

“Alone in the Universe?”
Genesis 42-47
November 26, 2000
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It is a very compelling story but because I have told it before I will only sketch it for you today:

It was 1948, three years after the end of World War II and Marcel, took his usual train from his suburban home and headed into New York City.

On this particular morning however he decided to change trains and visit a friend in Brooklyn.

After the visit and on his way to his office, a subway train seat opened up and Marcel sat down next to a man reading a Hungarian language newspaper.

The man's name was Bela and he told Marcel that he had escaped both German and Russian camps only to learn that his wife had been killed.

As Bela was telling his story, Marcel couldn't help but think of a young woman he had met a year earlier who said she came from the same city in Hungary.

She told of having been sent to Auschwitz and finally being liberated by the Americans and, since her family was dead, she was brought to the U.S.

Marcel had been so moved by her story that he had written her name and phone number on a piece of paper, which he **had** in his coat.

Marcel turned to Bela and said “Is there any chance your wife's name was Marya?”

Bela said, "Yes, it was, how did you know?"

Marcel said, "Let's get off the train."

He took a stunned Bela by the arm and led him to a phone booth where Marcel called the number.

Marya answered the phone and Marcel asked a couple of questions before turning to Bela and saying, "Something miraculous is about to happen. Here take this phone and talk to your wife."

Did chance introduce Marcel to Marya a year earlier?

Did chance cause Marcel to take a different train that day?

Did chance cause Bela to be reading a Hungarian paper at that time?

Was it chance or did God ride the Brooklyn subway that day?

Told in the context of a sermon on a Sunday morning, everyone is supposed to say, "Of course it was God!"

It's yet another example of the providence, the good guiding hand, of God in life.

But do we truly believe that?

Do we believe that God is in control of life and our lives in particular?

World War II and the defeat of Nazi Germany. Was God in it?

The fall of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall. Was God in it?

You are late for an important meeting downtown and just as you arrive at the building in your car, another car pulls out of a parking space making it, the only one, available for you. Was God in it?

You were without a job and because you had the time available you called a friend to get together for lunch and at that lunch a friend of your friend stopped at the table to say hello. As your friend introduced you to him, the other man said he was looking for someone like you to hire and your new job was arranged – Coincidence or was God in it?

Twenty years ago a radio frequency was purchased by some Christians in the San Francisco area, a station developed and grew with a strong evangelistic outreach.

Twenty years later a group of stations, having grown out of the original, purchased KWBL and it changed everything including your employment – you lost your job. Economic coincidence or was God in it?

Your spouse walks out, your child dies, your plans for an athletic scholarship are ruined in an automobile accident, your only friend abandons you, you acquire a chronic ailment, etc.

You watch as Uganda or Rwanda or Mexico go from one despotic or corrupt regime to another with no relief for the millions of poor in those countries.

You see free enterprise at its best as the economic standard of living rises for millions in our own country **while at the same time** you see that same unbridled free enterprise result in unprecedented child abuse, pornography, divorce, lawsuits, and pain of all kinds.

Is God in control of history?

Is He in control of my life?

“These are the times in which the church of Christ must ask herself whether she still has the courage, in profound and unshakable faith, in boundless confidence, to proclaim the Providence of God. Or is she possessed of secret doubts fed by daily events? Can she still speak of God’s rule over ALL things, of his holy presence in THIS world? Can she yet proclaim confidently God’s unlimited control over the world and life – war and peace... Dare she still, with eyes wide open to the facts of life – no less than those who from the facts conclude an imperative atheism – still confess her belief in (a sovereign God)?” Berkouwer p10 The Providence...

Elizabeth Elliott wrote, “The experiences of my life are not such that I could infer from them that God is good, gracious and merciful necessarily. To have had one husband murdered and another one disintegrate, body, soul and spirit through cancer, is not what you would call a proof of the love of God. In fact, there are many times when it looks just the opposite.” Cited on p1254 of Boice Genesis vol 3

“The beautiful story of Providence and the Hand of God, it is said, is a religious fancy, and belief in it an illusionary escape from reality.”

Berkouwer p23 The Providence...

Frankly, Bela’s and Marya’s story does only little for me.

You don’t have to be cynical to explain the story as the result of coincidence – and not all that improbable at that.

With the number of Hungarian refugees flowing into New York at that time, all living in the same area, it was not

unlikely that Marcel would meet them and make the connection.

I have read and heard numerous stories of seemingly unusual circumstances that resulted in heart-warming endings.

But I read and hear many more stories that result in heart-**wrenching** endings.

Are our stories of God's providential hand just wishful thinking?

Do we really have any evidence that God **truly** is in the midst of the "stuff" of our lives – the good and the bad?

Or has he left us alone in the universe?

Anecdotal evidence doesn't help much because we have conflicting data.

We cannot just pick from our experiences those things we like and say they prove God's Providence.

Instead what we have is the sure Word of God on the matter.

It takes Revelation to know of God's Providence with any confidence.

And that is exactly what we have in the latter chapters of Genesis – a solid example from real life of how God works in all things to bring about his desired and gracious plan.

