Hughes points out there isn't a single one in all fourteen chapters.[197] No sea parts and no fire falls. What God uses is a stranger giving directions in a field, a caravan on its regular route, a woman's lie, a cupbearer's bad memory, and a king's bad night. You'd have walked past every one of them.

It doesn't heal everybody's conscience on schedule. The brothers are still telling each other *we are being punished for what we did to our brother* twenty years after the fact (42:21). Seventeen years after Joseph forgave them, they're still afraid of him (50:15).

And it doesn't promise that everyone gets an explanation. Think about Jacob. He mourned twenty-two years for a son who wasn't dead. When the brothers come home with the news, Genesis records what they told him: *Joseph is still alive* (45:26). It never records anybody telling him what really happened at Dothan. We don't know if he ever found out.[198]

So what is providence, if it isn't any of that? It's God at work in every verse, including the ones where nobody could see him and nobody said his name. The pit was still a pit.

What Forgiveness Built (45:15; 49:28; 50:21)

Part Three asked a question: *What does forgiveness build?* Genesis answers in plain things.

Start with a table. Joseph fed these men and their children for seventeen years (47:12; 50:21). The men who sold him for silver ate his bread every day for the rest of their father's life, and past it.

Then a conversation. In chapter 37 they *could not bring themselves to speak peaceably to him* (37:4). By 45:15 they're talking.

And finally a nation. Seventy people went down to Egypt. In Exodus 1:7 they *became extremely numerous so that the land was filled with them.* Jacob blessed every son, and Genesis counts what they became: *the tribes of Israel, twelve in all* (49:28).

Run it the other way. Joseph clears the room in chapter 45 and says *I am Joseph, your brother, the one you sold into Egypt*, and stops there. He has Pharaoh's authority behind him and every right in the world. Ten men don't go home. Jacob dies in Canaan without his sons. Judah's line ends in an Egyptian cell, and there's no road from Judah to Bethlehem. That whole future hung on whether one wronged man would forgive.

Here's what forgiveness didn't build. It didn't build trust overnight. Seventeen years at Joseph's table, and the brothers still sent word of a command Genesis never records their father giving. Forgiveness built something strong enough to hold guilty people while they slowly learned to believe it.

And notice where Joseph's forgiveness came from. It didn't come from forgetting. He tried that, and he named a child for it. It came from seeing. Kidner says Joseph's certainty that God had sent him is the secret of his astonishing lack of rancor.[199] Once Joseph could see God's hand on the worst day of his life, he didn't need to get even anymore. Somebody bigger was already handling it.

That's where the two halves of this study's title meet. **Providence is what Joseph saw. Forgiveness is what he did once he had seen it.**

Looking to Christ

Stephen knew Joseph's story well enough to tell it in two minutes. Before the day was over, he was forgiving the men who were killing him.

He opens his defense with *Brothers and fathers, listen* (Acts 7:2). He tells them Joseph's brothers sold him, *but God was with him*. He walks them through Moses, rejected the same way. Then he looks at the

council and tells them they have done it again. This time they have betrayed and murdered the Righteous One himself (Acts 7:52).[200]

They drag him out of the city. *The witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.* And as the stones come, Stephen kneels and cries out, *Lord, do not hold this sin against them!* (Acts 7:58, 60).

He learned that from Jesus. Luke wrote both scenes. On the cross, while soldiers were still gambling for his clothes, Jesus prayed, *Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34).

Put the three of them side by side, and hold it loosely, because the New Testament never sets Joseph beside the cross. Joseph forgave his brothers after twenty-two years, from a seat of power, once he could see what God had done with their sin. Jesus forgave while the nails were still going in. Stephen forgave with the stones still flying. Jesus and Stephen didn't wait to see how it would turn out.

And Stephen never did see. Luke adds one line: *Saul agreed with putting him to death* (Acts 8:1). The man holding the coats would spend the rest of his life carrying the gospel to the nations. He would also write, *We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose* (Romans 8:28). Luke never says Stephen's prayer was answered in Saul. He just lets us watch.[201]

That's the providence of Genesis, carried all the way to the cross and past it. The people who trust him can forgive before they ever see how it ends.

Applying the Text

Give your own Genesis 50:20 time. Joseph's first word for what God did with his suffering was *forget*. It took him years to get to *sent* and decades to get to *planned*. If all you can say right now is that God has helped you stop thinking about it, say that. God didn't wait for Joseph to get the sentence right before he kept working.

