

The Story of Joseph

Rev. David C. Roth

“I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life (Genesis 45:4-5).

“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive” (Genesis 50:20).

How would you feel if your family and friends thought you were so worthless that they threw you into a pit to die? We might safely assume that this would never happen to any one of us, but it is true that sometimes the people we love do harm us. As was true in the case of Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob and the first of Rachel, this can happen.

This sermon is about Joseph. It is about his character and how he reacted to the life which befell him. Examining the life of Joseph can teach us many things about how the Lord leads each of our lives and about human relationships. A few questions to ask ourselves are: *Why do people harm other people when it seems so contrary to a life of charity? Why does the Lord let evil things happen to us, or anybody for that matter? How would and should we react if somebody hurts us?* These questions will be examined as we follow the life of Joseph.

Joseph was born while Jacob was still under the hand of his father-in-law, Laban. As soon as Joseph was born, Jacob asked Laban to send himself and his family away. It was almost as if this demand was a direct result of Joseph's birth. “And it came to pass, when Rachel had born Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, ‘Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my country’” (Genesis 30:25). It seems that the Lord was already guiding the steps of Joseph so that he could be near to Egypt in order to preserve his people. The truth is that the Lord in His providence guides us from our birth continually up to the end of our lives (see *Divine Providence* 333). He is forever working to provide for our eternal life.

From Joseph's birth in chapter 30, we don't hear of him again until chapter 37, when he and his family have left Laban and are living in the land of Canaan. He is now seventeen years old and spends some of his time feeding the flocks with his older brothers. It was on these occasions with his brothers that Joseph fell into trouble. Joseph was Jacob's favorite son because he was born of Jacob's deep love for Rachel. In order to show his deep love for Joseph, Jacob gave him a tunic of many colors. This caused his brothers to hate Joseph so much that they could not speak peaceably to him. Then Joseph began to have dreams which he shared with his brothers. They were dreams showing representations of Joseph's brothers and parents bowing down to him and being subservient to him. These dreams only added to the hatred and envy which the brothers had already felt toward Joseph.

How many of us can relate to the feelings which Joseph's older brothers had toward him? These feelings—jealousy, hatred, envy, and contempt—spring up when we sense that we are not being treated fairly or when we are not getting the recognition we think we deserve. To illustrate, imagine a business person who works like mad to get a promotion, only to have his associate receive it instead. Even if he is able to swallow his pride and congratulate his colleague, he may still be fighting a fierce battle within against contempt and hatred. In his eyes his colleague now starts to look unworthy and lazy, or underhanded in some way.

This is just an example of the many ways that the hells can turn our closest friends into our most hated enemies, with even the smallest dose of envy or loss of pride. We are vulnerable, even as Joseph's brothers were vulnerable. Nevertheless, we are in freedom to respond with good or evil. It was not Joseph's fault that he was the object of his father's love and the dreamer of unusual dreams. Instead of trying to stifle others' talents, we should be supportive of them, unless they purposely show them off to make us feel cheapened or less of a person.

In freedom, the brothers let their anger take control, and they responded with evil; they desired to kill Joseph. But the Lord did not will that Joseph should die. The Lord never wills that any evil should befall anyone. However, because more than anything the Lord wants us to be happy, thus in freedom, He permits evil to happen for the sake of a good end. We are taught, "To leave a person from his own liberty to do evil is permission" (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 170). And, "The permission of evil is for the sake of the end, namely, salvation" (*Divine Providence* 281).

To preserve freedom, and for the sake of a good end, the Lord permitted evil to befall Joseph. Yet in His providence the Lord moderated the evil intention of Joseph's brothers. In the story itself we see the Lord's providence acting to lead evil to break out to a lesser intensity than the brothers would have wished. We see Reuben suggest that they throw Joseph into an empty pit or cistern to perish rather than spill his blood themselves. (Reuben was planning to later remove him secretly.) They did this, but then saw Ishmaelite traders coming and planned to sell Joseph to them to make some money. Upon returning to the pit, Reuben discovered that Joseph had disappeared and tore his clothes in anguish. The brothers told their father a lie to conceal their own act of hatred toward Joseph. They took his tunic, tore it and dipped it in blood so that their tale of Joseph's being destroyed by a wild beast would be believed by their father, Jacob. We can see the contagious quality of evil: as covetousness causes the brothers to attempt murder, which then turns them to bear false witness to mask their deed.

Why was this evil allowed to happen? The Heavenly Doctrine tells us why evil things are permitted to happen. One reason, already mentioned, is for the sake of salvation, the end which the Lord desires and provides for all who are willing. So we read that the Divine Providence "continually grants permission for the sake of the end, and permits such things as pertain to the end and no others; and the evils that proceed by permission it continually keeps under view, separates and purifies, sending away and removing by unknown ways whatever is not consistent with the end" (*Divine Providence* 296).

Another reason evil is permitted is so that it may be exposed and then shunned. If we cannot see the evil in ourselves, it cannot be dealt with, and we cannot be led out of it toward what is good. We read, "Evil cannot be taken away from anyone unless it appears, is seen, and is acknowledged; it is like a wound which is not healed unless it is opened" (*Divine Providence* 183). We are also taught that with many people evil has to appear in actual act in order to be seen. These teachings explain why so many evil deeds are wrought by people. Unless a person sees his own hellish condition, he cannot take steps to correct it. We are taught that a person "from birth is like a little hell, between which and heaven there is perpetual discord. No one can be withdrawn from his hell by the Lord unless he sees that he is in hell and wishes to be led out; and this cannot be done without permissions, the causes of which are laws of the Divine Providence" (*Divine Providence* 251:2).

