

# Who's to Bless and Who's to Blame

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We are continuing this morning with Genesis 39 that returns to the account of the life of Joseph. When we last saw Joseph, his brothers had sold him into slavery, and the Ishmaelite traders who had purchased him were headed to Egypt. Chapter 39 tells us what happened to Joseph when he got there:

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> The *LORD was with Joseph and he prospered*, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup> When *his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did*, <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. Genesis 39:1-6 (NIV)

This short passage emphasizes that Joseph was ***blessed*** by God—so much so that the blessing spilled over into Potiphar's household. And before we move on to Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife (that's the racier part of the story—but you'll have to wait for next week before we get to that), I want you to think about God's blessings—and what form they can sometimes take. You know—it's not always easy to recognize a blessing.

Kris Kristofferson was a popular singer and songwriter when I was growing up. It's hard to believe, but this past June, Kristofferson turned 81 years old. He had a real way with words that would qualify him as one of America's true poets of the latter half of the twentieth century. But, he was one of those guys whose lyrics could sometimes be a bit puzzling. Take for example, one of his songs written way back in 1975 where he talks a little bit about blessings. The lyrics say: "If a cheated man's a loser, and if losers never win / If beggars can't be choosers, 'til they're weak and wealthy men / If the old keep gettin' older, and the young must do the same / And it's never getting better—***Who's to bless and who's to blame?***"<sup>1</sup> Of course, when I was young, I would just plug in an eight-track in my ole' Chevy Vega and sing out the words as I rolled down the highway—never giving a second thought to the philosophy behind the lyrics. But Kristofferson's lyrics sometimes had a really dark side to them, and here we find some of those lyrics. He may be suggesting that the blessings of life are just random events with no

rhyme or reason to them. In a sense, Kristofferson's words echo those of the Solomon at the beginning of Ecclesiastes who cried out in despair, "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless."<sup>2</sup> I hope I'm misinterpreting Kristofferson's views here, but if I'm not, then all I can say is that, on this point, he's just plain wrong. Life isn't meaningless, and blessings are not just random things that fall from the sky.

In fact, the blessings that we just read about concerning Joseph as he took up his stay in Potiphar's house, they were anything but random. Something happened in Joseph's life that laid the way for God's blessings. Now that he was in Potiphar's household, everything was prospering. But that prosperity was preceded by a very difficult time for Joseph. Think about what he had gone through. Before his brother's threw him in that pit, Joseph enjoyed the pleasures of a fairly wealthy home. As his father's favorite, he was pampered and over-indulged—he was given that luxurious multi-colored coat, and no-doubt paraded around in front of his brothers—fanning the flaming of their envy and hatred. But all of that had quickly changed. From sitting on top of the world, he found himself sitting at the bottom of a pit facing the prospects of death. And things became only marginally better when he was sold into slavery. He felt the pain of loneliness as he longed for the embrace of his father and feared that he would never see him again. He was crushed by the realization that his brothers had come to so detest him that they had considered killing him. He felt utterly lost in a foreign land filled with pyramids, where the people spoke a strange language and engaged in even stranger customs. And now he faced a future in the chains of slavery. What was he to do?<sup>3</sup>

Well, if he had been able to consult with Job's wife, she would have given Joseph the same advice that she had given Job. In light of all the adversity that Joseph was experiencing, she would have advised him to "curse God and die!"<sup>4</sup> That's not an uncommon response that people have during trying times. But, Job didn't do that, and neither did Joseph. Joseph didn't rage at God. He didn't look up from that hole in the ground and shake his fist at Heaven. Rather, during this time in the pit, and not in the comfort of his pampered home . . . during this time that he exchanged his beautiful coat for the iron ankle bracelets of a slave, I think that it is safe to say that Joseph's demeanor and his entire outlook on life changed radically. You see, he was given some valuable time to step back and take a good look at himself. And when Joseph looked inward, and it was quite evident that he did not like what he saw—because what he saw was a spoiled, proud, young man. So, again, what could he do? Well, he did the only thing that could help him—the only thing that logically explains the change that came over him. He turned humbly to God. And, most certainly, He prayed. He must have cried out to God for forgiveness and for strength. And from what we just read, God heard him, for it tells us that the Lord was with Joseph, and he "prospered". The Hebrew words used to here do not mean that Joseph became wealthy.

Rather, the words indicate that he was “***making progress in his situation.***”<sup>5</sup> That “progress” that he was making showed a marked difference in his outlook on life—one that enabled him to lay his circumstances before God, whether things happened to be going good or if they were going bad, and to trust in God, come what may.

