

"God be With You!"

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, St. Mark's. We come now to God's Word again. We're going to continue our journey through Genesis. We're picking it up from chapter 39, and with his help, we're going to cover hopefully the next three chapters now.
- So please do keep your Bibles open there. God be with you. That is a very common, especially throughout history, throughout Christian history, a very common blessing that people say upon each other.
- God be with you. But what does it really mean? What does it mean for God to be with someone? Have you ever thought about that? Because essentially, if God is omnipresent, as Christians believe He is, then He's everywhere, and therefore He's kind of with everyone, in a sense.
- So what does it mean when we say God is with someone, or God be with you? In the Bible, we discover that phrase, used quite often, and we discover that God can be with someone in a way that He's not with others, with someone in a special way, which is what we mean when we say God is with that person, or God be with you.
- And if that's the case, if God can be with certain people in a particular way, then it's important to understand what that means, and to find out whether you can say that about yourself, that God is with you.
- [1 : 1 9] And if so, what does that look like in your life? How does it play out, and what difference does it make in your life for God to be with you? And that's the question I hope to answer as we look at the story of Joseph.
- And what we notice in these chapters is the early chapters of Joseph's life. We notice that the narrator makes the point over and over again that God was with Joseph, in that special sense we're talking about.
- And the story then, as we read it, reveals to us just what that means, what it looks like for God to be with him. Now, if you've just joined us, maybe you haven't been with us for the previous sermons in Genesis.
- We're in the middle of the kind of story of Abraham's family, Joseph being his great grandson, right? The son of Jacob. And Joseph, at this point, now the family we saw last week, wasn't the most loving family.
- They were quite dysfunctional. And Joseph had actually been sold into slavery by his brothers. They were originally going to kill him because they were jealous of him. And they decided just to sell him into slavery instead.
- [2 : 3 7] And so he's taken off to Egypt on a slave caravan. Very gladiator-esque, if you've ever seen Gladiator. Russell Crowe gets taken off as a slave.
- And that's the beginning of the story, basically. But unlike Gladiator, there's something in this story, which is a true story, that affects how we read what's coming, that we're told.
- And that is that God was with Joseph as he was going into slavery in Egypt, as he was about to face what he was going to face. We're told over and over again that God is with him.

So look at how the narrator stresses that point. Verse 2, the Lord was with Joseph. Verse 3, when his master saw that the Lord was with him. Verse 20, but while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him.

Verse 23, the warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care because the Lord was with Joseph. I think the narrator is trying to make a point that helps us to read the story in a particular light.

[3 : 39] Whatever's about to happen, we've got to read it all in light of the truth that God is with Joseph. But the first thing we learn about that right off the bat, and about what that means for God to be with him, is we learn what it doesn't mean.

And what it doesn't mean is that Joseph is kept away from suffering and difficulty. In fact, if we read on, we realize that some of the troubles he faces come because God is with him.

He ends up, so we continue the story, he ends up in the house of a government official, Potiphar. It's quite a good gig for a slave, actually. And he becomes a really successful servant in that house.

So much so that Potiphar gives him responsibility over everything. His entire household, his accounts and everything. So he becomes this really successful and blessed slave in that position.

Problem, of course, comes when we read about his wife. And Potiphar's wife takes a shine to Joseph because he's quite a good-looking guy. And she tries to seduce him behind her husband's back.

[4 : 47] And she's probably, as the woman of the house, of this high official, she's probably used to getting what she asks for. And so she doesn't expect or take kindly to Joseph's refusal to sleep with her, to sin in this way, which he knows is a sin not just against Potiphar, but against his God.

And so she doesn't take kindly to that. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. And so she keeps on pushing to the point that she entraps him, tries to force herself on him.

And when he resists, she accuses him of trying to rape her. And he's then thrown into prison. But it's at that point that the narrator in the story reminds us once again, verse 21, But the Lord was with him.

And then we join him in prison. And it turns out, much like the situation in Potiphar's house, the same thing happens. He's such a good, responsible prisoner that he gets put in charge of all the other prisoners, eventually.

