

# God's Blessing Unrecognised

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     How about I pray? Father, we give you thanks for your goodness and love and we thank you for your word. Father, we ask that you give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we may know you better.

I pray that tonight you may enlighten the eyes of our hearts so that we may more and more know the hope to which you have called us in Christ. Amen. Well, I wonder if you can tell me, have you ever not been able to see what was right in front of you?

Yeah, I have often struggled with this in life. One particular time at Bible college, I learned a good lesson in seeing what was in front of me in terms of reading assignment instructions carefully.

On one particular occasion, we in our year had what we thought was a pretty easy assignment. It had two parts, a research paper and a reflection.

In other words, what do I think and feel about my findings? And we all thought, ha, this will be easy. We've just got to say, I feel this, I feel that, I think this, I think that.

[ 1 : 1 7 ]     Basically, I can say whatever I want, right? Sounds like the ideal assignment. Well, I did well enough on the research paper and I failed my reflection.

It turned out that I didn't feel the way that I felt. And so we all laughed, thinking that it was a bit ridiculous. And so I actually questioned the lecturer.

I wasn't cranky, I was just a bit confused. And she told me, well, you didn't do what the instructions said. You did write about how you felt and what you thought, but there was more to it than that.

And then she helped me to see what I hadn't seen at first. I did read the instructions, the same instructions that everyone else read, but I didn't look closely and think hard about it.

I was blinded by arrogance, I think. I wonder if you've ever done something like this. Well, tonight we're back in Genesis.

[ 2 : 2 4 ]     And chapter 42 is about people who, like me, were unable to see what was right in front of them. Either because they were looking and not seeing or just looking the wrong way.

The passage begins and we're back with Jacob and the family. Now, Jacob actually hasn't come up in this story since we heard of Joseph's death back in chapter 37.

And then we saw him, we left him mourning Joseph's death and refusing to be comforted by the family. And while we look back at this time in Jacob's life and we feel pity, we should remember for the sake of context that Jacob hasn't been an upstanding character of Genesis so far and not a great role model to his many children.

Things like taking multiple wives, blatantly favoring one child over the others. Prior to that, deceiving dear old dad, do you remember that? And cheating his brother out of a blessing.

By this point in the story, the relationship between Jacob and his sons, it actually wasn't that good. He was a big old grump. He was grumpy because of what they did to the Perizzites back in chapter 34, when his sons killed them because they defiled their sister.

- [ 3 : 47 ] And he was also grumpy because they had allowed Joseph to die. At the start of the passage in verse 1, I actually think you can feel this tension.
- Look again at verse 1. When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, why do you just keep looking at each other?
- Did you find this funny? Has Gillian read it? I did. It sounds to me like the comment of an exasperated parent. You might have experience of that as either a parent or a child.
- There's no food. We're probably about to die. And you're just standing around looking at each other. Go to Egypt and buy grain so that we live and don't die.
- Yes, I'm sure that famine would be trying. But Jacob is just a big old grump, isn't he? He says to his 10 remaining sons, stop being useless.
- [ 4 : 51 ] Go fix our problems. And before they go, he just gives them a brief reminder that he loves Benjamin, Joseph's brother, more than all the rest of them. Did you notice that?
- Thanks for that, Dad. So what happens? The brothers head down to Egypt and they discover that the rest of the world is doing the same thing, which Gillian read for us at the end of 41.
- But on their journey, something very unexpected happens. They don't meet their brother as far as they can see, but they do end up in hot water. Let's look at it again from verse 6.
- Now, Joseph was the governor of the land, the person who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph's brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.
- And as soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them. But he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. Where do you come from? He asked. From the land of Canaan, they replied to buy food.
- [ 5 : 49 ] Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Joseph and his brothers hadn't seen each other in a really long time.
- Let's think about the time that's passed since they lost each other, since they separated. There was time that it would have taken for Joseph to become the top of Potiphar's house. Do you remember that?
- And then a bit more time after going to prison to become the most respected man in prison. We read about that. And then remember he was forgotten in prison for about two years. So what could this be about? Three or four years potentially.
- And then there was the seven years of plenty before the famine. Remember that? And now we're two years into the famine. We find that out in chapter 45. So what's this about 12 or 13 years approximately since they've seen each other?
- Do you find it interesting that Joseph recognizes them immediately? But his brothers had no clue. Do you reckon you would recognize someone after that long?
- [ 6 : 55 ] I was out one night last year at a party in Melbourne. And as I was looking across the head of everyone, as I do, I saw a guy that I recognized.
- I glanced his way a few times. And I noticed that he was shooting a few glances my way. I was sure I knew this guy. I was sure. I said to the friend I was with, you know, I think I went to primary school with that guy.
- That is in Sydney 25 years ago. And as I was mustering up the courage to go and ask him, he approached me. Are you Jeff?
- It was exactly who I thought. I knew his name, he knew mine. And we caught up. Have you ever done that? Probably. Joseph's brothers hadn't seen him for a long time, but not so long that it would be impossible to recognize him.
- And they were brothers, not childhood friends. This is strange. But a typical family trait, I think.