What we will see is God's providential hand guiding in the very details of Joseph's life.

Someone might say, "Wait a minute, isn't that just more anecdotal evidence – just one more story?"

How can that prove anything anymore than Bela's and Marya's story or my finding a much needed parking space?

The difference is in God's interpretation of the story – God's revelation of what the story teaches.

These latter chapters of Genesis will affirm a very important theological concept – one that is at the very foundation of our faith, our lives and our future – The Providence of God – the superintending work of God in all things to bring about his gracious purposes in us, the church and the world.

I must briefly tell you the story to put you back in mind of the details.

Jacob was one of the grandsons of Abraham.

After a long time in another country, Jacob had returned to the land of Promise – Canaan with his family of 12 sons and a daughter.

Joseph was the next to the youngest son.

In his teen years, Joseph coincidentally dreamed twice of his brothers bowing before him one day.

In jealousy and hatred and without their father's knowledge, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery but not just to anyone, coincidentally to Ismaelites on their way to Egypt.

He was resold but again not just to any one but coincidentally to Potiphar, who was one of the Pharaoh's officials, and who had a wife who would unjustly accuse Joseph and get him imprisoned not just in any prison but coincidentally in the Pharaoh's prison.

A little later, it just happens that two other officials of the Pharaoh are thrown into that same prison.

In the preceding years, by coincidence, Joseph had been appointed chief prisoner and so he had regular contact with all the other prisoners.

The two imprisoned officials had dreams and Joseph just happened to see them that morning and interpreted their dreams.

Coincidentally everything turned out exactly as Joseph said.

And when the Pharaoh had two disturbing dreams, Joseph, with a track record of correct dream interpretation, just happened to be available in the Pharaoh's prison.

Joseph interpreted the Pharaoh's dreams and so impressed was the Pharaoh that he elevated Joseph to Prime Minister of the country and just coincidentally he had excellent references from Potiphar (one of Pharaoh's officials) and from the Pharaoh's own prison warden.

Joseph had predicted from the dreams that Egypt would have 7 years of abundant crops and then 7 years of severe famine.

Fortunately for Joseph the years of abundant crops came true and he was in position to prepare for the famine and did so by forcing a savings plan for the entire nation.

This is now 20plus years after Joseph is sold by his brothers.

Coincidentally the famine also affected the surrounding regions including Canaan where Jacob and the other eleven brothers and their families lived.

When Jacob learned that there was grain to be purchased in Egypt he sent his sons, minus the youngest, Benjamin, to get it to keep them all alive.

Egypt is probably a three hundred mile, two-week trip across desert.

It just happened that the brothers had to come to Joseph to purchase the grain.

And coincidentally the brothers had to bow down to their brother Joseph without knowing it was him.

Joseph put them to a test to see if these brothers had matured and if they were truly repentant of their earlier actions against him and could be trusted in the future.

He kept the oldest brother, Simeon, as a hostage of sorts, to guarantee the other brothers would return and with Benjamin this time.

Joseph then secretly put the money they paid for the grain back into the grain sacks and when they later discovered the money they were afraid.

Jacob refuses to allow the brothers to return to Egypt with Benjamin and potentially free Simeon.

When later, the famine is so severe that they must do something, Jacob finally relents and allows the brothers to return to Egypt with Benjamin.

After again tricking them by putting his own silver cup in Benjamin's sacks of grain, Joseph tests his brothers to see if they would abandon Benjamin as they had abandoned him.

When it is obvious that his brothers are truly repentant for their sin against Joseph, Joseph reveals his true identity and the brothers join in an emotional reunion.

All the brothers return home and Jacob finally consents to move to Egypt.

Then coincidentally the Pharaoh, in an effort to isolate this underclass of people, gives them the best of the shepherding land; thus ironically insuring the success of the Israelites in prosperity and size.

A rather awesome series of coincidences, wouldn't you say?

But most **would** say it was simply a curious set of historical circumstances.

But is that what God says?

Speaking through Moses, the author of Genesis, and before him, Joseph himself, God gives this commentary on those curious circumstances, that awesome series of coincidences:

Joseph speaking to his brothers after their repentance says: Genesis 45:5-10 "Do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you... God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. And so it was not you who sent me here but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay...'"

What has he said? God is in it!

God was in it when you sold me into slavery.

God was in it when I was purchased by Potiphar.

God was in it when I was put in that prison.

God was in it when I was made ruler of all Egypt.
From beginning to end, through the worst and the best, God was in it.

I want to present four concepts about the Providence of God, from this and other passages of Scripture, that ought to make a difference in your thinking about God's Providence in your life and in the church and world today.

1. In the Providence of God he incorporates into his plan the natural order of things and the free will of people.

God is not the immediate cause of everything that happens but he uses everything to mediate his cause.

You jerk your child out of the path of a car.

It is appropriate to say that you saved the child's life – you were the immediate cause of his life being saved.

It is equally appropriate to say that God saved your child's life – he mediated his will through your actions.

When the brothers left Egypt the first time with their sacks of grain and found money in one of the sacks, they said, "What is this God has done to us?"

What did they mean?

