

“Our Sovereign God”
Genesis 50:15-21
May 19, 2024

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s passage serves as a conclusion to the Joseph story, a story that has taken up almost a third of the book of Genesis. As the story begins, Joseph dreams that his brothers will bow down to him. But then his life takes several unexpected turns as he is sold into slavery by his brothers because of their resentment of the favor shown him by their father, Jacob. Things go from bad to worse in his life. He is bought by Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of high rank, and because of God’s blessing upon him, Joseph is soon put in charge of Potiphar’s household. But then it is all lost as he is falsely accused of sexual assault by Potiphar’s wife. He languishes in prison for years until by God’s hand he finds himself in Pharaoh’s court and is given a position second only to Pharaoh. Through all the ups and downs of his life, two theological truths emerge at the end of his life. These truths were an anchor to Joseph, and they can be to us as well as we face the inevitable changes and challenges of life.

During these final sermons that I am privileged to preach here, I am choosing texts that I trust will be helpful to my church family. We are all looking to an unknown future. It’s really always been that way, but it’s more apparent at a transitional time like the one our church is currently experiencing. Life is filled with unexpected twists and turns. You may have in mind a script for your own life, but life easily goes off script. That was certainly Joseph’s experience. Clarity will often come at the end, as it did for Joseph. The meaning of all the suffering and uncertainty of his life came into focus for him. When we face times of uncertainty, the two theological truths of this passage are like a drink of cool water to a parched tongue.

I. God Is God (and You Are Not)

Joseph’s father, Jacob, has just died, and the event triggers a new round of insecurity in the hearts of Joseph’s brothers. When they had power over him, they had used their power to treat him cruelly, selling him into slavery. Now that he has power over them, they are fearful that he will do the same. They fear that Joseph has only been waiting for Jacob’s death to seek his revenge against them, and now that Joseph is no longer impeded by Jacob’s disapproval of his act of revenge against them, the brothers worry that the time has finally come. They’re so afraid that they send a messenger to him with what is almost certainly a fabricated message. The message was essentially this: “Dad told us before he died that he wanted you to forgive us and not repay the evil we did to you.” It seemed to be a safe lie, since the only one who could

refute it was dead. But if Jacob really had wanted to say that, he would most certainly have said it directly to Joseph and not through his brothers.

Their deception was unnecessary due to Joseph's good theology, a theology expressed in his question, **"Am I in the place of God?"** (50:19). Don't miss the importance of the statement just before that. **"Do not fear."** I am convinced that good theology is an underappreciated asset, even being able to deliver us from fear.

Let's take a little time to explore more carefully Joseph's recognition that God is God and Joseph is not. As a result of that belief he renounces any right of vengeance, because to do so would have been to put himself in the place of God. Joseph recognized what Paul wrote centuries later. **"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'"** (Romans 12:19). Only God has the knowledge and power to judge and to repay. When we give someone the silent treatment in an attempt to pay them back for hurting us, we are putting ourselves in the place of God.

This particular sin of putting ourselves in God's place lies at the heart of much sin. It is significant that this was the first sin of the human race. When Satan came to Adam and Eve, he tempted them to eat the forbidden fruit in order that they might be as God. This is the sin of wanting to be in control of our lives. Seeking to repay those who hurt us is just one way of trying to be in control. We can see in Joseph's brothers two other ways of putting ourselves in God's place by seizing control of our lives. One is dishonesty. When Joseph's brothers send this messenger, they send him with a lie about their father's last request that Joseph forgive them. One of the main reasons people lie is the attempt to make reality what they want it to be. Joseph's brothers wanted the reality to be that Joseph would not seek his revenge, so they made up such a reality. They weren't sure the reality God had authored would be good enough for them, so they had to "improve" upon it by changing that reality. Lying is essentially a control issue, arising out of our attempt to wrest control of our lives from God. We don't like the reality God has given, so we attempt to change it. We don't like the reality of having to pay so much in taxes, so we lie on the tax return in an attempt to change reality. We're trying to be God-like in making reality what we want it to be. We don't like the reality of not having as much money as some of our friends, so we lie about it by living beyond our means. Dishonesty is an attempt to seize control of our lives from God.

A second way Joseph's brothers act differently than Joseph and try to stand in the place of God is through their fear and worry. Joseph says to them, **"Do not fear"** because they were full of a fearful worry. Worry is another form of being in the place of God. We worry when we think we know exactly what should happen, but we are afraid that God is going to mess it up. We think we

know what the good thing is that God should do, but we're not quite convinced that God sees things exactly as we do, so we worry. Our idea of the way life should work usually takes the form of wanting everything to work out as smoothly as possible. For example, we want God to make everything go smoothly for our children, and we worry that he won't be up to the task.

Let me say it like this. True humility says, "I don't know for sure how things ought to work out. I don't have the confidence to know that what I think is right, so I trust God with this task." It is when we give up the control that only God should have that we become humble. In a sermon he preached on this passage, Tim Keller pointed out a wonderful irony in this. He said that the fastest way to become like Satan is to try to become like God, while the fastest way to become godly is to renounce the attempt to have a godlike control over your life.