[ 8 : 02 ] Whereas Joseph, on the other hand, recognizes them immediately. So, what will Joseph do? Considering all that's happened since they've seen each other.

The tables have turned. What would you do in this situation? Would the revenge plots start forming in your mind immediately? Those jealous punks who sold me into slavery.

I can do whatever I want. I'm in charge of the whole country. What will he do? Let's pick it up. Let's read verse 8 again. Verse 9. Then he remembered his dreams about them and said, You are spies.

You have come to see where our land is unprotected. No, my lord, they answered. Your servants have come to buy food. We're all sons of one man. Your servants are honest men, not spies. No, he said to them.

You have come to see where our land is unprotected. But they replied, Your servants were twelve brothers. The sons of one man who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father and one is no more.

[ 9 : 04 ] Joseph said to them, It is just as I told you, you are spies. And this is how you will be tested. As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here.

Send one of your number to get your brother and the rest of you will be kept in prison. So that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth. If you are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies.

And he put them all in custody. Joseph doesn't hesitate, does he? He accuses them of being spies and he throws them in prison. Sounds like pretty good payback. Scare the living daylights out of them.

Throw them in prison. As far as they know, it could be forever. That will straighten them out. Is that what you would have done? No. It does seem like he's digging in for a bit of a laugh, doesn't it?

But is that right? Well, we actually know Joseph pretty well by now, don't we? Is that what Joseph is like? Let's think about what we know about Joseph.

[ 10 : 13 ] He was made governor of Egypt, second in charge to Pharaoh. He must be pretty mature. He's also self-controlled and not impulsive.

He persistently refused the advances of Potiphar's wife. Hey, he got special wisdom from God, didn't he? He could see and know things that no one else could like those dreams.

So what does all this mean? Well, perhaps he isn't just taking sweet revenge on his brothers. It does seem harsh and they think it's harsh.

But for us, there are a few extra clues to help us see behind Joseph's actions. But before we look at them, I just want to take a moment to reflect on a key theme, which has been poking its head.

In this passage, and that is that what you do or you don't recognize and how it impacts your understanding of a situation. There are a few different points of view in this passage, aren't there?

[ 11 : 17 ] There's Joseph and he recognizes his brothers who sold him into slavery and he chastises them, but probably not because he thinks they're spies. And there's the brothers.

They've got no clue about what's going on. They came to buy food and suddenly they're accused of being spies, thrown in prison, maybe permanently. All they can see is bad. All they can see is what is directly in front of them.

They're not pondering their predicament, are they? Hmm. What is going on here? Who is this strange man? Or even what is God doing?

How is God keeping his promise to us in this? Because he always keeps his promise. And also there's us, isn't there? We have a point of view in this passage.

We actually see all, don't we? We see even more than Joseph. We see the end of the story. We see their deliverance. We see God's faithfulness despite their hardship.

[ 12 : 20 ] What does that mean? Does that mean that we are wiser or more insightful than Joseph and his brothers? Why do you see?

Why do we know? This theme is important because it encourages us to remember God's promise and his faithfulness. It reminds us to ask and consider, what is God doing in my life?

How is God at work in this for my good? The story continues in verse 18.

And we see more of Joseph's motive and character. And it sort of seems like that the ten brothers see even less. They sit in prison for three days.

I wonder if you could imagine the discussions and the arguments and the fights that would have gone on. Joseph finally appears. And things aren't actually as bad as they were.

[ 13 : 26 ] Have a look again at verse 18. On the third day, Joseph said to them, do this and you will live for I fear God. If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households.

But you must bring your youngest brother to me so that your words may be verified and that you may not die. It seems like Joseph has had a change of heart, doesn't it?

Now only one has to stay in prison while the rest can return with food for their families. And then they must bring their youngest brother back with them. That's definitely better, isn't it?

