

# A Study of Joseph

## An Illustration of Romans 8:28

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### Introduction

**Romans 8:28** And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

Romans 8:28 is a key passage in Scripture that speaks of God's providential work in the lives of His own. In this study, we will focus on how that passage applies to the life of Joseph, the son of Jacob, also called Israel. Joseph suffered many indignities at the hands of others and is a textbook example of Romans 8:28. But to understand that, we must first understand what Romans 8:28 promises.

The passage begins with the phrase "And we know..." The particle *de*, translated as "and," marks a transition to something new, distinguishing it from what preceded it. The context is that Paul has been talking about the saved believer and his spiritual life, and this contest is between the flesh and the Spirit for control of the believer. It is wrapped up in the corrupted status that fallen man finds himself in, not only spiritually and in our battle for victory over sin, but also in the context of our environment. All creation and man groan within themselves for release from this curse. In verse 28, Paul suddenly shifts gears and begins with this particle. He intends to say something like "Yes, but..." Yes, there is all this difficulty and suffering and danger and threats to our spiritual walk with God – and then comes the but part, "we know."

*Oida* is translated as "we know" and means to see with our eyes, to know intuitively. This Greek word comes to us through Latin as our English word "video." However, in this context, *oida* does not imply perception through visual stimuli; rather, it affirms a known fact. Paul is saying, "It is common knowledge among believers." He isn't revealing a new mystery doctrine here; he is saying we already know this. Implicit in that statement is that this information has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

What do we know? "... that all things work together for good." *Hoti* means "because" or "since" and is translated as "that." *Pas* is translated as "all things." What happens to these "all things"? They work together, and that is the Greek *sunergeo*, translated as "works together." We get our modern word "synergy" from *sunergeo*, and it implies pulling together seemingly unrelated, discordant, even conflicting and negative things and events into some form of harmony. The result is greater than the sum of its parts, and it is implied that the result is positive, even if all that went into it as components were negative.

This act of working together has a cause: God. The NASB reflects this in its translation, "And we know that God causes all things to work together..."

What do we know? God often works with discordant, dissimilar, and even negative elements to create something greater than the sum of its parts.

What is the end result of this action by God, working this synergy with "all things"? We have the prepositional phrase *eis agathos*, which means "for good." *Agathos* is translated as "good"; however, the word conveys more than just that. It means that something is good by its very nature. This is good of intrinsic value; it is inherently good, and its value is not derived from without. Its value comes from within itself.

A diamond has intrinsic value. It is made up of two elements that, in themselves, have no real value: carbon and extremely high pressure. Without context, carbon has no significant value, nor does high pressure. Put the two together, however, and what results is a diamond with value far beyond the components used. A diamond is a perfect example of synergy between two non-positives that, when combined, produce something with great intrinsic value.

God takes these "all things" of our lives that may seem to us to have little or no value, works them together, brings about this synergy, and the result is a "diamond," something of intrinsic value.

We kind of glossed over the term "all things," and we need to understand what these "all things" are. What is God working with in this synergistic action that results in *agathos*, good of intrinsic value? Basically, Romans

8:28 says that God can take everything in your life, good or bad, and turn it into *agathos*, good of intrinsic value, if you will let Him.

**Romans 8:28** And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Here is what we know about the verse so far. The believer will face both adversity and prosperity. These are the "all things." Both adversity and prosperity threaten our spiritual walk. Adversity can cause us to stop trusting in God's abounding grace to be sufficient for any problem and revert to human solutions instead. This could include anger, revenge, gossip, maligning, and even physical attacks. Prosperity can cause us to lose sight of God as we fix our eyes on the blessings rather than on their source. We take what God has given us and turn it into our very own idol. Pick your poison. What in your life has the potential to distract you from God and His plan for your life? Ask yourself that, and never stop asking yourself that.

But we know that God will take these "all things" in our lives and use them to build us up in our faith, leading us to spiritual maturity, if we rely on His abundant grace as sufficient to deal with the "all things." God is taking both the positive and the negative in our lives and synergizing them into something intrinsically good for us! This process is what we call "experiential sanctification." It is our spiritual walk coupled with our spiritual growth. It is the "renewing of your mind" in Romans 12:2.

