



## THE STORY



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**Speaker:** Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor  
**Scripture:** The Story – Chapter 3

One of the most compelling books I have read over the last year or so is entitled, Seeking Allah. Finding Jesus. It was written by Nabeel Qureshi. Perhaps you have read the book. It describes the journey of a young Muslim man, Qureshi, who was challenged by a Christian friend to study Islam with a critical eye, the same way he looked at Christianity. After several years of investigation, Qureshi left his Muslim roots behind and converted to Christianity. A decision that came at a cost and caused a lot of pain and hurt in his family. Qureshi became an internationally known conference speaker, debater and preacher on the topic of Christian Apologetics. A field of Christian theology that presents historical, reasoned, and evidential proof for our faith. What made Qureshi specifically unique was the personal experience he had, to be able to engage with Muslims around issues of faith from a Christian perspective.

However, on August 30, 2016, the same day that his third book, No God But One was released, Qureshi announced that he was in the advanced stages of stomach cancer. He used Facebook to inform his followers of his illness. This is an excerpt of his post.

"This is an announcement that I never expected to make, but God in His infinite and sovereign wisdom has chosen me for this refining, and I pray He will be glorified through my body and my spirit," "My family and I have received the news that I have advanced stomach cancer, and the clinical prognosis is quite grim.

Nonetheless, we are going to pursue healing aggressively, both medical and miraculous, relying on God and the fact that He is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine." A little over a year after this post, last Saturday, September 16, 2017, Qureshi died of cancer. He was 34 years old. He left behind his wife Michelle and two-year-old daughter Ayah.

I have to confess when I heard the news of Qureshi's death this week, I asked the question, Why God? Have you ever asked that question? Why God? Here was this bright young man, who had a global platform and credibility to speak into the tension between Christianity and Islam. And now he is gone. Sometimes I admit, I don't always get it. Maybe you feel the same way about circumstances or situations you encounter.

If you are just joining with us today, we are in week three of a 31 week journey as an entire church, that will take us from the beginning of God's story right through to the end for now. It is the greatest story ever told. And our primary resource through this series is a book, entitled, THE STORY. In the pages of this book are scripture. It is all scripture, with some passages omitted or inserted so it flows a little smoother chronologically. From Genesis, right through to Revelation. It's all here. It is the unfolding of what we can call God's upper story. But connected to his upper story is a lower story.

That is the one we are all living out individually in our day to day lives. God's Story involves us, humanity.

As a way of a visual, let me just remind you of where we have been and where we are headed. God's larger story is actually broken down into 5 smaller movements. In our 31 weeks together, we will look a little closer at each of these movements.

They are:

The story of the Garden

The story of Israel

The story of Jesus

The story of the Church

The story of the New Garden (back where we started)

Two weeks ago, we began with Movement 1. The Story of the Garden and we looked at Creation, the Fall and the Flood. God's vision was to be in relationship with humanity. But sin enters into the picture and is a road block in this relationship.

But all hope is not lost. God promises to bring humanity back to him and he starts by building a nation. Last week, when we shifted to Movement 2, The Story of Israel, we discovered that God begins to build this nation, Israel through the line of Abraham. A man known for his faith that God will provide. Abraham had a son Isaac, who had a son, Jacob, who has 12 sons, one of whom is named Joseph and that is where we pick up THE STORY today.

So if you have your books, turn to chapter 3. I trust many of you have had a chance to read it this week to prepare. If you have your bibles, you can turn to the first book of the bible, Genesis.

The story of Joseph covers 14 pages in your book and 13 chapters in the bible. It is a classic story that perhaps many of you learned when you were children in Sunday School on the flannel boards. It has been more recently introduced to a whole new generation through the popular theatrical production, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour

Dreamcoat. Has anyone seen this show? Let's jump into the story. We often talk about dysfunctional families in today's world but going way back 3000 years or so in human history, Joseph came from a classic dysfunctional home. Let me explain.

