

God's timing is telling

Genesis 37:12-36

Here's a real life story about God's extraordinary timing. A couple had committed to putting something on in their town - something to help make God known and celebrated more deeply where they lived. But this undertaking cost money - and lots of it. They went ahead with their enterprise in faith, believing that God would provide what was needed for what they felt He was leading them to do.

Well, when it was all wrapped up, it looked like everything was good - the income matched the outgoings, everything was provided. But then the couple was hit with an unexpected extra bill for £1000. There was no way they could pay. Things had turned very difficult very quickly. Why had this happened? Why had God allowed such a crisis?

The bill needed paid imminently. There was no way it could happen. But then, a man turned up at the couple's door one evening. He said, 'I've no idea why... but we feel strongly led by God that we need to give you £1000. So here you go.'

This isn't a story that I've dug up in a book; the kind you can read and walk away from with a little scepticism: 'Yeah, yeah, but the whole incident has just been reported a certain way...' This is something that really happened in the last few years, and all the characters in the story are people in our church.

Now you could say, 'Wouldn't it have been better if that worrying little episode hadn't happened at all?' I suppose that might have been more comfortable. But we wouldn't have seen the amazing confirmation of God's watchful, patient control of things if we hadn't got to witness that incredible demonstration of God's timing.

The provision was amazing, of course - just *what* was needed. But the other thing that was amazing was the timing - just *when* it was needed. It's an example of the biblical teaching that theologians sum up with this word: 'providence.'

God's 'providence' is part of His 'sovereignty.' Last week, we introduced the idea that 'God is sovereign,' because it's a big theme in the story of Joseph. We noted that the Bible teaches that God has *ownership* over all things and all people. That He has *authority* over all things and all people. And that He has *control* over all things and all people.

'Providence' refers to the control bit - there's nothing that happens, whether in nature or in human action, that God does not direct and use for His amazing, emerging, world-recreating purposes. The Bible's teaching on this shows that we are still responsible for our own actions, good and bad - that will come out in the story of Joseph's brothers. But God intends something bigger and better through all that happens than what we intend as we live and act.

Let's have a look at the intentions and actions of Joseph's brothers here in Genesis 37:12-36. At the heart of this passage, in vv.18-32, we read about their evil intent. They want to kill their brother. They are so bitter, so jealous, so angered by the favouritism Joseph has been shown and by his arrogant flaunting of his dreams, that they are set on killing him. They're even comfortable enough with the idea to say it out loud and agree it.

The plan changes a few times along the way - instead of killing him, they intend to throw him into a pit in the desert to avoid directly murdering him or to buy them more time. Then they decide to be opportunistic and sell him as a slave when some traders come by. Then they decide on a cover up plan involving the lad's coat and some goat's blood.

There's an almost chaotic chop and change going on as a teenager watches on with his life hanging in the balance, but the bottom line intent remains the same and remains evil - get rid of Joseph.

It's chilling how well hidden these human intentions can be. Think how well the brothers masked all this stuff. At the start of the story, Jacob sends his favoured son fifty miles away to a group of brothers who would just love to get their hands on him. Why would Jacob risk that if he had *any* idea how much the brothers hated Joseph?

And at the end of the story, they've got the callous audacity to 'comfort' Jacob in v.35 with crocodile tears. When Jacob is shown Joseph's bloodied coat in vv.32-33, he reads into it exactly the explanation that the brothers had planned to give, before they need to give it. It never occurs to Jacob that any of the brothers might have wounded or killed Joseph.

Jacob's not an idiot. Read the stories earlier in Genesis, and you see him coming across as astute, cunning, and smart. But he can't see the evil, the rage, the capability of his sons to do what they do. Because humans are worryingly good at masking this stuff. We're going to see by chapter 42 how they get unmasked, and see that they can't hide from God.

But for now, the brothers freely act out their darkest qualities. The narrative's all about their plots, their words, their actions. Joseph doesn't speak in this passage after v.16. It's a story that just happens *to* him, out of his control. Ever feel like that? Like your life is a story of other things and other people happening *to* you?

What happens *to* Joseph is horrible. Walk through the experiences of this passage from his perspective. He takes a 4 or 5 day journey to travel the 50 miles to Shechem, and then the other 14 on to Dothan. As he arrives, he's seized by his brothers and hears them *all* saying 'let's kill him now.'

Gripped by fear and helplessness in that, it all changes. Now, his coat's been stripped off him, and he's been thrown into a pit, perhaps simply to be left to die. Maybe he'll die of exposure first, maybe of thirst. Who knows how many days it will take?

Then it all changes again. He's unceremoniously hauled out of the pit, paraded like a piece of meat before some foreign traders, and carted off as a slave to who knows where - but certainly never to see home again.

'So, Scott, you're telling us that this is the story about God being good and in control?' Yes. Yes I am. You've got to read the whole story to see it fall into place. But so far, if this story chimes with the bitter, how-can-this-possibly-be-in-any-way-good experience in your life, be encouraged with this: if *this* is what it was like for Joseph, and God had a plan that really would become clear, then that *can* be the future you head towards too.