And the story then continues in chapter 40. Two more prisoners arrive. And they're pretty high-profile prisoners. Because it turns out they work in the palace with Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the land.

[6 : 10] And this is his butler and his baker. The butler is the cupbearer, the one who serves him drinks and tests his drinks. These two people, in fact, were the ones who would be responsible for making sure that the king isn't poisoned, which was a common way of assassinating people in high positions.

Now, I'm assuming, the text doesn't tell us why they were in prison, I'm assuming there was probably an assassination attempt on the king by poison, and these two were the ones who were suspected. And they were being held there during the investigation.

Now, you'd think the butler did it, right? In these mystery stories, it's always the butler for some reason. Although, it turns out in this case it wasn't. It was the baker.

Yeah, because he ends up getting executed. And the butler, the cupbearer, ends up getting freed. But what's significant is what happened in the prison before that outcome.

They met Joseph, who was in charge of all the prisoners. And they both had dreams with hidden meanings. Often it was the case that God would speak to people, not so often non-covenant people, but in this case he did, speak to people through particular dreams with hidden meanings.

[7 : 20] And he made it such that only Joseph could decode these dreams' meanings. And in doing so, he could actually tell the future. It was a special ability God gave to Joseph in this particular situation.

And the future that he told, when he decoded these dreams, didn't turn out to be such good news for the baker, right? But it is good news for the butler, the cupbearer, because he turns out to be the one who is freed.

And while Joseph is telling the butler that he's going to be freed, and he's going to be restored to his position, he also said to him, please remember me. You know I'm here unfairly.

And you're going to be restored to your position. When you are, please just put in a good word for me with Pharaoh. And so we're thinking, yeah, there's a chance that now justice will be done, and he'll be freed.

But then we get to the end of the chapter, and we read this, verse 23. The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph. He forgot him.

[8 : 22] And so at this point, at the end of chapter 40, we've got this conflict. Because we've been told all along, God is with Joseph. God is with Joseph. And yet he ends up rotting in prison, forgotten by both men and seemingly by God himself.

How do we resolve that conflict? How does that make sense? It's the real low point in the story. But it forces us to read on to chapter 41.

Because this is not the end of the story. It covers all these three chapters. We didn't read chapter 41 for time, but I encourage you to read it in your own time at home. It picks up the story two years later.

Pharaoh himself has a dream. And it's a mysterious dream. And he nor any of his magicians or court assistants can interpret the dream.

And it's at that point that the butler, conveniently, remembers Joseph. He goes, oh yeah, there was this Hebrew in prison, I remember.

[9 : 26] And he was pretty good at interpreting dreams. Maybe you want to give him a try. And so that's exactly what Pharaoh does. He calls him out of prison. Joseph shaves and changes his clothes and gets ready to see the most powerful man of the land.

And he interprets Pharaoh's dream after listening to it. And he interprets it correctly. And it turns out his dream was a warning by God of a seven-year famine. Seven-year famine. That's pretty intense.

After a period of seven years of plenty. And so Pharaoh is really grateful to Joseph for revealing this, as you would be if you were the leader of a country. And he recognizes something about Joseph.

Something that is actually remarkable coming from the lips of a polytheist pagan like Pharaoh. He says in verse 38, Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the Spirit of God?

So this is just another way that this story confirms to us, even now through Pharaoh's lips, that God was always with Joseph. Not only did God decree the seven-year plenty and the seven-year famine, but he also caused Pharaoh to dream what he dreamed.

[10 : 32] And he caused Joseph to be able to understand it and decode it. Why? Well, we see what happens as we continue the story in chapter 41. Pharaoh is so grateful that he frees Joseph from prison.

He promotes him. He gives him the daughter of one of the highest priests in the land as his wife. And he gives him charge of all of the resources of Egypt.

Joseph essentially becomes the most powerful man next to Pharaoh in this country. And so this is probably the most remarkable rags-to-riches story, true story, that history has ever seen.

Joseph goes from literally rock bottom, being in a pit as a slave, to being the richest man. And in charge of the most powerful country of the day.