Learn to say God's name before you're caught. The brothers only talked about God's hand when a sack came open or a cup turned up. If the only time God comes into your conversation is when you're afraid of being found out, you've got the brothers' theology. Joseph named God in a prison cell, when nothing was going his way and nobody was accusing him of anything.

Call evil what it is. Providence never asks you to pretend. Joseph said *evil*, to their faces, in the same sentence where he said God planned it for good. If someone uses Romans 8:28 to tell you that what was done to you wasn't wrong, they've only heard half of Genesis 50:20. Genesis keeps both halves.

Forgive from what you've seen of God. Joseph's forgiveness grew out of his theology. His brothers hadn't earned it, and the memories never faded. What he had was a clear view of God's hand where they had meant him harm. The more clearly you see God at work in your story, the less you'll need to be the one who settles the score.

Make room for endings you won't see. Genesis never says Jacob learned the truth about Dothan. Joseph died in Egypt. Stephen died with Saul still holding the coats. Every one of them trusted God with a story they wouldn't live to finish. So will you.

For Discussion

1. Make the list from 39:2 through 50:24: who says God did something, and how often? Who says it most, who says it least, and what is each of them feeling when they say it?

2. Trace Joseph's words from 40:15 to 41:51–52, then to 45:5–8, then to 50:20. What changes in the way he talks about his suffering? What do you think changed it?

3. God spoke to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but never to Joseph. Why do you think Genesis tells his story that way? What does it mean for people like us, who have never heard God's voice either?

4. Genesis never records the brothers telling Jacob what really happened at Dothan. Why might Moses have left that out? Does it bother you?

5. Where in your own story are you still at *God has made me forget*? What would it take to get to *God sent me*?

6. Is there someone you won't forgive until you can see what God was doing with what they did to you? What if you never see it?

Looking Ahead

Beyond Genesis: Exodus 1–2

The study's over. The story isn't. Exodus opens with a family count and then this: *A new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt* (Exodus 1:8). Everything Joseph did for that country, and within a few generations nobody on the throne remembers his name.[202]

Before you close the book: read Exodus 1 and 2 in one sitting. Write down everyone in those two chapters who forgets Joseph's family or wants them gone. Then find the one who remembers.[203]

---

[192] The CSB names God five times in Genesis 50 (50:17, 19, 20, 24, 25) and not at all in Genesis 37; the Hebrew has *ʾĕlōhîm* at the same five places. This count is an observation on the text. Kidner, *Genesis*. In his introduction to chapters 37–50 he argues that placing the dreams at the very outset makes God, rather than Joseph, the hero of the story.

[193] Borthwick, *Life of Joseph*. In his leader's notes to the study on Acts 7:9–16 he suggests having the passage read aloud and timed, observing that it usually takes less than two minutes and covers a period of more than a hundred years, and he reads Stephen's summary as underscoring the providence of God over the long haul. Joseph's age at 37:2 and 50:26 gives a span of ninety-three years; the thirteen years from the pit to Pharaoh's service follow from 37:2 and 41:46. These figures are observations on the text.

[194] Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. In their conclusion they observe that God appears to and converses with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and makes them direct promises, but never speaks directly to Joseph, working instead in the background of his story, and they close by quoting Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), that the ways of this God are inscrutable but nonetheless sure and reliable, something Joseph and his brothers learned only late. That 46:2–4 is the only direct divine speech in chapters 37–50 is an observation on the text.

[195] The statements that God has acted, by speaker: Joseph at 40:8; 41:16, 25, 28, 32, 51, 52; 45:5, 7, 8, 9; 48:9; 50:20, 24; Pharaoh at 41:39; Joseph's steward at 43:23; Jacob at 48:3–4, 11, 15–16, 21 and 49:24–25; the brothers at 42:28 and 44:16. Wishes and oaths (43:14, 29) and mentions of God that ascribe no act (39:9; 42:18; 50:17, 19) are left out. The narrator's own statements about the Lord fall mostly in chapter 39 (39:2, 3, 5, 21, 23; cf. 38:7, 10; 46:2). This tally is an observation on the CSB and depends on what one counts.

