

The Joseph Story | Broken Family/Beautiful Plan

The Moral of the Story

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Genesis 50.14-26; Romans 8.28-31

After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers, and all who had gone up with him to bury his father. ¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!" ¹⁶ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father charged before he died, saying, ¹⁷ 'Thus you shall say to Joseph, "Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.'" And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? ²⁰ "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. ²¹ "So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. ²² Now Joseph stayed in Egypt, he and his father's household, and Joseph lived one hundred and ten years. ²³ Joseph saw the third generation of Ephraim's sons; also the sons of Machir, the son of Manasseh, were born on Joseph's knees. ²⁴ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob." ²⁵ Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here." ²⁶ So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

***Romans 8** And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; ³⁰ and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. ³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?*

We've been looking at the Book of Genesis each fall for the last 3 years. This year we looked at the long story at the end of the book (The Joseph Story) and today we come to the end of that story and the end of the whole book...Fifty chapters now draw to a close.

It's often sad to come to the end of a book or a great story ...even when there's a happy ending to the story (as there is in the Joseph Story) still you hate to say good-bye... And this story has both a happy ending BUT ALSO sad because, in the scope of the whole book, we are NOT where we started. We began with LIFE...God bringing LIFE into being and God creating a Paradise and filling it with LIFE...but the book ends with death...a body in a coffin...and that's the end of Genesis...starts with life, ends with death...AND there's a sense that there's gonna be a sequel...

It's hard to reduce this final section to ONE theme because there are REALLY TWO giant ideas that run through the whole book and they both come home to roost here in the final scenes. I want to look at both themes today (almost like two sermons in one): the theme of forgiveness (in broken families) and, what is perhaps the theme of the entire book, benevolent providence – i.e. the Goodness of God demonstrated in the way He governs human events.

This is the wrap-up of the whole book, what literary scholars call the “denouement” (which means the untying – like a tangle or a horrible KNOT that finally gets loose and straightened out) AND YET...there's already BEEN an untying of the knot...this family has already been reunited...but...there's something that's just...NOT RIGHT...unfinished business SO TODAY...a second denouement/untying for this family. So let's get into it: 1) A 2nd Untying 2) The FIRST Theme 3) The Second Theme and a Little Mystery in the Text

It was a huge ordeal to bury their father, Jacob, in the land of Canaan. And they must've all been amazed at how the Pharaoh honored Jacob and sent the whole retinue of statesmen and soldiers...Even the Canaanites saw that THIS Jacob must've been an immense blessing to Egypt if they would mourn for him with so great a parade of mourners (God had promised Abraham, “In your people will all the families of the earth be blessed” – and the brothers saw that promise being fulfilled).

And now they make the long journey back to Egypt...I'm sure they felt a sense of “mission accomplished”...but slowly it dawns on them that, “Dad is not here to protect us anymore...” and soon their little suspicions and fears turn to full-blown paranoia. And they become convinced that Joseph, Mr. Prime Minister, is going to have his revenge... because that's what powerful people DO...when they have the opportunity the “stick it to you”!

They have never really addressed the way they got so SICK of his “tattle-tale-ing” and his prancing around as a kid (the father's pet) and how they were sick every time they heard his voice or saw his smug little face and how they eventually SOLD HIM (like human trafficking!)...And Joseph forgave them and never made them pay or (apparently) even talk about it and now they hear the sound of that “tell-tale heart” again (remember that?).

So, they hatch a plan...they ARE, after all, the sons of the snatcher/schemer (Jacob) and they KNOW how to manipulate and squirm (Ezk. 16.22) when they had to (it runs in the family)...SO THEY CONTRIVE A STORY and they send word, “Your father commanded before he died, saying, 'Say this to Joseph, 'Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.'”

They finally make a kind of confession to this brother whom they sold into slavery and they make this confession come from the mouth of their deceased father, “Dad said to tell you that we sinned against you...”

And then they speak directly...as if to agree with their dad (who, BTW, probably never even said those words) after they USE this trick to sort of break the ice and broach the subject of what they did...after they use this ploy to actually name their sin, THEN they say it for themselves, "And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father."

