

# THE ROAD PAVED WITH GOD INTENTIONS, PART TWO

Sermon, August 16, 2020

Texts: Genesis 42 selections; Romans 8:28-39

Some of you may remember the story about how the Devil was planning to go into retirement ... it was shortly after he celebrated his 666<sup>th</sup> birthday,<sup>1</sup> so he thought about hanging up the pitchfork. So, in preparation for his retirement, the Devil decided to have a yard sale (*or better yet, a fire sale*) and placed price tags on all his diabolical tools. On the day of Hell's Yard Sale, all his devilish instruments were laid out. There was the hatchet of hatred (*that's the one people often refuse to bury*), the drill of depression (*which grinds people into lethargy and inactivity*), the grating sandpaper of self-righteousness (*self-righteousness always gratingly rubs people the wrong way*), the cutting jigsaw of jealousy (*which works to cut misshapen messes in the best of relationships*), the needle-nosed pliers of pettiness, the vise grip of viciousness, the twisted and tangled coils of corruption, the heat lamp of lust, and so on. Set apart from the rest of the diabolical devices was a harmless-looking, nondescript tool, one which seemed to be worn more than the others and it was priced extremely high. "What's the name of this tool?" asked one of the customers. Replied the Devil, "That tool is Discouragement." Replied the customer, "Why have you priced it so high?" The Devil's response: "Because *Discouragement is more useful to me than my other tools combined. When no other tool seems to work, I can always count on that one to do the job. I can get inside a person's heart with that tool when I cannot get near him with any of the others. It is so badly worn because I use it on almost everyone, since so few people know it belongs to me.*"

By the way, the Devil *hasn't* retired. And discouragement is still the devil's tool. He continues to use it to weaken the will and resolve of good people every day. A new Center for Disease Control recently reported the following: 11% of pandemic-discouraged American adults of all ages reported seriously considering suicide in June 2020, about double the percentage who did so June 2019. Interestingly, rates of suicide ideation were highest among 18 to 24-year-olds (25%) and unpaid caregivers for adults (30%). The report also found the prevalence of symptoms of depression and anxiety quadrupled and tripled, respectively, compared to last year at this same time. In total, fully forty percent of Americans reported some mental health issue or substance abuse related to the pandemic<sup>2</sup> ... no, they did not have the disease itself, but they have certainly been afflicted by the related restrictions and fears. At times discouragement works like a jackhammer, breaking one's resolve quickly and suddenly, other times it's like being pecked to death by a relentless duck as day after day and hour after hour it just peck-peck-pecks away at your stability of mind. Discouragement ... the devil's most effective tool. "When no other tool seems to work, I can always count on that one to do the job." When discouraged, we often find ourselves doing and saying and thinking all kinds of things we wouldn't even dream of otherwise.

The patriarch Jacob was certainly discouraged. In our reading from Genesis, he throws up his hands in despairing discouragement, and wails, "Everything is against me!" A severe famine had now come to the land and the family of Jacob. The news had come north out of Egypt that Egypt had stored up great supplies for the eventuality of a famine; while the rest of the known world was in danger of mass starvation, there was an abundance of grain available there (*unbeknownst to Jacob, it was his son who had engineered Egypt's abundance!*). So the patriarch Jacob instructed ten of his sons to go down to the courts of Egypt to plead for relief supplies for the famine. That was the occasion that brought Joseph and his brothers together again ... these brothers who had treacherously delivered Joseph into slavery a week ago (*actually, verse 41:46 tells us he was 30 years old when made Prime Minister of Egypt; he was seventeen when his brothers sold him into slavery, then seven years of abundance before the famine, twenty-two years have transpired since the events we talked about last week.*) Remember how the brothers connived to get rid of this little brother; they threw him in a deep cistern, held him captive there until they sold him away to some slavers, and then lied to their father that Joseph was killed by a wild animal. Well, through a long and remarkable and divinely-orchestrated chain of events (*which you can read about in chapters 39-41*), throughout his ordeals in Egypt Joseph prospered again and again. He eventually wound up winning so much favor with the Pharaoh that he was placed in a position of tremendous influence, becoming the equivalent of prime minister of the greatest empire in the known world.

As we pick up the story in chapter 42, having made their journey to Egypt, these sons of Jacob, Joseph's brothers, came into the court and saw this Egyptian prime minister in his Egyptian garb with his Egyptian mannerisms and they heard him speaking the Egyptian language as he was called by his Egyptian name Zaphena Paneah. They had no clue it was Joseph! But Joseph recognized them; although he didn't let on ... he keeps up the act, speaking to his brothers through a translator and accuses them of being spies. He says, "Prove to me you are not spies. Go back home with the grain, but one of you will stay here in Egypt in prison as a hostage, and bring back your youngest brother

<sup>1</sup> This was a bit of a play on my recent 66<sup>th</sup> birthday for the Revelation 13:18-minded; for the record, I'm not planning to retire anytime soon. During a recent online Hymn Sing I came across the story of the Rev. John Rippen, who served as pastor of the Carter's Lane Baptist Church in London for 63 years, 1775 through 1838. I've been here 23 years, so I got forty more to go!

