

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors at North Shore Alliance Church. In a few short hours my wife and I, along with our kids, will be heading off on vacation for a few weeks...which means, this message my last bit of work before I go. I've really enjoyed studying the Scriptures this week, and I trust you will receive the fruit of my preparation.

This morning, we are going to get to our two texts (Genesis 37 and 39), but we're going to take the scenic route. I want to invite you to wander with me for a bit, and I trust our "wandering" will bring us back to the text, better able to hear and understand.

So I want to begin by taking some time to talk about how to read Biblical narrative well. Did you know that 60% of the Bible is made up of narrative, stories about God's interaction with real, live, people? The question is: *how do we read these stories without missing the point?*

When we read a story of almost any kind, we've been trained to center in on the central characters and pay attention to who they are and what they do; we do this instinctually. And so as you read *The Lord of the Rings*, you cannot help but observe Gandalf and Gimli, Frodo and Sam, Merri and Pippen, Aragorn and Boromir. As we observe them, without even thinking, we notice both the things that are praiseworthy and the things that are not.

We wonder to ourselves, *if I were in the same situation, would I display the same courage, or would I run away at the critical moment?* If the story we are reading is a true story about human courage, or ingenuity, or strength, or artistry, there is a gravitational pull (of sorts) that takes place...we find ourselves celebrating the

person and perhaps we are inspired to emulate them (I'm going to try and be more creative, or strong, or wise, etc). This is the power of a story; it draws us in and evokes our own story.

There's nothing inherently wrong with recognizing admirable traits in people, nor in wanting to emulate those traits. But if we want to read biblical narrative well, we need to keep God in mind or we may just miss the point.

Our Scripture this morning is a case in point. As we read the story of Joseph and his brothers, we could observe their character, their behaviour, and conclude that Joseph is good, but his brothers are bad. And of course the moral of the story is to be good like Joseph and steer clear of bad people like his brothers. But is this how we are meant to read biblical narrative? I would suggest, only if we want to read it poorly.

There is something else going on in biblical narrative that is deeper and wider; it includes these human actors but they are not the point of the story, God is. In every biblical story, God is both the Director and the Chief Actor; He is both the Maestro and the featured Performer.

When we read about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and now Joseph, there are certainly character qualities that we could (or should) celebrate and emulate, and equally we will see character qualities that might be best to discard and forget. But what the author of Genesis wants his readers to see is God (who He is, what He's like), and to see how God's grand plan is being worked out through human history.

The Book of Genesis, and in fact the entire Bible tells the story of a God who is fully committed to putting the world to rights. God is the Author of beauty, not brokenness, and He is actively at work, seeking to rescue and restore all that is broken. God began this rescue operation by calling Abraham and his family into relationship, and promising to work through their family to bring His blessing to the entire world.

And so as we read biblical narrative, we need to be asking: *what is God doing? Or, how is He at work in/through these characters?* The answers to these questions will keep us connected to God's grand story and connected to how He operates in the world.

There's a reason why I've started this message the way I did. When we read Genesis 37 and 39, I trust you'll understand why; I don't want us to miss the point. We are going to observe various character qualities in Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers, but the "point" lies elsewhere.

We are going to observe Joseph going through incredible trial and yet persevering, but again, the point lies elsewhere; this is not a story about the triumph of the human spirit. This is a story about God's stubborn refusal to let evil have the last word. What Joseph's brothers did to him, what Potiphar's wife did to him, was intended for evil, but God redeemed their actions and brought good out of it. This is a story about how God is at work, sometimes in hidden ways, to bring about His plans to bless the world.

Just before we dive into the story, I would like to pass along a dialogue I came across in my reading this week; it will help to frame the Joseph story.

- "Do you know why Satan is so angry all the time? Because whenever he works a particularly clever bit of mischief, God uses it to serve his own righteous purposes."
- "So God uses wicked people as his tools?"
- "God gives us the freedom to do great evil, if we choose. Then he uses his own freedom to create goodness out of that evil, for that is what he chooses."
- "So in the long run, God will always win?"
- "Yes"
- "In the short run, though, it can be uncomfortable."¹

Genesis 37 (page 60 in the Blue Bibles).

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. **4** When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

5 Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. **6** He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: **7**

¹ O.S. Card, *Ender's Shadow*, 236-37.

We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.” **8** His brothers said to him, “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.

9 Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. “Listen,” he said, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” **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?” **11** His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

12 Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, **13** and Israel said to Joseph, “As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them.” “Very well,” he replied. **14** So he said to him, “Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me.” Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, **15** a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, “What are you looking for?”

16 He replied, “I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?” **17** “They have moved on from here,” the man answered. “I heard them say, ‘Let's go to Dothan.’” So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. **18** But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

19 “Here comes that dreamer!” they said to each other. **20** “Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.” **21** When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. “Let's not take his life,” he said. **22** “Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him.” Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing— **24** and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it. **25** As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

26 Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? **27** Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed. **28** So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

29 When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. **30** He went back to his brothers and said, “The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?” **31** Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. **32** They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, “We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe.”

