



The Sermon

Dr. Steven J. Lawson

Genesis 42:29-38

"Hidden Smile of Providence"

October 23, 2022

TRANSCRIPT

We have a great passage to look at as always, because it's from the Word of God. And so I want you to take your Bible and be turning with me to the book of Genesis. Genesis chapter 42. Genesis chapter 42. And as always, I want to begin by reading the passage, then I'll pray, and then we'll look more carefully at the passage and try to understand: What does it mean, and what does it require? What does it mean, and what does it require of me? So, Genesis chapter 42, beginning in verse 29. I will read through the end of the chapter; and this will be our focus today.

"When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, 'The man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly with us, and took us for spies of the country. But we said to him, 'We are honest men; we are not spies. We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no longer alive, and the youngest is with our father today in the land of Canaan.'" The man, the lord of the land, said to us, "By this I will know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me and take grain for the famine of your households, and go. But bring your youngest brother to me that I may know that you are not spies, but honest men. I will give your brother to you, and you may trade in the land."

"But it came about as they were emptying their sacks, that behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack; and when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were dismayed. Their father Jacob said to

them, 'You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and you would take Benjamin; all these things are against me.' Then Reuben spoke to his father, saying, 'You may put my two sons to death if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my care, and I will return him to you.' But Jacob said, 'My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should befall him on the journey you are taking, then you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow.'" This is God's Word recorded infallibly for our instruction this day, recorded by His servant Moses under the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit. Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, how we thank You for Your Word, that You've not left us without witness or testimony, that You continue to speak to us every moment of every day. Every time we open our Bible You are speaking directly and personally to us. And so we asked today that You would give us ears to hear, that we would understand not only what this means, but what its relevance is for my life today. As a result of this, Father, I pray that in the morning when we go to work, in the morning when we go to school, that the truth of this passage, we will carry it with us. When we're with our family, with our in-laws, wherever You will send us this upcoming week, I pray that the truth of this text, this passage will be emblazoned upon our mind and upon our heart. We live in a world of lies, and we have stepped out of the world and into this church to hear the truth. So I pray that Your truth will ring loud and clear in our hearts this day, in Jesus' name. Amen. [End]

The title of this message is "The Hidden Smile of Providence. The Hidden Smile of Providence." And what leaps off the page to me as I have read these verses for you is what I see at the end of verse 36. It's wrapped in this narrative, this story involving Jacob and his sons. But in the epicenter of this passage is the end of verse 36. This is the thunder and the lightning. At the end of verse 36, this is really the tip of the spear, this is the sharp edge of the sword, this is what should grab us by our lapels and draw us up close.

At the end of verse 36, Jacob says, "All these things are against me." As he looks around him and sees his circumstances, he sees really his world collapsing around him. He sees tragedy. He sees trials. They're very close to home in his own family. He considers his son Joseph to be dead, and it has left an empty place in his heart. He's been crushed. And now he has sent his sons down to Egypt; and in the process of that, once they are in Egypt, now Simeon has been taken captive and is held as collateral, is held as a prisoner really, until the other sons can come back to Canaan and get the youngest son Benjamin and bring him down. And as Jacob is watching all of this unfold before his eyes, it seems as though everything is against him.

His circumstances could not be more negative, especially for a father concerning his sons. And yet unknown to Jacob is this truth that all things are not working against him; all things are actually working for him, he just can't see it. Just like you and I can't see it when we're in the midst of the storm, in the midst of the trial. In the midst of the difficulty, we can't see the master plan, all we can see is what's right before our eyes, and we see difficulty and adversity and trials. But in reality, the Bible says in Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

And so we have to ask ourselves this question: "Which am I going to believe? Am I going to believe what my eyes tell me as I see unfolding circumstances, or will I believe the Bible? Will I believe God? Will I believe that actually all things are working together for good?" That's where each one of us stands in life. There's not a one of us in this room who is not faced with difficulties. It may be at work. It may be with your health. It may be with your finances. It may be with your relationships. But all of us face mounting challenges.

