

## **Ordinary Joe**

Joseph's Life in the Book of Genesis  
How God Uses Ordinary People to Carry Out His Extraordinary Plans

Message 2 – "The Long and Winding Road"

Genesis 37:25-36

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Rev. Dr. David Woolverton

Grace and peace to you in the name of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! It's so good to be sharing the Word of God today with you today. My name is David Woolverton and I'm one of the pastors here at St Paul's church and we are continuing in our message series looking at the life of Joseph. Joseph in the Old Testament, for us, for our purposes is "Ordinary Joe".

Last week when we began this series, we looked at the expression,

**God uses ordinary people to carry out  
His extraordinary plans.**

And then we asked a very important question –

**What does God need to do to claim your ordinary?**

As we continue in this message series today, I invite you to open your Bible; we're going to delve a little bit further into Genesis 37. While we prepare our hearts, would you join with me in prayer?

*Gracious, Heavenly Father, I pray that You would open us up to Your Word and open Your Word up to us. Lord, teach us what You would have us learn as You conform our lives into the disciples that You have called us to be. Lord, all of this I pray in Jesus name, and all God's people said, "Amen."*

So, I have a question for you –

**Are you the same person today that you were 5 years ago?  
10 years ago?**

It's a hard question to answer, I know. I look back on my life 5 years ago, 10 years ago..... am I the same person? Okay, maybe I've shrunk a half an

inch, I don't know... do I look smaller? I think I look taller on the screen - don't you think? Over the past 7 months I've come to look at myself through totally different lenses, literally! Through a camera lens. As I evaluate how I come across online, as I challenge myself to preach in new ways and look in a camera or a vacant room or a full room or even an outdoor arena. Am I the same person that I was 5 years ago, 10 years ago? Let's take it up another notch...

## **Can you picture what your life will be like 5 years from now?**

This is rather humorous to me... I was really exhausted from working a long day last week, so to kind of de-process all of it, it was roughly 10pm at night, I sat in front of the TV and I started flipping channels. There was nothing on, but one thing caught my attention -- it was the old movie from the mid-1980's "*Back to the Future II*." Do you remember "Back to the Future I,"? It was a great rendition where Doc and Marty go back in time to when Marty's parents were meeting and falling in love. "Back to the Future II," they actually go into the future. This was 1985 and they are projecting into the future. Do you know what the future was for "Back to the Future II"? 2015! So, I watched this, and, I have to be honest with you, from the movie's perspective of 1985, 2015 is nothing compared to the 2015 that we actually lived out! In fact, in the fantasy of 2015 - cars were flying, everything was digital at home. Life looked a little different. Is that how we imagined that life was going to be back in 1985? Obviously for some - what do we think it will be 5 years from now? 10 years from now?

Here's the deal... the challenge for us is that really, God knows the hearts and struggles that we go through. But if we were to imagine our life, our struggles, from the perspective of what God can do through them into the future, then I have to ask this question:

## **What if, by God's grace and sovereign love, the struggle you are facing is exactly the key to unlocking your unique part in God's unfolding plan?**

Think about this for a second - what if the very thing that you are going through right now, the struggle, the heartfelt struggle that you are facing into, the circumstances that are challenging you right now - what if they are the very key for God to use to open up doors for God's amazing plan that has yet to happen in the future? What if your struggle or trial right now becomes a testimony for tomorrow?

## ***What if your struggle or trial right now becomes a testimony for tomorrow?***

We serve a God who never wastes a hurt, and Joseph of all people, Joseph of the Old Testament, he knows. So, let's draw back into the Old Testament in chapter 37 of Genesis. Last week we walked through most of it, but I want to go back and highlight just a few verses that tell a deeper dimension of this story line and I think when we look at it through that vantage point, we're going to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit giving us a word today, a word of challenge for today and a word that reminds us yet again that **God uses ordinary people to carry out His extraordinary plan.**

So, let's look together first at Genesis 37, verse 25 –

*As they sat down to eat [the brothers] they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead (Genesis 37:25).*