From what he said before. And they agree to it. But I think not because they're suddenly clued into everything that's going on, but because they have no other option. They still haven't realised who this is right in front of them.

Every few weeks after Word Youth, which is the 130 youth service, we all clean the kitchen together.

[ 14 : 32 ] Word Youth is mostly kids in grades 6, 7 and 8. And sometimes cleaning the kitchen is a bit like herding cats. One of the most amusing moments of the cleaning process is when one of the kids picks up a dry mug, having come out of the dishwasher, and holds it up in front of me or one of the other leaders and says, where does this go?

And because we want them to learn, we tend to say, look with your eyes. And after taking a second or two to realise that they are in fact able to look with their eyes, they look at first a bit like a robot.

And eventually, not always, eventually they figure out where it goes. But the lesson takes a little while to sink in. And so when they pick up another item, where does this go?

Some of them even eventually say, much to our amusement, everything in this kitchen is labelled. This came to mind as I was reading this part of the passage.

At their first meeting, the brothers were shocked and scared. They didn't recognise their brother and you could believe it. But here, they really should have been looking more closely, listening more carefully.

[ 15 : 56 ] What was the first thing Joseph said to them when he came to their cell? Verse 18, Do this and you will live, for I fear God. What?

The governor of Egypt? Second highest authority in the land? Fears God? Who? What? Why? At this point in history, the people of God are one family, one household.

So when this foreign ruler, as he speaks his decrees, acknowledges God's authority over him, they don't recognise anything. Imagine if our rulers and governors spoke like this.

We make this law acknowledging God's authority over us. We bend the knee to him. Right? I want to say to these ten brothers, look with your eyes.

See what is right in front of you. But they're blinded by this trouble that they're in, aren't they? If they were watching and trusting God, they might have noticed that this isn't just more harshness from this Egyptian governor.

[ 17 : 14 ] He's letting most of them go now. He actually gives them the food they need. And he cares about their hungry families. Joseph may seem harsh, but he's also kind, isn't he?

There's grace in what they think is judgment from God. The passage finishes with the brothers returning to Jacob with a pretty strange story.

From verse 29, we read that they came back to Jacob and told him all that had happened. How this man who is Lord over Egypt, he spoke harshly to us and put us in prison.

In fact, funny story, our brother Simeon, he's still there. And we can't go back and get more unless Benjamin comes with us. And not only this, upon their return, they discover that they still have all the money that they took to buy their grain with.

When I read this, I tend to see a mix of good and bad. Yes, we had a tough time down there, but we got our food for free.

[ 18 : 28 ] How will Jacob respond to this news? With comfort and support? With encouragement? No. And I don't think we should be too surprised by that.

Instead, he pours on blame and guilt and offers no help. Have a look. Verse 36. What does it say there? Father Jacob said to them, You have deprived me of my children.

Joseph is no more. And Simeon is no more. And now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me.

Not one word of comfort or kindness from this grumpy old man. This is all your fault. You have taken my children away, which is partly true, but he doesn't know that.

You have brought this upon me. Everything is against me. Before we saw how Joseph's brothers couldn't see because they weren't looking with their eyes.

[ 19 : 35 ] Jacob is looking, but only at himself. He's grumpy and selfish. And all he can see is the terrible things that are happening to him.

Woe is me. Everything happens to me. What is God doing to me? No, no, I will not help you.

He says. You will be the death of me. Jacob does not see. He is not looking. He is not asking. He's not even wondering.

Basically, he's just not trusting God. Yes, he is suffering, but he's not making godly conclusions in the midst of his sorrow.

Conclusions like God is good. God is faithful. God has promised me and my family blessing. How is God at work for his good purposes and mine in this bad situation?

[ 20 : 36 ] And you know what? A good part of me isn't really surprised, not just because he's been a lousy character, but because he's had a hard life, hasn't he? Maybe he should feel this way.

I reckon I would feel this way in his shoes. I wonder if you would feel this way. So how should we think about this story today for us?

We who believe are God's people who know God's promise and his faithfulness. We know that God is at work, but perhaps don't always recognize his hand.

What is this teaching us about him? Well, I presented this story mostly from Joseph's point of view and with God's point of view in mind. We know who Joseph is, probably not malicious, maybe confusing at times, though he seems to be seeking their good.

And we also have God's plan in mind, who, as Mark's been showing us, is working in the evil and foolish actions of people for his good purpose, the saving of many lives, which we know from Genesis 50 verse 20.

