

THE ROAD PAVED WITH GOD INTENTIONS, CONCLUSION

Sermon, August 23, 2020

Text: Genesis 45:1-15, 50:15-21

Today we'll finish this three week series on the story of Joseph; the title of which was inspired by the proverb, *"The road to hell is paved with good intentions."* As mentioned in the sermon July 5, something many if not all of us know from at-times bitter experience is that well-intended actions ... actions we did (*or did not*) do, and/or actions done to us by the intentional or thoughtless (*or, more often than not, usually a mixture of both*) deeds of others ... can often have disastrous, even hellish, results. In the providence of God, however, seemingly disastrous actions can wind up with God intended results. One might say the road to heaven ... the road to wholeness, shalom, salvation ... is paved with God intentions. In fact, that's really the summary of the whole biblical drama from Genesis to Revelation.

As we noted a few weeks back, when Joseph was a teenager, he had some great dreams for his life. However, all of those dreams appeared shattered when his older brothers got fed up with the favoritism their father Jacob showed Joseph. It was no secret the patriarch Jacob favored Joseph, his youngest son, over all his other sons. Most believe Joseph was Jacob's favored child because he was the oldest son of his favorite wife, Rachel, who died in childbirth when Joseph was fifteen. Some think maybe Joseph was given special attention by Jacob because Jacob had special compassion for this son who lost his mother, and lost her during that turbulent time of adolescence when emotions are just so intense. Yes, good parenting dictates that the parent should not love one child more than another; all children should be loved equally. However, the wise parent recognizes that, at times, some children just need more love than others, some need more attention than others, some need more grace than others, in order to make it. So, maybe Jacob was actually trying to be a good father with the best intentions. But again, in spite of our best efforts, good intentions can often have disastrous results.

Whatever the cause of his favoring of Joseph, we know from the story that it sowed the seeds of rivalry and jealousy in Joseph's older brothers, who stripped him of his robe, threw him in a deep pit, and eventually sold him as a slave to a caravan heading toward Egypt. After they had done this, they took Joseph's robe, spread animal blood over it, maybe used knives to put a few fake fang tears in it, then took it to their father Jacob, and said, "Joseph is dead." Now, sibling rivalry has been common since the days of Cain and Abel, but this really was an unthinkable crime, even in that day and age (*as a related aside ... another reason Jacob may have favored Joseph is that as one reads through Genesis, we find his other sons did some pretty nasty things along the way that rightfully angered the patriarch, but that's another sermon ... or series of sermons*). In the following chapters we read that it wasn't long before Joseph found himself wasting away in a forgotten corner of an Egyptian prison. Thanks to his brothers, he had fallen about as far in life as anyone could go. This was certainly not what he dreamed of in his younger years. But it was there, even at one of the bottom places of life, that Joseph remained faithful and went on to experience and discover the love of God that would not let him go ... a God Who would bless him and use him to be a blessing to many.

You know, sooner or later we may all find ourselves on the bottom of life, and quite often it was because someone else helped put us there. Maybe you were sent to the bottom by a parent who was too hurt or preoccupied to love you. Maybe you were sent to the bottom by a friend who betrayed a trust, or who spread innuendos or lies about you. Maybe the bottom came when someone you loved walked out. Maybe the bottom came when you were received a terrible diagnosis. Maybe the bottom came when your job was declared nonessential or your school was closed or you had to be isolated from friends or you had to postpone your wedding or you had to stay home from church and you became terrified to leave your home or any of the other almost countless effects caused by this government-imposed "fifteen days to flatten the curve" that is now in day 167. Whatever the cause, you were at the bottom, and maybe you felt like your life was over. Like Joseph, this was not what you dreamed of. Maybe you feel like you might as well be wasting away in a forgotten corner of an Egyptian jail. But if, like Joseph, we lift our eyes in faith and determine to live by faith, no matter what; well, we may find it can change everything ... if nothing else, it can give hope and purpose and determination. Like Joseph, we can not only survive, we can come up from the bottom *better*, not bitter, AND go on to be a huge blessing to others.

As we read in Genesis 41, Joseph eventually rose from the bottom of that jail to become the second most powerful man in Egypt, after interpreting the dream of Pharaoh about the upcoming seven years of abundance and seven years of famine. We read that he married, had children, and gave thanks day after day to his God Who was faithful. His first son he named Manasseh, which means *"makes to forget."* When that boy was born, Joseph said, *"It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household."* He named his second son Ephraim, which means *"makes fruitful"* or *"twice fruitful."* When that boy was born, Joseph said, *"It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."* When the predicted famine came, father Jacob sent Joseph's brothers to Egypt to buy food where Joseph was now in charge of the distribution of relief aid. Many years had passed since the brothers sold

“little Joe” into slavery; remember, he would have been about seventeen at the time. He entered Pharaoh’s service at thirty (Gen 41:46), seven years of abundance came, and now they are in the second year of famine (45:6). So he is now about 38 or 39, he is the prime minister of Egypt with an Egyptian name (*“Zaphaneth Paneah”*) wearing Egyptian clothes speaking the Egyptian language. Of course, his brothers didn’t recognize him. But Joseph knew who they were. How many nights had he seen their faces in his nightmares as he relived that awful day they stripped him, threw him in a pit, and sold him to slavers? Yes, he knew them all too well.