He was the 11th child of Jacob and the first child of Rachel, Jacob's second wife. Joseph's half brothers and sister were the children of Leah, Rachel's elder sister, and wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. Have I lost you, yet? A classic soap opera, like the Young and the Restless. Now to make matters even more intriguing, Joseph was the favourite child of Jacob. Which as you, who are parents know, that is really not supposed to happen. You shouldn't have a favourite child. Well, if you do, at least don't make it too obvious. I try not to.

Jacob however made it very obvious.

*Genesis 37:3*

*Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him.*

Israel, the name God had given to Jacob, loved Joseph more than all his other sons and gave him a beautiful robe to wear to signify that he was the special one. Now how do you think, his brothers are going to respond to that?

*Genesis 37:4*

*When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.*

This favouritism, a father to one son, has caused a huge rift in the family but it goes deeper than this.

*Genesis 37:2*

*This is the account of Jacob's family line. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.*

So, here we have 17-year old Joseph, with ten older brothers and a sister. Walking around day after day flaunting the beautiful coat his dad gave him, and tattling on his brothers about how they are slacking off when they were supposed to tending to the family sheep business.

Ok, so I don't know about you. I don't have 12 sons, but I have two. A 21 year old and a 24 year old. Throughout their childhood years, they shared a room. Ninety-nine (90%) percent of the time they got a long beautifully, but I am quite certain that if my younger son had ever flaunted his status or snitched on his older brother. There would be some repercussions. The bedroom door would be shut and there would be some "one on one" mediation occurring, a few bumps against the wall, and matters would be settled. Is that the way it works in your home, or is it just the pastor's house?

Joseph has some growing up to do here, he needs a little lesson in humility perhaps and to make matters worse, oh there's more! Joseph begins to dream. Not about girls, not about being the next great sports star or the winner of the Israel's Got Talent contest. He dreams about his brother's bowing down to him one day. And in verse 5, it says that when he told them this dream, they hated him all the more. Do you think?

That is the context and the mood, for what happens next. Look at the beginning of chapter 3 at page 29 in your books or,

*Genesis 37:12-13*

*Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them."*

His father sends Joseph to check up on his brothers, but when they see Joseph approaching in the distance, with his colourful coat flapping in the wind, they devise a plan to kill him. Thankfully, cooler heads prevail and they instead strip him of

his robe and sell him into slavery. Joseph is carted off to Egypt and sold on the auction block to the highest bidder, which just happens to be a one of Pharaoh's highest ranking officials, named Potiphar. And this is when God gets introduced into the story. Look at page 31 of your book or in the bible at

*Genesis 39:2*

*The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.*

The Lord was with Joseph, so that he prospered. Now let's be clear. Joseph is a slave in the home of Potiphar. But he knew God was with him and he worked hard and with integrity, maybe a little maturity and humility has set in because Joseph could have pouted, moped. Things weren't going his way. He could have given up and no one would have blamed him. Instead, he made the best and the most of his situation, with God's help.

And this begins what I would call the "good news/bad news" episodes in Joseph's life as I skim over the next few chapters of Genesis.

Good News...Joseph is a slave in Potiphar's house but he finds favour with his master and he rises to a level of being in charge of all of Potiphar's cherished holdings.

Bad News....Joseph is very good looking. With a muscular body like the Rock, Dwayne Johnson. Which may not seem like such a bad thing, but let me tell you, for those of us who can relate to Joseph, this can be a curse at times too, right?

The bad news is that Potiphar's wife takes a liking to Joseph and tries to seduce him.

Good News...Joseph resists her temptations. An awesome example of Godly integrity. His response to Potiphar's wife's seduction, look at the bottom of page 31 in your book or,

Genesis 39:9

*How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"*

He rebuffs her advances. I am not going against God. That's good news!

But the Bad News....She frames him and lies about him. Potiphar's wife tells her husband that Joseph tried to rape her and Joseph is thrown in jail. That is bad news.

