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CHAPTER 1

FAMILY TIES

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

—Romans 8:28

Those who have been Christians for any length of time may find that the page in their Bible which contains this verse is a little worn, even smudged—and with good reason. This great verse is a promise from God that we are not hapless victims of life, at the mercy of fate or chance. We are not driven along by some blind, impersonal force.

On the contrary, we are the objects of God’s providential care. We are under His guiding and protecting hand.

The providence of God is “that continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all His creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end.”¹

The implications of God’s providence are staggering because they impact every area and every moment of our lives. This truth is one that separates believers from unbelievers.

We need not be concerned about Sagittarius, Gemini, or the other signs of the zodiac, or about the movements of the planets and other silly things that preoccupy pagan minds. Jesus says they may run after these things (Matt. 6:32), but as His people, we are to be different.

So we are faced with this incredible truth that God rules and overrules in all the circumstances of life. Romans 8:28 is not a pious platitude to be mumbled at a bedside or a graveside when we don't know what else to say but want to be helpful. It is truth that's meant for life, so what we need is a real-life illustration of how this truth looks "with skin on."

That's what we hope to discover in this book. The biblical doctrine of God's providence is classically expressed in the story of Joseph. As we trace the powerful principle of God's providential care unfolding in Joseph's life, we will find that his story is probably *the* classic Old Testament illustration of Romans 8:28.

If you enjoy stories as much as I do, I can assure you that we are at the threshold of a classic in the story of Joseph. Indeed, it is an epic, a saga: the biography of Joseph covers more space than that given to any of the other heroes in the book of Genesis. That's even more amazing when you realize that this group includes Abraham, the friend of God and the father of all who believe.

Even people who have only a scant knowledge of the Old Testament probably know of Joseph, for the same reason many people know of "Noah and the ark" or "Jonah and the great fish": his story is memorialized by something visually unusual—his multicolored coat.

And for those who have no biblical clue at all, Joseph may

still be a familiar name, courtesy of the DreamWorks animated feature *Joseph: King of Dreams* or the popular Broadway musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* by Timothy Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber. Joseph, as we are about to discover, is a man worth knowing.

Joseph's birth is recorded in Genesis 30:23–24, and he is mentioned several times in subsequent chapters. But we are introduced to him in depth when he is seventeen years old, a young man tending the flocks of his father, Jacob, with his brothers (Gen. 37:2). Between this notice and the record of Joseph's death ninety-three years later at the age of 110 (50:26), we have the details of a truly amazing life presented to us in biblical Technicolor.

The story of Joseph is a tale of jealousy, deceit, slavery, misrepresentation, injustice, lust, rivalry, and forgiveness. It pits brother against brother. We encounter imprisonment and deep trials that do not produce self-pity, and prosperity that does not bring the accompanying pride.

Joseph's life encompasses all of this and more—and in it all, the overarching theme is that of the sovereign hand of God manifesting itself in His providential care over His dearly loved children and bringing about all that He has purposed in the affairs of time.

Joseph's life ought to be for us a story of great encouragement and reassurance as we make our way in the walk of faith, carrying with us the baggage of our past, the fears of our present, and the prospects of our future. We are sometimes tempted to wonder in the midst of all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of life, *Does God care? Is God in control? And if so, what might we expect?*

We don't know if Joseph asked those questions before he was seventeen. We will see that his early life did include a great amount of turmoil, in large part because his father's past was catching up with him. But if Joseph never had reason to wonder what God was doing in his life, all of that changed when he turned seventeen.

Before we look at the events that sent Joseph's life spinning, let's consider the influences on his life up to that point.

JOSEPH'S BACKGROUND

Where did Joseph come from? If you were to encounter his name for the first time in Genesis 37:2, you might ask this. Did Joseph have the kind of family background we might expect to produce a person of such exceptional character?

What were Joseph's family ties? All of us have them, and they all mean something. Our family ties can be frustrating and full, blessed and benighted.

There's no question that Joseph came from quite a family. Few seventeen-year-olds could have boasted that their great-grandfather was Abraham, their grandfather was Isaac, and their father was Jacob. By looking at Jacob we can trace the family ties and the influences of Joseph's early life.

Jacob's Early Life

Jacob's character was revealed at his birth when he grasped the heel of his twin, Esau, and was given a name that means "deceiver" or "chiseler" (see Gen. 25:26). Jacob was aptly named, for he was skillful at manipulating people and events to get circumstances to turn out the way he wanted. The first thing

we learn about him is that he “chiseled” his elder brother, Esau, out of his birthright (25:27–34). Then, as recorded in Genesis 27, Jacob deceived his father, Isaac, into conferring upon him the blessing that should have belonged to Esau. When Esau found out, he said, “Isn’t he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me” (27:36).

Esau vowed to kill Jacob, so his mother, Rebekah, sent Jacob to live with her brother Laban in the land of Paddan Aram (28:2). It was there that Jacob met and fell in love with Rachel, the younger daughter of his uncle Laban (29:9–10, 16–18). Jacob loved Rachel so passionately that he offered to work for Laban seven years in exchange for Rachel’s hand in marriage.

