

Sympathize... do you know what it means? I'm assuming most of you have a working definition for that word. It comes from two Greek words *sum* and *pathos* which mean to *feel with*. So to sympathize with someone is to feel with them – to feel what they feel because you love and care about them so much that what they feel is what you feel. If they feel sad, you feel sad. If they feel angry, you feel angry. If they feel happy, feel happy. That is sympathy. It is a deep emotional connection to another human being, fostered by love.

I think that if we are going to get anything out of that reading from Genesis 41 that Pastor Adams read a bit ago we need to *sympathize* with Joseph – to build a connection with this man and understand what he was feeling on that day when Pharaoh, king of Egypt made him second in command, and why he was feeling it, because if we do, we can learn something very important for our own lives.

We can't properly sympathize with Joseph at the end of Genesis 41 if we don't also understand what Joseph went through before this climactic empowering - made second to only Pharaoh, king of Egypt, in complete command of one of the most powerful nations on earth. I'll give you a synopsis of what happened before, but I'd encourage you to go home today and read the whole story of Joseph. Read Genesis 37-41, it won't take more than fifteen minutes and it will be worth it. While Genesis 41:41-49 are a triumphant and jubilant day in Joseph's story if we are going to *sympathize* with Joseph we need to remember that his day came on the heels of over a decade of unwarranted suffering.

Before this empowering day in Genesis 41 Joseph had spent *thirteen years* in slavery.

If we are going to sympathize with Joseph, to feel what he is feeling, we need to know what he had been through, but more than just sympathize, knowing what Joseph had been through can teach us some very important truths about how God works in this world and how we should think and react when we begin to not just feel *with* Joseph, but feel *like* Joseph.

Here's a quick synopsis of Genesis 37-41:

Joseph is the favorite of twelve sons born to Jacob. Because of Jacob's obvious favoritism and because of some dreams that God sends to Joseph where he sees his brothers groveling at his feet, the envy and frustration of his eleven brothers builds and builds until they can't hold it in any longer and they lash out. One day, out in the middle of nowhere, they grab Joseph and throw him into a pit. As they are talking about what to do with him (they are so frustrated that murder is not out of the question), a caravan of slave traders comes along. They see their out. They see a way to be rid of their brother and so they sell their own brother to slave traders.

Can you sympathize with that? His own flesh and blood is considering killing him, but they settle for slavery.

Joseph is sold to slave traders, dragged far away from home to Egypt, and sold to a man named Potiphar.

For ten years he suffers the injustice of being another man's slave. But he makes the best of his circumstances. Over those years he slowly works his way up in the house. Blessed by God, he earns his way back to a somewhat respectable life only to have the vindictive wife of his master get him thrown in prison because he wouldn't sleep with her.

Can you sympathize with that? Can you imagine what it would be like to spend a decade as a slave, slowly improving your life, only to have that all ripped away from you because you stood up for what was right, and didn't sin against God and your master?

For three more years Joseph would rot in a prison, three more years of unwarranted suffering before the climactic turnabout we read just a bit ago.

If you stop and think about it, if you try to put yourself in his shoes and sympathize, the story of Joseph is a powerfully story.

I've had bad weeks. I've had bad months, even. But thirteen consecutive bad years is something I can scarcely wrap my mind around.

Here's the real crazy part of all of this (and this is where we go beyond sympathy and start learning from Joseph), all 4750 days (give or take) of those thirteen years happened exactly how God planned it. Thirteen years of unasked for, unwarranted, unrelenting, heartbreaking, soul-crushing suffering, and it was all a part of God's plan.

If you are sympathizing with Joseph, that is hard to swallow.

This is the big truth of the Bible that we need to wrestle with today: God's providence. Now, I know that *providence* isn't a word we use all that often, but it is pretty a simple idea. The providence of God is the Biblical teaching that God is in control.

The Bible says it this way: **“From one man [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and [God] determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”**

This is what we call God's providence. As Christians we believe that nothing in this world happens without God allowing it to happen. Everything that happens in this world is a part of God's master plan.

The providence of God is supposed to be a very comforting truth because it is that little reminder that God is going to work all things out for the good of those who love him. God is in control. God has a plan. God's plan is to love and bless you. That is a comforting truth... at least in theory...

The truth that God is in control, that God has a plan, *should* produce confident, patient, resilient, irrepressibly hopeful believers. Think about it. No

matter what a believer goes through, no matter how out of control a believer's life may feel, God is the God who fed the 5000 – he is in control and he has a plan.

In theory God's providence should make confident, patient, resilient and irrepressibly hopeful believers. But how does that theory work out in real life?

If you visited Joseph in jail on year 12, day 350, as he is ending his third year in that cell, after being sold as a slave by his own brothers almost 13 years earlier – sympathize with him - do you think he would have felt confident, patient, resilient, and irrepressibly hopeful?

How would you feel if your life started playing out like Joseph's? How *do* you feel when your life *does* start taking the path of Joseph's, to its own degree? (Certainly I don't expect any of us are going sold as slaves by our siblings, but we too know what it is to suffer. We too know what it is like for days, weeks, months, years, even decades to struggle and suffer. Each to our own degree, each in our own way, we all suffer, and all too often that suffering is unasked for, unwarranted, and painfully unrelenting just like Joseph)

In theory God's providence should make you confident, patient, resilient and irrepressibly hopeful no matter how painful your life gets, no matter how long the pain lasts. But how is that theory working out in real life?

Instead of confident, are you ever scared? You look at what tomorrow might bring and you feel terrified?