And they grovel before him and swear to be his slaves if ONLY HE WILL NOT DO what all powerful people DO in these situations – they USE their advantage to dominate – "Please! Spare us!"

And Joseph sees the 11 sheaves bowing to him (just like that dream at the start of the story) and then he articulates what may be the THEME of the entire Book of Genesis, "But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for YOU, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." (19-20)

Turns out this KNOT was not really untied...and the tangle was not REALLY resolved...Jacob sought all his life to be blessed...he snatched and grabbed...and in the end, he put down all the managing and controlling...he rested and he received blessing and died a blessed man (the tangle untied)... BUT WAIT...there's more: the sons still had issues...tangles in this broken family that God is now untying and resolving – a second denouement, ONE MORE UNTYING.

Now, the themes that emerge here are so big that they can't be ignored. One is what I'm calling "Benevolent Providence" and the other is one we ALL face many times in our lives and families, i.e. forgiveness (esp. in broken families)...

In some sense, Joseph's words are the theme of the whole Book, "You meant it for evil but God meant it for good". Genesis began in a Garden and there man meant evil...tried to dethrone God...to do away with God...That act unleashed death and evil on our whole planet...it reverberates in the death of Abel. It's like a contagion...But Genesis is really the story of God governing all things for GOOD. He is NEVER taken by surprise but has somehow figured all things into His great overarching plan...not merely allowing things to happen...but somehow incorporates our own evil into His plan so that goodness comes out of our evil. God wanted Joseph to go down to Egypt and...while HE HIMSELF is not guilty of sin...HE USED THE BROTHERS' jealousy and hate to accomplish His plan...SO THAT "many lives would be preserved".

Out of their freely chosen envy and evil God brought good...saved the Egyptians and saved Jacob's family... got the chosen family into Egypt where they could thrive and multiply and where ONLY a Big, BIG MIRACLE would get them out.

It's the MORAL OF THE STORY, the theme of the book, "what WE meant for evil, God means for good." He rules with absolute sovereignty...and yet evil exists ... and yet EVIL will never thwart His goodness... but somehow... will even serve the bigger plan.

We see this theme woven through the entire Bible but articulated in an equally famous text in the NT, Romans ch. 8... "God causes ALL THINGS to work together for GOOD to those who love God and are called according to His purpose"...

My failings...the hurts and wounds inflicted against me by others... what we deem to be accidents or acts of nature...somehow...in ways that are OFTEN unclear except to the trusting heart...SOMEHOW they are acts of Benevolent Providence...

And in the dark...when we JUST CAN'T see a single good that's coming from this bad situation...as when Joseph was taken away in handcuffs from the family he loved...as when he went down into Egypt...down into the dungeon...forgotten for years... and it was all totally ABSURD... when we JUST CAN'T see a single good that's coming from this bad situation... Then, for US, THE One point of light...that keeps us walking is the Cross of Jesus Christ.

The Christian sees that out of that one MOMENT when evil and absurdity most triumphed and when everything that was good, true and beautiful was eradicated ...WHEN God came to His fallen planet, in Jesus Christ, and was spat upon and punctured and rejected and ridiculed...THAT MOMENT WAS actually planned BY GOD from all eternity... The apostles included that fact in their earliest sermons. Here's Peter's sermon from Acts ch. 2, "this Man, Jesus, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." (Act 2.23)

Was it OUR evil that put Jesus Christ to death or was it God's plan? Mysteriously...it was BOTH...AND it will be the moment that UNRAVELS ALL EVIL...and the start of something that will eventually make all things new...

Now, before we look at this second theme, let's talk about how to use this first theme in your life. The idea of Benevolent Providence is seen throughout the Bible. Joseph verbalizes it here, but Paul makes it into a kind of overarching key for interpreting life – "all things work together for good..."

And of course, Paul was writing to these early Christians who were facing ALL THINGS...a lot of pain and opposition. Life in the ancient world was hard and for these young Christians it was becoming a lot harder. And I know Christianity is sort of SOLD today as a way to escape the pain...but IS that how it really works? Do Christians get healthy and wealthy and do they avoid the painful stuff that others face?

(If the Cooks make it to the Philippines, are they going to be able to tell the Christian homes from the non-Christian homes...because all the Christian homes are undamaged?)

