Lesson Eight

Joseph: Participating in God's Purpose

Focal Text
Genesis 45:1-15; 50:19-21, 24

Background
Genesis 42—50

Main Idea
As we choose to live in faithfulness to God, God graciously and often mysteriously leads us in participating in the larger purpose God will bring to pass.

Question to Explore
How do the circumstances of our lives and the actions we take relate to God's purposes?

Quick Read
The will of God never leads where the grace of God cannot sustain.

Commentary
John D. Rockefeller, Sr. (1839-1937) became a millionaire by the age of twenty-three. He formed Standard Oil Company in 1870; by 1879, it controlled 90% of oil refining in the United States and about 70% of refined oil exports. By the age of fifty he was the richest man on earth.
In 1891, at fifty-two years of age, Rockefeller fell gravely ill. The hair on his head, eyebrows, and eyelashes dropped off. He could digest only milk and crackers, and could not sleep. Doctors predicted he would die within a year.

Rockefeller was a committed Christian, the son of a devout Baptist mother, but his business ambitions had dominated his life. One night, as he struggled to sleep, he came to realize he could take nothing with him into the next world. The next day he changed the course of his life. He established the Rockefeller Foundation, which channeled his fortune into mission work, medical research, and hospitals. His contributions led to the discovery of penicillin, and to cures for malaria, tuberculosis, diphtheria, hookworm, and yellow fever.

John D. Rockefeller’s life was transformed as a result of his benevolence, and he lived to the age of ninety-eight.1

What purpose gives your life direction and significance? God has a “good, pleasing and perfect will” for you (Romans 12:2). He stands ready to use you and your class members in ways that will bear fruit for eternity. If God could transform an enslaved Hebrew into the leader of his nation and race, he can employ us for purposes far beyond our comprehension.

The key is our submission to God’s call, a fact Joseph will make clear this week.

**Trust the purpose of God (45:1-7)**

When we left Joseph in lesson seven, he had become the second-in-command of all of Egypt. In the course of time, famine struck the Promised Land, and Jacob sent ten of Joseph’s brothers to buy food in Egypt (Genesis 42:3). Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. He insisted that they leave his brother Simeon imprisoned in Egypt and return with his remaining brother, Benjamin. When the famine plaguing the land again threatened them with starvation, Jacob’s sons made their second pilgrimage to Egypt, this time with Benjamin as part of their group (Gen. 43).

Joseph sent them back to Canaan with his personal cup in Benjamin’s sack. When it was discovered by Egyptian envoys, the Hebrews returned to Joseph’s palace in shame. Judah pleaded with Joseph for Benjamin to be released, offering himself in his younger brother’s place (Gen. 44).

Now our text begins: “Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, ‘Have everyone leave my presence!’ So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers” (45:1). In this way none of the Egyptians would know of the cruelty with which their master had been treated by his Hebrew brothers.
Joseph’s emotional reaction was significant to the palace: “And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it” (45:2). Loud weeping was and is common in the Middle East as a way of expressing deep emotion. This was one of five occasions when Joseph wept over his brothers (see 42:24; 43:30; 45:14; 50:17). “Pharaoh’s household heard about it,” not because they could physically hear Joseph’s cries but because the attendants standing outside reported the news to them. This detail shows us the remarkable interest Pharaoh took in his young Hebrew advisor.

Then came the moment toward which the entire narrative had been building: “Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph! Is my father still living?’ But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence” (45:3). “Terrified” is a good translation; the Hebrew indicates deep fright in their souls. They were understandably afraid that he would punish or even kill them for their treatment of him.

Joseph took steps to reassure them: “Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come close to me.’ When they had done so, he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!’” (45:4). He had previously been known to them by his Egyptian name, Zaphnath-Paneah (41:45). He had “pretended to be a stranger” when he first met them (42:7), and “they did not recognize him” (45:8). He had used an interpreter in speaking with them on their first trip to Egypt (42:23), a custom he presumably continued until this moment.