I mean, this is remarkable. It's like the guy begging at your gate becoming the president of the United States. I mean, no, I'm not going to make any Donald Trump jokes. But that's how crazy this story actually is.

[11 : 37] That's how remarkable this transformation is. And as we read the story over these three chapters, we need to make some very important observations. We've made one already that this is all about teaching us what it means for God to be with Joseph.

But there's a few important observations around that that we need to bring out of the story. Note, firstly, that all of the good stuff that happened to Joseph in the end of the story would not have happened if it wasn't for the bad stuff happening first.

Do you realize how all of those things, the whole chain of events which caused him to end up in this elevated position, I mean, that would have never happened if he didn't interpret Pharaoh's dream. And Pharaoh would never have known about him if he wasn't in prison and interpreted the cupbearer's dream.

He wouldn't have been in prison if he wasn't falsely accused by Potiphar's wife. And he wouldn't have been in Potiphar's house if he wasn't sold into slavery by his brothers. Do you see how there's this chain of events, many bad things, actually causing the ultimate good thing in the end?

That's the first major observation we make about this story and Joseph's life. And it shows us something remarkable about the events of his life. It shows us that they were all planned.

[12 : 52] That none of them were random. But the way the story is written, it does look like all of these events are random. Until you get to the end and you look in hindsight and you realize they weren't.

Maybe that's a privilege we can have at the end of our lives. As we look back at seemingly random events and realize they weren't as random as we thought they were. But it seems, as we read the story, that Joseph is at the mercy of random and unjust and capricious people.

And that he's subject to their whims and inconsistencies. Maybe that's how you often feel. That you're a small little boat in a stormy sea buffeted by forces and winds and waves beyond your control.

Or the things around you and forces which actually have no concern for you. Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like your life is not determined by anything but random forces?

Well, that's certainly how Joseph would have felt. But then, as we read the story deeper, we discover nothing could be further from the truth. The opposite was actually the case.

[13 : 56] We realize that there was a central, consistent control of all the situations Joseph went through. And everything proceeded towards his good, despite the acts of unjust and inconsistent people around him.

And the reason for that, we're told, was because God was with him. And so God was the one who decided what was going to happen in the circumstances of his life.

And that's the first thing we learn in this story about what it really means for God to be with Joseph. It doesn't mean that everything will go well for him.

But what it does mean is that the circumstances of his life are no longer under the control of random and capricious forces. The second important observation we need to make in this story, we see, in fact, right at the end of chapter 41, when we discover the point that God does all this in Joseph's life and raises him to this position of power.

And we realize it actually wasn't just because God wanted to bless Joseph. He had a plan in all of it, which the next few chapters that we're going to look at in the next few weeks slowly unfold.

[15 : 14] But even now we see it wasn't primarily for Joseph's sake that God raised him to this position, but it was part of the bigger picture. Look at verse 56 of chapter 41.

When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. Look at verse 57.

And all the world came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph because the famine was severe everywhere. All the world, that's quite a big statement.

Now, the writer doesn't literally mean everybody on the whole globe, but he deliberately uses that hyperbole to remind us of something.

Now, it referred to the known world, the surrounding countries. But in using that language, he's telling us Joseph was actually being a blessing to the nations, not just to Egypt and not just to his own family, which is also the case, but to the nations.

[16 : 14] Why? Why does it make that point? Well, because he was part of the covenant family that God had made a covenant with, whose purpose it was going to be to bless the nations.

Remember back in Genesis chapter 12, verse 1, where God first makes this covenant with Abraham, and his promise that through his family, all the nations will be blessed.

Well, now we start to see that unfolding. We start to see the beginning of that blessing of the nations, that this family, particularly one person in this family, will flow out to the nations.

And we also see that Joseph's position, spoiler alert for the next few stories coming up, Joseph's position ends up saving that very covenant family, Jacob's children, despite the evil against him, despite the terrible things they did.

God saves them, and he does it through Joseph, and that's why he does all these things in Joseph's life, because he wants to save that family. Why does God want to save that particular family? Because he has decided and resolved that that family is going to be the one that he carries out his plans for this whole world, to bless it and save it and remove it from the curse, ultimately.