Are you ever impatient? You start to suffer, and for the first days and weeks you cling to the providence of God, but then you get tired and that initial patience wears thin until it snaps... ever had that happen?

Instead of resilient, do you ever feel frustrated – frustrated with the people who are making your life hard, frustrated with the God whose providence essentially doesn't line up with how you would run things if you were in control?

Are you ever anxious or worried? Far from being irrepressible your hope gets smothered and suffocated by worries and the depressing sufferings of year 12, day 350 in your own life (whatever form that takes).

In theory, God's providence should make us confident, patient, resilient and irrepressibly hopeful. But in real life we are often anything but. And it's important to remember that when that is the case, when we are scared, impatient, frustrated, anxious and worried, the problem is not with the theory, the problem is not with God's providence, the problem is us.

God says, "Trust me. I've got this."

We say, "Ok, God!"

Then the rubber meets the road. God's providence allows a life situation where we need to put that trust into practice, and we fail. Time and time again, we fail.

"So let me get this straight," that sympathetically frustrated voice in all of us wants to ask, "God is in control of this whole world, which means God is the one who allows unthinkable suffering into the lives of people like Joseph and me, and we are just supposed to blindly trust that he has our best interests in mind?"

God gives us an answer to that question today through the life of Joseph, through the life of Jesus, really it is an answer that fills the pages of the Bible. The answer is: "Yes and no."

Yes, I expect you to trust in me completely, to trust that I have a plan and that my plan is for your good. And yes, for your life right here, right now, that trust is going to be blind because you don't know how God's providence will exert itself in your life. You don't know what God has planned for you, the twists, turns, blessings and sufferings coming down the road. You have to trust that God has a plan for your life without seeing all of the details of that plan.

Yes I expect you to trust me blindly, but that trust is not completely blind. God has given us just enough of a glimpse into his providence to give us confidence, patience, resilience and irrepressible hope. That glimpse is the Bible.

The Bible gives us two key insights into the providence of God.

First, it gives us abundant proof that when God says he is in control, he means it. Joseph's life is just one example of many in the Bible that prove that.

Yes, God allowed Joseph to suffer in ways we can't imagine, spending 13 years as a slave and prisoner. But hindsight is 20/20. Joseph certainly couldn't have imagined all of the ways his suffering would benefit him and the rest of the world. But we don't have his same limitation, we *know* how Joseph's suffering worked out – both for him and for us.

You see, Joseph *had* to go to Egypt because only in Egypt would he be able to do what we read about in Genesis 41. Joseph *had* to go to Egypt so that millions of people could be saved from a horrible seven year famine that was coming. There *had* to be famine so that there would be a reason for Jacob to move his family to Egypt where they would be safe and able to grow from one family into an entire nation (Remember that promise to Jacob's grandpa Abraham, the one about his descendants being as many as the stars in the sky?).

Joseph *had* to go to Egypt so that Israel could grow, and Israel *had* to grow because God has a special plan for the nation of Israel – another promise he had made to Abraham. Israel *had* to grow so they could go back and take possession of the land God promised, so that thousands of years later, a Jewish baby could be born in a small town outside of the Israelite capital of Jerusalem – a baby God had promised long before Abraham was even a twinkle in his father's eye.

A baby destined to die so that the rest of the world could be saved – so that *you* and I could be forgiven for our lack of trust.

The Bible shows us over and over again that when God says he is in control he means it. (Now why all that *had* to start with 13 years of slavery instead of 10 or five, the Bible doesn't say. But the Bible gives us more than enough proof that God has a plan, and nothing can stop him from getting it done)

Second, the Bible tells us what the ultimate plan is.

Joseph couldn't have known all the details of how this would all work out for his good. But he did know that God had promised to bring him good. He had those dreams about his brothers bowing down to him (dreams that came true in the chapters after Genesis 41). Beyond that, he knew all the promises made to his father Jacob, his grandfather Isaac, his great-grandfather Abraham. He knew how it would end – God would bless him and his family, and bless the whole world through him and his family.

Friends, we may not know all the of details of God's plan for our lives - all the steps, twists, and turns along the way - but we do know what all those steps are leading to...

God's plan started in the Garden of Eden. In fact, the Bible tells us *before* God even created the world he had a plan to create and love you, each and every one of you. And ever since sin and suffering entered the world God's plan has revolved around bringing *you, each and every one of you*, safely home with him to heaven. God has been guiding all of history (from the life of Adam and Eve, to Joseph, to Jesus, to your life right now) so that he can get *you* home with him in heaven.

That's God's plan. The scope of God's plan is inconceivable in its vastness and incomprehensible in its intricate details, but you can trust him because he has proven time and time again that he is in control and because his ultimate promises and plan is clear. He asks you to trust him, to trust him blindly in many ways, but he gave us his Word, his promises, his Bible to give us life-altering glimpses into his providence – confidence strengthening, patience building, resilience creating, irrepressible hope giving glimpses through the word.

I don't know what suffering is waiting for me in this world, but I know, like Joseph, I'm going to suffer. I also know that God has a plan, and that plan involves me in heaven with him because he tells me so. And the biggest obstacle to that plan (my sin) has already been taken care of in Jesus, his word tells me so. And his word can and will give me and you confidence, patience, resilience, and irrepressible hope.

Sympathize not only with Joseph's suffering but also feel with Joseph the joy as that suffering finally ended. Joseph's God had a plan and the power to carry out that plan. Your God has a plan and the power to carry out that plan.

Amen