And we live in a fallen world, and we are surrounded by all forms of darkness; and it would be very easy for us to emotionally collapse and say what Jacob says here at the end of verse 36, "All these things are against me," and to pull back and to fall into a black hole of discouragement and despondency. Or, we can choose to believe what God says in His Word, that "all things are working together for good."

And we should ask the question, "What is that good for which all things are working together?" All things are not necessarily working together for a pay raise, or for the positive report from the doctor, or for graduating at the head of your class. None of that is promised to us. But what is promised is the good, that we will be being conformed into the image of God's Son. God has chosen to use trials to humble us; at times, to crush us, to drop us to our knees. It causes us to look up, to be less self-sufficient, to be becoming more God-dependent.

And so as Jacob is in the midst of this storm that is swirling about his life, he says, "All these things are against me." But he can only see with physical eyes, just like you and I can only see with physical eyes. The fact of the matter is, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, I can assure you that no matter what is taking place in your life, that God is at work for good in your life.

So I want us to walk through this passage. You'll be able to relate to the family issues that are taking place here, the family stresses, the unresolved conflict, the strained relationships, the hurt feelings, the sibling rivalries, the petty jealousies, the unforgiving spirits. I mean, all of that is in the milieu of this passage. And yet through it all, God is working for good. So let's walk through this passage together.

The first thing I want you to note is "the return." That's the first half of verse 29, the return. "When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan," let's stop right there. "They" refers to the nine sons of Jacob that he sent down to Egypt in the midst of the famine to buy grain to bring the grain back to Canaan. And so they have now returned from this journey.

They have gone down to Egypt, specifically to the to the city of Memphis, which is where the Prime Minister Joseph was, where Pharaoh was. It is a journey one way of 250 miles. It would take three weeks with camels one way to make the journey from Canaan down to Egypt. And now they have returned another 250 miles to come back to their homeland. And when they

left Canaan to go down to Egypt they had no idea what all difficulties would await them.

They have come down to buy grain. They never imagined in their wildest dreams that they would be returning back with one less brother. They had no idea that they would be spoken to harshly by Joseph. They don't recognize Joseph to be Joseph. They have no idea that they would be called out to be spies. They have no idea that they are threatened to be thrown into prison. They have no idea that one of them - Simeon, as we will find out - will be taken captive on this journey.

And it reminds us that whenever we wake up in the morning we really have no idea what all awaits us. We go through the routines of life and we almost feel like we're in automatic pilot and that this day will be like just any other day. But that's not always the case. And when we go off on trips, we just assume we'll arrive there safely, just like they assumed, and that we will return as we left. But that's not always the case, is it.

Proverbs 27:1 says, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." We have no idea what awaits us tomorrow. And it really is a mercy of God that we do not know. You would not want to know, because there are trials and difficulties that lay ahead. You don't know but that tomorrow will be the day of your death. You would be traumatized to live today if you knew that about tomorrow. So God in His mercy has withheld the knowledge of the future, except for a few rays of prophecy that are mentioned in Scripture. But we're not to boast about tomorrow, because we do not have control about tomorrow, just like they did not have control about their trip to Egypt.

In James 4:13, James writes, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit verse.' - verse 14 - "Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow." So even as we begin to read verse 29, I think we somewhat look between the lines. But nevertheless, it's there. They had no idea that their trip was going to turn out the way that it did,

just like you have no idea how tomorrow is going to turn out for you, or how your journey or trip will go.

Sometimes I'll get in the car with Anne, and we'll be going on a family vacation. And I'm pulling out of the driveway, and I'll feel her hand grip my strong masculine hand. Security is just oozing into her. And she will remind me, and she'll always say this: "Let's pray." "Pray? I'm driving. We're in good hands." And so before I pull out, I'll stop and pray that the Lord will give us a safe journey and a safe trip. We cannot presume on tomorrow, or even today, how life is going to unfold.

So, this is the return. Matthew Henry writes on this: "When we go away, we should consider how many sad accidents that we little think of may happen to us before we return home. We ought therefore to always be ready for the worst." So that's not pessimistic, that's just realistic. We have no guarantee of how our trips and our journeys will unfold; and neither did they.