If his knowledge of their language and identities was not proof enough of his statement, the added description, “the one you sold into Egypt,” would have demonstrated the reality of his claim beyond all doubt. No one in Egypt except Joseph could have known of their betrayal of their brother, for they sold him to Ishmaelites who in turn brought him to this land (37:28, 36).

At the same time, his statement of their crime against him restated the reason for their terror. So Joseph quickly added, “And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you” (45:5). “Do not be angry” translates a Hebrew phrase that could be rendered literally, do not let it burn your eyes.

This had all been part of God’s purpose: “For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance” (45:6-7). “Plowing and reaping” indicates the nature of the famine—a great drought apparently prevented the Nile from overflowing its banks and watering the lands that would then be cultivated. Without such irrigation there was no way to plant seed (“plowing”) or receive its harvest (“reaping”).
From the time God first revealed his life purpose for Joseph (37:5-9), every step led to this moment. Such trust in the purposes and providence of God had sustained his young servant through the heartbreak of his brothers’ betrayal, his enslavement in Egypt, his unjust imprisonment, and even the temptation to self-exaltation in Pharaoh’s court.

Now Joseph called his brothers to trust that God’s purpose included them as well. God redeems all God allows, in this case using their sins as a means of saving their family. As Joseph trusted the purposes of God, so should his brothers. So should we.

Such a commitment stands in opposition to our cultural insistence on self-dependence. We value the self-made person, the Horatio Algers who achieve greatness by fortitude and hard work. Get up earlier, stay up later, try harder, and you can do anything, or so we think. But self-sufficiency is spiritual suicide. God will not do for us what we try to do for ourselves. He can lead only those who will follow.

Submission to the purposes of God is a challenge even for those of us who serve Jesus. The most common question I was asked in twenty-five years of pastoral ministry was, How can I know God’s will for my life? People often wanted a game-plan, a strategy or blueprint they could choose to follow as they wished.

I always began my response by asking, Will you follow that will, whatever it is? God does not reveal his purposes as an option for us to consider but as an order for us to obey. The Lord of the universe will not be trifled with. We will know God’s will to the degree that we are willing to follow it.

If you want your life to count for eternal purpose, begin by submitting to that purpose, whatever it may be. Joseph had no idea his obedience would lead from Potiphar’s house to prison to Pharaoh’s palace. Nor could he have imagined that you and I would be studying his life story this week, some thirty-seven centuries after the fact. We cannot measure the future significance of present faithfulness.

Is there anyplace God cannot send you? anything God cannot ask of you? Do you have business with your Father today?

**Follow the plan of God (45:8-15)**

Moses called the people to cross the Red Sea, but they had to risk their lives to do so. Joshua could lead the nation through the flooded Jordan River, but they had to step first into the water. So it was with Joseph’s family—they had to follow the plan God had made for their lives before they could experience its benefits.

Joseph continued: “So then, 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” (45:8). “Father” is used here in the sense of counselor or advisor.
But his brothers had a choice to make: “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’” (45:9). He would release them to return to Canaan, hoping they would not seize the opportunity simply to flee. If they did, they would perish in the famine. The urgency of their return is clear in Joseph’s syntax: “Come down to me; don’t delay,” which could be rendered, *Come down as soon as possible to me; don’t delay for any reason whatsoever.*

With this promise: “You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me—you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute” (45:10-11). “Goshen” was a fertile area in the Nile Delta, a place where the drought and consequent famine would be less severe. By contrast, if they refused his invitation they would “become destitute,” a Hebrew phrase which means *to be robbed of your possessions.*

His brothers still needed reassurance that this plan was indeed from God: “You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly” (45:12-13). Finally his brothers were persuaded: “Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him” (45:14-15). “Wept over them” may indicate that they were bowed at his feet while his tears fell upon them.

The scene could not fulfill Joseph’s boyhood dreams more fully:

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: 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.” 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. 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.” 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?” His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind (37:5-11).

