

# The marks of Gods presence

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Preacher: Rev. David Court

[ 0 : 00 ] Well this evening we're going to read again in the book of Genesis, this time at the end of the book, Genesis chapter 50, and we shall read from verse 15 of that chapter to the end of the chapter at verse 26. So really the very last section of the book of Genesis and indeed of the story of Joseph, we left that off this afternoon, or this afternoon as Joseph was taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar. The story is well known, he was raised up in Potiphar's household to be a servant of the servants and a master of the household. He endured sexual harassment and was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife. He was thrown into prison and in prison he rose again. His skill with understanding dreams was used and through that he was promoted out of the prison eventually through the cupbearer and he came before Pharaoh interpreting the dreams of Plenty and famine and made Prime Minister over Egypt.

In the course of time the great famine that struck brought his family to Egypt and through a series of events, Joseph brought to bear, tested his brothers and they came to face up to their sin against him. He revealed himself to them and forgave them and his father and the family came to Egypt to settle in the land of Goshen. Eventually over time his father Jacob died and that really is the part of the first part of Genesis 50 and we're just going to read and pick up the story from there at verse 15. When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead they said, it may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him. So they sent a message to Joseph saying, your father gave this command before he died. Say to

Joseph, please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin because they did evil to you and now please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.

Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, behold we are your servants. But Joseph said to them, do not fear for am I in the place of God.

Ask for you, you meant evil against me but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today. So do not fear, I will provide for you and your little ones.

Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house. Joseph lived 110 years and Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation. The children also of Machia, the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph's own.

[ 3 : 47 ] And Joseph said to his brothers, I am about to die but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear saying, God will surely visit you and you shall carry up my bones from here.

So Joseph died being 110 years old. They embalmed him and he was put in a coffin in Egypt. This is the word of God. Well before we come to look at that passage in a little more detail, we're going to stand and sing together from Sing Sam's. This time Sam 126, Sam that speaks of God restoring and renewing. When Zion's fortunes, God restored. It was a dream come true. Sam 126, the whole of the Sam and we stand to sing.

The nation said the Lord has done great things for Israel. The Lord in mighty things for us.

Enjoy our hearts new well. We store our fortunes gracious Lord like streams in desert soil.

Our joyful harvest will reward the weeping soul as toil.

[ 6 : 10 ] That land who bearing seed to sow cause and with tears of grief will come again with songs of joy bearing this harvest sheath.

If you have a Bible please turn to that passage we read together at the end of the book of Genesis in Genesis chapter 50.

It was one of my favourite TV shows as a youngster growing up in the 1960s. Starring Clayton Moore and Jay Silverheels, the Lone Ranger was a must watch programme in our house on a Saturday.

As youngsters we got caught up in all his daring do as he along with his faithful friend Tonto righted wrongs and chased rustlers and apprehended crooks and generally caught the bad guys.

My passion for the programme even extended to having my own Lone Ranger outfit which I proudly wear while watching the latest episode on our black and white television.

[ 7 : 48 ] At the end of each episode the Lone Ranger would ride away on his white horse Silver. The William Tell overture would play and the Lone Ranger would cry out, hi, oh, Silver away and off he would ride into the sunset.

And often two men were standing in the foreground one would say to the other, who was that masked man anyway? To which the other would reply pointing to the silhouette on the horizon, why that is the Lone Ranger.

And then he would take from his pocket a Silver bullet which the Lone Ranger had given him. And that Silver bullet was the token of the Lone Ranger's presence. It was the Tell tale mark that he had been there.

It was the sign that he was the one behind all the writing of wrongs that we'd just been witness to. Tonight we're looking at the concluding verses of the Joseph story, indeed the closing verses of the book of Genesis.

And what we see in these verses is like the Lone Ranger's Silver bullet, the Tell tale marks of God's presence, the Tell tale signs that God himself has been at work.

[ 9 : 19 ] And in fact three revealing marks of God's activity are I think to be seen here. In fact they're seen right throughout the Joseph story. But here they are again cropping up.

It's almost as if the writer of Genesis wants to make sure that we do not miss them. Rather wants us to see clearly the unmistakable marks of God being at work in his people's lives.