So I want you to note, second now, "the report." Beginning in the middle of verse 29, the report that they give to their father as they come back. And this is not an easy report to bring back to their father. In verse 29, "They told him all that had happened to them," all the difficulties, all the trials when they were in Egypt. They now begin to recount this to their father Jacob; and this is what they said. And what now it follows in verse 30 and the next several verses is a restatement of what was earlier in this chapter when it actually happened. So this is the report of what happened.

Verse 30, "The man, the lord of the land," let's just stop right there. We know who that is. That's Joseph. He's the lord (meaning the sovereign) over the land (meaning the whole land of Egypt, the whole nation). He's not just lord over this backyard, he's lord over the entire Egyptian Dynasty on behalf of Pharaoh. And so they say to their father, "The man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly with us."

Now as you recall from last week, the reason that he spoke harshly is because Joseph recognized that these are his brothers, and he doesn't want them to know that he knows it is them, so he speaks to them in a very severe and harsh manner so as to not disclose himself to them. And so this is what he harshly spoke to them: "He took us for spies of the country."

You see, on the perimeters of the Egyptian nation, there would be robbers and pirates and spies and all kinds of gangs that would attack the perimeter that was unguarded, and steal the crops and steal the cattle, and spy out the land to see where the weakest link is. And so they report to their father, "This man, the lord of the land, he called us out as spies." Of course, he did so to keep himself disguised from them.

And so, verse 31, "But we said to him," - the ten sons to the Prime Minister - 'No, no, no, we are honest men,' - the word "honest" here means upright and just - 'and we are not spies.'" That's repeating verses 10 and 11 above.

And in verse 32, "We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no longer alive." What an irony this is. The ten brothers are saying to their living brother, not knowing it's their living brother, that "one of our brothers has died," - I mean truth is stranger than fiction - "and the youngest is with our father today in the land of Canaan." We know why, because earlier in verse 4, Jacob, exercising parental protection, said, "Benjamin, if he goes, he could be hurt. He's not old enough, he's the youngest. He's going to stay home with me."

And so, verse 33, they report to their father, "The man, the lord of the land, said to us, 'By this I will know that you are honest men,' - so he devises a test to see if they truly are honest. So he says - 'leave one of your brothers with me' - he would be taken as a hostage, he would be taken into custody - 'and you may take the grain and return home. But you must bring your other brother back with you; and I will release this brother, if you will bring me the other brother. So if you will go home and get Benjamin the youngest, bring him down here, I will release Simeon.'"

Now what Joseph is up to, this isn't all just arbitrary; what he's up to is, "I want the whole family together at one time, because I want to make myself known, and for there to be a peacemaking reconciliation; and it needs to take place all at once," kind of like a family intervention where the whole family is here at one time. And so, verse 34, "Bring your youngest brother to me that I may know you are not spies, but honest men." So this is the test. And it's really a shrewd and brilliant test that Joseph plans, and it shows again Joseph's wisdom and his administrative abilities, and his powers of analysis and to take a situation and come up with the solution. So he comes up with this brilliant plan."

And so he says that the end of verse 34, "I will give your brother to you, and you may trade in the land." In other words, "You bring me Benjamin, and I'll give you Simeon. And on top of that, I'll give you a free pass to buy and sell in the whole land of Egypt, as much as you desire."

So, verse 35, "Now it came about," and that's a way of saying, "This is what happened next." And what is recorded here is what they say to their father that has already happened on their return from Egypt to Canaan. So we read in verse 35, "Now it came about as they were emptying their sacks," they were emptying their sacks on their return back home from Egypt. They stopped to feed their camels, they stopped in order that they might eat something as well; and so when they stopped, they opened, we would say, their saddlebags, their sacks that has the grain that they have come to purchase. They open it, probably to give some to the camels; and then there's some food in there as well.

And so the next thing we read is this one word "behold." And the word behold literally means see; and the idea is they see something that causes their eyeballs to jump out of their socket. They see something that is astonishing and amazing. They cannot believe their eyes what they're looking at.