At this time, Joseph was only 17 years old. So at this fairly young age, he came to realize something that often takes others—many of whom are Christians—a lifetime to discover. He came to understand that God’s “***blessings***” are not always apparent to us when His blessings are being conferred. Joseph’s fall into that pit and his sale into slavery wasn’t punishment for his juvenile actions. Rather, they functioned as a blessing: Otherwise, he would have remained being that same spoiled kid who paraded around in his pride-filled coat of many colors, and he may have carried that same prideful attitude right on through his adulthood. The trials that God put Joseph through were exactly what were required to confront him with the need to change.

Sometimes, even prominent Christian leaders fail to understand what true blessings really are. Take Joel Osteen as an example. I like Joel Osteen. I admire the way he clings to God’s Word even when it is not always popular to do so. I borrowed some CD’s of his sermons not too long ago, and I have to tell you that he is a wonderful preacher. But I just cringe sometimes when he talks about blessings. The following quote of Joel is typical—he says: “***It’s God’s will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty. It’s God’s will for you to pay your bills and not be in debt.***”<sup>6</sup> Sometimes that may be God’s will, but other times that is simply not the case. If God always wanted Joseph to live in prosperity in the sense of wealth and riches, God would have made sure that he always got to wear that coat of many colors. But, God had put him in a different wardrobe. God had Joseph wear the mud and dust from that dried up well into which he was cast. God had Joseph wear the emotional and psychological chains that he carried into Egyptian slavery. If financial prosperity is such a blessing, as Joel Osteen suggests, why are there so many rich people today who will tell you that they are so unhappy and have lost purpose in life? To always equate financial prosperity with blessings is a big mistake—whether it is preached by Joel Osteen or anyone else.

So, what are blessings? In the big picture of things, they are events—both good ones and painful ones—that put us back on track. Not too long after Joseph died, God’s people became slaves in Egypt. That was a very long, pain-filled and trying time for God’s people as they labored under Pharaoh. But if they had stayed in the comfort of the Promised Land, what would have happened to them there? If we consider the track that Judah was on, we can have an idea of the answer. Last week, what did we find him doing? Well, we were told that he married a Canaanite woman, fathered two immoral sons

who apparently took up the morality of the Canaanite culture around them. Judah himself—well he started cavorting with prostitutes. When famine came and the Hebrews migrated to Egypt and fell into slavery, it appeared like a tragedy then. But, in God’s Plan, it may have separated them from those very same Canaanites that they were beginning to act like—just like Judah was beginning to do. Their slavery prepared them for the coming of Moses and the liberation and restoration that God had in store for them. What looked like a tragedy was actually a blessing—a blessing of preparation for a closer walk with God. That kind of blessing—the hard kind of blessing—has happened to God’s people throughout history. It happened in Egypt with Joseph. It happens here in this country. It even happens in China.

Take the case of John Sung, a missionary to China. When we think of missionaries to China, people like Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong usually come to mind. But John Sung was one of the greatest revivalists in China of the twentieth century. He came to know Christ at an early age and by his late teens he arrived in America to further his education, and he eventually entered seminary. Now, you wouldn’t think that this is the case, but sometimes seminary professors can cause as much confusion and doubt in a young person as they can in teaching them about the Christian faith—it’s sad, but true. (The same has been true of college and university professors throughout this country—who for years have skillfully stifled any sense of patriotism—but that’s another subject for another day.) At any rate, rather than strengthening his faith, John Sung’s seminary studies turned him away from his childhood faith. His doubt and lack of faith that was fomented by his professors tormented him so, that he felt just as lost and abandoned as if he’d been tossed into a deep pit or shackled with chains and sold into slavery. So, what could he do? Like Joseph, he got down on his knees and prayed. And when he finally got back up, he could see that his seminary professors had been just as cruel to him as Joseph’s brothers had been. And the more that John Sung reflected upon his situation, the more he came to realize that we are not saved by seminary professors or angry brothers who relent and pull us from the pit, or even by Ishmaelite traders who sell us to a good master like Potiphar—we are saved by grace through faith alone.<sup>7</sup> And so, he recommitted his life to Jesus Christ. And that was a blessing in John Sung’s life.