What's different for the Christian is NOT the degree of pain he faces (often it's greater than what non-Christians face) the difference is what the Good News enables us to DO with the pain.

Because we believe the Cross of Jesus Christ was NOT only the ultimate tragedy of human

history but ALSO the WAY that God would preserve many lives, the ultimate rescue...and it led to resurrection, the new world breaking into the old FALLEN world... because we believe that we also believe these lesser tragedies (and they're still TRAGIC!) but we believe they TOO will work together for good. And the good is defined by Paul, not as a care-free fun-fest of health and wealth but the INNER TRANSFORMATION of the real me. I am being changed; my character is being made like the character of Jesus Christ – “to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren” – and it hurts! Ask Joseph! But, in the Gospel pleasure, pain, heights, depths, successes and failures have an end, a goal i.e. to renovate and beautify the real me.

Difficulties don't automatically make you a better person. They quite often make people bitter/biting and fearful and over-sensitive and self-protective...but the Gospel of Benevolent Providence can help you face tough stuff differently.

But if YOU don't answer the call...if you don't trust in this God who absorbed our guilt in order to have us and beautify us...if you don't WANT to live “according to his purpose”, you really have no assurance that “it's all gonna work out in the end”... ‘Good News is, He's calling today.

The second theme is forgiveness and reconciliation, especially that kind that can change a broken family. This is the first time it's recorded that the brothers actually own their sin and as Scott Peck says, they “come to terms” with it, meaning, they “name it.”

They get there in a kind of funny way as I mentioned. They put their confession in the mouth of their Father, “Dad said we're really sorry for what we did...” and then in the next sentence they make it their OWN declaration, “Now please forgive the transgression of the servants of your father's God” (meaning “US”!)

And the mystery...that might help us get a better handle on forgiveness and reconciliation is this simple question: why did Joseph weep after he heard those words? V. 18 “And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.” The question is, “Why?”

I admit, it's a little like asking, “Why was Mona Lisa smiling?” (Of course, no one knows.) OR maybe a little like asking, about that shortest verse in the whole Bible, John 11.35...Jesus Christ standing outside the tomb of Lazarus and it says simply, “Jesus wept.” We don't really know why...but what about Joseph? (I'm indebted to my focus group here).

Well, it could have been because he's already told his brothers back in ch. 45, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” (vv.4-5) and maybe he's grieved that they didn't believe him...back then and years have gone by and they still...wonder.

Maybe, he's grieved that the sins of the fathers are still seen in the sons...they're still manipulating!

Or maybe he STILL doesn't feel like ONE OF THEM... he didn't when he was a kid and they still see him differently...not simply "one of us."

Or maybe...it's the clearest moment of fulfillment... they are not bowing to some big prime minister, it's to HIM to Joseph, just like the dream said...and now it's happening...

OR maybe the mention of the words, "sin... transgression ...evil...wrong" all these words remind him of the whole long painful ordeal?

You know what I think?

I don't know...why did Mona Lisa smile? What I think is: families are complicated...I think emotions are complicated...our past and our hurts and abuse and memories...they're all very complicated...Probably all the options I mentioned came into play.

If I had to guess though I'd look at the words Joseph says, "Joseph wept... and said, 'Do not be afraid for am I in God's place?'"

Turns out the two themes are deeply inter-related. Because Joseph believes in Benevolent Providence he can forgive. Families need to forgive each other...and while there CAN be true forgiveness even when the offending party really isn't sorry or even truthful about the offense... but RECONCILIATION requires truth and sins have to be named and faced...if there's going to be restoration of broken relationships.

Joseph does forgive...and HAS forgiven...and THIS is another step in reconciliation...and what makes that next step possible is the truth – the admission of the sin and Joseph's admission... "I am NOT God...but I do know Him...He's the God of 'hesed'...covenant loyalty...the God of the oath...of grace...HE IS THE GOD WHO DEALS WITH SIN...and who, in Jesus Christ, names sin and pays for it...to know Him makes forgiveness real...and makes reconciliation possible even for the broken-est of families.

So...Genesis ends...but I think we all have a feeling...there MAY be a sequel.