God had a plan for Joseph’s life, a way for him to fulfill his divinely-given purpose. So it is with us. Our Father wants us to know his plans for our lives even more than we want to know them.
By contrast, our culture sees us as the chaotic result of chance, with no larger direction. The philosopher Martin Heidegger tells us that we are actors on a stage, with no script, director, or audience, and courage is to face life as it is. Postmodernists say that truth is relative, with no overriding purpose or significance. We used to view history as a line, a progression. Now many people see history as chaotic, dots on a page with no direction or purpose. In the words of Shakespeare, we are “sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Scripture disagrees. God could assure his exiled people, “‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (Jeremiah 29:11). God had a plan for Moses and Joshua, using them to bring his people to their Promised Land. He had a plan for David and the other kings who led them, and for the prophets who revealed his word to them.

Jesus had a plan for the apostles he chose to lead his global kingdom march. He would send Peter to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:9), and use John even on the prison island of Patmos to bring his Revelation to the world.

Now God has a plan for your life and for those you will teach this week. He promises us, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). The “heart” in Hebrew psychology was the seat and center of the intellect, emotions, and will. God wants us to use all three in seeking his will for our lives today.

God speaks to us rationally, through the intellect. When we study his word, its truth speaks to us. When we examine the situation and consider the options, God speaks to us. As we reason, God reasons through and with us.

Our Father speaks to us intuitively, through the emotions. His Spirit bears witness with our spirits. We have a sense, a leading, an unspoken direction. And God speaks to us practically, through the will and circumstances of our lives, through open and closed doors, opportunities, and the counsel of others.

One of these ways of knowing tends to dominate our personalities, and so it’s always good to supplement with the other two. I am almost completely a rationalist—if something makes sense to me, that’s usually good enough. I need intuitive and pragmatic advisors to help me discern the plan of God for my life and work.

Which way does God typically use in leading you? Whom would God employ to help you know his will more fully?
**Depend on the provision of God (50:19-21, 24)**

God has a purpose for our lives, a plan for fulfilling that purpose, and provisions to meet our needs along the way (Philippians 4:19). So it was that Pharaoh approved Joseph’s arrangements for his family, even adding to their provisions, and his brothers returned to their father with their astounding news (Gen. 45:16-28).

Jacob then made his final pilgrimage, traveling with his family to be reunited with Joseph in Goshen (Gen. 46). Jacob met and blessed Pharaoh (47:1-12), while Joseph’s wise administration continued to save the people of Egypt and prosper his family (47:13-31). Jacob gave his final blessing to his sons and their families and died (Gen. 48—49); Joseph and his brothers then returned their father’s body to Canaan for burial (50:1-14).

Now came the confrontation that had been building since Joseph first made his true identity known to his brothers. All along they had feared that his forgiveness and benevolence were motivated by regard for their father. With his death, retribution could quickly follow.

Consequently,

> When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?” So they sent word to Joseph, saying, “Your father left these instructions before he died: ‘This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.’ Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.” When their message came to him, Joseph wept. His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. “We are your slaves,” they said (50:15-18).

Joseph would have been completely within his rights to repay their crimes with prison or worse. If their crimes against Pharaoh’s most trusted advisor had become known to the Egyptians, Joseph might have felt obligated to punish them in order to protect his political position. In addition, if his exalted status in Egypt had changed his sense of self-importance, he might well have been motivated egotistically to seek retribution.

His brothers’ fear was so great that they did not even speak to him personally: “they sent word to Joseph” (50:16). They only “came and threw themselves down before him” after he wept at their message (50:18).

They had no reason to fear, however, for slavery and prison had done their humbling work well. The teenager who had been only too willing to share his dreams of exaltation with his brothers had learned in prison the true source of his identity and power.
Remember his first conversation with Pharaoh: “Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it’” (41:15). How did the young Hebrew respond? “I cannot do it,” Joseph replied to Pharaoh, “but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires” (41:16). So it was with his brothers: “But Joseph said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God?’” (41:19).

In Joseph’s response we find the essence of biblical forgiveness. To forgive is not to pretend the wrong did not occur, excuse such behavior, or forget it happened. Joseph was clear and blunt in this regard: “You intended to harm me” (50:20a). Rather, biblical forgiveness extends the grace and mercy God has extended to us: “God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (50:20b; 45:5-7).

