

**Christ Community Covenant Church**  
**"Joseph...What God meant for Good"**  
**Genesis 50:20, Romans 8:28**  
**Pastor Gloria Merritt – September 25, 2011**

How many of you like roller coasters? The scarier, the better, right? Well, back in the day I LOVED them – I even asked my husband to take me to an amusement park on our honeymoon so I could share the thrill with him! But, not any more. My stomach, my neck, my back, just can't take that much excitement. In fact, the only roller coaster I now ride is the one of life – you know the one, with the ups, downs, twists, vicious curves, awful plunges, tunnels, fast parts and the uphill climb with all of that clickety-clackety noise that lets you know something terrible is about to happen.

In fact, I rode one about seven weeks ago when my daughter got married to a wonderful guy. Many of you already know this story, and were even part of it, but please indulge me while I tell it again (because it fits). In the end it was truly a beautiful and blessed event, but there was a lot of suspense leading up to the final moment when Jacob and Evie were pronounced man and wife. You see, while my daughter and the bridesmaids were getting ready (and I was there), we got a call letting us know that the groom had been really sick all morning with terrible stomach issues. It was decided that he should go to the emergency room, because the pain was severe and it looked like appendicitis.

Wow. Totally unexpected. We figured there'd be some "little" thing that would go wrong – something we could all chuckle about down the road. But, not THIS! All of the anticipation of the day now hinged upon whether or not the groom was going to be able to show up. On our end of things, the freight train was headed down the tracks. The food was being prepared, the out of town guests were in place, the local guests were poised to come, the flowers were cut and arranged and ready to go, the rented chairs were already being set up. You get the picture. But, would the groom need emergency surgery? Would he make it to the ceremony? I can assure you, it stirred a gamut of emotions and the bride, especially, was on the roller coaster ride of her life!

In a little bit, we heard from the groom with a bold (but very sick) declaration that he would be there for his bride, so we proceeded with preparations and pictures and prayers with the hope and faith that all plans would eventually unfold. It was determined not to be appendicitis, or some sort of stones, but getting him well enough to be able to say his vows didn't go quite as smoothly or as quickly as any of us had hoped. The turning point came when the bride insisted on going over to the hospital to rescue her groom from the E.R. folks who were holding him hostage, so the bride thought.

So, we sent the limousine with the bride and the entire wedding party to Lutheran hospital. And, if only there had been a video camera rolling to capture the scene when all were running down the hall all dressed up, the bridesmaids assisting with the dress and the bride calling out – "I want to see my groom!" Apparently it caused quite a stir, and a tearful reunion, with nurses grabbing tissues, as well. And, in a few minutes, Jacob was on his way.

Back at the park where the wedding was being held, the guests were passing the time by playing Frisbee, snacking and visiting, ready to get the party started. When the wedding party returned and then finally the groom, we had a very rushed wedding complete with a standing ovation!

So, it happened. The bride and groom were married. But the process of getting there was filled with angst, laced with some disappointments and tests of faith. We really didn't know how it would turn out, but by God's grace, it DID!

And, if you got a chance to read Chapter 3 (which begins on page 29) this week in The Story, featuring our Biblical hero, you probably also noticed the angst and suspense for poor Joseph as his story unfolded. In fact, let's take a look at this little re-cap:

Stick Figure VIDEO (narrating along the way)

As you know, each Sunday morning we will have the opportunity to look at some snapshots as presented to us here in this abridged version of the Bible, and honestly, some of these stories have many, many sermons in them. This story of Joseph especially does. But, one of the things that is important to notice as we read each chapter is that there are always two parts. They are the Upper Story and Lower Story. The upper

story is always God's story, His overall purpose, or what we might call the Big Picture. The lower story includes all that happens in the circumstances and details of the characters in the story. The lower story can also be our story – how God's Upper story impacts us. Let's keep that Upper and Lower story idea in the backs of our minds today.

The story of Joseph is one of my absolute favorites. It's actually one of the most unified stories of the Hebrew Bible, a type of novella of perfect proportions. It plays upon the emotions and cultivates suspense. I found myself riding the emotional roller coaster right along with Joseph as I read! You know, even Egyptian lore confirms the details of this story, and we can be confident that its details are reliable. You see those Egyptians were a lot like us Americans who loved the stuff of good stories: power, revenge, sex, devotion, intrigue, despair, and reconciliation. Joseph could have been a strong, handsome character whose image might be on the front of some romantic story, but for me, he is a mentor, because, through Joseph I have learned a lot of things about how to respond to life, especially to those things that I don't like very well. Because, as you know, sometimes bad stuff just happens.

Let's review the tragic events of Joseph's life. Remember that we first meet Joseph at age 17 and then this stuff spanned a period of 22 years. There are some pretty extreme things that he encountered. You might want to list them if you're into taking notes...