Now, ironically, Uncle Laban was a bit of a schemer himself—so when the seven years were completed and Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her” (29:21), Laban deceived Jacob by slipping his older daughter, Leah, into the wedding chamber.

It sounds like a soap opera, doesn’t it? I imagine that when Laban went to bed that night, he must have said to his wife, “Wait until Jacob discovers what I’ve done. It is going to be unbelievable.”

When Jacob realized he had been deceived, Laban tried to legitimize the whole affair by saying it was the custom that he couldn’t give away his younger daughter until he had given away his older daughter. But Laban had another deal for Jacob: “Finish [Leah’s] bridal week; then we will give you [Rachel] also, in return for another seven years of work” (29:27). Such was Jacob’s passionate love for Rachel that he said, “Fine, it’s a deal.” So Jacob married Rachel, too.

Joseph's Family

With Jacob's marriages, the family album of Joseph began to fill up; the dining room was regularly in need of extra chairs. Jacob favored Rachel, but God closed her womb and opened the womb of Leah. God is sovereign in the details of life.

In rapid succession, the Bible describes how the first twelve children of Jacob were born—eleven sons and a daughter. Altogether, Leah bore Jacob six sons and the only daughter, Dinah. Leah also gave her maidservant Zilpah to Jacob, and through her Jacob had two more sons. When Rachel could not conceive, she gave *her* maidservant Bilhah to Jacob, and Bilhah bore two sons. Finally, in Genesis 30:22–24 we read, “God remembered Rachel . . . and enabled her to conceive. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. . . . She named him Joseph.”

This was quite a family! One father, four mothers—two who were wives, and two who were concubines—eleven sons, and one daughter. And at the end of this mixed-up, complicated family, Joseph arrived, at that time the youngest of Jacob's sons. (Benjamin would not be born for several years, and in giving birth to him, Rachel would die [35:16–18].)

JOSEPH'S FORMATIVE YEARS

Between Joseph's birth and his appearance on the scene for good in Genesis 37:2, his name appears only three times, and in each of those he is given the barest mention (33:2, 7; 35:24). But he was part of the family during the events recorded in Genesis 31–36, which cover the first seventeen years of his life.

These were Joseph's formative years, a part of God's providential work to mold him for the future He had for him. God was already forming Joseph's character for an exceptional, sovereign purpose that neither he nor any of the others in his family would understand for many years.

So, by way of summary, let's look at what happened to Joseph and his family during the years between his birth and the real beginning of his story. What a record it is!

The Family's Flight from Laban

Sometime after Joseph was born, Jacob decided it was time to go back home and face his brother, Esau, in Canaan. We don't know how old Joseph was at this time—maybe six or seven years old? If so, he was old enough to take in his father's announcement across the dinner table: "We're moving back to Canaan."

Joseph probably didn't understand what it all meant, but he would have known that a big change was underway. One of his earliest recollections as a child must have been the hurried flight from the home of his grandfather Laban as Jacob took his family and flocks and left by night without Laban's knowledge (31:17–21).

I remember all the questions from our own children when our family moved from Scotland to the United States: "When are we going? How are we going to get there? What will we do when we get there?" When we arrived in the United States, they didn't know where they were. When we went on vacation, they thought they were going home. They just couldn't process all the information involved in a big move like that. Their tiny lives were in an amazing whirl.

The experience of his family's flight to Canaan would have been much the same for Joseph. The family left under the cover of darkness so they wouldn't be detected. Jacob knew that if Laban found out they were leaving, he would try to stop them. And so, in the moonlight, little Joseph was put on a camel with his mother, and the large caravan started out toward Canaan.

I can hear Joseph asking Jacob, "Father, why are we running away at night? Don't you like Grandfather? Doesn't Grandfather love us? Shouldn't we say goodbye to him?" And then days later, when Laban caught up with the family (31:22-23), I wonder whether Joseph was standing on the fringe listening as his grandfather looked at his father and said,

"What have you done? You've deceived me, and you've carried off my daughters like captives in war. Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? Why didn't you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of timbrels and harps? You didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters goodbye. You have done a foolish thing." (31:26-28)

Now, I don't know about your relationship with your grandfather, but my grandpa and I were as close as we could be. He never drove a car, as a result of wounds he had suffered in the First World War, and so we became experts in public transport in Glasgow. I've been on just about every bus to every terminus in the system. I would ride the buses with my grandpa just to go places with him. At other times, Grandpa and I would ride the whole subway system maybe three times, going nowhere, just me sitting beside him, listening

to his stories. I wouldn't want anybody tearing me away from my grandpa without the chance to kiss him goodbye.

But that's what happened to Joseph. He was going to have a lot of tearing away in his life—many times when he didn't get to say goodbye. He was going to have to learn how to weep and how to deal with pain. Even in these early life circumstances, God was forming Joseph in preparation for what was to come.