At first he kept his identity a secret and used his power to toy with the brothers. He treated them as strangers, which is what we often do to people who have hurt us. He spoke to them harshly, which is also something we like to do to people who have hurt us. He called them spies and threw them in jail; he sent them back home with money hidden in their sacks to make them look like thieves and later hid a silver cup in the sack of the youngest. Like Joseph, we often do all in our power to manipulate situations to make those who have hurt us look bad; we like getting others to see them in a bad light. These are the actions of a man who wants a little payback. But Joseph apparently found no joy in it. No one ever really finds joy in payback. As we pick up the story today in Genesis 45, eventually Joseph took a long, hard look into his brothers’ eyes. I’m sure he also was thinking about his father, whom they all loved; as intimated at the end of chapter 44 and as mentioned during the Time With the Children, I think the thought of causing his father more heartache was just unbearable to Joseph. So, he began to weep. He wept so loudly, we are told, that many Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard it. That was the sound of compassionate forgiveness; that was the sound of letting go; that was the sound of finding gracious freedom from the hurt.

After the tearful reconciliation, the brothers eventually returned to Canaan to bring their father Jacob and all their families back to Egypt. There they all lived until Jacob died. Jumping ahead to the end of Genesis, years later, it seems apparent the brothers couldn’t quite believe they were forgiven. The brothers assumed Joseph didn’t kill them out of deference to their father, and now that Jacob is gone, the brothers were terrified. They came back before Joseph and bowed down before him again, just as Joseph had dreamed they would do so many years ago. This time, however, they were bowing not out of respect, but in abject fear. Well, this made Joseph weep again. Joseph had to convince his brothers that he was really was free to forgive them, that he was doing this not out of obligation or duty, that he wasn’t being gracious just because of his father.

Joseph says two very important things to them. The first was to ask his brothers, *“Am I in the place of God?”* There is so much freedom waiting for those who learn they do not have to be the judge. We *have* a judge. And so do those who hurt us. Judgment is a business reserved to sacred activity; let God deal with those who hurt us. It is hard enough to live in this world that is so full of imperfection; we are always, always going to be hurt or adversely affected by something or someone in life ... and we are going to hurt others as well. Trust me on this, but it is impossible to live in this world with any peace if you assume the role of judging everyone who hurts you. After a while your heart will be so full of anger and bitterness that no room will be left for love, or hope, or joy. This is why Jesus taught us to turn the other cheek. It wasn’t meant to let the abuser off the hook, but to let *us* off the hook for being the judge ... and carrying all the onerous burdens a judge has to carry. It was meant to make *us* free.

The second thing Joseph says is even more profound: *“Even though you intended to do harm to me,”* he said, *“God intended it for good.”* And there it is ... *God* intentions ... the mystery of God’s unfolding drama in Joseph’s life; the mystery of God’s unfolding drama in all our lives. As a direct result of the brothers’ actions, Joseph was sent to Egypt. As a result of being in Egypt, he rose to his position in Pharaoh’s government. And as a result of rising to this position of power, he could save the family ... and the whole Messianic and biblical drama of redemption which started with Abraham continues, and will continue to its grand fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The evil of the brothers got Joseph into the right place. As Paul said in Romans 8, *“All things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose.”* God can redeem any evil with His own good intentions.

Now, the big question: Why does God allow evil, and more to the point, why does God use evil at times to get His people to the right place? Sure, Joseph was in a powerful position in Egypt to keep the Hebrews from starving thus ensuring the continuance of the Messianic family line. But weren’t there easier ways for God to get this done; easier ways to get him there? Did Joseph really have to go through betrayal, brutality, slavery and prison along the way? Why do good people have to be pushed around by mean people just to get to the right place?

Well, I can answer that. My answer is, *“I don’t know.”* It’s one of the questions I’ll ask when I get to heaven.

What I *do* know is that God can and does work all things together for good. I also know God is much more interested about who we are than where we get to in life; He is more interested that we be faithful, come what may. The good intention of God is not just to get us to the “right place” but to mold us into gracious, useful and blessing people who live by His great faithfulness, to live as people who are called by God according to His purposes and who will live according to those purposes, no matter what ... trusting in His love that will never let us go.