

Intended for good

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Date: 25 June 2023

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[0 : 0 0] a door, he always opens a window. Now, there is a phrase that you might have heard in the Christian life. It's a phrase that people have said to me, usually when I've just been disappointed by something. It's a phrase that you might have heard people say to you. If you haven't heard someone say that to you yet, you almost definitely will at some point. It's the kind of phrase that's meant well, meant to encourage someone in a rough time. It's kind of one of the quintessential quick fix Christian phrases. It has about the same relational impact as, oh, well, don't worry, there's plenty more fish in the sea. It's kind of a comfort, but not really. Out of a desire to comfort someone, we often end up saying something along the lines of, well, don't worry, God will use this for your good. We mean well when we say that. But often that can feel like very cold comfort, because how do people hear that? Well, when they lose their job, when a relationship or marriage breaks down, when they lose a loved one, when they get a negative diagnosis, or even times when they just feel so low and they do not understand why. Telling someone, remember, God will use this for your good. It's a good thing. It actually just feels completely wrong. Because it totally misses the point. This pain is very real. These things really matter. If we were really honest, most of us would probably say, I know that God can use it, but honestly, I would rather just have the easy thing. So is it wrong? Well, that's the problem though, isn't it? The person who says that isn't incorrect. God does use the hard things of our lives for good.

But the question is, how? And the thing that we have to wrestle with is, how do we relate to a God who intends even the evil we see for good? You've heard Ruth just read in verse 20 of our passage, you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done in the saving of many lives. In another translation, you planned evil against me. God planned it for good. And so today we're going to grapple with what it means to have a God who not just uses, but intends good, even through the evil we experience. Now, we are at the very end of Genesis, the end of our series in Joseph's life. It's a book that started with the creation of the world, with the beginning of life, and is now ending with the deaths of two of its main characters. The first of which is the patriarch Jacob, who dies resting in God's peace. So that's our first point this morning, resting in God's peace.

Last year, we witnessed the sad death of Queen Elizabeth, whose funeral was watched by over 40 million people, with a quarter of a million people having queued to pay their respects.

Those figures show something of just how much she was loved, how much respect people had for our queen. And that makes sense for a monarch who is given 70 years of her life to rule, that there would be deep respect. In Genesis 50, we see that Jacob gets something that kind of equates to a royal funeral.

[3 : 2 6] Now, all the way back in chapter 23, we would have read that Jacob's grandfather Abraham had bought a field of a man in the land of Canaan. It's the field mentioned in chapter 49, verse 29, that Ruth read.

He used it to bury his wife, but all the subsequent generations of that family have been buried in this cave, in this field. Isaac and Rebecca have been buried there, and even Jacob, himself, has buried his wife Leah there. In choosing to be buried back in this cave, Jacob is saying to everyone, I'm choosing to identify my life with this lineage, with my heritage, my people, my forefathers.

And therefore, in verse 29 and 31 of chapter 49, we have the words, he was gathered to his people. Through God's providence and sovereignty over the events of Jacob's life and Joseph's life, Jacob is now living the high life in Egypt. He's surrounded with his family, living in safety in Egypt. But when it comes time for him to die, he wants to give up on the glitz and glamour of Egypt and be buried in a foreign land, in a cave with his ancestors. And the first 14 verses of chapter 50 expand on how remarkable this funeral is. I wonder how you imagined it as we read through this.

It gives a sense of just how important and how highly honoured this family have become in Egypt. Joseph has had his father embalmed. And in verse 2 of chapter 50, we hear that's a 40-day process.