The final scene in Genesis 31 is one we need to etch onto our memories, as far as the life of Joseph is concerned: Jacob and Laban made a covenant together, then had a meal to seal the agreement, and Laban spent the night before going back home (31:43–54).

I want you to sense the emotion here. If you have ever moved a great distance from home, you know this “night before” experience well. The family is gathered, and there is a great reunion—but the joy is clouded by the prospect of the next morning and the separation.

So it was in Joseph's family. The text tells us, “Early the next morning Laban kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then he left and returned home” (31:55). Don't you think Laban squeezed those boys, maybe giving little Joseph an extra hug as the baby of the clan?

The Meeting with Esau

That part of the story comes to an end without any arguments or ugly scenes—but Jacob's distress was just beginning. Now he had to face the dreaded prospect of meeting his brother, Esau, who was coming to meet him with four hundred men. Fear gripped Jacob's heart at the very thought (32:7).

Again, Joseph would have been aware of this to some degree. He may not have grasped the whole picture, but he knew something was wrong; he knew his father was afraid. Maybe he heard Jacob and Rachel talking in the tent, the way my mom and dad used to talk as they did the dishes. I would listen from the doorway, and I knew when my dad was troubled—and that is an apt word to describe Jacob's state in a very personal encounter with God.

You'll remember that Jacob divided his family and possessions and sent them on ahead. Separated from his family and his possessions, he encountered God in a surprising, personal, necessary way, and the result was permanent: he received a new name and a whole new identity (32:28).

In the morning, when Jacob returned to his family, he was limping as a result of his wrestling match with the Angel of the Lord. I don't know if he ever told Joseph what had happened that night, but the event had clearly stamped Jacob, for when the family got to Shechem, Jacob (now called Israel) built an altar to the Lord to set his family apart from the surrounding culture (33:18–20).

The Tragedy at Shechem

Jacob was reconciled to his brother, Esau—but when the family camped at Shechem, a dreadful tale unfolded: Dinah was raped by a young man (also named Shechem), and Simeon and Levi devised a fearful reprisal against the men of the city (34:1–31).

Joseph may have been eleven or twelve at this time, and we can imagine what went through his mind as he heard all the hushed conversations and the extreme agitation of his

older brothers. Through it all, God was working to form the character of this young man.

The Death of Rachel

From Shechem, the clan moved on under God's orders to Bethel, where Jacob had stopped in his flight from Esau (35:1; cf. 28:10–22). Jacob built an altar there to purify his household—and then bereavement touched his home: First, a woman named Deborah, the nurse to Jacob's mother Rebekah, died and was mourned (35:8). Then, Jacob suffered the loss of his beloved wife, Rachel, as she was giving birth to Benjamin (35:18).

The birth of Benjamin was a key moment in Joseph's life. As the next youngest child, Joseph would have had the closest emotional ties to Benjamin. Besides this, they were the only sons of Rachel. But the day of Benjamin's birth was one during which joy and sorrow mingled, as life had ebbed from Joseph's mother in her final pangs of childbirth.

Once again, then, the threads of pain and sorrow and bereavement were woven into Joseph's life. Then he had to deal with the death of his grandfather, Isaac (35:29)—another funeral, another reminder of the frailty of life, the reality of death, and the necessity of faith.

THE GRACE OF GOD

These chapters contain much more that will reward your careful study. By the time we arrive at chapter 37, the camera lens is focused upon Joseph as the central person in the narrative. Now we are ready to look into the eyes of a young

man of seventeen who has already been through more excitement, intrigue, and trauma than most of us will experience in a lifetime.

In modern-day terms, Joseph came from a dysfunctional family. Indeed, we all come from a dysfunctional background because sin makes people dysfunctional; but when you take all the sins of a large number of selfish people and mix them together in a family, you have an entity badly out of alignment, with wheels turning in different directions.

We can summarize this background briefly. We need to remember that in the rough-and-tumble of a less-than-perfect family life, God was preparing Joseph for the role He had planned for him. As a matter of fact, the only explanation for the life of Joseph and the role he played is found in the electing grace of God. There is no human reason whatsoever that Joseph should have emerged from the emotional and spiritual carnage of his family life to be the incredible man of God he was. The only way we can explain it is to say God purposed that it should be so: “God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform; / He plants His footsteps in the sea / And rides upon the storm.”² We therefore mustn’t allow our circumstances and disappointments to become excuses for the choices we make in life. God is greater than all of that, and He can bring beauty out of ashes. Trials come, Augustine said, to prove us and to improve us.³

The mosaic of Joseph’s background also provides us with a striking reminder of the impact a father’s life has on his children. Jacob was not a good model of integrity. He did poorly when it came to decisiveness. He was slow when it came to action. He tended to avoid issues rather than face them. But

God chose to use this imperfect father to raise the boy He had chosen to redeem His people from famine through his experiences in Egypt.

What of us parents? What legacy are we leaving? What stories will our children tell? When they stand and gaze at our tombstones, what then? Be encouraged that out of the chaos of Joseph's background came a man God used as a stirring example of His grace.