Did God put the money in the sack?

Only in the sense that he was the primary cause behind Joseph's steward who put the money in the sack.

God was the cause behind the cause.

It is true that there were people before the scientific revolution and even people yet today who speak as if God is the immediate cause of everything that happens.

God found a parking space for me.

God said such and such to me.

God healed me.

While it is true that God can act in those ways, in our text for today it is obvious that God uses means to accomplish his ends.

God was not the **immediate** cause of the famine in the land of Egypt and surrounding area, but God sovereignly used that famine in his plan.

Likewise God does not make robots out of the people forcing them to act against their wills.

In God's providential plan he brought Joseph's brothers to a free, un-coerced repentance of their sin against Joseph.

God didn't force their repentance, he incorporated it.

God is not necessarily the immediate cause of everything that happens in life, but he incorporates everything that happens, including our free will into his good plan.

2. Secondly, the Providence of God is not thwarted or confused by evil but incorporates that "unwilling instrument of grace" into the overall plan.

There is no more difficult issue to wrestle with than the one of the relationship of God to evil.

How can God use evil in his plan?

What we see in Joseph's story is that God, without being guilty of the evil that was done, uses that evil to bring good.

The brothers' jealousy and selling of Joseph, by God's providence, put Joseph in exactly the right place at the right time.

Potiphar's wife's lust, seduction and treachery likewise was used by God to place Joseph where he was needed.

The cupbearer's selfish abandonment of Joseph in prison meant that in God's timing, Joseph would be at hand when the Pharaoh dreamed his dreams.

Phil Yancey wrote, "I think of God's style as ironic. A more straightforward approach would respond to each new problem with an immediate solution. A woman gets sick; God heals her. A man is falsely imprisoned; God releases him. Rarely does God use such an approach, however. An Author of great subtlety, he lets the plotline play out in perilous ways, then ingeniously incorporates those apparent detours into the route home. Thus Paul gives thanks for his

‘thorn in the flesh’ because it advances rather than impedes, God’s work through him; and Joseph can look back on his harrowing life and say to his cruel brothers, ‘You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good. God grants us freedom to rebel against (his) original design, but even as we do so we end up ironically serving his eventual goal of restoration.’ (In Christianity Today May22, 2000 p112)

So awesome is the wisdom and power of our God that by His providence even our evil becomes an “unwilling instrument of grace”.
(CT May22,2000 p112)

Paul summarized it this way, Romans 8:28 “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him...”

3. Thirdly, the Providence of God is seen best **not** in the moment or the immediate circumstances but in light of history and eternity – it is seen best with eyes of faith.

Joseph never could have seen the end from the beginning.

How could he have possibly believed that being sold into slavery would be good for him?

How could he have ever believed that being falsely accused and imprisoned, awaiting death, could be God’s best?

How could he ever have known that his long ordeal would save not only his own family but be used of God for his eternal plans for the world?

Listen to what God said to Abraham 150 years before Joseph became Prime Minister of Egypt:

Genesis 15:13-16 “Then the LORD said to him (Abraham), “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions... In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here...”

The Providence of God was being worked out over many, many years and even generations.

It was 500 years between that promise made to Abraham and the time that Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt.

Here's how the Apostle Paul summarized the whole history of events: Acts 13:16-23 "Men of Israel... listen to me! The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country, he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. All this took about 450 years.

"After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then...he gave them Saul... who ruled forty years. After removing Saul, he made David their king... From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised."

We must not judge the Providence of God by the immediate experiences alone – they are part of a whole.

That is why they must be seen with eyes of faith – faith that God truly is at work in everything.

4. Lastly, the Providence of God is not an intermittent, infrequent interference in the natural order of things but is the usual, everyday, involvement of God even in the smallest details of life.

We are tempted to think of the Providence of God as reflected only in those special occasions when God does something "big".

And thus we don't think of God as involved in the day to day events of our lives.

This Joseph example in Genesis, teaches us that God is not only "out there" somewhere, he is "here" now. He is not only intervenes specially but he is always involved and guiding.

Joseph came to realize that his dreams, his slavery, his imprisonment, his appointment to high office were all part of the stuff of life that God used.

No, more than that, God was in it all.

It was not that God was absent some of the time and present on occasion – God was in it all the time.

So intimate is God's knowledge of our everyday lives and so involved is He that Jesus said in Matthew 10:29-31 "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

And what is my response to such knowledge of God's providence?

I am less likely to yield to fear or despair.

In my trust of God's involvement in every detail of life, I don't assume that it all depends on me and take on unnecessary responsibility and anxiety.

But neither do I yield to fate or apathy thinking it is all decided, because I know that God has chosen to use means to accomplish his ends.

My faithfulness, my actions, and my prayers make a difference in God's way of doing things.

An understanding of the Providence of God does not most importantly bring comfort; **most importantly it brings confidence!**

I know about the Providence of God not because of heart-warming stories of coincidence but because God, in his Word, and illustrated forcefully in Joseph's story, has declared himself to be Lord – Lord of every detail of life – and Lord of every detail of my life and yours.

Will we believe him and trust him?