Perhaps you sit here today and really feel like you are having a run of bad circumstances, nothing is going right, everything is falling apart. No good news seems to be on the horizon. Can you imagine how you would feel if you were accused of doing something that you didn't do and it caused you to lose everything? You get sent to jail. The injustice of it all. I can't imagine the anger, resentment, bitterness that could well up inside a person.

But that is Joseph. Wrongly accused and now in jail. That is bad news. But look at the middle of page 32 in your books or,

Genesis 39:20-23

*But while Joseph was there in the prison, 21 the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. 22 So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. 23 The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.*

The Lord was with Joseph. He is building this relationship with him. Joseph's life is being transformed and God is using him to make a difference even in prison.

Remember, God's upper story is all about the work he is doing in the lives of his people, humanity, by restoring and redeeming them. Freeing them, to live the lives he truly intended for us all.

Nowhere is that more evident than in the good news, bad news life of Joseph. Do you see that? Even in Jail. God is at work and grants Joseph favour with the jailer. He works his way to the top. Becomes the convict in charge. He is put over the whole prison. Some may ask, while why God doesn't just rescue Joseph from the situation, spring him from jail. That is total redemption right? Freeing those who are enslaved.

But, and this is what we will see unfold throughout the next several weeks. God's story is bigger than ours. His plan goes beyond just our momentary circumstances. The Lord is with Joseph and is at work in his life. And this is when Joseph begins to interpret dreams for a couple of the other inmates.

One of whom is about to be released and return to work for Pharaoh and he promises Joseph that he will put in a good word for him when he gets on the outside. That is good news. And Joseph stands waiting by the cell door assuming that he will be released anytime. Waiting. And as we stated last week, it is hard to wait. Time passes. Two years. That is Bad News, Joseph is forgotten for two more years. Can you imagine his prayer life during this time?

God, is this how I get treated? Is this my reward? I tried to live with integrity. I didn't give into the temptations of the world, of that woman, Potiphar's wife. But I was falsely accused, put in prison, and now forgotten. Why God? Where are you God?

These words aren't in the bible, but they have probably been in our journals, in our hearts, in our conversations, at various times, haven't they? Where are you God? How do we factor in the pain, hurt and disappointments of life? If God is in charge, if God knows what is going on, why does He allow Joseph to end up in prison? Why does he allow bad things to happen to good people? Wow, I just opened a can of worms didn't I!? Why did Nabeel Qureshi have to die of cancer at 34? A lot of people were praying for him. Maybe you were one of them.

In March of this past year, I got a call from a woman in our church community. Her brother-in-law and 3 year-old niece, a father and young daughter, on their way to daycare, like many of you do every day, had been involved in a traffic accident. A large truck had attempted to pass them but instead caused them to spin into oncoming traffic. The father was left comatose with brain trauma and the beautiful little girl was on life support with massive injuries.

Despite hundreds of people praying worldwide, she died three days later. And as you can imagine, the family asked why? Why God? A little girl.

Last weekend, I had a moment to chat with a lady after the service right here in the front pew. I remembered the first time I had really met her. It was two years ago at a funeral home in Thamesford. She was burying her 15-year-old son who had collapsed days earlier on the soccer field during the first game of the season. She held him in the middle of that field as she waited for the ambulance to arrive. Praying for him in the emergency room throughout the night to hold on. Calling out to God to save him. But he was gone. Why God? Why a 15-year-old boy?

These kind of questions, if you were to look in a theology textbook would be found in a chapter called Divine Providence. Providence addresses the question, is God actively involved in his creation? Christian author and pastor Max Lucado states that Providence has two sub points. The first part of Divine Providence believes that:

God sustains everything. God is involved. The promise in scripture is that God provides. He guides, directs and manages.

*Hebrews 1:3*

*The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins,*

*he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*

The Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was in the beginning involved in creation. The Father gave his Son, Jesus for the sins of the world. He has not withdrawn himself from his creation. No, he sustains all things. He holds it all together. Which means he transports, he carries, he gets something from point A to Point B. There is order to the universe because of God. Without him, all humanity would perish. Everything would fall apart. With him, the world is held together. That is the first part of Divine Providence.