**Romans 12:2** Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

"Transformed" is the Greek word from which we get our modern English word "metamorphosis." In Greek, "renewing" means renovation, changing something from old to new. Taken together, these two words imply a complete change of status from one condition to another, from fallen and depraved to saved and spiritually mature.

This is not a condition brought on at regeneration, but regeneration and the indwelling Holy Spirit do make this renewing possible. The "renewing of your mind" is a process that takes place after salvation. This renewing, this metamorphosis, is the process of spiritual growth, and it works

through the steady, constant study of God's Word. We take in doctrine, understand it academically, then transform it into faith-based doctrinal knowledge ready for application to the "all things" of life. Through a series of tests, the "all things" of our lives, we apply this learned doctrine we have assimilated, which is nothing less than the very mind of Christ, and we trust God to provide the strength needed for victory. In the experience of that process, we grow in faith, and grace abounds as a result of this trust in what God said He would do. We see Him working out the "all things" in one situation, and this builds faith muscle for applying to the next, more difficult "all things."

We talk about repentance a lot as Christians. I believe many Christians attach too much significance to it, or perhaps the wrong kind of significance. We often attach all sorts of emotional baggage to the word. Repentance isn't about feeling sorry for your sins, though that may very well be a part of it. Nothing wrong with that, but we should remember that feeling bad is merely an emotional reaction to a greater, much more profound truth, namely that we have recognized we are in error and are willing to change. It isn't about feeling bad that you sinned. You sin because you are a sinner and like to sin. It's fun! If it weren't fun or, in some way, gratifying, we wouldn't have such a problem avoiding it. Repentance means a change of mind for the better. It simply means you thought one way, but now you think another way, and that new way is superior to the old way. In this case, the new way is the way God thinks. Well, guess what, that is renovated thinking. That is a metamorphosis. This is changing from a fallen and depraved state of mind to a saved and spiritually mature state of mind. This spiritual growth is true repentance on a strategic level, a true change of mind. The mind has been renovated!

As a result of this metamorphosis, this renovation of your mind as God works all things together for good, we have true, lasting, and meaningful repentance. We want nothing to do with our former selves because we know who we once were and what we once did. These things are offensive to God and have become repugnant to us. You can't repent more than that.

We have dealt with the "all things" and the resulting *agathas*, and we have seen how this process works, but the very next phrase in verse 28 is a warning. This synergistic process is limited to a specific group of people, "those who are called according to his purpose." Who might "those" be?

And what does it mean to "love God"? And what does it mean to be "called according to his purpose"?

Do you love God? Do you really love God? Or do you merely say you love God? The Christian life is not just a lot of knowledge; it is knowledge put into practice. It is not merely belief, but belief lived out. How do we love the Lord? Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). It begins with the participle *ean*, which is translated "if" and is the third-class condition in Greek that corresponds to the English conditional phrase "maybe you will and maybe you won't." Then we have *agapao*, which is "love" in a social or moral sense. Then we have *tereo*, which is translated "keep" and means guard against, keep an eye upon. In the military sense, it denotes fortified lines or holding fast. We are to both cling to and guard His commandments with a military-like fervor. The last word is *entole*, which means a commandment or precept. This is not limited to the Decalogue (Ten Commandments). It means all of the commandments, precepts, and moral rules given to us through God's Word. It says, "If you love me, maybe you will and maybe you won't, but if you do, you will guard my precepts and keep them as your own."

**1 John 5:3** For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

This constitutes true love, that we keep His commandments, and those commandments are not *barus*, which means weighty, burdensome, heavy.

As an unbeliever, I found God's commandments burdensome. As a believer relying on human effort, I still found them burdensome. And that is how most Christians try to keep God's commandments, by human effort, so naturally, they are burdensome! But this passage says they are not burdensome. Who are you going to believe, your personal experiences or what God tells you? If God says they aren't burdensome, then He must have provided some means of dealing with them. They are not burdensome because we have divine enablement through the indwelling Holy Spirit. On our own, we can do nothing. But with Him we can do all things.