[196] Hughes, *Genesis*. On 41:50–52 he explains *Manasseh* as "he who causes to forget," reads the name as relief from the hardship of Joseph's first thirteen years and his longing for home, and stresses that Joseph gave both sons Hebrew names in an Egyptian court. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 41:51–52 they read the two names as Joseph's acceptance of God's blessing in the midst of his personal struggles. The progression from 40:15 to 50:20 is an observation on the text; on *planned* in 50:20, see note 187.

[197] Hughes, *Genesis*. In his introduction to 37:1–11 he says there are no miracles in the Joseph story, that God does not suspend his natural laws to make things happen, and that the story is about the hidden but sure way of a God who is not only a God of the extraordinary but of the ordinary, using the good and evil actions of Joseph's family, of Pharaoh and his servants, and of passersby.

[198] Hughes, *Genesis*. On 50:15 he notes that the brothers had never confessed to Joseph or asked his forgiveness. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 45:24 he judges that the old crime was bound to come to light before their father. That Genesis records no such disclosure to Jacob is an observation on the text.

[199] Kidner, *Genesis*. On 45:1–15 he calls Joseph's certainty that God had sent him the secret of his astonishing lack of rancor. The seventy of 46:27 and the growth of Exodus 1:7 are observations on the text. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 47:27 they note that the language of Israel's being fruitful and multiplying in Goshen ties the family's experience to the exodus.

[200] Kidner, *Genesis*. In his introduction to chapters 37–50 he traces a pattern running through the Old Testament to Calvary, the rejection of God's chosen deliverers by their own kin, a rejection made to serve the deliverance, and notes that Stephen was the first to draw it out. On Stephen's arrangement of the Joseph material in Acts 7:9–16, see Lesson 5.

[201] The correspondence between Stephen's prayer in Acts 7:60 and Jesus's in Luke 23:34, both recorded by Luke, is an observation on the text. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 50:21 he says that Joseph's repayment of evil with practical affection anticipates the word *Christlike* (cf. Luke 6:27). Hughes, *Genesis*. On 50:19–21 he sets Genesis 50:20 beside Jeremiah 29:11 and Romans 8:28 as the great statements of a providence that works through all events, including apparent evil, for the good of God's people.

[202] Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. In their seventh chapter, on the family's reunion and settlement in Goshen, they note that Exodus 1:6–7 echoes Genesis in describing Israel's growth, that the new king of Exodus 1:8 forced the Israelites into slavery out of fear of their numbers, and that God was fulfilling his word to Abraham that his descendants would be strangers and slaves in a foreign land and come out afterward (Genesis 15:13–14).

[203] The CSB keeps *remember* in Joseph's request to the cupbearer and in the cupbearer's failure (40:14, 23), at 42:9, and at Exodus 2:24, where *God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob*. This link is an observation on the text.

Afterword

Read It Again

When we began, this book asked you not to rush ahead to the good part. You didn't. We left Joseph in a slave market and went home. We left him in a dungeon for two years and went home again. Some of those mornings ended so flat it felt like the lesson had been cut off. It hadn't. That was the lesson.

Somebody in this class is still waiting on a phone call. Somebody's son still hasn't come home. Thirteen weeks in Genesis didn't change either one, or this book never promised it would. What it gave you was practice. Every Sunday for a quarter you sat with a story that wasn't finished, and you came back the next week anyway. That's a skill, and most of us will need it again before long.

So here's the last assignment.

Read Genesis 37 through 50 again, all fourteen chapters, in one sitting. Give it an evening. You'll be surprised how short the pit is when you already know about the palace.

And this time, read it as one of the ten.

We spent a quarter with Joseph, and that was right. Genesis puts him at the center. But be honest about which part you've played. Few of us have been sold by our families. A lot more of us have stood in a field and done the math on somebody we resented.

Watch Judah. He's the one who sits down to eat a few feet from the pit and asks, *What do we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?* (37:26). He's also the one who stands in front of the man who runs Egypt for Pharaoh and begs to stay behind as a slave *in place of the boy* (44:33). Genesis gives us one glimpse of the turn, the day he admits Tamar is more in the right than he is (38:26). Mostly it shows us both men and lets us work out that they're the same man.

That's where the hope is for the brothers among us. Genesis gives the wronged man most of fourteen chapters, and it gives the men who wronged him a way back. Twelve tribes came out of that family. Judah's is the one Jacob hands the scepter (49:10).

Start with chapter 37. You know how it ends now. Watch who changes.