

Scripture Reading: Genesis 50

“14 And after he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers and all who went up with him to bury his father. 15 When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him.” 16 So they sent messengers to Joseph, saying, “Before your father died he commanded, saying, 17 ‘Thus you shall say to Joseph: “I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.”’ Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, “Behold, we are your servants.” 19 Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? 20 But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. 21 Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. 22 So Joseph dwelt in Egypt, he and his father’s household.”

“Joseph Comforts His Brothers”

We have come to the final chapter here in the Book of Beginnings! Last week we studied the death and burial of Jacob and our text this morning presents a bit more drama in the family of Jacob along with one of the most important lessons we can learn in all of the Scriptures. It is a lesson that is at once very simple and very profound... Yet in our flesh a lesson that is oh so hard to accept and rest in. It is the lesson that is at the heart of our favorite chapter in the Book of Romans AND it is at the heart of the most difficult chapter in Romans, and perhaps all of the Bible!

Yes, it is that lesson that teaches us that God is not only the author and finisher of our faith, but He is also the Author and controller of all of His grand creation!

- **And as our loving Father and redeemer He is working out ALL Things for the good of His people and ultimately for His own glory!**

But before we dig into that, let me briefly look at that family drama which brings up this important subject here in the final chapter of Genesis... After the death of their father, Joseph’s brothers are concerned:

Genesis 50: “15 When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him.”

Now obviously with all the kindness that Joseph has shown these brothers they should have been at ease... BUT as we often teach, sin has its consequences and I suspect that the past actions of these brothers are haunting them and causing them to think about what Joseph might do in light of some of their own past actions...

- **In other words, it is difficult for them to imagine someone being as gracious as Joseph has been, rather than cruel as they were!**

Now we have often, and rightly, seen Joseph as a type of Christ and here is another good example: He is the gracious one and it is hard for the brothers to believe he could be that gracious to them!

Yet, sadly that is often how we perceive the Grace of God toward us. We are much more likely to cling to the guilt of our past sins than God is because we think surely God remembers them & will one day remind us of them or even penalize us for them...

- **But such is not the case!**

The Scriptures teach us that God is faithful to cleanse us of all unrighteousness, and that He remembers our sins no more, casting them as far from us as the east is from the west.

- That is the image we should always have fresh in our minds whenever the devil, the world or even our own flesh try to remind us of past sins!

Without that confidence, these brothers approach Joseph and think they must beg for mercy...

16 “So they sent messengers to Joseph, saying, “Before your father died he commanded, saying, 17 ‘Thus you shall say to Joseph: “I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.’” Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.”

Again, we have an emotional moment for this great leader of Egypt and I think there are a couple reasons... These could be tears of joy as he rejoices in the repentance that his brothers exhibit here, but I suspect there are also some tears of sadness because they have doubted his sincerity with regard to the forgiveness and kindness he has already extended.

18 “Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, “Behold, we are your servants.”

- Once again, we see the early dreams of Joseph coming true!

But Joseph has not and will not treat his own brothers as servants...

- But rather gives them that simple and profound lesson that is the center of our focus this morning:

19 Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? 20 But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

First we should notice the attitude of Joseph here: He basically says, do not be afraid of me because I am not God, it is not my place to judge the rightness or wrongness of your actions!

- The sense of the Hebrew is that Joseph is saying that he is under God, acknowledging that he is a player in God’s grand story and NOT the author of that story.

Seeing Almighty God as the author of the story is simple enough for a young child to understand & yet oh so profound.

- So, children if Sam sets out to write a story, who gets to decide how the story ends?

But what if some of you say, ‘hey that is not fair, we should vote to see how it will end so everyone has some input!’ Or we could ask, who gets to decide who the good guys are and who the bad guys are in Sam’s story?

- That is right, Sam does and he can make the good guys as good as he wants and the bad guys as bad as he wants because it is HIS story!

Now that seems very simple when it come to a children’s story and the concept could be carried forward to even a great playwright like William Shakespeare...

- But we struggle when it comes to God’s story because it is so much more profound!

You see Sam’s characters are only in his mind or on the written page, but God has brought forth a real Creation and filled it with men and woman made in his image!

Many argue that IF God is in complete control then we must be just mere robots!

- Well, that is only true if your God is too small!

A character in Sam’s story could be interesting, but he or she would reflect his skill level. On the other hand a character like Hamlet seems to come alive and be someone we can cry with & even yell at... ‘why did he do that!?’

- Well, when it comes to God’s story you have to multiply that advance by, oh I would say a trillion or so to even be close!
- This is why Joseph could honestly and rightly say, I am not God or in God’s place to judge the story!

This was a lesson that Job learned the hard way and if you want some homework those final five chapters in the Book of Job would be a great assignment to help us learn what proper humility looks like.

- And this important lesson carries over into the New Testament in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans.

Listen to the struggles that are exposed as the Apostle Paul answers some of those tough question about God’s story in Romans 9: As Paul agonizes over the loss of some of his fellow Jews he writes this in explaining that even here it is God Who writes His own story:

“For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, 7 nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.” 8 That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. 9 For this is the word of promise: “At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son.” 10 And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac 11 (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), 12 it was said to her, “The older shall serve the younger.” 13 As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.”

There is debate with regard to whether God is referring to them as individuals or as nations, but it makes little difference to the argument that Paul is making and I believe he had both in mind. And here is where the really tough questions begin to be asked about God’s story...

Romans 9: 14 “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?”

Put in modern terms, Paul is addressing the cries of: “THAT IS NOT FAIR!”