It is comforting to know that even when evil is upon us, the Lord is still intimately involved, leading to good. In hindsight we can see why Joseph's brothers were permitted to harm him. One reason was so that their own evil could be seen and thence dealt with. Another was because good was able to come from it, as we will see.

After Joseph's arrival in Egypt he was sold to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard. In Potiphar's house Joseph was a very successful man. The Lord was with Joseph and made all that Joseph did prosper in his hands. Yet, even in success, Joseph was again the target for the outbreak of more evil.

Joseph was a handsome man, and Potiphar's wife recognized this and wanted him to lie with her. After many proposals, met with aversion by Joseph, one day Potiphar's wife grabbed Joseph's garment and again said, "Lie with me." Joseph fled from the house and left his garment in the hands of Potiphar's wife. She used it as evidence to bear false witness against Joseph, accusing him of attempting to forcibly lie with her. Potiphar believed her, and Joseph was cast into prison. Again, in Potiphar's wife, we see love turned to hate when she did not get her way.

And, again, in this evil desire and act, we see an outcome for good. In the Lord's providence, working through permission, Joseph was cast into prison where he interpreted dreams for the baker and butler of Pharaoh, who were also incarcerated. As Joseph had foretold, the baker was hanged and the butler was restored to his position in Pharaoh's house. After two years, Pharaoh had two dreams of his own, which no one could interpret. Upon hearing Pharaoh recount his dreams, the butler finally remembered that Joseph had the gift of interpreting dreams. So Pharaoh sent for Joseph from prison.

When asked to interpret the dreams Joseph replied, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace." Joseph first gave God the glory, and then he proceeded to unfold the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams. The Lord gave Joseph the interpretation about seven years of plenty followed by seven of famine, and Joseph then gave Pharaoh some suggestions about how to manage the situation. This advice was good in the eyes of Pharaoh, and he thought there could be no better man to manage the storage and eventual distribution of grain than Joseph. Within hours Joseph had risen from an imprisoned slave to ruler over all of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. Surely the Lord meant the evil of Joseph's brothers and of Potiphar's wife for good.

Thirteen years had passed since Joseph had been rejected by his brothers and sold into Egypt. He was now thirty years old. Pharaoh gave Joseph a wife who bore him two sons. Joseph called the first-born Manasseh, saying "for God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house." Manasseh literally means "making forgetful." Their second son he called Ephraim, literally meaning "fruitfulness"—"for God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction." The names of his two sons sum up the life of Joseph. Even though evil befell him and he was made to suffer and toil for many years, the Lord had caused him to forget all the pain and gave him great honor and fruitfulness.

We cannot leave the story of Joseph without examining the tender story his reunion with his brothers, especially Benjamin. It brings into fruition the foreseen use for which the Lord permitted evil to happen to Joseph. Without a wise and just man to rule over the storehouses of Egypt, the family of Israel could not have survived the famine. So the Lord sent Joseph before his family into Egypt to keep them alive, so that he could raise up an entire nation. In doing this the Lord's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would be fulfilled: the promise that their descendants would inherit the land of Canaan and be numbered as the stars.

The first time the sons of Jacob went down into Egypt to buy grain, Joseph recognized his brothers. He spoke harshly to them and accused them of being spies. He did this to get them to go back and bring down his brother Benjamin. They agreed to bring him next time, and left Simeon bound in prison as collateral. As a result they realized the gravity of their crime against Joseph, made themselves guilty, and discerned that this must be a rightful form of punishment.

After dealing in such a harsh way with his brothers and secretly listening to them shamefully confess their guilt, Joseph turned himself away from them and wept. From this we can see a picture of what a good person might feel if he has to deal harshly or even punish someone. It's like a loving parent punishing his child and saying, "This is going to hurt me more than it does you." This can be a true statement. Here we see Joseph mercifully correcting his brothers, but it grieves him to do it. We read, "And he turned himself away from them and wept." To weep in this instance, and the others in this story, signifies the effect of mercy, or love grieving for the object of its love.

Again we see the merciful nature of Joseph when the brothers returned to him to buy grain for the second time, and Benjamin was with them. When Joseph learned who Benjamin was, we read, “His heart yearned for his brother, so Joseph made haste and sought somewhere to weep. And he went into his chamber and wept there.” His mercy is again seen after his brothers leave for Canaan. They do not return home, but are brought back before Joseph after his guards plant and then find a stolen silver cup in Benjamin’s sack. Joseph hears Judah explain how their one brother is dead and that their father will die if Benjamin is not returned home safely. When he sees their protectiveness for Benjamin, he can no longer restrain himself, but weeps aloud to his brothers: “I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” Later he tells them, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

In Joseph’s words we can see the deep trust that he had in the Lord, and the tender forgiveness he held toward his brothers. Do we find it difficult to forgive others when they have wronged us? When bad things happen to us do we trust the Lord, as Joseph did, and not lose heart, trusting that He is forever leading us to some good end? Civilly and morally we might have to correct someone’s actions when he has done evil. But still, in our hearts we can forgive the person and trust that the Lord is leading to good for all involved, whatever may be the appearance of the means. The example of Joseph’s steadfastness and forgiveness is one we should all contemplate and attempt to follow.

In closing, listen to the reassuring words of the thirty-seventh Psalm:

*Do not fret because of evil-doers,
Nor be envious of the workers of iniquity.
For they shall soon be cut down like the grass,
And wither as the green herb.
Trust in the Lord and do good;
Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.
Delight yourself also in the Lord,
And He shall give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the Lord
Trust also in Him,
And He shall bring it to pass.
He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light,
And your justice as the noonday.
Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him...
[T]hose who wait on the Lord,
They shall inherit the earth...
[T]he salvation of the righteous is from the Lord;
He is their strength in the time of trouble (Psalm 37:1-7,9,40).*

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 37; Divine Providence 296