- 1) Because he was Daddy's favorite, he was bullied by his brothers, being the object of their jealousy (**bullied**)
- 2) They hated him so much that they literally wanted to kill him (**death threat**)
- 3) One of the bros had some compassion and suggested they put him in a pit and just stage his death (**kidnapping**)
- 4) He was sold into slavery – and that walk across the desert in shackles was no picnic! Many slaves would die just from the treatment received on that trek! (**enslaved and tortured**)
- 5) He was then falsely accused of rape and put into prison (**false accusation and innocently imprisoned**)
- 6) He might have gotten out sooner, but his fellow jail mate forgot about him. Forgot???? Talk about feeling invisible! (**abandonment**)

Talk about a roller coaster ride! Joseph goes from good to bad, bad to good. But, don't forget – the story reminds us that God was with him and gave him good success. That's stated 3 times just in chapter 39!

In fact, I'm pretty sure that Joseph was under an awful lot of stress. It reminds me of an email that I received just this week!

(stress email and photo illustration)

I am not exactly sure how it works, but this is amazingly accurate:

The picture you'll see has 2 identical dolphins in it. It was used in a case study on stress levels at St. Mary's Hospital. Just look at both dolphins jumping out of the water. The dolphins are identical. A closely monitored, scientific study revealed that, in spite of the fact that the dolphins are identical; a person under stress would find differences in the two dolphins. The more differences a person finds between the dolphins, the more stress that person is experiencing.

Look at the photograph and if you find more than one or two differences you may want to take a vacation.



Did you ever see dolphins that were more identical? I couldn't find ANY differences! 🐬

Back to Joseph, what I find so amazing about re-reading this story of Joseph was how I found his story intersecting my story and how I felt the Holy Spirit teaching me and reminding me of some important truths that I felt I wanted to share with you this morning. There are a few things that I want to touch on briefly, and then I want to zero in on what struck me the most.

First, I am inspired by how God shaped and molded Joseph's character through those tragic events that we just listed. When I think of Joseph, I think of Romans 5:3, it says, ***"We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, and character, hope."*** And then, I like the way it is worded in the New Living Translation: ***"We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they are good for us – they help us learn to endure. And endurance develops strength of character in us, and character strengthens our confident expectation of salvation."*** Joseph's response to his difficulties reminds me to allow difficult things in my life to have a purposeful impact.

Another thing that I noticed is that Joseph is a poster child for the character traits of ***humility*** and ***wisdom***. Did you see how many times in the story that Joseph gave the credit to God for his natural and supernatural abilities instead of claiming it for himself? One example, on page 33 in your books, taken from Genesis 41:16, tells us that Joseph says this about interpreting dreams, ***"I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."*** You know, if, back when he was 17 – his brothers thought he was a bragger when he talked about his dreams, he certainly matured beyond that and was now giving God the credit. And, as for wisdom, Joseph is praised for his interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, and God is again given the glory when Pharaoh says in verse 37, (also on page 33) ***"Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?"*** Joseph could have exalted himself, proposing that he be the one put in charge of collecting the grain, saying, "Hey, you should put me in charge. After all, I interpreted Pharaoh's dream, and I deserve the role." No, Joseph had matured from being a bragging, know-it-all teen to a mature, God-honoring person, now groomed for leadership. And, I don't know if you noticed, but he also wisely understood the cause and effect of sexual immorality. He wisely acknowledged that it is a sin against God, and he knew that what happens in a person's private life can vastly affect a person's public effectiveness. Randy Frazee, a pastor who also took his church through this Story says this,

Another part that stands out to me is the contrast between Joseph's character and his brothers' character. Joseph saw firsthand the effects of jealousy, and it served to develop deep wisdom within him. James 3 (a little book near the back of the Bible, just after Hebrews, but before Revelation) tells us this, starting in verse 13: ***"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice."*** Joseph could attest to the reality of the evil and disorder that resulted from his brother's jealousy.

But, one of my favorite parts of this story, the part that gives me chills every time I read it, is the Upper part where God's purposes are revealed. It's stated similarly a couple of different places within the text, but Genesis 50:20 states it this way, and it's on page 42 in your books... ***"You [speaking to his brothers] intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done..."*** Here is a statement about the Sovereignty of God – His rule, His plans, His purposes, His story. And, His sovereignty is total – over the good and the bad. In the story of Joseph we see that when we capture and align our lives to God's upper story, it enables us to process all the junk we might experience in our lower story.

So, as awesome as all of these details are, there is still one more part of this story that really stands out! Remember how we learned a couple of weeks ago in Chapter 1 that once the Fall took place, it changed everything in all of Creation? And that the rest of the story is then all about God's plan to restore what was ruined? We also call it ***Redemption***. It also speaks of our ***Reconciliation*** with God. To me, that is an amazing outcome of this story of Joseph. Yes, Joseph's story speaks of trials, of character development, of humility and wisdom, and LOTS of God's sovereignty, but in the end, we also see the ***Restoration*** of relationship!