So what are these marks that we see here? Well the first is this. A forgiveness that appears too good to be true. A forgiveness that appears to be too good to be true.

Here at the end of chapter 50 after Jacob's death and burial, we discover that even though Joseph has completely forgiven his brothers for all that they had done to do to him, all the wicked things they had done to him, selling him into slavery in Egypt, they still harboured fears that this forgiveness was not genuine, that it wasn't real, that it wasn't from the heart, but it was only for their father's sake.

Joseph was only being kind and loving and forgiving to them because his dad was around. But now his dad was gone.

[ 10 : 55 ] Joseph's brothers verse 15 saw that their father was dead. They said, it may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.

To the brothers, Joseph's gracious forgiveness appears just too good to be true. Now that their father had died, they are overcome with fears and anxieties, the fear of retribution. While Jacob was alive, they felt safe and secure.

But now his death triggered all manner of feelings of guilt and shame and anxiety. We are told in verse 16 and 17 that they sent a message to Joseph saying, your father gave this command before he died. Say to Joseph, please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin because they did evil to you.

Now please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father. Now this message about a command from their father is likely not to have been true. We're not told, but it may well have been something concocted by the brothers themselves.

A story designed to put pressure on Joseph so that for the sake of their father, he wouldn't give them their just desserts.

[ 12 : 22 ] You see, they simply didn't think that Joseph's forgiveness would last. Even though some 17 years had elapsed since their reunion, it was all just too good to be true. They just could not believe it.

Such were their crimes, such was their wickedness, such were their sins that they could not and would not accept that they had been forgiven.

How does Joseph respond to this message and the pleading of his brothers? Well, in verse 17 we're told Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, behold, we are your servants, but Joseph said to them, do not fear, for am I in the place of God?

It's a striking reaction, isn't it, from Joseph? He weeps, he cries. His brothers' doubts and fears and anxieties cut him to the quick.

[13:42] He's astounded. He's deeply hurt by their words and actions, by their lack of faith in him and their questioning of his forgiveness and his love.

Of course, that forgiveness that Joseph bestowed upon his brothers, in one sense, was not a natural thing. It was a sign, you see, of God's work in Joseph's life. A sign that appeared just too good to be true.

You know, that ability to forgive others deeply from the heart is often, I think, a telltale sign that God is at work in someone's life.

I was reflecting yesterday that it was 31 years since I'd been in Carloway sometime in the summer, late summer of 1987.

And later, that same year, in November, some of you will remember the Innoskeleton bombing that took place, I think, on Remembrance Sunday that year.

[14:58] The bomb planted by the provisional IRA fatally injured a young nurse by the name of Marie Wilson. Her father, Gordon Wilson, a Christian, gave an emotional interview with the BBC. And if you, those of you who were around then can remember it, it was a very powerful interview.

It was just hours after his daughter's death. And in that interview, Gordon Wilson described with anguish his last conversation with his daughter and his feelings towards her killers.

He said, she held my hand tightly and gripped me as hard as she could. She said, Daddy, I love you very much. Those were her exact words to me.

And those were the last words I ever heard her say. And then, to the astonishment of everyone who heard them, Wilson went on to add this, but I bear no ill will, I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie.

She loved her profession. She was a pet. She's dead. She's in heaven. And we shall meet again. I will pray for these men tonight and every night.

[16:33] The historian Jonathan Bardin writes this, no words in more than 25 years of violence in Northern Ireland had such a powerful emotional impact.

Friends, what was that if not a forgiveness that appears too good to be true? What was that if it was not a sign of God at work?

In verse 21, we're told, if I, Joseph, spoke to his brothers through his tears, he spoke to them, we're told, with kindness and comfort. So do not fear. I will provide for you and your little ones.

Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. It's the same Hebrew words that are used here, that are used later on in the Bible in Isaiah chapter 40, the first couple of verses. You remember when God speaks to his people, he says, comfort, comfort my people.

Says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

[17:52] Familiar words, aren't they, in the opening part of Handel's Messiah. Words spoken tenderly and from the heart. Words of good news.

Troubled time of exile and disgrace coming to an end. They speak of God's forgiveness and pardon and the restored relationship with the living God.

It's the comfort of God's pardon to a people weighed down and burdened with their sins. Friend, God wants to comfort us with his forgiveness tonight. That's the good news, isn't it? That's part of the gospel.