It's a long time to preserve the body. And then on top of that, the Egyptians are mourning for 70 days. If you look back in the history books, this is only something reserved for the highest of kings in Egypt. This is almost a Pharaoh's burial. And in fact, when Joseph asks Pharaoh to let him go to bury Jacob in Canaan, not only does he say yes, but follow along from verse 7, all Pharaoh's officials accompanied him, the dignitaries of his court and the dignitaries of Egypt, besides all the members of Joseph's household and his brothers and those belonging to his father's household. Only their children and flocks and herds were left in Goshen. Chariots and horsemen also went up with him. It was a very large company. The entire ruling class of Egypt goes to bury this foreigner. And for another week, there's mourning. And so much so that the Canaanites, who are probably a little confused and terrified that half of Egypt has just turned up on their doorstep, they name the place Abel Misery, meaning the mourning place of the Egyptians. This death has been marked as incredibly significant, not just for this family, but for the whole of Egypt. A man having died honored among the people, even though he was a foreigner. And so this family finally buries their father. And in real terms, he is gathered to his people.

[6 : 39] And this is not just a sentimental moment in Genesis, although it is lovely to hear him being buried along with all of his ancestors. But this is a reminder to those reading that for all the wealth of Egypt, for all the prosperity, this is not the home of God's people. This is not the land the Lord promised to them. Jacob could have had a pyramid, but instead he's got a cave in a foreign field.

And though they live in Egypt, what defines these people is that they are the family that received the covenant promises of God. They received them through Abraham, Isaac, and now Jacob. Jacob is identifying his life and identifying the lives of his family with the promises of the covenant-keeping God, knowing that those promises will keep going beyond his lifetime. So wonderfully, we see a God who's not only at work in keeping those promises, but at work through the whole story. And that's what's going to lead us on to our second point and the main focus of our time this morning, seeing God's providence.

Now, Jacob has come a long way from deceiving his brother and deceiving his father to buried at peace with his relatives. God has made a miraculous change in the story and in his life. But the question we're left with is, well, I wonder what's going to happen to his 12 warring offspring? Because they've not had a good rep in this story, have they? Selling their brother into slavery, fighting each other, fighting other people, committing horrendous deeds. Is this family going to reconcile last minute?

[8 : 24] What will it mean for them to figure out that they are God's people? Well, the first indication of whether this is going to go well or go badly happens in verse 15. So look down to that. The brothers say to one another, what if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him? So on one hand, even after the reconciliation with Joseph, after being given a land in Egypt, providing for their children through the famine, they wonder if just possibly Joseph might have just been acting the whole time. That maybe their dad had been the last line of defense and it was about to all come crashing down on their heads. Is Joseph finally going to get his revenge? The lack of trust remains. But also notice in verse 15, pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him. If we're reading carefully, we would have seen in this story that this is the first time that the brothers seem to collectively regret what they've done. They acknowledge that they have actually wronged Joseph. And there is a hint in that, that these brothers have really changed.

They've come to terms with how bad what they actually did was. So they send a letter to Joseph claiming that Jacob asked him to forgive his brothers. Now, we don't know from the text whether Jacob really did command this letter to be sent or whether they are just making it up to cover their backs. But Joseph receives it as if it is genuine. See what they request in verse 16, though. Your father left these instructions before he died. This is what you are to say to Joseph. I ask you to forgive your brothers the sin and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.

Now, please forgive the sins of the servants of God, of the God of your father. And so notice the change through that little section there. First, forgive your brothers. But secondly, forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.

These brothers are beginning to identify themselves with the same lineage that their father gave to them. They are being defined by their relationship to the God who has given them the promises and

the covenants. And so finally, it seems like the brothers are indeed penitent for what they've done. In the sight of God, they really see that what they have done to Joseph has been a terrible thing. That they regret selling him into slavery and all the pain that it's caused. And Joseph, hearing this news, weeps. We aren't told why he weeps. It could be for the lost years. It could be out of joy for their acknowledgement of what they've done. But we just know it affects him deeply.

[11:18] And so the brothers then come to him in verse 18. And again, the trust, you can tell, is still not there because they throw themselves on the floor before him and ask him for mercy, asking to be made his slaves.

They think that the best they could possibly hope for in this situation is to be made a slave in Egypt. Which, in one chapter's time in Exodus, will become quite an interesting thought.

But they're not expecting much other than mercy. At worst, judgment, at best, mercy. But what they get instead, we'll follow along with verse 19. Joseph said to them, says he isn't their judge. God is. They may have intended evil through their actions, but God intended it for good. And because of that, many lives have been saved. Not just Joseph's, but thousands in Egypt.