[17 : 35] And so that's the second thing we learn about what it means for God to be with Joseph. Not only that God was in control of all the circumstances of his life, but that in everything God did in Joseph's life, the end goal wasn't first and foremost to bless Joseph.

It was to carry out God's covenant plans for his world. So those are the things we observe in this story. But what does it mean for us today? I mean, that was thousands of years ago.

What is this story here for in our Bibles today? What is it meant to be telling us? Especially because we're not Joseph in this story. We mustn't make that mistake. We mustn't read ourselves into all of these characters indiscriminately in the Bible.

We're not Joseph. We don't get the ability supernaturally to interpret dreams. And we're not guaranteed fame and riches and promotion in this life like many false teachers today on TV with big followings will tell you because that is a very nice thing to hear.

But it's not true. It's not what the Bible teaches us. We're not guaranteed to rise up to positions of power in this life and have promotion and riches and fame and glory in this life.

[18 : 51] That's not the point. God doesn't exist actually to make our lives better here on earth. That's not his purpose. So why did God do it for Joseph? Well, he did it for Joseph because that was necessary for him to save the covenant family through which he was going to carry out his purposes for this world.

It was a much bigger picture that we've got to see Joseph's story in. And so if we're not Joseph today though, who is Joseph today? Well, if anyone, it's Jesus, isn't it?

Think about it. I mean, if we're anyone in the story, we're probably the brothers who threw Joseph into the pit. But I think the story of Joseph is here to teach us something about how God saves his covenant people from their own mistakes, how he saves them from their own evil.

And he does that by raising an individual and exposing that individual to some very wicked and unfair treatment.

All so that he can put that individual in a position to be able to save God's people. And he did it with Joseph. But he also did it, it turns out, with Jesus.

[20 : 03] In that very same way. It's the same way he saves us today. The way he saved his covenant family back then. Because we see the same pattern in the life of Jesus, don't we?

God's chosen man. Being unfairly accused. Punished for something he didn't do. But all those circumstances, all the things Jesus went through, betrayal and arrest and beating and crucifixion, culminate, of course, in him being raised up.

Not raised up like we think. Not raised up as a ruler of the country, like Joseph. But literally raised up on a cross. And yet that raising up, Jesus referred to his disciples when he was preparing them for it.

And he referred to that as his glorification. As him truly being raised up. Why did he refer to it as something good? It was a wicked crucifixion of a man who didn't deserve it.

Why was that good? Well, because Jesus knew. And the reason he had it for it in his life. And not ran away from that. Is because he knew through that, God was going to put him in a position to save God's people.

[21 : 14] From their own mistakes. And from their own wickedness. And that's the first thing this story, therefore, does for us today. It explains the gospel to us.

In Technicolor. It shows us through a story of how God has saved his people in history. How God is saving them today as well. Through Jesus. And it outlines for us.

Right here in Genesis, it outlines how God plans to save wicked people in this world. Secondly, the story also comforts God's people to know that we too are no longer at the mercy of random forces.

If we too have been caught up in God's plans for this world. And the New Testament affirms that to Christians. It says God is with you. Over and over again, Paul makes that point in his letters to the churches.

That those who have come under the rule of Christ. Those who have come into the covenant. God, they can know that God is with them in this special way. The same way he was with Joseph.

[22 : 20] In fact, it was Jesus' parting words before his ascension. Which we're going to remember on Thursday. Come join us for our ascension day service, by the way. But remember just before he ascended at the end of the book of Matthew.

What words does he leave with his disciples? He says, I will be with you. I will be with you. But what does that mean? Well, it means that like with Joseph.

Joseph, he is now in control of the circumstances of the lives of his people. And he is working out his plans in those circumstances.

Irrespective of how random they might seem. Paul says the same thing in Romans. He says in Romans 8, 28. In all things, God is working for the good of those who love him.

And are called according to his purpose. And that might not look like that in your life if you're a Christian. For years, it didn't look like that in Joseph's life.

[23 : 18] He was in prison. He was in really bad situations where it seemed that he was just forgotten. It didn't look like there was a plan being worked out in his life.