And sometimes even as believers we find it hard to take it in, hard to believe, hard to grasp. Such is the incredible forgiveness of our God.

We scarce can take it in. As that old hymn say, will help me understand it, will make me understand it, will help me take it in. Would it meant to thee the Holy One?

[19:09] To bear away my sin. Such are our sins and our guilt that it all seems too good to be true.

Surely God cannot love me. Surely he cannot forgive my sins. Surely he cannot be favourable towards me after all that I have done.

But friends, the gospel tells us that he can. The gospel tells us that he is. And the gospel tells us it is true.

That's part of what we do as we come to the Lord's table, isn't it? We are reminded of a forgiveness that appears too good to be true.

One of the biographies of Martin Lloyd-Jones, Ian Murray, wrote two of them. The second one, *The Fight of Faith*, but the first one, which I think is the better of the two, is a book called *The First Forty Years*.

[ 20 : 19 ] It is an account of Lloyd-Jones' ministry in the first 40 years of his life. And one of the stories that's told in that biography relates to the 1930s when Lloyd-Jones was minister at Sandfields in Abergavenny in Wales.

And there was an notorious sinner in the community, a man named William Thomas. And he had a nickname. He was known as Staffordshire Bill. He was a man of around 70 at that time.

And he was infamous in the community for his dirty languages. Loose morals, his heavy drinking. And while in the pub one night he heard a conversation at a neighbouring table.

The men were speaking about Sandfields Church where Lloyd-Jones was the preacher. And yes, said one man to the other. I was there last Sunday night and that preacher said that nobody was hopeless.

He said there was hope for everybody. And the rest of the conversation, Staffordshire Bill heard nothing.

[ 21 : 25 ] He sobered up completely and said to himself, if there's hope for everybody, then there's hope for me. I'll go to that chapel myself and see what that man says.

And to cut a long story short, he eventually made his way to church one Sunday evening. He heard the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was marvellously and gloriously converted.

As he walked out that night, a church member introduced him to the minister's wife and said, Mrs. Jones, this is Staffordshire Bill. Oh no, no, no, no, he said. That's a bad name for a bad old man. I'm William Thomas now.

And then just a few weeks later, early one Monday morning, William Thomas appeared unexpectedly at the man's door. He was very distressed.

He was full of anxiety and worry and care. Thoughts of his past life, the things he had said and done, even calling Christ a bastard, had flooded into his mind and heart so that he could not believe he had been forgiven.

[ 22 : 44 ] He had found himself overwhelmed and gulped in darkness and misery. So Lord Jones spoke to him patiently and showed him from the word of God that he could indeed be forgiven and that his heinous sin, like all the others, had been washed away completely by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

His sin had been forgiven and forgotten. We sometimes sing a hymn in our church.

There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins. Sinners plunged beneath that flood.

Lose what? Lose some? Lose a few? No friends. Lose all their guilty stans.

Isn't that good news? Isn't that good news for you? Isn't that good news for me? If you're a Christian believer then God wants to reassure you that he's not holding a grudge against you.

[ 24 : 06 ] He wants to comfort you with his forgiving love. He wants to remind you again at the Lord's table that your guilt has been paid for.

For in Jesus Christ in that fountain filled with blood you have lost all your guilty stans. It's a forgiveness that may appear to be too good to be true.

Oh but friends, it is true nonetheless. A forgiveness that appears too good to be true.

Second here, a providence that works out all things for good. Look at what Joseph says to his brothers in verse 20, a very famous verse, Ask for you, you meant evil against me but God meant it for good.

To bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today. That's one of the remarkable aspects of the Joseph story.

[ 25 : 12 ] Human wickedness and evil are in the hands of a loving God turned to a good purpose and to the saving of many lives.

And we say to ourselves, how can this be? How can God bring good out of evil? How can God bend even the evil acts of sinful men to his own glory?

And of course there is much that is mysterious about the providence of God. It's a doctrine that confronts us with the absolute sovereignty of our God over his creation and his creatures.

It's a doctrine that tells us that God is in control, that he is on the throne, that he reigns and rules over every situation and every circumstance and every pain and over every human being.