And his answer is very direct but certainly not what autonomous man wants to hear... The Apostle Paul says: “Certainly not! 15 For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” 16 So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.”

In other words, WE the players do NOT get to tell God the author how He must write the story: That is His job and we should trust that He is not only a good author, but a great author...
Nay the greatest of authors!

The Apostle then reminds his readers that God used Pharaoh as a ‘bad’ player in His story which of course leads to yet another tough question in verse 19: “You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?”

- In other words, how could God blame a bad player in His story for being the bad player He intended them to be?

Again, the Apostle’s answer, which I would remind you is God’s own answer, is direct...

- And very unpopular.

20 “But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” 21 Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?”

The Apostle then does a bit of speculation about what is going on in God's story:

22 “What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, **23** and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, **24** even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?”

Now while very direct and unpopular, that answer leads us directly to the lesson and comfort in today's text:

- Joseph's brothers in the early part of this story were the bad guys; busy doing evil things!

Such evil things that it still bothered them and caused them to be concerned about how Joseph would treat them now that their father was dead. Now the answer that Joseph gives lines up very nicely with what the Apostle Paul had taught the Romans.

Joseph does not say that yes, brothers you did some bad things, but God managed to come up with a plan B that somehow worked around the awful things you planned and did against me years ago.

- You really messed up the story, but God did an amazing rewrite!

No, instead Joseph could not be clearer in what he told his brothers:

“20 But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

- Those evil actions by Joseph's brothers were part of God's story and not something that was outside of His control or purposes.

This is something that we studied, not once but twice in the Book of Acts as we considered the early sermons given to God's people at Pentecost and soon after... Listen to the Apostle Peter as he explains this same truth that Joseph is sharing with his brothers with regard to the greatest event in history:

Acts 2: “**22** “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know— **23** Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; **24** whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. **36** “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

And just a few days later in Acts 3: “**13** The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. **14** But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, **15** and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses... **17** “Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. **18** But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled.”

Just as Joseph's advance in Egypt was not a 'plan B' to work around the sins of his brothers, so the resurrection of Jesus and the Gospel were not a 'plan B' to work around the sins of Israel.

- It was God's story, just as He intended it to be worked out!

Now of course we must be very careful here because when we say that God is the author of a story that contains sinful actions, that does not mean that God is the author of sin or a sinner as our confessions make very clear.

Going back to my literature examples, Sam could make one of his characters be a bank robber, but that would not mean that Sam robbed a bank.

- **Shakespeare had many complex characters, but that does not mean that he himself murdered anyone nor committed suicide.**

With that said, no one would try to make the case that Hamlet was off doing his own thing.

So yes, the lesson is simple: God is in complete control of His story or Creation and that should bring us great comfort as we will also see from the Apostle Paul.

- **It is also profound because we must learn to trust God fully as His story plays out in our lives.**

Turning back to the example of Joseph, one might argue that it was easy at this point for Joseph to look back and see how well things worked out!

He is the most powerful man in Egypt besides the Pharaoh and his brothers are bowing before him as servants!

- **OF course he could say that God worked everything out for his good!**

The question for us to ponder is how did Joseph handle this important doctrine down through his life...

When his brothers cast him into that pit and spoke of murder did he cry out and say, 'Excuse me God, but I don't like how this story is going!'

Obviously, he did not, but that does not mean he had to like being in the pit, anymore than we have to like the nasty things that happen in our lives.

The theft of Job's van was an evil act and while Job & Katie are commanded to trust that God will work all things together for their good, including that theft, it does not mean it is not inconvenient and they can rightly see it as an evil action just as Joseph did the actions of his brothers.

We could go on with many other events in the life of Joseph, but I hope you can see that the test of his faith did not come in the good times:

Whether back with his father as the favored son or sitting next to Pharaoh in a seat of power...

But rather the true test of his faith came when things looked rather bleak.

**That trip down to Egypt in chains,
the deception of Potiphar's wife or being abandoned in prison for many years.**

It was in those times that he had to trust in God's control...

- **And trust he did as we saw God bless his faithful service over & over again and in the end use him to save many people as he told his brothers.**

And this is why grasping this simple but profound lesson is so important for how we live our lives today...

My wife did not plan her heart attacks, Sean did not plan to have cancer, as a Church we do not plan to do excommunications or to have major struggles...

And on a grander scale, the Island of Puerto Rico certainly did not order the hurricane that wasted their island! And of course as we learned last week, death is the final and most devastating of our enemies, the last to be destroyed.

- **IF we do not understand and believe this simple but profound lesson then our lives will be a roller coaster of ups and downs driven by events and our emotional reactions to them.**

That is always a temptation that we must face, but by faith we are to be overcomers which is what the Apostle Paul encourages us to be in Romans 8 where he begins on a very high note:

Romans 8:1 “ There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. “

The Apostle goes on to show the importance of walking in the Spirit and reviews the struggles of separation we studied last week and then proclaims at verse 27: “Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. 28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. Paul continues to show all of God’s purposes for us and then reminds us that faith believes in the bad times as well as the good times:

35 “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

36 As it is written: “For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”

And our text this morning ends just as the Apostle Paul does in Romans chapter eight when Joseph tells his brothers: “21 Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.”

Romans 8: “³⁷ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Communion Meditation: Isaiah 40

**“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Says your God.
2 “Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,
That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned;
For she has received from the Lord’s hand
Double for all her sins.”**

**3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.
4 Every valley shall be exalted
And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough places smooth;
5 The glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
And all flesh shall see it together;
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”**

➤ This is God’s story and it is a story that we are reminded of at this Table each and every week!