

Trinity 13 (2020)

Sometimes the end of a story is not the end.

For example, if you like murder mysteries – ‘who done its’ – you will likely have encountered plots where all the pieces of the puzzle seemed to be in place. The identity of the villain seems plain. The story appears to be at an end.

But then there is a twist in the story, and everything you thought to be settled changes. There is new intrigue, and the story takes new direction and continues. Sometimes the end of a story is not the end.

And that is the way it is with the story of Joseph which we have been exploring over the past several weeks.

You will remember when we first met Joseph, he was a cocky young man sporting a distinctive coat his father had given to him. He obviously enjoys wearing it, as it sets him apart as his dad’s favourite.

Not only is he cocky, he is a little too forthright in telling his dreams . . . especially since in the dreams he tells he sees his father and brothers bowing down before him.

As a result, and you can almost understand why, his brothers come to hate ‘this dreamer’, and, when away from their father’s eye, plot to kill him.

Better judgement, however, prevails and they *merely* sell him to a band of Ishmaelites bound for Egypt in exchange for some silver coins.

From here on, Joseph’s life is like a seesaw. First, he is up, and then he is down. Then he is up again.

In Egypt, he lands a first-class position at the home of one of Pharaoh’s top men, a man named Potiphar. Life is good.

Then his fortune takes a plunge in the other direction when Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce him and Joseph refuses. Spurned, she falsely accuses him of rape, and Joseph winds up in prison for about 11 years.

Then, because of his reputation of being able to interpret dreams, he is brought before Pharaoh, whose dream he interprets. At this point, Pharaoh makes second only to himself in Egypt. He gets a wife, has children; life is good.

At this point, you almost expect to hear the words: “And they lived happily ever after.” But they don’t come. The end of the story is in fact not the end.

New intrigue and drama emerge when Joseph’s brothers show up down in Egypt to buy grain and Joseph is reunited with Benjamin, his only full-blood brother.

This morning, however, I wish to focus not so much on Joseph and his brothers but on **God’s amazing providence in the midst of the ‘what ifs’ and ‘if onlys’ of our lives.**

“Providence” refers to God’s hand moving across the page of human affairs. And this is what we find happening in the Joseph saga:

God at work through all the twists and turns of life;

God fulfilling his greater purposes working through and using the freewill choices, even thoroughly wicked ones, of his human creatures;

God at work in and through the ‘what ifs’ and ‘if onlys’ of life. Think about this:

- If Joseph’s brothers had never sold him as a slave, then Joseph would never have gone to Egypt.

- If Joseph had never gone to Egypt, he would never have been sold to Potiphar.

- If Joseph had never been sold to Potiphar, Potiphar’s wife would never have falsely accused him of rape.

- If Potiphar’s wife had never falsely accused him of rape, then Joseph would never have been put in prison.

- If Joseph had never been put in prison, he would not have been in a position to be called when Pharaoh needed someone to interpret his dream foretelling a coming famine.
- If Joseph had never interpreted Pharaoh's dream, he never would have become prime minister.
- If Joseph had never become prime minister, he never would have wisely prepared for the terrible famine to come.
- If Joseph had never wisely prepared for the terrible famine to come, then his family back in Canaan would have died in the famine.
- If Joseph's family back in Canaan, God's covenant family, had died, then the Messiah could not have come, and we would be without hope in this world today.

But, things did work out. God remained at work. God's hand remained over the page of human history. Well, you get the picture.

But, God's amazing providence is more than an historical curiosity. It remains operative in our lives today.

Some people make themselves miserable by dwelling on the 'if onlys' and 'what ifs' of life.

If only I had married this person rather than that one, I would be happy today.

If only I had taken Route A rather than Route B, I would have avoided the crash that destroyed my car and almost killed me.

If only I had not taken my money out of the stock market in '08 and had waited for the rebound, I could retire today.

If only, if only, if only . . . what if, what if, what if. Well, you get the picture and know what I am talking about and perhaps have engaged in such thinking yourself.

Such thinking is very human and we often indulge in it. But it is also most unhelpful and can paralyse us from making constructive decisions today and moving forward.

What is to be done with the ‘what ifs’ and ‘only ifs’ of life?

Well, if what was done in the past was truly sinful, then that sin ought to be openly acknowledged and confessed. God’s forgiveness then needs to be received.

Some folk say they believe in the forgiveness of sins, but they don’t act like it. Instead of nailing the sins of the past to the cross, they post them on their bathroom mirror and review them often.

That is not humility. That is disbelief in the promises of God made in Christ.

In the Joseph sage, and in many other places in the Bible, we learn to exchange our ‘if onlys’ for God’s ‘if onlys’. I am thinking in particular of word found in 1 John 1:9:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Allow me close with the words of a somewhat new prayer that comes out of the Southern Hemisphere, New Zealand to be specific.

It is for the night but says what we need to hear and live throughout each day:

“Lord, it is night. The night is for stillness. Let us be still in the presence of God.

“It is night after a long day. What has been done has been done; what has not been done has not been done; let it be.

“The night is dark. Let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives rest in you.

“The night is quiet. Let the quietness of your peace enfold us, all dear to us, and all who have no peace.

“The night heralds the dawn. Let us look expectantly to a new day, new joys, new possibilities. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.” ///

And so we move forward in the assurance of God’s providence . . . not just way back then in Joseph’s day, but in our day and in our own lives. Come labour on!