It reminds us that nothing lies out with the scope of our sovereign God. And friends, the Christian faith is not escape us.

[ 26 : 19 ] Friends, we know that we live in a world where terrible and dark providences sometimes come our way and into our lives. Cruel and horrible and painful things happen.

People die. Tragic accidents occur. Illness comes without warning. Love ones are taken from us. None of us are immune from those things. Biblical faith is not escapism. Joseph's life, as you read through the story, was not a bed of roses.

The Bible does not avoid confronting those dark experiences of human life and existence. In fact, if we're reading our Bibles at all, we soon discover the Scripture forces us to think about these things. Holding to the authority of Scripture does not mean escaping reality. It means facing it in all its complexity and all its pain.

[ 27 : 27 ] Remember Job's words, uttered after that catalogue of disaster that befell him, naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I shall return.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Here Joseph reminds his brothers of God's providence.

Here is the sovereign Lord who can make even the sin and wickedness of evil men serve his ways and his purposes. The loving God who makes even the wrath of men to praise him.

It's not that the brothers rejected Joseph and sold him and then God looked at it and said, oh, things are going awry here. I must intercede. I must intervene and turn it all around to make a happy ending.

It is rather that God was working out his sovereign purpose even in their evil intentions and actions.

[ 28 : 27 ] And friends, in a world of great wickedness and evil, in a world of harsh experiences, that should greatly encourage us. William Cowper wrote these words, judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace, behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.

And God's hands intended evil becomes eventual good. Nothing in the Joseph's story glosses over the presence of evil and sin.

Blood stains and tear stains are everywhere. Joseph's heart was rubbed raw against the rocks of disloyalty and injustice.

And yet time and time again God works out his gracious purpose. The torn robe becomes a royal robe. The pit becomes a palace.

The broken family eventually grows old together. The very acts intended to destroy God's servant turned out to strengthen him and bless him.

[ 29 : 40 ] You meant evil against me, Joseph tells his brothers. You wove evil, but God wove it together for good. Friends, we live in a world where men and women weave their evil designs.

But here it is God, the master weaver, who is stretching out the yarn and intertwining the colors. The ragged twine with the velvet strings, the light colors with the dark.

He escapes his reach, he passes the shuttle back and forth across the generations. And as he does, a design emerges and behind that design, a smiling face.

In all things, God works for the good who also love him and have been called according to his purpose. But of course, the statement that we find in Genesis 50, verse 20, comes at the end of the story.

It doesn't come at the beginning. God's providence can only be read in a sense at the end. Joseph didn't make this statement when he was in a pit in Dofan.

[ 30 : 50 ] He didn't make it as a slave in Egypt. He didn't make it as a prisoner in Pharaoh's dungeon. This perspective only came later.

In chapter 45, verse 80, he tells the brothers, So it was not you who sent me here, but God. That only came with time.

Friends, the doctrine of God's providence is not to be used in a flippant way as if it were something cheap or easy. As if we can say to someone in the time of trial, cheer up, brother, cheer up sister, all things work together for good.

For sometimes we just don't see the good. We see only the frowning providence. We shall perhaps only see the smile later.

But the Gospel assures us that the smile shall come. It's the Gospel that tells us that God has a smiling face. That's what the table of our Lord Jesus Christ tells us, isn't it?

[ 31 : 56 ] An American minister tweeted this a wee time ago. These words, life is heavy, pain is real, consequences hurt, brokenness is hard, but grace abounds.

Forgiveness, it appears to good to be true. Forgiveness that works out all things for good. And thirdly and finally, as time disappears quickly, a promise that brings hope for the future. You'll hear often a lot about promises and vows, mainly I think from the lips of politicians. I doubt it's much of a surprise that many of such promises prove to be empty and worthless. Because as human beings we're all promise breakers. There is only one promise keeper. And that is God Himself, for God always keeps His promises.

And here at the end of Joseph's life and just before his death, there appears to be one thing on his mind, and that is the promise of God. The promise made by God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

[ 33 : 09 ] A promise that he would make them into a great nation. A promise that he would give them a land. The promise that he would bless them. And through them bless the whole world.

At the end of a life of 110 years, the one thing he was thinking about was God's promise. And it was this that moved him and motivated him and concerned him.