Verse 35, "Every man's bundle of money was in his sack." How can this be? They went down, bought the grain, gave the money to Joseph and his administration; so the money has left their hands, probably gold and silver, and handed over. They have received the grain. They put the grain into the saddlebags, mount with their camels and they head out. They're on the journey back, time to rest. They stop, they open the bag; there's the grain, but there's all their money, it's right there in the bag.

"And when they and their father saw the bundles of money," and so now they're in front of their father and they're showing their father what they discovered earlier: these bags with bundles of money. It's in the plural. So all nine sons now have bundles of gold and silver.

And the last three words say, "They were dismayed." The Hebrew word literally means they were terrified, they were fearful, they were afraid. And we would ask the question, "So why would they be afraid with all this money, all this gold and silver?" And there's three reasons why. Number one, people could easily assume they stole the money. "I mean, you went down to Egypt, there was the transaction that was made, you handed the money over, but now the money is with you. You obviously are a bunch of thieves and robbers; you really are spies. You're completely unethical." That's one reason to be scared.

The other is they would have just taken the grain without paying for it. "That's how we still have our money. We just went down and robbed the storehouse without giving our money, and we are coming back, and we have both the grain and the money. People will assume we must have stolen it." Or, the other third possibility is, they sold Simeon for money. They've already sold Joseph for money to the slave traders when they put him in the pit and they came by. This could just be second verse same as the first: they'll do now again to Simeon what they have already done to Joseph and just sell him for money. So no wonder they are terrified.

There's a lesson for us to learn here, but the lesson is with Joseph, because it would have been easy for Joseph to have sought revenge, it would have

been easy for Joseph to retaliate at this point, "I recognize you. I am in charge of the whole nation of Egypt. You've done me dirty, you've done me wrong, you've come down here. Now I have the upper hand, I have the advantage." But instead, Joseph demonstrated restraint, and he showed grace. Joseph obviously is not harboring a grudge. And we could say from a human perspective he would have every reason to want to get even with them. But whenever you get even with someone, you always come down to their level. And Joseph wants to maintain a high level of integrity, and so Joseph returns their evil with good.

You remember when Peter asks Jesus in Matthew 18:21, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" and Peter now comes up with a number that he thinks is pushing the boundaries so far out, he thinks he's speaking with hyperbole. He says, "Up to seven times?" And Jesus says, "No, Peter. Not up to seven times, up to seventy times seven." For those of you who can't reach your cell phone, that's 490. It represents you just never stop forgiving.

Seven, number of perfection; seven, number of infinity. You just keep on keeping on forgiving others of their transgressions and of their sins. And that's exactly what Joseph is doing here. Rather than harboring a grudge and carrying that acid around in his heart, he has chosen to take the high road and to exercise compassion and love by.

Joseph gave the order for their money to be put back into those bags and to be hidden in those bags; you understand that? That was Joseph doing that. And Joseph also said on top of that, "Put provisions in there for them to eat on the way back and to be able to feed their cattle, or their camels." Joseph is an example to you and me of what genuine Christian love looks like to not harbor a grudge, but to wipe the slate clean, and to move forward and to forgive. And so that is what is taking place.

Listen to the apostle Paul in Romans 12:14, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Verse 17, "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone." Verse 18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all

men." There's a sense in which this is speaking directly to every one of us here in this room right now, but there is also a sense there are certain ones of us here today surely that this is addressing exactly where you are in your life right now, that you need to stop nursing a grudge from the past, and to bless those who persecute you.

Solomon said in Proverbs 20:22, "Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; wait for the LORD, and He will save you. And in Proverbs 24:29, "Do not say, 'I shall do to him as he has done to me.'" And in 1 Thessalonians 5:15, "See that no one repays another with evil for evil." This is the Christian ethic. This is Christlike morality that we are not like the world who get even, who retaliate, who return evil for evil. No, we are believers in Jesus Christ, and we bless those who persecute us.