These brothers come expecting a harsh judgment. At best, mercy. And instead, what they find is peace and forgiveness and blessing and reconciliation. And that's because God has a better story to tell than they do.

[12:59] Because remember how this began back in Genesis 37? Joseph was dreaming of his brothers bowing down to him. And then those same brothers sell him into slavery.

And now, here we are, with those brothers bowing down to him, but nobody going into slavery. It's actually a beautiful restoration. They fear that he will treat them how they treated him.

And instead, what they get is grace, kindness, and forgiveness. Here is a story that, in 13 chapters, has moved from hatred to love, from division to unity, from famine in the wilderness to feasting in Egypt.

And Joseph, having become a slave all the way through to the prime minister of Egypt, God is able to change stories for good. But even knowing that, how often do we come to God the same way these brothers come to Joseph?

We know that we have done wrong when we sin against God. But so often we come to him thinking, well, I might get judgment. The very best I can hope for really is mercy.

[14:12] Look at what I've done. Yet the good news of the gospel is, we don't just get the mercy we need. We get the grace we don't deserve. Jesus, in one of his most famous parables, tells the story of the prodigal son running away, wasting his wealth and coming back to the father in disgrace.

He goes home expecting rejection, hoping at best to be made a servant. But let me read from Luke's gospel what happens to the son on the return to the father. If you want to follow along, it's Luke 15, starting at verse 20.

While he was a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, It's quick, bring the best robe, put it on him, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it.

Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and now is found. And so they began to celebrate.

[15:24] It's a beautiful picture in a well-loved story. Jesus is telling us that when we repent, God welcomes us home, just like this father welcomes his son.

We shouldn't expect cold mercy, but extravagant grace. And so often we look at our sin and we come grudgingly to Jesus, like the brothers come to Joseph, expecting begrudging forgiveness that just leaves us as slaves.

Yet just like the prodigal son, we are welcomed home by a father who opens his arms to us, forgives us, and graciously restores and blesses us.

Because we have a God who brings good out of evil. Just like he did with Joseph and the brothers. That is his pattern. That's his MO.

God brings good out of what is evil. But there is even more to this. If we go back to Genesis, the brothers' plan to get rid of Joseph out of hatred, God has used.

[16 : 29] But not just used, intended. One of the things we have to grapple with in this passage is it doesn't say, you intended this for evil, but God used it for good.

No, you intended this for evil, but God intended it for good. And the good that God brings out of it isn't just for the family. It goes way beyond the family to all of Egypt.

God repurposes this evil act for miraculous blessing. But we have to remember that for a long time it did not look like that. It has been 22 years since Israel, since Joseph was thrown into a pit and sold into slavery.

God's providence might look amazing in Genesis 50, but for a long time, for Joseph and his brothers, for the years of prison and slavery and struggle, it might have just seemed painful and pointless.

But yet it is our God's very nature to bring good out of bad, to intend things for good. And let's face it, we know this when we look at Jesus.

[17 : 38] When Jesus comes, he is despised and rejected. Even the closest of his followers deserts him. He ends up crucified, dead and buried. And yet, through all that suffering and through that distress and ultimately his death, God brings about the forgiveness of sins for all who believe in Christ.

In the resurrection, to share an eternal life of Christ forever. Humanity intended it for evil. God intended it for good. It is the nature of our Heavenly Father to bless us like this.

So what stops us from believing that he can use the evil we experience for good? And not just use, but intend. I think sometimes we really struggle with the idea that God really is in control at this level.

That he really is sovereign over all the evil things in this world as well as the good. It's disconcerting for us because it really makes us have to grapple with the idea that God is a lot bigger than we are. And we don't know the things that he does. God is not responsible for evil, yet is able to intend it for good. When we find ourselves struggling with this, sometimes we need to remember what the alternative would be.

[18 : 57] A God who has no power when evil comes up. A God who isn't able to intend anything through it. A God who ultimately evil has power over. And that is a God that would not be worth worshipping at all.