**Philippians 4:13** I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

“All things?” Yep, it is that word *pas* we saw in Romans 8:28. Paul doesn't say he can do some things. He says he can do all things. How? Through Christ. In our positional identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, and in the new birth of regeneration, we are children of God and divinely enabled by the indwelling Holy Spirit. What you could not do as an unbeliever is now possible. That makes God's commandments not grievous or burdensome. They are burdensome to the unbeliever but not to the believer who uses the provisions God has left for us. What is that?

**Galatians 5:16** ...walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Walk by (means of) the spirit and you are demonstrating love for God, because you are keeping His commandments.

Who receives this benefit? “Those who are called according to his purpose.” God has a purpose for you, and it isn't for you to stumble aimlessly through life. To succeed in the “all things” of life, you need to be in step with the Spirit and to demonstrate the love of God, with faith in His support.

### **So, what do we have here?**

In Romans 8:28, Paul tells us that our lives will include both trials and tribulations and good times. This is captured in the word *pas*, which is translated as “all things.” But for those who love God, as demonstrated by our obedience to Him and His calling, He will take these “all things,” both the good and the bad, and make them work together for our good, so that in the end we will benefit. God's purpose is to make believers holy (sanctified or set apart) and blameless. This relates to Romans 8:29, so that we will be “conformed to the image of his Son.” And verse 30 says, “That we would be glorified.” Almost 2000 years before Paul penned Romans 8:28, Joseph lived it as a classic example of that New Testament passage in action.

## **Joseph**

The story of Joseph begins in chapter 37 of Genesis. He was the son of Jacob (also called Israel) and Rachel. Israel had four wives: Leah, his first wife; Rachel, Leah's sister; Bilhah, Rachel's servant; and Zilpha, Leah's

servant. How he acquired all these wives is a story in itself, but this is Joseph's story. We will only note that Joseph was the son of Jacob and his second wife, Rachel, who was also his favorite. She seemed barren at first but eventually gave birth to Joseph and a younger brother, Benjamin. She died giving birth to Benjamin. Because of his association with Rachel, whom Jacob loved, and because he was born late in her life, Joseph became Jacob's favorite among his twelve sons, which led to problems.

The children of Jacob were:

1. Reuben – Leah's first son
2. Simeon – Leah's second son
3. Levi – Leah's third son
4. Judah – Leah's fourth son
5. Dan – Bilhah's first son
6. Naphtali – Bilhah's second son
7. Gad – Zilpah's first son
8. Asher – Zilpah's second son
9. Issachar – Leah's fifth son
10. Zebulun – Leah's sixth son
11. Joseph – Rachael's first son
12. Benjamin – Rachel's second son

There was also one daughter, Dinah, by Leah. Jacob's family was somewhat dysfunctional. One big reason was the multiple wives and the intrigue associated with four jealous women. The family was marked by murder, rape, prostitution, incest, and other dishonorable carnal behavior. As herders, they lived a somewhat nomadic life in the land of Canaan.

## **The Theme of the Story**

Suffering is a test of character. This applies especially to Joseph, but also to his brothers. Though Joseph exhibits righteous behavior, he still suffers, yet he perseveres through it by faith.

What we should observe in this story:

- **The believer has a destiny** – God has a plan for your life, and He will give you a vision of His purpose. It may not come quickly. It may not come in full. It may come as a series of “closed door/open door” revelations. It may come in stages designed to develop the character and skills you will need. It may not be clear at first, but sooner or later, you will understand what God intends for you to do for Him.

- **God will prepare you to fulfill your destiny.** That will involve building character and developing spiritual maturity through training and specialized education.
- **Success in the small things will lead to success in the larger things.** Obedience and success will result in added responsibility. Pass one test, and expect to apply what you learned to larger, more complex tests. Fail a test, and you will repeat it until you pass.
- **God will supply your needs to fulfill your destiny.** If God calls you to a task, **He is obliged** to provide whatever support you need to accomplish His calling. He will provide logistical resources to sustain you, along with whatever other support you need to fulfill your destiny.
- **Obedience to God and faithful dependence on Him will facilitate the fulfillment of your destiny.** That requires building and exercising faith in all things, especially in God's promises and sovereignty. Obedience means listening for God's providential leading, then following and doing what you are led to do. Failure to trust God will prolong the lesson.
- **Fidelity to the plan will bring glory to God and, ultimately, rewards in Heaven for you.** You must keep your focus on God, not on yourself or your circumstances. This is very hard for most of us. Wait on the Lord – it will be on His timing, not yours.