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.insider.com/cdc-11-percent-us-adults-seriously-considered-suicide-in-june-2020-8>

*with you when you return!"* Joseph has the second eldest brother, Simeon, bound and imprisoned before their eyes; he then gives orders to fill the other brothers' bags full of grain. Then Joseph had his servants secretly slip the silver (*which the brothers offered for payment*) back into the bags. They return home, they tell their father all that transpired, they try to explain why Simeon is not with them, and they then tell him this Egyptian governor now wants to see their youngest brother Benjamin. As they are explaining all this, they are horrified to discover the pouches of silver in their bags. That means they are going to be accused of theft, which would most likely mean Simeon would be imprisoned for good, and they could never hope to return to get more grain for their starving families.

Put yourself in the patriarch's shoes (*or sandals*). Remember, there's a famine. He and his wives and children and grandchildren and livestock are all starving. He's already lost his favorite son, now his second-born son is being held prisoner in Egypt, and now this Egyptian official is demanding to see *another* of his sons. Jacob laments in verse 36: *"Joseph is no more. Simeon is no more. And now you want to take Benjamin. And everything is against me!"* I can see Jacob glaring at his boys and saying, *"This is the second time! This is the second time you have gone out of my home and come back without one of your brothers. And now you want to take little Benjamin? Are you crazy? Every time you go out of here you come back without one of your brothers. I'd rather starve to death than let you go back to Egypt with Benjamin in your care!"*

Now remember, this is the same Jacob who one night years ago had a fantastic dream in which he saw a stairway ascending to heaven with the angels ascending and descending upon it; we looked at that story July 19<sup>th</sup>. In that vision God promised Jacob He would always be with Jacob and watch over him wherever he would go. He promised and assured Jacob He would never, ever, ever leave him. Now, years later, Jacob's sons come back from Egypt and relate all that transpired. Jacob assesses the situation, and says in so many words, *"The truth as I see it is that Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and everything is against me."* To the despairing, discouraged Jacob, it seems the God who promised to never, ever, ever leave him ... **left**.

Now, what is the reality? The reality, the truth, is not at all as Jacob perceived it to be. Jacob was convinced his once-favorite son Joseph was long dead. Jacob said with conviction and certainty, *"Joseph is no more."* What was the truth? Joseph was **some** more. He was a WHOLE LOT more! Not only was Joseph very much alive, he was the prime minister of the most powerful nation in the known world! He was the very human instrument whom God had appointed to bring the people of Israel into the land of Egypt for their immediate salvation and preservation. Jacob wailed, *"Simeon is no more."* Well, Simeon was not dead! In fact, Simeon was never, ever more safe and alive in his entire life as he was right now in Egypt, under the guard and protection of his brother, the prime minister! Jacob is wringing his hands saying, *"Everything is against me,"* when in reality everything is **for** him! The unseen, divine reality is that God had moved heaven and earth on behalf of Jacob and his family. God never, ever left Jacob.

Hear again these words of hope and promise from Romans 8: *"What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all -- how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him Who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

If Jacob, this patriarch who had witnessed and experienced so much of the reality of God, can be so overcome with discouragement, and say *"Everything is against me,"* ... then so will we, at some time or another. It will happen. That's when we **must** be on guard against the Devil's principle tool, and probably especially so in these trying times. God IS for us. He is faithful to keep His promises. We must remember the reality is not always the discouragement-magnified nightmare we perceive it to be. Our perspective is limited ... as someone once put it, we may have a point of view; but God has view! All the pieces of the puzzle aren't within our grasp, but God does have the "big picture" ... and He does clearly promise to work all things together for good for those who love Him, who are called according to His purposes ... and who go on to live by faith accordingly no matter what.

So many of you have stood where Jacob stood. Some of you may be standing right now where Jacob stood, especially in these unprecedented times ... I mean, here we are one hundred and fifty five days into our "fifteen days to flatten the curve." We shut down America, impoverished millions, forced businesses to fail, isolated ourselves, stayed home from worship and closed our schools over a virus that has a 98% survival rate, many of our inner cities are in borderline-anarchic chaos, downtown Manhattan and Chicago look like bombed out war zones, and frankly many of us are cynically worried our democracy is at serious risk of being lost in the mail come November. Apart from all that, others of you have endured loss, you have been overwhelmed with one diagnoses too many, you have been in situations where nothing seemed to be going well, and in short you have felt in some form or another everything and/or everyone has been against you. But over 23-plus years of ministry here, I have been many times humbled and privileged to witness how so many of you have been seemingly impervious to the devil's principle tool; you have refused to be discouraged ... and you have been an encouragement. Because you have believed you can trust the God of Jacob Who has promised never, ever to leave you or forsake you.

We'll continue this story one more week.