Think of it like this. Have you ever been riding in a car in which the driver made you nervous because you lacked confidence in their skills at the wheel? Your tendency in such a situation is to want to take control of the automobile yourself. The reason we want to be in control of our lives is that we don't think God is up to the task. So if we are going to be able to be humble and give up control to God, we are going to have to learn to trust him.

II. God Is in Control

Verse 20 contains a classic statement on the theological truth known as the providence of God. Speaking to his brothers, Joseph said, **"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."** Question 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism has a beautiful and comforting definition of the providence of God.

Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which He upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand.

Joseph had the benefit of being able to see the wisdom of God's providence at this point in his life. Perhaps he saw it by faith when he was younger, but he sees it now with his own eyes. The fear he felt as a teenager when his brothers threw him into that pit is now put into a bigger context. His hope was raised when he was pulled from the pit, only to be dashed again when he heard his brothers barter with the slave-traders for his purchase price. He was being betrayed by those closest to him. His life of suffering seemed frequently to be

marked by this same pattern of hopes being raised only to be dashed again. Hopes were raised as he was promoted within Potiphar's household, only to be dashed when he was falsely accused and thrown into prison. Again, he was promoted in prison and had his hopes raised when he correctly interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. But when the cupbearer's dream came true exactly as Joseph had said and he was released from prison, he forgot Joseph. For years, Joseph was imprisoned, with seemingly no hope of release. But God did intervene and Joseph was released when he was able through God to interpret Pharaoh's perplexing dream. The very circumstances that were most painful in his life, such as his betrayal by his brothers and the false accusation by Potiphar's wife, turned out to be essential elements of the outcome of the story. God's use of those evil deeds didn't lessen their evil, but they do show the absolute sovereign goodness of God.

I wonder if in the next life we will be given the same clear-sightedness to see what we can't always see in this life. We will see that in that disappointment we experienced, that suffering we endured, that God's fatherly hand was directing all. I suspect that this will indeed be the case, because it highlights the power, wisdom, and goodness of God. Once we live long enough, we can see some of that this side of heaven.

I would probably not be your pastor today if a whole series of events hadn't happened in precisely the way they did. One of those events was my coming to faith in Jesus as an 18-year old freshman in college. I would not have gone to that college had I not lived in Memphis, where my family lived after my father had been transferred there because of his job. My father would not have been transferred there had he not worked for Eli Lilly. He would not have worked for Eli Lilly had he not gone broke in his attempt to become an agricultural businessman and farmer in Jackson County, Alabama. The reason he went broke was that one year he decided to expand his business by borrowing money to open the only cotton gin in that entire county. It just so happened that it was that exact year that the federal government began a new program of paying farmers in certain years not to grow particular crops, and they paid the cotton farmers of Jackson County not to grow cotton that year. So the reason I'm your pastor today is because of an act of Congress to approve a massive farm bill. Actually, there were probably a million reasons God had in mind with that, but I was one of them. This event that disrupted my parents' lives in a significant way turned out to be used in God's providence to such a good end, not just for me, but for our entire family.

Three applications come to mind from the theology of God's providence. First, it gives us patient endurance of hardship in our lives, knowing that God has a good plan that he is executing on our behalf. Joseph's suffering didn't make sense at the time. The crucifixion of Jesus didn't make sense at the time.

But in the end, it all made perfect sense. All things come from God's fatherly hand. We can trust him.

Second, we can be thankful for good things. If all things come from God's fatherly hand, that means that good things do as well. If you have a good job, good health, a good marriage, or any other good thing, it's ultimately due to God's hand of blessing upon you. One of the perversities of sin is that we blame God for the hard things in life and take credit for the good things.

Third, the providence of God gives us confidence for the future. Our confidence is not that hard things won't cross our paths again, because they very well might. Our confidence is that all future things come from God's fatherly hand. Wendy and I, like our entire church family, are facing some future uncertainties. But it is such a comfort to know and trust of God's fatherly hand controlling all things.

CONCLUSION:

It is important that this teaching of God's providence be more than an idea in our minds that we affirm. It must also be a commitment of the heart. Such a movement to the heart is helped by asking why Joseph wept when the request for forgiveness was presented to him. It's been frequently pointed out how Joseph's life is similar to that of Jesus. Joseph was betrayed by those closest to him, considered dead by his father, falsely accused, but then one whose sufferings turned out to bring life to many. The similarities with Jesus are hard to miss. The same similarity can be seen in Joseph's tears. Why did Joseph weep? He wept because he had been so misunderstood by his brothers. For the past seventeen years they had lived with him in Egypt, they misunderstood him only to be biding his time until his father died so he could take his vengeance upon them. The truth was that he had long ago forgiven them and wanted only good for them. His response was to weep at the loss of intimacy their suspicions of him had brought about.

So many today misunderstand God, thinking that the hard things he allows into our lives are due to his lack of character. Others think that surely God has not forgiven us. Jesus weeps at these misunderstandings. He longs to have us trust him and draw near to him. He wants us to see that he too was the victim of evil done against him. But the evil of his crucifixion came by God's desire to bring good to you and me. May God have mercy on us and help us to trust his good providence always!