What's the most disturbing part of this story for you?

There are two hints in the passage that God is in the background, working out all the circumstances we're reading about for His purposes. That behind the stage where the actors are freely responsible for the malicious plan, the chaotic changes of mind and the callous cover ups; there is a director who weaves all these free actions together as if He'd always intended to use them in a good and meaningful way.

Firstly, there's the caravan of Ishmaelite and Midianite traders appearing in vv.25-28. Their arrival brings about a change of fate for Joseph. Instead of death by sword, sun, cold, thirst or starvation... he will live. The next reality for Joseph will be slavery - but of course, that's not the end of the story either.

There was nothing unusual about the caravan coming that way. Caravans passed through where they were often; it was a significant trade route. But the *timing* - that was where God's hand lay. That it should arrive when it did, when the brothers were eating, before they might move on - *that's* what changed Joseph's fate.

Some of the things that happen in our lives where God is weaving something together are pretty ordinary, really. But sometimes, the *timing* of these things just jolts you enough to think - 'that's weird that this should happen *now*.' Ordinary things happening at what strikes you as extraordinary times aren't something to think of as coincidence, serendipity or chance. They are reminders to us that God's there, weaving things together - moments to say, 'God, I see you are in charge.'

Then there are the *extraordinary* things that happen with extraordinary timing. Like the story I shared at the start about the people in our church. And like the verses that you probably read over without noticing anything, as I did, until the incredible significance of them was pointed out to me.

I'm talking about vv.14-17. Joseph bumps into a bloke in a field. It's not the most dramatic, obvious, attention grabbing part of the story. But it is actually the turning point. It's a fleeting, seemingly unremarkable thing that might barely have had a second thought from Joseph, or from us as readers. But consider what would have happened without this.

Joseph had been sent to Shechem. And his brothers were not there. They were fourteen miles away. Joseph wouldn't have had the first clue where to look for them if he hadn't bumped into this guy who happened to overhear them say earlier, 'Let's go to Dothan.' Joseph would have had no choice but to go home.

What would have happened? Joseph would have avoided being nearly murdered, sitting cold and alone in a pit thinking that he would wither away his final days there, and being sold off into slavery in a land far from home. He would have been spared all of that grief and misery.

Wouldn't that have been better? If this seemingly chance encounter with a man in a field is actually God's providential timing, why would God do this? Surely God was therefore sealing Joseph's fate, ensuring that he *would* suffer deeply, rather than get to be home, safe, comfortable and secure?

Okay, think what else would not have happened but for this bumping into a bloke in a field. Joseph would not have gone to Egypt. He would not have arisen from slavery and then prison, to become a man in a position of government. He would not have been there to foresee the famine that would devastate not just a nation, but an entire region of the world. He would not have been there to oversee dealing with that crisis.

Tens of thousands of lives would have been lost. And the family that God had chosen - the family that God adopted and told, 'I will be your God, and you and your family will be my people, and I'm going to rescue the world through you' - that family would have perished, and with them, God's promises and the hope of the world.

Like I said last week, we tend to think quite narrowly about ourselves concerning issues of God's control of things. If Joseph could have glimpsed into the future and seen what was going to happen to him at his brothers' hands, I imagine he'd pass on it. But that would be to pass on the salvation of the world around him.

I imagine that you would rather have passed on the deep, deep pain you've felt or are still feeling. I imagine that, like me, there are things you can see might happen in your life that you would never choose and cannot possibly fathom how God would use. But none of us can imagine what God is going to do - yes, perhaps for you yourself, but maybe more importantly, for countless people around you, because of what He's weaving together.

One other wee thought on this encounter - if it was so easy for us to read over it and think nothing of it, what brief conversations or trivial circumstances might we have brushed over that God may have devised as turning points? Might we be so busy shouting, 'God, you're not doing anything,' that we missed the five second moment that changed our lives without us realising it?

It's the *timing* of the man being in that field at the same time as Joseph, having heard what he overheard earlier, that is so telling in this story. God is in it - the timing tells us so. He is in control. And yes, that means God is deliberately intending for Joseph to suffer the deliberate intentions of his brothers. But God's intentions are bigger and better than either the brothers' genuine evil, or the welfare of Joseph alone. So God directs Joseph's path to Dothan.

Can you look back to a moment where God's timing was really telling of His being in control?

So we've looked at how God is in control and works His will even through evil human intentions and actions, as well as through apparently chance circumstances of timing. But there's one more thing to learn about how God works through human action. And it's that when men step up, God gets to work through that.

In vv.21-22, we read about how Reuben tried to rescue Joseph. He heard his brothers' plan to kill the lad on his arrival, and he stepped in with another idea. 'Let's not kill him... let's put him in that cistern.... no, no, not these ones here where everybody can see us; that one out in the desert!' And we're told that Reuben's plan was to come back for Joseph and get him back home.

Reuben stepped up. We're not told *why* he did this. His motive might have been to try to get back in his dad's good books. Back in 35:22, we read that Reuben went and slept with Bilhah, one of the four women that Jacob had fathered children with. It was a scandal and a family disgrace. Maybe Reuben hoped that by bringing the golden child safely home, he might win back some favour with Daddy.