In verse 36 I want you to see "the reaction." Jacob now reacts to this report. verse 36, "Their father Jacob said to them," - this is his response now to their report - 'You have bereaved me of my of my children.'" The words "bereaved" and "children" are actually one word in the Hebrew, and it just literally means, "You have made me childless." The word is often used for a miscarriage that a woman would suffer and to be left without an infant child. And he says, "You have left me without my children."

Then he goes on to explain, "Joseph is no more." Joseph in his understanding is dead and he's been devoured by wild animals, according to their report to him. And then he adds, "And Simeon is no more." He's being held captive in Egypt, and who knows if he will ever escape. Who knows if he'll ever see Simeon again.

And then he adds, "And you would take Benjamin. If you take Benjamin down to Egypt, I'll probably never see him again either. He'll be just like Joseph, and now probably Simeon. And so Jacob is filled with remorse; his heart is crushed. I mean, there is a hole in him that leaves him empty.

And then he says these words at the end of verse 36 - and this is what I want us I clearly see and understand - he says, "All these things, all these things are against me, so the whole world's against me." "All these things" refer to the loss of Joseph, refers to the loss of Simeon, it refers to the possible loss of Benjamin. And from a human perspective, Jacob has come to the conclusion that "all things are against me."

But little does Jacob understand, that in reality all things are working for him. God is actually working through all of these painful circumstances for a far greater good. And there is a happy ending to this story: to gain Joseph. But Jacob does not know it. What he thinks is against him is actually a part of the inscrutable wisdom of God, the incomprehensible genius of God to work through all of this, not against him, but for him."

And we too can have the same limited perspective that Jacob had. I have. I've thought about, "What are the two greatest heart-wrenching experiences I've ever gone through in my life?" And one I feel rather odd even sharing the first one, especially with my wife seated here. I was engaged when I was in college, OK. I mean, I had to be. She proposed, and, no. No, I was engaged for an entire year and was going to be married. And just weeks before the wedding, after all the gifts have been given, the invitations printed, et cetera, it's called off. I was crushed. I was devastated.

I remember my father got on a plane the middle of the night in Memphis, Tennessee, and he flew all the way out to West Texas just to let me cry on his shoulder, and drove me all the way back to Memphis, Tennessee. He said, "Son, you just need to come home with those who love you."

It was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. I would not be standing here today preaching the Word of God if that had gone through. God was so much wiser, and He knew exactly what I needed. And what to me was, "All things are against me," was in reality the very opposite. All things were working for me, I just couldn't see it in the moment.

You see to read providence is like reading Hebrew letters. You have to read them backwards, you can only see it in the rear view mirror. You can't see providence out ahead because you don't know what tomorrow holds. You don't even know what today holds. You just know that providence is what has happened for your good in the past.

The other greatest heartache and time that I thought all things are against me, 20 years ago I was actually run out of a church. I was just dismissed; and truth be known, I resigned before they could dismiss me. And it was a horrible experience. It was an awful, gut-wrenching experience that was played out on a very public stage. Involved the newspaper, involved television. It was an awful experience.

I remember when I walked out that Sunday at the end of the service after I'd read my resignation, I went out to the parking lot, my family was with me, and one of my twins drove the getaway car, and the church came out the doors looking to see how I would leave. And as we pulled out of the parking lot, I said, "Stop," and I got out of the car, and I took off my two shoes and I shook the dust off my shoes. I am biblical, OK. I am biblical.

That was a crushing, soul-crushing, humiliating experience; and it was the greatest thing that's ever happened to me. I wouldn't be here today if it had not been for that, I'd be stuck in some hole in the ground in Alabama. God was working for my good, and it's really what launched many aspects of my ministry that would have never come to pass. But for me, those were the two worst days of my life, and they were the two best days of my life.

What happened at the cross, is it not, the worst day of human history was the premeditated murder first degree murder of the second Person of the Trinity, the Lord Jesus Christ, as they rose up and put to death the Prince of life. No more heinous sin has ever been perpetrated or committed on this planet than the crucifixion and death of the Lord Jesus Christ; and yet, it was the greatest day in the history of the world, as there Jesus Christ laid down His life for us to secure and purchase our eternal salvation. From the

world's perspective, all things were against Him; but from God's perspective, all things were for Him.