The second part of Divine Providence believes that God not only sustains everything but:

God uses everything. Everything is used by him to accomplish his purposes. God sustains and he works out everything.

*Ephesians 1:11-12*

*In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*

God works out everything. Not just the good things, the easy things or obvious things, but he also uses the difficult things, the challenging things and the mysterious things.

Divine Providence states that God sustains everything, holds it all together and uses everything. The good and the bad.

So if God is in charge why is Joseph in prison? If God is in charge why did Nabeel Qureshi die? Why did that beautiful little 3-year-old die in a car accident, why did the 15-year-old boy die on the soccer field? Why did your parents get a divorce? Why did your father beat you? Why were you sexually assaulted as a child? Why did you receive a cancer diagnosis?

And this is where we have to tread carefully. There is nowhere in scripture that suggests that God ordains or endorses evil. But there is this powerful picture of Providence that says that the God who sustains and uses everything can take even evil and recast it into something good.

The story of Joseph gives us a powerful portrayal of how God can take even what was intended for evil and use it to accomplish his upper story, something good. Keep that in mind as we go back to the story of Joseph. Do you know what it was that finally prompted Joseph to be sprung from prison? It was a dream. Interesting.

The dreaming that caused Joseph to be hated by his brothers, now springs him out of jail. Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt had two dreams that were bothering him and no one could tell him what they meant. Suddenly a light goes off for that guy who Joseph met two years before. That guy who promised to put in a good word for him when he got out of jail. He remembers Joseph can interpret dreams so he tells Pharaoh.

Pharaoh summons Joseph from the prison to the Palace and on page 33 of your book or,

*Genesis 41:15-16*

*Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." 16 "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."*

I can't but God can. God can. Joseph had gained such a trust and faith in God through the good times and the difficult times in his life that he knew it was God who gave him the interpretation of the dreams.

So, Pharaoh shares two rather strange dreams and God allows Joseph the wisdom to describe to Pharaoh that his dreams mean that there will be a time of plenty coming for the Egyptian people followed by a time of extreme famine.

Joseph recommends that Pharaoh put a wise man in charge of rationing the food in the good times so they have enough to sustain the nation in the times of need that will follow.

And Pharaoh responds, look at it a little lower on page 33 in your books,

*Genesis 41:39-40,*

*Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."*

The good news, bad news story of Joseph has taken him from being in a favoured position of his father, wearing a special robe. To being abandoned by his brothers and sold into slavery. Taken to a foreign land. Overseer of a household. Falsely accused and imprisoned. Dream interpreter. Forgotten man but now. Now, he has been elevated to second in command over all of Egypt. And over the next 14 years, Joseph navigates the people through a crisis, first stockpiling food in the years of plenty and then carefully distributing it in the times of severe famine. Joseph's actions saved hundreds of thousands of lives, not just of the Egyptians but also neighbouring nations who came to him for help.

Including, do you know who? Those same brothers who had sold him into slavery years before. They needed his help now. They needed food so they bowed to him. Of course, they didn't recognize him after all the years but he sure knew them. And he wrestled with his response now that their future, their lives were in his hands. He could have gotten angry and bitter and no one would have blamed him. He could have had them punished or sent them away hungry. But he didn't. He chose to filter their behavior through the providence of God.

What they did, all those years ago, was evil. Joseph calls it evil. He didn't pretend, he didn't down play

it, it was evil. When he finally reveals his identity to them, they were frightened. Afraid of what he would do to them.

*Genesis 50:20*, Joseph says to them,

*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

Did you notice the word intend is used twice in this verse? You intended but God intended. Intend comes from the Hebrew word that means to weave.

Joseph is saying to his brothers, you came weaving a scenario of hurt and heartache and abandonment, you came to weave pain and destruction in my life and the life of our family. But God who did not ordain evil but can recast your evil, has rewoven it, into something good. He took the very threads that were intended to weave evil in my life and he reweave it into something good and productive and worthwhile. Do you see that?