But in this story, as we read on. And many like it in the Bible. We're reminded that God is not removed from the lives of those who are called by him into his plans.

Those who are incorporated into his covenant people. God is not removed from the circumstances of their life. It's not like he doesn't care about those circumstances and leaves us to the mercy of random forces.

No. If you're a Christian. God is actually far more involved in even the little things in your life than you know. And you know what knowing that and believing that actually does for us?

What it prevents in our lives? It prevents self-pity. Feeling sorry for ourselves. Which I think is... We're all prone to do. But especially now.

[24 : 18] While we're all under stress. In lockdown. And our jobs are insecure. Insecure. And the future is insecure. You know what I think we're prone to? Self-pity.

Oh, poor me. I just want people to notice how difficult my life is now. But that attitude, which we are very prone to. We've got to check that attitude.

Because it's not consistent with faith in a God who is with his people. If we really believe that, it doesn't leave room for much self-pity. Because we know, even if we don't know how, we know that God is working in these things.

For our good and for his purposes. And so it's worth it. And that leads us to the third thing that the story reminds us of. And that is that there is now always meaning to our suffering.

You know, there's one thing. Suffering. And not having any belief that it means anything or it's for any purpose. There's a different thing. When we suffer and we know there's meaning to it.

[25 : 17] And God's people, Christians, can know that. Now, God being with us, tells us that it doesn't preclude us from suffering and hardship in our lives any more than it did for Joseph.

But it does assure us that God uses our suffering. And what you might think is the unfortunate events of your life. God uses those events and circumstances to achieve his purpose in your life and the people around you.

And he uses even the unfortunate, even the bad things to put us into positions to do his work which we might not otherwise have been able to do.

And I've seen it time and time again. Christians, things that seem unfortunate in their lives. And yet that puts them in a position to be able to share the gospel with someone they wouldn't have otherwise.

To be able to witness to someone and show their faith and give a reason for the hope that they have which they wouldn't have been able to do if they weren't in that position. God, just like he did with Joseph, raises up his people today through difficulties to put them into positions to do his work and to glorify him.

[26 : 29] The apostle Peter says in his letter, which we looked at earlier. He says, keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of his visitation.

Do you see here how Peter realizes that even when Christians suffer at the hands of others unfairly? God will use especially those situations to put us into positions that will end up glorifying him and magnifying him, bringing people to realize who he is and what he's done.

And that is what it means for God to be with us. But I guess the question I must ask is, is that true of you?

Is he with you? And how do you know if he is? Well, the answer to that is simply, have you trusted in the one that he has raised up to save you from your sins?

Have you come to realize who he is and have you put your trust in Jesus? Because the moment you do that, the moment you come to realize that Jesus is God's son and that he died for sins and that he rose again and that he's coming back and that he's the Lord of the whole world.

[27 : 46] And that he's going to establish his kingdom over all this earth one day. When you realize that and put your faith in that and come into God's covenant people, which that opens up the way for you to do through the forgiveness of your sins.

When you do that, you receive his Holy Spirit. You literally receive God's presence, God with you in your life. And you receive the guarantee of his presence and his working in every circumstance in your life to preserve you, to save you, and to make you a blessing to this world.

Shall we pray? Lord, we do thank you for the story of Joseph. We thank you that you have great plans for this world. Plans that we could have never hoped for and never hoped to be involved in.

And yet you sent your son to be raised up into a position where he can save us from our mistakes, from our failures, from our sins. Just like you raised up Joseph to save the covenant family back then.

Lord, we thank you for that. And we thank you for this reminder that you are at work, even in the seemingly random and unfortunate circumstances. We pray, Lord, that you would give us that faith, give us that perspective in our own trials, in our own circumstances.

[29 : 10] Protect us from self-pity, feeling sorry for ourselves. Rather, as Peter encourages us, help us to live holy lives, even through suffering, so that we might bring glory to you.

Help us to realize when you put us into positions that we might not otherwise have chosen, that we can do your work and that we can be a witness to those around us. And we do pray, Lord, that you would work in and through us for the glory of your name.

Amen.