Because Joseph recognized the Sovereignty of God in all that had happened to him, both good and bad, he refused to play the victim card. He "got it". He realized that there was more going on here, that there was an Upper Story, something bigger than himself. And he set those things aside – both the bad things that were "done" to him and that good blessings that he was afforded, in order to reconcile with his brothers – those brothers were the co-founders of a people set apart for God. And he recognized that he was part of saving those people for God's future purposes! And, he did something very dear to our culture -- he celebrated that

reconciliation with a feast!

In a few moments we are going to celebrate our reconciliation to God and to one another with the symbolic feast of communion, but before we do so, I'd like for us to do some reflecting and some examining, so that restoration and reconciliation can be truly experienced. We are told to examine ourselves before taking communion at this table, and that simply means reflecting on the condition of our hearts, pausing to see what's going on there, and allowing the Holy Spirit to speak to us.

So, I'm going to suggest that we start reflecting by thinking about the roller coaster rides of our lives, places where things aren't turning out like we had envisioned. And, I'm very aware that right here in this room there are places of pain and bitterness – disappointments, broken marriages, difficulties within families, financial failures, hurts received and hurts given, difficulties with health. In all of those things we need the perspective of Romans 8:28, which is a New Testament example of what Joseph has already taught us. It says, ***"Now we know that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purposes."***

That is a very familiar verse to many of us, and we need to look at it carefully for a moment. This incredible promise does not apply to everyone. It applies to those who are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, to those who love Him; to those who have aligned their life to the purposes of God, or to the upper story of God. Therefore, I feel strongly that this promise from God should call for one of three responses from us today:

- 1) First, if you have never entered into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, you would respond today by taking that step of putting your faith in Him. (***Do you believe you are a Christian?***) I'd like to repeat that... This table has food on it meant for those who are looking forward to the ultimate wedding feast that will be shared in heaven when we the Church, whom the Lord calls his bride, will eat with Jesus, who calls himself the Bridegroom. It is THE wedding of the Millennium, and you won't want to miss it. But, in order to be a part of that, you must admit that you need Christ's saving power to make it possible.
- 2) Second, if you already follow Christ and love Him, you'd respond today by aligning your life to God's purposes, not your own. You would adjust your entire life to what God is up to so that this promise from Romans 8:28 is yours, as well. (***Do you live within God's Sovereignty? (He's in Charge?)***)
- 3) Third, if you are a Christ-follower and you struggle deeply to get through life's trials, if things are not making sense in your lower story, you recognize that you need to get through this by abandoning your will to God's will. It becomes a place of Surrender. Like the surrender or the giving up that takes place when a lifeguard comes to a drowning person to help them out of the water – the person being rescued must relax and trust the Rescuer. And, I would suggest that you especially surrender those places where you feel evil was done against you by someone else's action or decision. In fact, evil spelled in reverse is LIVE. Reverse what you consider to be evil through the act of forgiveness and LIVE in the grace of God the same way that Joseph did. (***Do you live enjoying the grace of God and extending that grace and forgiveness to others?***)

Sometimes we miss out on the blessing of reconciliation with our brothers and sisters because we have not surrendered hard places to the grace and Sovereignty of God. We get very frustrated with human decisions and human actions and don't let the Sovereign hand of God have its way in our lives! Sometimes we accuse people around us of evil intent and we completely forget that God can work it for good if we participate in his grace, the way that Joseph did.

Remember 2 Cor. 5:18-19 ***"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them."*** We put ourselves into a prison of our choosing when we act in the place of God and count men's sins against them.

So, I'd like for us to pause and remember the reconciliation that took place between Joseph and his brothers and the humility and wisdom that brought that about. It is a reminder to us of the restored relationship that God has given to us, those of us who have betrayed and offended God, originally being his enemies. I ask you to ponder these 3 questions for a little while before we participate in the celebratory meal. If need be, I ask you to offer reconciliation to someone in this room before coming to the table. And, if you have allowed someone's to decision or mistake to keep you from enjoying the sovereignty of God, please surrender that, too.

When communion begins, we will be available to pray with you because sometimes we need one another as we surrender things to God. It's up to you. Revelation 22:17 says, ***"The Spirit and the bride***

**say...Come. And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."**

**Moments of quiet instrumental music, prayer** – then leading into singing "I Surrender All".

**Communion**

**Offering** – You Never Let Go

**Benediction:**

It is interesting to look at what was spoken of Joseph in the book of Hebrews, that famous chapter on Faith. It doesn't mention his wisdom or humility, his rise to power, or his brush with death, or his ability to interpret dreams. No, it mentions how Joseph prophesied about the freeing of the Hebrew slaves and about Joseph's desire to be buried in the Land of Promise. That's what made him a man of faith – looking forward. We too, can look forward, and enjoy now the daily blessings of what has been restored and to what has been promised. Have a great week!