Let's see how Joseph breaks through to fulfill his destiny.

## **Joseph Dreams of Greatness**

We pick up the story with Jacob advanced in age. The boys are mostly grown. It begins around 1898 BC, when Joseph is a young, immature 17-year-old and Benjamin is a bit younger. He has been thrust into a position of authority by his father that he is not yet ready for. He is honorable and focused on God, but a bit naive because of his immaturity, and a little full of himself. Joseph is clearly Jacob's favorite son, and this favoritism causes problems with the older brothers. Basically, they hate his guts! (Genesis 27:4)

**Genesis 37:3** Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. <sup>4</sup> But when his brothers saw that their father loved him

more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

Scripture does not explain the reasons, except to say that he was his father's favorite son and that Jacob gave him a special coat as a sign of his favored position.

Under the cultural rules of primogeniture, the eldest son is the heir and enjoys a certain status within the family. Jacob has turned the system upside down. Clearly, the coat symbolizes his favored position within the family, and his brothers hated him so much that they could not even speak "peaceably" to him. The word comes from the Hebrew *shalom*, meaning they could not wish him well. Rather than peace, they wished evil upon him and conspired to harm him.

In verse 2, we see that Joseph brought "a bad report of them to his father." The two Hebrew words translated as "bad report" suggest the report may have been petty, evil, and unkind, causing distress or injury. Were the boys guilty? Probably, as we shall see when we learn more about their personalities later in this study. Whatever was in this report, his brothers were unhappy with Joseph "tattling" on them. Verse 4 says they hated him. This sets the stage for disaster.

**Genesis 37:5** Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more.

Joseph has two dreams and unwisely shares them with his brothers. At that time, dreams were a common way for God to communicate with His anointed. There was no written Scripture to consult, only oral traditions that were passed down. Moses is the author of the book of Genesis and the other four books of the Pentateuch, but he had not even been born at this time.

**Genesis 37:6** He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed:  
7 Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf."

The first dream involved sheaves of wheat, and his brother's sheaves bowed down to his sheave. The dream indicates that Joseph will gain superiority over his brothers.

**Genesis 37:8** His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

The dream was a picture of the brothers bowing and somehow being subordinate to their younger brother, and they were not happy.

**Genesis 37:9** Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

Joseph adds insult to injury by telling his brothers about the second dream. In this dream, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bow down to him. In ancient cultures, astronomical symbols represented rulers. Symbolically, the dream anticipated Joseph's elevation over the whole house of Jacob. Sensing that Joseph was to be elevated over them, his brothers resented him even more. Even though the elders should normally lead the younger, their attitudes and actions demonstrate why they should not have led.

Joseph understood how God works; he was well aware that God **could** choose the younger to rule over the elder and declare His choice in advance through an oracle or a dream. God has turned the system of primogeniture upside down. Therefore, it is suspicious that Joseph told his brothers about these dreams. Was it arrogance on his part?

**Genesis 37:10** But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" <sup>11</sup> And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

Joseph's father rebukes him for this, but what about the comment, "his father kept the saying in mind"? This indicates that the dream was a source of concern for Jacob.

## Jacob sends Joseph to spy on his brothers.

**Genesis 37:12** Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup> And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." <sup>14</sup> So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. <sup>15</sup> And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" <sup>16</sup> "I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." <sup>17</sup> And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. <sup>18</sup> They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. <sup>19</sup> They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup> Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams."

Joseph travels a considerable distance from the family camp and does not find the brothers where they are supposed to be. I think this brief, seemingly unimportant narrative emphasizes that the brothers are not where they are supposed to be spiritually, as we see them plotting to kill Joseph to prevent the dreams from coming true and then telling Jacob that wild animals devoured him. Joseph eventually finds his brothers and the flocks.

If it is God's plan for Joseph to rule over his family, can they do anything to prevent it?

Reuben seems to be the only brother with any compassion and good sense, and he tries to prevent Joseph's death. He suggests they throw him into a cistern, from which he hopes to rescue him later.