Just a reminder here, these brothers of Joseph saw him coming from their Dad and they saw this amazing coat that symbolized the favoritism that their Father had applied to this brother Joseph. And as they see Joseph coming in the distance, they plot to kill him; and the brothers gather around imagining what life would be like if Joseph was no longer there. So, they beat him up and they strip him of that special coat and dump him down an empty cistern -- a deep pit that once housed water for people to drink. Then they sit down to eat as if it's a normal thing to do in the day. That's where we pick up here, it says as they are eating, they see a caravan coming from Gilead. Their camels, it says, were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh and in verse 26,

*Judah says to his brothers, "what will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood, come let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed (Genesis 37:26-27).*

I want to highlight a few of those phrases again just to show the irony for us. If you think about it, Judah is one of the brothers who is plotting first to kill and then now steps in to somehow save his brother Joseph from being killed. But he comes up with a plot that talks about selling him off into slavery. You know, slavery was not a new concept at this point in Genesis, it probably existed for some time. But what we get a picture of that is so significant here, is that we have a picture of one of the first examples of family-oriented human trafficking. Meaning, we have members of Joseph's family who were selling their brother off.

The story continues on in verse 28 –

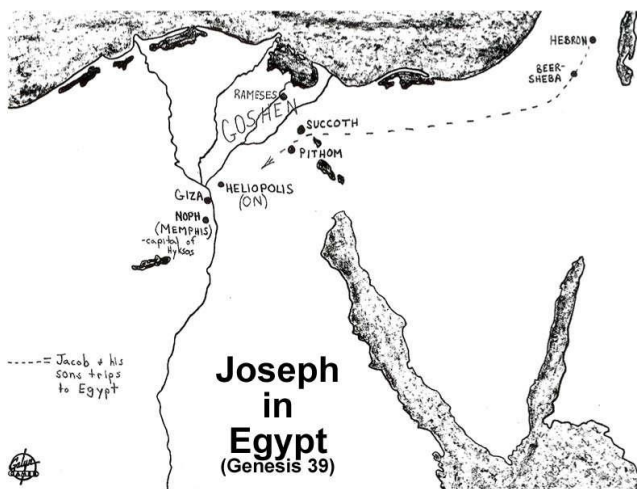
*So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for 20 shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt (**Genesis 37:28**).*

Twenty shekels of silver is really an Old Testament principle - in the book of Leviticus we read that 20 shekels of silver is the price for a young slave. They actually had that listed. Can you imagine, I just want you to picture this for a second: Can you imagine being Joseph, having just experienced being beaten up by your brothers, most of us can imagine that, right? Stripped of your dignity and then thrown into a deep cistern, a deep pit and then listening above you to the echoes of your brothers negotiating a price tag for your life? Imagine then that one of your brothers climbs down that cistern grabs ahold of you and drags you up out of that pit, places you into some kind of bonds and then you have to stand there while you're being scrutinized by potential slave owners. What are you doing? What are you thinking? What are you imagining? Can you picture what Joseph was facing into? Horrible.

Let me give you one more verse of scripture and then I want to pull all this together for our purposes. It says here in verse 36,

*Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard (**Genesis 37:36**).*

We're actually going to talk more about that next week, but I want you to focus in on one word in this verse - the word is "meanwhile." "Meanwhile" - and it's a long meanwhile.



What does that "meanwhile" mean? The place where Joseph is thrown into the cistern and then raised up out of that pit and sold is in a village called Dothan. From Dothan to Egypt, which is the final destination, is 300 miles.

Think about that - what we know from the earlier verses is that that caravan was loaded down with spices and products

that were all placed on camels. Not in other vehicles, so probably because Joseph was now a slave, he walked. **He walked 300 miles as a slave!**

Picture this - just a little while ago Joseph arrived to check on his brothers, he had traveled some 60-70 miles from his Dad's home to where his brothers were grazing with the sheep. And now, he's walking 300 miles to Egypt.

That was a long and winding road. A long and winding road.

On that long and winding road, Joseph lost everything. Even his identity -- as a favored son of Jacob-- that identity no longer existed. You see, no one in Egypt cared about who he was. He was no longer a multi-colored-coat-wearing-favored-son-of-royalty. Instead, he was a sweaty, dirt-covered, humiliated and betrayed slave. Let that sit with us for a moment....

See, but here's a truth we learn from scriptures like this: circumstances like this can take a lot from us, but no one can take away our identity as a child of God.