He says to his brothers in verse 24, I'm about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land that he swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He'll take you there. God will surely visit you and you shall carry up my bones from here. What is that telling us?

It's telling us that Joseph was a man who believed the promise of God. When everything else in life was disappearing, he held on to the promise of God.

[ 34 : 11 ] He knew that God would keep his promise. He knew that God would not let his people down. He knew that nothing could thwart the purpose of God for his people.

God will surely visit you. Egypt shall not be my resting place. You shall carry my bones up from here.

What is that if it is not faith in the promise of God? And of course we read in Exodus 13 that that is precisely what happened. As Moses led the people out, they took the bones of Joseph with them. He was a God who finishes what he begins and who delivers on his promise. It's interesting, I think, that the writer to the Hebrews chooses to highlight this very point in that great chapter on faith in Hebrews 11 verse 22, by faith Joseph at the end of his life made mention of the Exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

Joseph knew that God would one day deliver his people and fulfill his promise. He believed that his very bones had a future. None of it looked very likely.

[ 35 : 41 ] But Joseph knew God and knew that God never abandons his covenant promise. His confidence was in God.

And that our confidence needs to be in that same place, in that same God. A God whose promise, promises never fail.

I came across these words of Dale Ralph Davis in one of his commentaries, he writes this, God's promises are not intended as sedatives, but as stimulants.

He does not want us to swallow his promises, but to seize them. God's gifts are not meant to tame, but rather to arouse God's people.

The great promises of God in the Bible are there to stimulate us into action and activity. They're not meant to lull us asleep.

[ 36 : 53 ] We are to grab hold of them. We are to seize them by faith. We are to live by them. Are you laying hold of the promises of God?

Jesus said, Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my father's house, in many rooms, if it were not so, would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also. What a great promise.

Have you laid hold of it by faith? Have you seized the promises of God that are yea and amen in Jesus Christ?

They should be stimulating us. Stimulating us to prayer. Stimulating us to evangelism.

[ 37 : 57 ] Stimulating us to good works. I wonder if we've got hold of God's promises. There's an old story about John Brown of Haddington, the 18th century Scottish minister, visiting one of his parishioners.

She was on her deathbed and Brown was probing her for assurance. He said, Janet, what would you say after all he's done for you? God, she'd let you drop into hell.

She replied, even as he likes. For if he does, he'll lose more than I'll do. He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.

He is faithful and he will do it. God always keeps his word. His honour is at stake. So let his great promises grip you and hold you fast.

Let them give you a hope for the future beyond the limited horizons of this life. Actually, you know, God's promises are our only hope for the future.

[ 39 : 11 ] What sign does God give us of his presence? What sign do we have of his pardon and providence and promise? What sign do we have of his love?

What sign is there of him being at work? Of course, he doesn't leave us with a silver bullet. He leaves us with a different sign.

The sign of an empty cross. A table spread with bread and wine. A table that tells us of a full and complete forgiveness.

Sometimes it appears too good to be true, but it is true nonetheless. A table that tells us of human wickedness and evil, resulting in a good purpose to the saving of many lives.

A table that speaks to us of all the wonderful promises of God. Fulfilled in and through our crucified Saviour. All those promises that are yes and amen in Jesus Christ.

[ 40 : 21 ] And so friends, let's look to this Jesus and let's keep looking to him, looking to his cross, that we might receive his full forgiveness, looking to the cross and wondering afresh it is gracious providence, looking to his cross and the trusting in his unbreakable promise and unshakable love, a love from which we cannot be separated.

Amen. Let's close our time of worship together. We sing from, sing Psalms, Psalm 130.

Lord from the depths, I call to you. Lord, hear me from on high the final verse and full redemption from their sins, his people heal redeem.

We stand to sing. Lord from the depths, I call to you.

Lord, hear me from on high and give attention to my voice when I form a sick eye.

[ 42 : 03 ] Lord, in your presence, who can stand if you have since record but yet forgiveness is with you that we may fear you, Lord.

I wait my soul waits for the Lord. My hope is in his word.

More than the watchman which foretold my soul waits for the Lord.

O Israel, your hope and God for mercy is with them and full redemption from their sins, his people heal redeem.

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling, to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority before all time, now and forevermore. Amen.