And so I want to ask you: I wonder what is there in your life that you think is working against you right now? Can you see that it is actually working for you, to conform you further into the image of God's Son?

Fourth, in verse 34, I want you to see "the rashness" or "the recklessness," whichever you like. Reuben steps in with a rash plan. He says in verse 37, then we read, "Then Reuben spoke to his father." He immediately spoke to his father. The word "then" indicates really without thinking carefully.

"Then," - immediately, suddenly, overreacting - "then Reuben spoke to his father," - trying to reassure his father that - 'Let me take Benjamin with me down to Egypt, and I promise you, I will return with both Benjamin and Simeon.'" And so he says, "You may put my two sons to death if I do not bring him back to you." The "him" refers to Benjamin: "Put him in my care," referring to Benjamin, "and I will return him to you," referring to Benjamin. It was a rash solution. That means just trying to almost duct tape together a solution to this problem. He doesn't think about it, he doesn't pray about it, he doesn't consult others about it, he just flies off the handle and tries to immediately solve this problem; and his rash answer would have been the worst solution.

I mean, think about this. Put yourself in Jacob's place. Jacob has already lost Joseph, so he thinks. He's already lost Simeon who's now imprisoned in Egypt. He would possibly lose Benjamin if he goes to Egypt. And if they don't come back, he'll lose two grandsons on top of that, because he says, "You may put my two sons to death if I don't bring Benjamin back." This is good money going after bad money. That this is just making the problem even worse. Ecclesiastes 5:2 says, "Do not be hasty in word, do not be impulsive in thought." So I wonder what decisions you need to make that are of consequence in your life. Don't make a hasty decision that is not well-thought through and prayed about.

This leads us, finally, to "the refusal" in verse 38, the refusal. "But Jacob said," – so he says this now to his nine sons – 'My son' – referring to Benjamin – 'shall not go down with you,' – the "you" referring to Reuben: "I'm not going to give him up, because I can't suffer any more heartache," and he gives the explanation – 'for his brother is dead,' – that refers to Joseph – 'and he alone is left.' – Benjamin – 'If harm should befall him' – referring to Benjamin – 'on the journey that you're taking, then you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow.'" What Jacob is saying is, "If you take Benjamin and you don't return, I'll now lose Benjamin; I'll lose you, Reuben; I'll lose Simeon. I've already lost Joseph. Then I'll lose my two grandsons. I will surely die of a broken heart." And there are people who die of a broken heart.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon essentially died of a broken heart. Greatest preacher who ever lived since the apostle Paul was put out of the Baptist Union, the motion seconded by one of his family members. He died alone in France of a broken heart. And Jacob says, "If I let Benjamin go, I too will die of a broken heart." "Sheol" refers to the abode of the dead.

What great grief there is for a child to lose a parent. I've done that twice. I've buried both my mother and my father, preached both of their funerals. What sorrow there is and pain of loss. But what is even more painful is for a parent to lose a child, and the greater capacity that the parent has to lose a child. And Jacob says, "I just can't go there." So the narrative ends, and we will pick this back up next week.

Let me conclude by saying what you think is working against you, if you're a believer is in reality in one way or another working for you. It may not be working out the way you want it to work out, but it is working out the way God wants it to work out. It may be humbling you. It may be crushing you. It may be stripping you of self-confidence and self-esteem. All that's a wonderful thing to happen to your life, because that's making you more like Jesus Christ; and there could be no greater good that would come to your life than for you to become more like your Savior, who was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, who has rejected by virtually all, who was condemned as a public criminal by being crucified upon a cross. And

yet it was all part of God's plan to bring about the greatest good to your life.

So wait on the Lord. Look to the Lord. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths." Let us go to the Lord in prayer.

[Prayer] Father in heaven, help us to see that that which is working against us is actually working for us. Lord, help us to understand the inscrutability of Your sovereign will and how You are really bringing about Your master plan for our lives. Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.