**No one can take away our identity as a child of God.**

But...there are times though when we can sell ourselves into slavery to the very things that our society says we need in order to have a good life, a fulfilled life, a happy life. We sell ourselves into slavery all the time and not only that, but there are times when people, family, friends, others, they betray us and sell us out and exploit us and abuse us and they abuse the power that they have over us. But...

**God's ability to use us is not limited by our view of our circumstances.**

We have to hear this folks, God sees what's underneath the coat and God uses all circumstances -- no matter how good or how bad -- to help form and shape us to prepare us to be doing and participating in the extraordinary plans that God has for us. God always uses ordinary people to carry out His extraordinary plans. The freedom for those of us who are in Christ, the freedom that we have because of Jesus' death on the cross provides us with an amazing moment in our journey with God and that amazing moment was not a transaction -- it was a gift. It was a gift given to us because God believed in us. God believes in you -- it's what we call "Prevenient Grace."

Do you know what Prevenient Grace is? It's a term that we Wesleyans, we Methodists, are familiar with. Literally, what this means is that God's grace is at work in our lives before we are ever aware of it. It's Pre-venient; it comes to us before we are aware of it. In other words, God starts working

in us before we are ever aware of it – at times, even before we are even aware of who God is. So, God sees what we're going through before we're aware of it - God sees ahead of time. God sees 5 years, 10 years down the road, God sees 20 years down the road, He sees 40 and 50 years down the road of our life and God has the unique ability in any given moment to use what we're going through for His greater good.

We're actually going to see that as we get closer to the end of Joseph's story, but right now, we have the opportunity to glimpse from the beginning, the very early part of his journey, the picture of a God who never wastes anything. And what we also see is that God uses other people to help carry out that character development in us.

There's a wonderful story that I want to share with you by video, it's not going to be a long clip but this little video shows the story of a young man named Chadwick Boseman. He's known for having played "The Black Panther" in the film of the same name, and also Jacky Robinson in the movie "42." The amazing story about this young man is his faith journey and what God did to shape him through somebody else. Sadly, Chadwick at a very young age, a week or so ago, passed away from cancer. But his story is a legacy that I want to share with you in part as he represents it in an awards ceremony to honor another actor. The other actor is Denzel Washington. Hear what Chadwick shared at the AFI (American Film Institute) about Denzel Washington before he received the Lifetime Achievement Award last year (6/21/2019):

I know personally that your generosity extends beyond what you have given on the stage and on the screen. Many of you already know the story that when Mr. Washington was asked by Felicia Rashard to join her in sponsoring nine students from Howard University who were accepted to a summer acting program at the British Academy of Dramatic Acting in Oxford, he gracefully and privately agreed to contribute. As fate would have it, I was one of the students that he paid for. Imagine receiving a letter that your tuition for that summer was paid for and that your benefactor was none other than the 'dopest' [slang for 'greatest'] actor on the planet! I have no doubt that there are similar stories that there are boys and girls clubs in theatres and churches across the country where I know you have motivated and inspired others. "An offering from a sage and a king is more than silver and gold; it is the seed of hope; a bud of faith." There is no 'Black Panther' without Denzel Washington. And, not just because of me, but my whole cast, that whole generation stands on your shoulders. The daily battles won, the 1,000s of territories gained, the many sacrifices you made for the culture on film sets through your

career, the things you refused to compromise along the way, laid the blueprints for us to follow. And so now, let he who has awarded be awarded. Let he who has given be given to. It is an honor to now know you, to learn from you, and join in this work with you. May God bless you exceedingly and abundantly more in what's in store than he ever has before. God bless you.

It's an amazing story and when you back up and ask the question, "What made Denzel Washington invest in the next generation of actors?" and you get this video.