[ 21 : 51 ] And since we read it in this light, and rightly so, I wonder if there is a danger for us to stand over the foolish people in this passage.

Ha, ha, ha, you fools! How could you be so blind? I am wise. I would not make that mistake. So we should learn from their mistakes, because, to be honest, we probably would have done the same thing.

And so what's the first lesson we learn from them? Well, what is true for them is true for us. God is working in our lives as he was in theirs.

And the mistake that we can make in light of this truth, like them, is forgetting what we know, rather than letting what we know impact what we see.

Does that make sense? The danger is forgetting what we know, rather than letting what we know impact what we see. What do we know? We know, don't we, that God is sovereign and faithful.

[ 23 : 08 ] We know that God is at work in foolish and evil people for salvation. We even know what his purpose is, to transform us into the likeness of Christ as he brings us to heaven.

That is his purpose. God has told us. God has told us, to transform us into the likeness of Christ as he brings us to heaven.

And even knowing the important truths about God and his plan, we still sometimes won't see or understand why things happen.

The fact that God is at work in our hardships and our challenges and our trials doesn't mean that we should just put a smile on because everything will be okay.

Because from a human point of view, which is what I have, we see and feel things go wrong, don't we? We see and feel evil, brokenness, sadness, futility even.

[ 24 : 33 ] And often, we see no light at the end of the tunnel in human terms, a little bit like Jacob.

Peter teaches Christians from the first century to expect hardship, trials and grief. Not to pretend they don't matter, but to fix our eyes on the inheritance that is kept in heaven for those who believe.

And so, standing in their shoes will remind us that life is tough and often, we won't really see or know why.

And even, even asking the question, how is God working for my good? It won't always make us feel better. It won't always give us the answer we desire.

Let me give you an example. I had a friend who I studied with at Bible College, really switched on guy, great Bible teacher and evangelist. He was doing ministry in Victoria, running a church, preaching the word.

[ 25 : 37 ] He had lots of years ahead of him and he died only three years in. And I don't know why. I am looking.

At times, I'm looking. I'm sort of straining. I'm wondering. I know that God is good and I know that God is faithful, but I only see so much.

What I do see is his wife and his children struggling. In 1 Peter, Peter calls the Christians, he's writing to the elect that is chosen by God, exiles, elect exiles, strangers, you who don't belong because we have another home.

It's comforting, isn't it? But not at the same time. This passage shouldn't make me think of my friend's family and say, I'll be right.

Why am I even worried? No. And nor should you in the midst of your trials and suffering and pain. But it can help us to prepare for these trying times, to be ready when they come, to know how to think.

[ 26 : 55 ] So let me conclude with a comfort and a warning. The comfort is God's character. Take comfort in God's character and his faithfulness. Faithfulness. When we don't recognize that God is at work, it doesn't mean that he's not.

Does that make sense? I'll put it differently. God isn't only at work when we see or understand what he's doing. Be comforted by his character. But there's a warning as well, which I've called the Jacob syndrome.

Beware the Jacob syndrome. While we mustn't forget that Jacob's problems were pretty bad, he responded wrongly. This is your fault. Everything is against me.

What is God doing to me? There's an observable difference between asking God what he's doing in our lives and blaming him for it. Jacob's attitude shows which he's doing.

The attitude of looking only inward is a danger, I think, for two reasons. It can train us to think, firstly, that when things go wrong, God is doing wrong.

[ 28 : 09 ] And secondly, God is only doing right when things go right for me. And what's the danger? It produces a bad understanding of God's character.

It can make us bitter like Jacob and make us think that God's goodness and faithfulness actually depends on how I feel. I feel good. Yeah.

Excellent. God, you are awesome. I love you. I love it when you give me what I want. I feel bad. Pull your head in, God. What?

Did you forget about me? This is not the God of the Bible. It's not the God who saved me by grace to serve him, but it's a little bit more like a genie who exists to serve me.

God is always good and faithful and has given us the best thing we could ever want. And this isn't more true when things are good in life and it's not less true when things are bad.

[ 29 : 13 ] He's good and faithful and actively working for our good, even in our trials, our frustration and our pain. How about I pray?

Will you join me? Father, give us your strength to see and know that you are working for your glory and our good, which is our salvation.

Father, thanks for this passage. Please use it to help us trust your goodness so that we can persevere in trials. Amen. Amen.