True forgiveness pardons, choosing not to punish, as when a governor pardons a criminal. So Joseph promised his brothers, “So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them” (50:21; see 45:11). “Spoke kindly” could be translated, spoke tenderly to their hearts.

Joseph lived 110 years, 90 or so of them in Egypt, living to see his sons’ grandchildren (50:22-23; note that Joshua, who superintended the burial of Joseph’s remains in the Promised Land, also lived 110 years; Joshua 24:29). Such an accomplishment fulfilled Jacob’s blessing on Joseph’s sons: "may they increase greatly upon the earth" (Gen. 48:16).

Joseph’s two sons were born before he was thirty-seven years of age (41:46, 50). Ephraim was thus born when Joseph was thirty-six at the latest. As a result, Joseph’s grandsons were likely born when he was fifty-six to sixty years of age, his great-grandsons when he was seventy-eight or eight, and his great-great-grandsons when he was near 110 years of age.

Then “Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’” (50:24). God first promised the land to Abraham:

- “Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land’” (12:6-7a).
- God renewed this commitment: “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites’” (15:18-21).
God made it clear to Abraham that this covenant would be extended through Isaac: “Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him” (17:19). He then renewed this covenant personally with Isaac:

To you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed (26:3-4).

As Joseph reminded his brothers, God extended this land covenant to Jacob as well:

God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, “Jacob! Jacob!” “Here I am,” he replied. “I am God, the God of your father,” he said. “Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes” (46:2-4).

Now Joseph asked his brothers to bring his remains with them when they returned one day from Egypt to this Promised Land. And so Joseph died. His remains were embalmed for that time when God’s promises would be fulfilled and the nation he saved would come to its land (50:25-26). His ancestors had significantly longer lives: Abraham lived to the age of 175 (25:7), Isaac to 180 (35:28), and Jacob to 147 (47:28). But none was more courageous or faithful in his service to his God and people than was Joseph.

Joseph’s importance to the nation was so great that the people remembered this commitment and kept custody of his remains for centuries to come. When the people finally left Egypt centuries later (Exodus 12:40), “Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, ‘God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place’” (Exod. 13:19).

Generations later, after forty years of wilderness wanderings and years of conquest and conflict, the people finally settled in their Promised Land. Still they kept Joseph’s remains and their commitment to him: “Joseph’s bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph’s descendants” (Joshua 24:32).

Well more than a thousand years later, Joseph’s story and significance were still important to the people of God: “By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones” (Hebrews
11:22). Now you and your class will continue Joseph’s legacy by your study of his life and model this week.

Our culture rejects such a faith commitment as this. We value three-year strategies and insist on business plans. While such cost-counting measures are valuable (Luke 14:28-32), they must never keep us from submitting ourselves fully to the call of God (Luke 14:27, 33). His will never leads where his provision cannot sustain. He will give you all you need to do all he asks. Why do you need this assurance today?

**Conclusion**
Our study of Joseph has followed his career from a boy in Canaan to the highest levels of significance and status. The theme recurring throughout Joseph’s story is obedience. From youth to old age, he continued to trust the purpose, plan, and provision of his God. And the Lord used him to save a nation through whom one day he would send the Savior of the world.

Are you as yielded to your God as Joseph was? Would you respond to his story with your own surrender to your Father? To this end, consider this statement by Watchman Nee, the Chinese theologian and spiritual advisor. It means so much to me that I have taped it inside my Bible where I can see it every day:

> A day must come in our lives, as definite as the day of our conversion, when we give up all right to ourselves and submit to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. . . . There must be a day when, without reservation, we surrender everything to Him—ourselves, our families, our possessions, our business and our time. All we are and have becomes His, to be held henceforth entirely at His disposal. From that day we are no longer our own masters, but only stewards.

> Not until the Lordship of Jesus Christ is a settled thing in our hearts can the Holy Spirit really operate effectively in us. He cannot direct our lives until all control of them is committed to Him. If we do not give Him absolute authority in our lives, He can be present, but He cannot be powerful. The power of the Spirit is stayed.

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1 See http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rockefellers/peoplevents/p_rock_jsr.html and