33 He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."

34 Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him.

36 Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

Genesis 39

1 Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. 2 The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, 4 Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.

5 From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. 6 So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

What follows is an account of sexual brokenness that Pastor Dave is going to address next week. In brief, Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph but he refuses to dishonour God, or Potiphar, by

sleeping with her. Out of her humiliation and anger, Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph of sexual misconduct and in spite of his innocence, he is handed a one-way ticket to prison. Let's pick up the story at verse 20.

20 Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison, 21 the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. 22 So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. 23 The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

The Joseph story begins with some stark characterizations. We're told that **Jacob** "loved Joseph more than any of his other sons (vs. 3)". He made Joseph a richly ornamented robe that none of the others had (vs. 3), and in doing so he caused hatred and division among the brothers. You'd think Jacob would have learned his lesson from his own family dynamic. His mother and father chose favourites which didn't help the animosity between Jacob and Esau.

Vs. 4 tells us that "When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him." You'd think that in the face of such favoritism, the brothers would turn their hatred towards their father; why pick on Joseph? Because every child longs to be loved by their parents. We've been made to receive affection, to be deemed valuable and significant. It's much easier to pick on Joseph, than to turn on the one from whom they long to receive love.

Then there's **Joseph**; he's 17 when we first meet him in the story. We're given the impression that he's morally upright, but that he sees himself as the moral police (he tattles on his brothers and gives a bad report to his father). This doesn't help his plight with his brothers.

And then there are his two dreams; they are one and the same. God reveals, by way of a dream, what He intends to do: Joseph will be exalted. Now, it's one thing to receive a dream like that, it's another to tell anyone about them. *Hey guys, you're not going to believe the dream I had last night...it was amazing!* Really? What was it about? *Well, all twelve of us were there, and we are all bunches of grain laying on the ground (weird right?!), and then all of sudden my bunch of grain stood upright and you guys started bowing down me. Isn't that awesome!*

Clearly there's smart, and then there's street smart; Joseph may have had the first kind of smarts, but he was missing the second. We're told that "**8** His brothers...hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said."

The second dream followed the pattern of the first: vs. 9 reads, "*Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."* This time all 11 brothers (11 stars) were joined by the sun and the moon (dad and mom) in bowing down before him. You'd think he would have got the message the first time...ponder the dream, but keep it on the down-low.

Bruce Waltke writes, "In the ancient Near East, dreams were a common means of divine communication and prediction".² In all kinds of cultures, this is still the case. To this day, for many Muslims, their first encounter of Jesus comes about in a dream, not by reading the Scriptures. Because of our Western, rational, scientific worldview, there is very little room for *God dreams*, even among Christians...is it any wonder that we have so few of them?

One might think that on the basis of Joseph's *God dreams*, he was destined to take off like a rocket...onward and upward! Not so; before Joseph was exalted, the decisions of others thrust him on to the path of humiliation.

In fact, chapters 37 and 39 chronicle the "highs" and lows of Joseph's path: exalted by his father but brought low by his brothers, exalted in slavery as a leader in Potiphar's household only to be thrown into prison by a false accusation, and then exalted to a place of leadership in the prison system.

Notice all the phrases that describe the Lord's presence and favour in Genesis 39: "*The LORD was with Joseph*" (vs. 2), "*the LORD gave him success*" (vs. 3), "*the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph*" (vs. 5), "*while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him*" (vs. 20-21), "*the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.*" (vs. 23).

Ironically, in the pit of slavery and prison, God was there, exalting Joseph.

²Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis, A Commentary*, 500.

How often have we made the mistake of believing that God is Sovereign and gracious on a part-time basis? A pastor friend of mine once remarked that *faith isn't faith until it is tested*. We have little difficulty believing that God is in control as long as everything is going well *for us*, but is our belief shaken when things are not going well?

There's a question we need to wrestle with that has massive implications for what we believe and how we live: **when was God present in Joseph's story? Was He "more present" in some places than others?** The thing we need to wrap our heads and hearts around is that God was just as Sovereign and present with Joseph in the well, in slavery, and in the prison cell, as He was when Joseph was at home living the good life with his dad. Friends, God is just as present and sovereign over your difficulties, suffering, and pain, as He is when everything is going great.

This is a hard word to accept isn't it? It means that though Jesus might love me immensely, and surround me on every side, He may not spare me from difficulty, pain, or the evil caused by other's decisions.

Last January, for our Spiritual Emphasis week, we invited Sunder Krishnan, a pastor from the Toronto area, to come and teach us. And while he was here, he spoke some words that have been helpful to me in understanding the sovereignty of God and the pain of our lives. Sunder said that the only reason that we pray at all is because God is Sovereign; He alone rules over life and history. He alone fully knows His plans and purposes for our world.