Or it might just be that Reuben, as the oldest of the brothers, was the responsible one whose job it was to stop the brothers doing something stupid. If something happened to Joseph, it would feel like it was on him, so it fell to Reuben to step in, step up and change the plan.

To begin with, Reuben isn't very bold. He doesn't simply say, 'Boys... this is *wrong*. Let's not do this.' Instead, he comes up with a different plan with the hidden motive of sneaking Joseph home. He's not quite man enough to call out the whole band of brothers yet.

Later on, his plan goes wrong, in vv.29-30 when he discovers that Joseph's been hoisted out of the pit he was expecting to find him in and sold off. And at that point he gets a bit bolder. He tears his clothes (something that people do often in the Bible when they are publicly grieving about something), and he speaks directly to the brothers like what they have done is a big mistake.

Between this and other mentions of Reuben in Joseph's story in the chapters to come, Reuben comes across as a basically well intentioned but slightly ineffective influence. He tries to influence things, but doesn't quite influence them the way he'd hoped.

In chapter 42, he tries to convince dad Jacob to let the wee one of the family, Benjamin, travel with the brothers. He does the big brother thing of saying, 'I'll take responsibility for him, you can hold me accountable.' Jacob doesn't budge. But when brother Judah says the same thing in chapter 43, Jacob agrees. When Judah speaks, things happen. People are influenced.

We see it here in our passage, in 37:26-27. Judah is the one who says, 'Guys, let's *sell* Joseph as a slave instead of killing him!' The brothers probably still all had the idea of doing away with Joseph at that point. The money they got for selling him - 20 silver shekels - wouldn't have mattered much to a rich family like them. They didn't do it for the money.

They did it because when Judah spoke, people listened. For better or worse, good or ill, the man is influential. In this chapter, Judah influences people with ill motive and evil action. But in future chapters, things change. Judah will speak to make good things happen. And as the commentator John H. Walton observes, 'each speech is longer than the previous one, and each one is more commendable than the previous one.' It's like we're watching Judah growing as a man as the story unfolds.

So what do we learn about God bringing about His purposes through men like Reuben and Judah, who step in and step up in different ways? Well, firstly there's Reuben. You've heard the saying, 'All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to stay silent?' True enough. If Reuben hadn't spoken up, Joseph would have been murdered.

Reuben didn't speak up with the sort of backbone that would have got Joseph safely home. The contrived, slightly cowardly way he did it ended up going predictably wrong - the boy was lost from his grasp.

The good that Reuben intended - getting Joseph home - was not the good that happened. But the good that *God* intended - bringing Joseph to Egypt to save thousands of lives - happened because God worked His plan through Reuben's faltering, clumsy, half-hearted efforts to do the right thing.

God doesn't just bring good out of evil. He brings good out of good! The good we intend and succeed in, as well as the good that we aim for that doesn't quite come to pass. Don't think you're not lion-hearted enough to bother stepping up; or that you're not likely enough to succeed to bother stepping in. God will work a bigger picture even through your half-successes. Reuben *saved a life* though his half-success.

Then there's Judah. Here's a new saying for you: 'All it takes for evil to triumph is for *persuasive* men to fail to become good.' Some of you will know that you're like Judah. When you speak, people listen, and tend to follow your charismatic lead.

To you I say: Aspire to growing as a man. As we're going to see Judah doing. Because God brought about His good purposes through Judah as he grew in character, conviction about his sin, humility before God, compassion, sense of responsibility, and leadership by example.

You'll have spotted I'm talking in a fairly sexist way (unless you're a man, in which case you'll be so busy thinking about yourself that you won't have noticed the ladies getting left out). I could just as easily have spoken in this whole section about 'people' rather than 'men.' And everything I've said applies to you too, girls. The stepping in, the speaking up.

It's just that I had a sense in writing this that it's the men I'm supposed to address particularly about this stuff. Time to grow, boys. Time to step up, step in, speak out.

Whether you're one of the about dozen blokes that I pray for because your other half stepped in to follow Jesus a while back and you're still hanging back from it, missing out whilst your woman grows in life and character. Come on, guys. Come and pin your colours to the mast too, heart and voice.

Whether you're someone who knows you've got talents that you're not using. Whether you're someone whom God has placed in a workplace or a family or a friendship group where it needs someone to man up and say, 'This is wrong. Let's stop this.' Man up, step in, step up, speak out.

Don't misunderstand - God *is* in control. The salvation of the world doesn't rest on the shoulders of men or women. Actually, the saying should go like this: 'All it takes for evil to triumph is for Jesus not to go to the cross.' But Jesus *did* go to the cross. Evil is *already* defeated. It's still flailing and dragging us down in this life. But it's defeated.

God is working all things together to bring about His saving, world-reshaping, forever purposes. Yes, even through your pain. But how about, instead of God doing that entirely despite our sinful refusal to live according to Him, we get to see some of God's purposes coming about through us stepping up, stepping in and speaking out where we are?