I meet with many people, many of you. And I hear about some pretty bleak and seemingly hopeless situations. Stories of evil and pain, hurt and destruction. Some of you here today, it just seems like life came weaving evil for you, causing heartache. I never met anyone who has escaped it entirely, but some of you have had more than your share. A broken marriage, a mom or dad that deserted you, bullying and abuse. People can be cruel. They can be evil.

But the story of Joseph teaches us that we have a choice when tough times come our way. We can either wrap ourselves in our hurt or wrap ourselves in our hope. We can either cave in to the pain or we can stand firm on the peace and the promises of God. That there is divine providence in the world.

That God does sustain everything and God can use everything. He is not the author of evil, but he can recast it. Into something good and purposeful. This has been my experience. When there is a life that has become a hopeless wreck, you can trace it back to the belief that no one is in charge.

When you find a person's whose life is not pain free but is victorious and hopeful in spite of pain, you can trace it back to the belief that there is a good God. Who we may not always understand. But we are going to trust in Him, even when we don't always know what lies ahead.

Although Nabeel Qureshi's life was tragically taken too soon by cancer, millions of people have witnessed and been touched by his faith that did not wavered. That God is in control, right up to the moment he took his last breath.

Even though a beautiful 3-year-old girl's life was taken far too soon by the careless actions of another driver, hundreds of people have seen the faith of her extended family, fully reliant on God, even as they continue to process, why God? Their hope and belief is firmly planted in the Providence of God.

And that family of the 15-year-old that died on the soccer field, through a set of circumstances that only God could have orchestrated, the mom and dad are now spearheading a campaign for AED's, automated external defibrillators.

They have raised thousands and thousands of dollars with the goal to get an AED in every school in the Thames Valley District School Board. What was intended for evil, has been rewoven for good, to save many lives.

On Tuesday night of this past week I received a call. It was from a dear friend of mine in Waterloo. He was distraught. He told me he was in his car on the way to Muskoka to assist police in recovering the body of his 29- year-old son. He had gone missing while paddle boarding with his wife and was presumed drown. Here is the background story.

While in his second year of medical school, this man, the son of my friend, was diagnosed with a brain tumour. Despite the chemo treatments, the pain and disruption, he persevered through and last Friday, he completed his Family Medicine Residency and went away with his wife to the celebrate for a few days in Muskoka.

While paddle boarding on Tuesday, he had a seizure directly related to his brain tumour and fell into the water and he was gone. How do you reconcile that?

Sickness and disease, that is not from God. When God created us back in the garden, there were no sickness and disease, but it is the result of our fallen world. Evil. Pain and hurt and grief and devastation. When I sat with the family on Thursday, I didn't give pat answers. I hugged them, cried with them, listened to them and I prayed with them to the one who sustains all creation and uses everything. God is not the author of evil but he can recast it into something good and profitable when we turn it to him.

And when I stand up and officiate at this young man's funeral this Wednesday. In front of that young widow and the gathered mourners, I will point to hope, our only hope in this sometime hopeless world, the Divine Providence of a merciful God. That he does sustain all things and can use all things, the good and the bad. That is what the story of Joseph teaches us in chapter 3 of THE STORY.

I pray that it has been a hope filled story for you wherever you are today and whatever you are dealing with. Next week, we move to chapter 4, the Deliverance of God's People from Egypt.

## **Points to Ponder**

### **THE STORY**

#### **Joseph: From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh**

#### **Chapter 3**

**With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.**

1. Why did Joseph's brothers want to get rid of him?
2. Why does God allow hurtful things to happen to people?
3. What were the positive effects of Joseph's being sold into slavery?
4. What does Joseph's statement to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good," tell about God?
5. In what ways have you seen God work through the most bleak and hopeless situations to cause a greater good?
6. Why can God be trusted at all times?

#### **Prayer and Action Item**

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray for those who are going through particularly difficult times. That God would reveal himself and his purpose through these situations and that they would trust God through these valleys in life.