At the macro level of history, God ensures that His plan to reconcile all of creation is going forward unhindered. At a macro level, we can see God's sovereignty and His majesty. But at the micro level of our lives, when we find ourselves in a well, or in a prison cell, His "majesty" seems hidden by mystery. At times it is hard to see how our lives, and maybe our current circumstances fit within the larger plan of God...at times we cannot see or understand what He is up to.

I once heard someone say, *Never doubt in the darkness what God has revealed in the light*. In other words, never let go of what you know to be true of God (His loving kindness, His grace, His love, His forgiveness, His wisdom) when you find yourself surrounded by painful mystery...God has not changed.

Joseph's dreams take him on a path that is anything but onward and upward. His dreams landed him first in a well, later in a prison cell, and sandwiched between the two was a long stint of slavery. He was 17 when he was thrown in the well; he was 30 when he was released from his cell. But when Joseph walked out of his cell, he walked straight into the presence of Pharaoh, and minutes later became the second most powerful man on the face of the earth.

Joseph was just like us: he didn't have the benefit of knowing the end of the story while he was living in it. He couldn't flip ahead a few chapters to see how things would turn out and then flip back to living life and persevere, knowing that everything would turn out alright in the end. He did not have that luxury; neither do we.

There is majesty at the macro level, and mystery at the micro level. At times I think I'm able to see this twin realities at play in my life, in the lives of others, and in the life of our church. At other times, all

I can see and feel is hurt, and I'd rather not contemplate how these two work themselves out; I just want the mystery to be over. But friends, it's in these places, in the places where we hurt, that faith is tested and proved. It's in these places that we hold on to what we know to be true about Jesus, and trust Him to be with us whether we are at the bottom of a well, or trapped in a cell, or seated on Pharaoh's throne.

Conclusion: As I studied this week, one scholar by the name of Walter Brueggemann made a connection for me between Joseph's story and a promise made by the Apostle Paul thousands of years later.³

In Romans 8:28-29, we read: "**28** *And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.* **29** *For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*

Joseph's brothers and Potiphar's wife intended evil for Joseph, and God did not spare Joseph from their actions; God gives us tremendous freedom and choice. But God did subvert their actions so as to bring good and blessing out of it; blessing for Joseph, for his family, and for the world.

Listen again to the words of Romans 8:28-29, *God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.* Now if we stop there, like many do, then we've only got half of the promise, a half-truth; His promise

isn't that everything will turn out well, or that we will be spared from difficulty.

God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them. Namely, that we will become like his Son, Jesus.

The promise is that no matter what we experience, no matter what we endure, no matter what others force upon us, God will be at work in us for our good, to make us like His Son, Jesus. And so, no pain, no difficulty, no experience will be useless or wasted...at least not from God's end of things. Because God is involved, evil will not have the last word...not in this world, and certainly not in your life.

Friends, we have not been forgotten by God, we have not been abandoned, our life has not been discarded or thrown away as redundant...*how could God forget you?* He couldn't. He hasn't. He won't...not ever, for the Lord loves all He has made. Never forget in the darkness of your present experience, what God has made clear in the light: He is with us, He is sovereign, and He will be faithful to the end of your life and beyond.

In a moment I'm going to lead you in prayer, but before I do, I want to invite you to be still and listen. I came across a song by Matt Redman called "Never Once"...I'm going to have played for us over P.A system. Listen

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Genesis*, 294.

Response Song: Never Once (Matt Redman)

Verse 1

Standing on this mountaintop
Looking just how far we've come
Knowing that for every step
You were with us

Verse 2

Kneeling on this battle ground
Seeing just how much You've done
Knowing every victory
Is Your power in us

Pre-Chorus

Scars and struggles on the way
But with joy our hearts can say
Yes, our hearts can say

Chorus 1

Never once did we ever walk alone
Never once did You leave us on our own
You are faithful, God, You are faithful

Verse 2

Kneeling on this battle ground
Seeing just how much You've done
Knowing every victory
Is Your power in us

Pre-Chorus

Scars and struggles on the way
But with joy our hearts can say

Yes, our hearts can say

Chorus 1

Never once did we ever walk alone
Never once did You leave us on our own
You are faithful, God, You are faithful
You are faithful, God, You are faithful

Bridge

Scars and struggles on the way
But with joy our hearts can say
Never once did we ever walk alone
Carried by Your constant grace
Held within Your perfect peace
Never once, no, we never walk alone

Ending Chorus

Never once did we ever walk alone
Never once did You leave us on our own
You are faithful, God, You are faithful

Every step we are breathing in Your grace
Evermore we'll be breathing out Your praise
You are faithful, God, You are faithful
You are faithful, God, You are faithful