Number one: Put God first. Put God first in everything you do. Everything you think you see in me, everything I've accomplished, everything you think I have, and I have a few things...everything that I have is by the grace of God. Understand that. It's a gift. Forty years ago, March 27, 1975...I was flunking out of college, I had a 1.7 grade point average, I was sitting in my mother's beauty parlor, and I'm looking in the mirror, and I see behind me this woman under the dryer and every time I look up she was looking back at me. She was looking at me right in the eyes. I didn't know who she was. All of a sudden she looks up and says, "Someone give me a pen, I have a prophesy." She says, "Boy, you're going to travel the world and you're going to speak to millions of people." Now, mind you all, I'm flunking out of college, I'm thinking about joining the army...I don't know what I'm gonna' do... and she's telling me I'm going to travel the world and I'm going to speak to millions of people! Well, I have traveled around the world, and I have spoken to millions of people. But that's not the most important thing, the success that I have. The most important thing is what she taught me and what she told me that day has stayed with me since - I have been protected, I have been directed, and I have been corrected. I've kept God in my life and I've it's kept me humble. I haven't always stuck with Him but He's always stuck with me. So, stick with Him in everything you do. If you want to do what I have done, then do what I have done and stick with God.

Powerful, powerful stories. Friends, allow me to prophecy over you: somebody listening or reading this message right now... you are going to hear the words of God's message to you and it's going to penetrate. It's going to penetrate through the walls of the pain that you've been feeling, through the walls of the circumstances that you've been facing. It's going to penetrate through the walls of brokenness and sin that has long covered everything that you have seen about your life to date and it's going to speak a word of hope to you. Hope given by a God who never ever wastes an opportunity to shape us into the individuals whom He will use to carry out

His extraordinary plans. You mark my words, there's somebody who's life you will touch because of the faith that God is going to pour into you, through your present circumstances. How do I know that? He did it to Joseph, ordinary Joe. For Joseph, it was in the midst of slavery and, as we will see later in Joseph's story, prison.

It was in slavery that Joseph experienced the crucible in which his character was developed. You see, it was in the season of betrayal and accusation that he learned grace. It was within the seasons of his false imprisonment that he learned forgiveness. It was within the seasons of his loss that he learned how to lead. And God would use all of those circumstances to equip this 17 year old kid to become a 30 year old adult who would go on to lead a nation -- not just Egypt, but all of Israel -- to a whole different kind of promised land where they moved from survival to thriving and set in place and in motion a larger plan that God had which would involve delivering a Messiah, Jesus Christ into that world.

That was the world in which another man, years later, a man that we know as the Apostle Paul, would write these words in Philippians chapter 4:

*I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength **(Philippians 4:10-13)**.*

And you know what? Paul wrote these words while he was in prison. He had been beaten almost to death several times, he had been in shackles, he had been mocked and stoned and yet his view and perspective was of a God who never wasted an opportunity.

Friends, why do we do this? As followers of Jesus? Because on the cross, Jesus himself shifted the power dynamics by giving power away. He redefined our identity for each of us - giving us a freedom that cannot be taken from us. Ever. His death and resurrection freed us from slavery to sin and empowers us to serve others in love.

So I ask you "What if the struggle you are facing, the dark pit that you feel you've been dumped into, the betrayal of family or friends that you've encountered - what if by God's grace and sovereign love that is exactly the key to unlocking your unique part in God's unfolding plan?"



What if?

What if?

Will you pray with me?

*Father God, the "what if" is a big question, and it's a question on all of our hearts. Each of us in our own way - we have our stories, we have our brokenness, we have our needs, we have our sins, we have our "coats." Things that the world sees but may not reflect what you see. So often Lord the world gets the Facebook version of us, the Instagram pictures of our lives that are somehow miraculously Photoshopped, but underneath it all we're a people crying out for true freedom and that freedom comes to us as a gift, there is no transaction, we have been set free by the blood of Jesus Christ -- and so Lord I pray that you would speak that word of hope into each one of us that is watching. And Lord, that you would give an opportunity to every individual to simply come to you... to come to the cross and to trust you to give them freedom. It's that freedom that we have in Jesus Christ and it's in His name that I pray, Amen.*

Friends, don't miss this opportunity. A prophecy has been issued - God is at work in you no matter how ordinary you feel. No matter how below ordinary you feel. We have a God who uses ordinary people to carry out His extraordinary plan and guess what? He wants to use you. Let's go out of this house of worship and bear witness with our life to the God who would waste nothing to pursue us so that He could use us for His greater glory and plan. You have been set free by Jesus Christ so let's live in that freedom and serve one another in love. God bless you, thanks for joining us for worship and have a blessed week. Amen.