But instead, we're given the truth of a God who uses even what is evil for good. And that is hard to grapple with.

Because importantly, it doesn't mean we will always see how God manages that. It doesn't mean we'll be able to put our finger on any bad event that we see and say, I can see how God is intending this for good.

No, we have to come humbly to him, acknowledging that the way he does this is often beyond our comprehension. And yet, trust him anyway. In the worst things of our lives, sometimes all we can say is that he will definitely use those things to bring us closer to him, to show us how to depend on him more keenly.

And that will always be our highest good, even in the deepest pain. Romans chapter 8, verse 28, says this, we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

[20 : 15] For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. We know that in all things God is working for his glory and for our good to make us more like his Son, Jesus.

Our God is so sovereign at work through the evils of the world to bring about blessing, that it's a blessing that isn't just for us but for the whole world as he blesses people through those he has chosen.

Because that's the promise he made to Abraham right back at the start of Genesis, and that's a promise he continues to keep, that his people will be a blessing to the world even in the deepest evil. This might be beyond our comprehension, but isn't it such good news that God can take the worst things of our lives and the worst things that we see in the world and intend them for good, that he is not held at ransom when bad things happen but is able to intend them for good.

That is a God worth worshipping. And so yes, grappling with this is hard because we don't always know how God is doing it. But in Joseph's life we see someone who grappled with it and saw that God could turn even the very worst of situations for good because that is the God he believes in.

And so finally with that in our minds we look to these last verses looking forward to God's promises to come. The last few verses are just a small, sweet, fairly simple picture of the last 60 years of Joseph's life.

[21 : 51] He becomes a grandfather, a great-grandfather and then a great-great-grandfather. He even meets one of his grandsons called Makiah whose name in Hebrew interestingly means sold like Joseph was almost in honour of his grandfather.

The story of Joseph's life may have been bitter but it has been turned to good and these grandchildren and great-grandchildren are a sign of this. That God has kept his promises and will continue to keep them.

And so that's what we read in verses 24 and 25 at the end. Joseph says, I'm about to die but God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land, the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Right in line with his father and with his ancestors and even with his history in Egypt where he has lived most of his life, he knows that this is not his home, that God has prepared something better and will lead his people there.

God made promises to Abraham that some of his descendants would one day be enslaved in a land that was not their own for a long time but that he would be the one to rescue them out of that land and bring them to the land of promise.

[23 : 07] And there it is again, the providence of God intending evil for good. And so Joseph dies as his father did, believing the promises of God to be true and even making provision for his burial saying, God will surely come to your aid and then you must carry my bones up from this place.

He wants to be buried in the land that God has promised to his ancestors. And reflecting on this, Hebrews chapter 11 verse 22 says, By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones. Joseph's faith in his God leads him to give instructions that won't be possible for hundreds of years. Bury me in the land. That's not going to happen for a very long time. But Joseph absolutely believes that God will do what he has said.

In fact, if you come back this evening for our evening service, that is actually the passage when they do bury Joseph. So come back to this evening to hear the end of that story. But as with his ancestors, Joseph doesn't believe that the final goal for God's people is an earthly thing alone. He knows that one day God will keep all of his promises way into the future and that something greater would come. And he was right. Joseph's faith was in the right place because one day a man did come through whom all the nations of the earth were blessed.

[24 : 33] He would bring all of his people together into an eternal promised land because Jesus has come and he will one day take all of his people home to an eternal promised land forever.

We share in the faith of Joseph when we trust in this God in whose peace we rest, in whose providence we receive every blessing and in whose promises we trust.

The evil of these brothers led to their blessing and the saving of thousands of lives in Egypt. The evil of the cross led to the resurrection and the salvation for all of those who believe in Jesus. So imagine what it will look like when God brings together all of the evil of human history and intends the whole thing for good. That is worth being around for.

And that is a God that we can trust. A God that intends all things for good. And so with that in our minds let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[25 : 34] Amen. Amen. Amen.