**Genesis 37:21** But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." <sup>22</sup> And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. <sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they

stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. <sup>24</sup> And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

There appears to be a time gap between verses 22 and 23. In verses 23-24, the brothers strip Joseph of his coat of many colors and throw him into the dry cistern. The conspiring brothers then coldly sit down and eat a meal. It is unclear where Reuben is at this point, but he is evidently not at the meal with his other brothers.

**Genesis 37:25** Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup> Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him. <sup>28</sup> Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

Some Ishmaelites arrive, and Judah suggests selling Joseph into slavery rather than killing him. Ishmaelites are descendants of Abraham through Hagar, and Midianites are descendants of Abraham through Keturah. The term Ishmaelites is a general term for these desert tribes that later became the various Arab nations. They are hostile to the Israelites. And Joseph is sold into slavery for 20 shekels of silver.

**Genesis 37:29** When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes <sup>30</sup> and returned to his brothers and said, “The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?”

Reuben enters classic cultural mourning by tearing his clothing.

**Genesis 37:31** Then they took Joseph’s robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. <sup>32</sup> And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, “This we have found; please identify whether it is your son’s robe or not.” <sup>33</sup> And he identified it and said, “It is my son’s robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” <sup>34</sup> Then Jacob tore his

garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. <sup>35</sup> All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father wept for him. <sup>36</sup> Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

The brothers slaughtered a goat, smeared its blood on Joseph’s coat, and then told Jacob that Joseph had been killed by wild animals. They even pretended not to recognize the coat and asked Jacob to identify it. After Jacob identified the coat as Joseph’s, he immediately mourned his favorite son. Meanwhile, the Midianites sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt to a man named Potiphar, an “officer of Pharaoh and captain of the guard.”

### **What do we have so far?**

We have an awful deed committed against Joseph by his own brothers, who at one point considered murdering him. Instead, Joseph was sold into slavery. Think about that for a moment – can you imagine brothers doing that? What kind of family is this? Where did all this hatred and violence come from?

It is interesting that the only one not described in the text as “troubled” is Joseph. Joseph may have been immature, naïve, brash, and foolish in some of his actions – maybe even a bit arrogant when he became aware not only of his favored position within his family but also of his anointed calling from God. But that certainly did not warrant the treatment he received from his brothers.

And obviously, the brothers did not care much for their father’s feelings. They were bitter toward him and resented his love for Joseph. They were perfectly willing to inflict misery on this old man, with no consideration for his feelings.

Though the Scriptures do not say so, it is possible that Jacob may have resented the other boys. His first love was Rachel, and that love was transferred to her two sons when she died. But that didn’t stop him from going to his other wife and their two servants, and having children with them. Though we see multiple wives and concubines many times in the Bible, it is not condoned in Scripture. So Jacob was outside God’s will in that matter. And what is happening here may have been payback for some

earlier mistakes and deceptions of his own. His name means the supplanter.

But God is not finished with Joseph. He still has a destiny despite his brothers' efforts to thwart God's plan. What they intended for evil, God intends for good. Joseph is right where God wants him! He may be immature and brash, somewhat full of his own sense of destiny, but God intends to mature this young man and, in the process, develop his character. That arrogant streak will be removed through his servitude in Egypt.

Joseph has been torn from everything he is familiar with: his family, his father, his brothers, his friends, and his prosperity. He has been cast into completely strange surroundings, where danger is around every corner, and the weak of mind and spirit cannot survive for very long. He has gone from being the favored son in a large and wealthy household, where he had been given considerable responsibilities he might not have been ready for, to a large and wealthy household where he is the lowest of the low, a slave called to do his master's bidding.

Joseph has lost everything—everything but one thing: God. He can no longer rely on his father or his favored status. Now he must rely on God and God alone. Fortunately for Joseph, that is exactly what he does.

Joseph is going to learn humility and develop the character of a servant's heart. That maturity will not come overnight. Joseph will be in training for many years as God prepares him for the great responsibilities He has in store for him, responsibilities that will ultimately save many lives from starvation, including his own family — yes, even the very ones who sought to kill him.

But he isn't ready for his destiny yet. God has work to do in Joseph's heart, and we will see him develop and mature into a man that God can and will use for great things. All that happens to Joseph, including many terrible things that befall this young man, will be worked together for good by God for this man who loves God and demonstrates that love by remaining obedient to Him even through the bad times.