Yet even with that blessing, I can’t tell you that John Sung lived happily ever after, any more than I could tell you that Joseph lived happily ever after once he began to prosper in Potiphar’s house. You see, John Sung returned to his seminary classes and started preaching the true Word of God so fervently that his seminary professors decided that they needed to get rid of him. After all, with all this preaching of the Word of God going on, it might spill over and start affecting his classmates. You know what these professors did? They had John Sung unjustly committed to an asylum for the mentally ill. And for six months, without cause or reason, he was virtually imprisoned there with his Bible as His only

means of comfort. And you might be asking yourself why God would allow such a dedicated young man to go through something as painful as this. Of course, if John Sung had adopted the theology of Joel Osteen, he might have been wondering the same thing. But the reality was that the blessing was unfolding right before him even as he sat there in that insane asylum, seemingly all alone. And the blessing was that he wasn't all alone. The Holy Spirit was right there sitting beside him. As it turned out, this time of solitude and reflection ended up being a time of great spiritual development for him. It became a time of preparation that was instrumental in the years to come. When he emerged from the dark confines of that sham mental facility, he headed back to China. And from 1927 to 1937, John Sung led one of the most potent revivals for Jesus Christ that China has ever seen. His ministry ended at the age of 43 when he succumbed to tuberculosis just a few years before the communist takeover in that country. But, John Sung's ministry helped to pave the way for future missionary work that spurred Christianity in China, where today there are over 67 million Christians in China.<sup>8</sup> But during his times of trial and trouble—the very things that would prepare him for the difficulties of missionary work—these blessings—well, they were not so apparent to him. God could see the big picture and the blessings that He was weaving—but at the time, no one else had such a divine perspective.

Now as we heard, Kris Kristofferson's song poses the question, "Who's to bless, and who's to blame?" Neither Joseph nor John Sung would have any problem in answering the first part of that question. They'd tell you that God *always* blesses His people. Even when from our limited perspective we can't see how the blessing is shaping up—nevertheless, God continuously blesses those who remain faithful to Him. The challenge is to remain faithful and trust in His ultimate goodness and His plan for our lives when we are at the bottom of the pit peering up (like Joseph was) or when we are surrounded by a world of insanity (like John Sung was cast into).

But what about the second part of Kristofferson's question—the part that asks, "Who's to blame"? I think Joseph could answer that one too. Joseph remembered to do a little self-examination, a little soul searching—and when he did, he came to admit that he was mainly to blame for being there in that pit. After all, it was his own boastful demeanor that had ignited his brothers' hatred of him. And so it is for us—we are to blame when we fail to engage in that same kind of self-examination . . . when we fail to remember that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28 (NIV) We are to blame when we fail to turn to God in prayer—the way Joseph prayed when times were darkest for him. Maybe we could offer God a simple little prayer, one that says: "Lord help me, Jesus / I've wasted it so / Help me, Jesus I know what I am / Now that I

know that I've needed you so / Help me, Jesus / My soul's in your hand."<sup>9</sup> Some of you may recognize those words, because they were penned by Kris Kristofferson himself in one of his other songs.

So, "Who's to bless, and who's to blame?" For all those in Christ, we are all blessed as children of the Living God with every spiritual blessing.<sup>10</sup> For all those in Christ, our blame is washed away by His blood. And we rest in the assurance of the Psalmist who sings: <sup>31</sup> "For who is God, but the LORD? And who is a rock, except our God?— <sup>32</sup> the God who equipped me with strength and made my way blameless." Psalm 18:31-32 (ESV) For those who can remember those things in times of trial, you are always truly blessed, and, through Jesus's work on the Cross, truly blameless as well.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church  
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor ©2017  
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<sup>1</sup> Kris Kristofferson, "Who's to Bless and Who's to Blame?", from the album of the same name, Monument Records (1975); Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NIV) "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

<sup>3</sup> *The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible – Genesis II*, (Chattanooga: Leadership Ministries Worldwide, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "C. Joseph Enslaved in Egypt: How to Become Stronger Through the Blessings and Trials of Life (Part 1), 39:1-23".

<sup>4</sup> Job 2:9 (ESV) Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die."

<sup>5</sup> *NET Bible*, First ed. (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 39".

<sup>6</sup> "25 Powerful Joel Osteen Quotes to Encourage You," <http://christianbiblelife.com/articles/25-powerful-joel-osteen-quotes-to-encourage-you>. Dec. 26, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 2:8 (ESV) For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

<sup>8</sup> John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary – Genesis: From biblical text...to contemporary life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 698-699. Zoe Li, CNN, "The future of Christianity in China: Sino-theology and the Pope," September 11, 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/15/world/asia/china-christianity/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Kris Kristofferson, "Why Me?", from the album, "Jesus Was a Capricorn," Monument Records (1973); Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 1:3 (NIV) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.