

Messages from Genesis “God Has a Plan”

The place is Egypt. Ever since Joseph was taken there when his brothers sold him into slavery, his life been like a roller coaster ride. He rises to a place of trust in the household of an Egyptian official, only to be thrown in jail when falsely accused of molesting the man’s wife. Now, because he’s able to interpret a dream Pharaoh had, he's released from prison and elevated to a position of power in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh.

Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dream to mean there would be 7 years of abundance in the land, when there would be plenty of grain, followed by 7 years of extreme famine. Under Joseph’s guidance, Egypt stores up an enormous supply of grain from the years of prosperity, so that when the famine hits, many people from surrounding countries come to Egypt to buy grain, so that they can survive.

Meanwhile, in Canaan, Joseph’s father Jacob and his 11 brothers are running out of food. In desperation, Jacob suggests that his sons make a trip to Egypt to buy grain. So they go – all but Benjamin, Joseph’s one blood brother. The scene is set for a rendezvous between Joseph, and the half-brothers, who years before had sold him into slavery.

As they arrive in Egypt and have to appear before Joseph with their request for grain, they don’t recognize him. It’s about 13 years later, and no doubt Joseph has a new look, new language, new garb, and added maturity. But slowly it dawns on Joseph who *they* are! Face to face with them, his heart pounds with emotion! *What will he say to them? How will he treat them? They're foreigners in Egypt; he has power to do with them whatever he wants.*

How he responds to them makes for interesting reading! (You might read Genesis, chapters 42-45 to get the full details of Joseph’s reaction to them). On the one hand, he’s so glad to see them he can hardly control himself from crying for joy. He longs to tell them who he is, throw his arms around them, and especially see his brother Benjamin and his father once again - if his dad is still alive. But on the other hand, *he remembers* what they did to him, and painful memories of the violent way they treated him are dug up and replayed in his mind. For instance, Genesis 42:7 says, “As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them...”. He kind of plays around with them - accuses them of being spies, has them put in jail for a few days. Apparently, he’s struggling to let go of the harm they did to him. But in the end he forgives, and they are reconciled:

"Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, 'Have everyone leave my presence!' So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph! Is my father still living?' But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come close to me.' When they had done so, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!'" (Genesis 45:1-4).

This is a great lesson on the power of forgiveness, a fitting text for a sermon on forgiveness.

But there is something else that I want to focus on. The story continues in Genesis 45.

"And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Genesis 45:5-8a).

Joseph saw the hand of God in the events that brought him to Egypt. He tells them, don't be distressed, don't be angry with yourselves for doing what you did, "because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Genesis 45:5). In other words, if I wouldn't have been here to interpret Pharaoh's dream, to store up all this grain, you couldn't have come here for food, you would have starved back home. God knew that. "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God" (verse 8). How amazing!

Later on, Joseph reminds them again that God was overriding their evil intentions when they sold him into slavery: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). He telling them, you meant evil. You did something awful. But God had a plan in this – to save you and all our family!

Remember, too, the bigger picture here. Joseph and his family are Abraham's descendants! God promised that Abraham and his descendants would be blessed, and be the channel through whom God would bless the whole world with salvation. If Joseph had remained in Canaan, perhaps his whole family would have been wiped out with the famine. How could God's promises then be fulfilled?

God took evil, and brought good out of it. God took the hate and resentment Joseph's brothers felt, their violence towards him, and wove it into a plan for good! His grand designs *for the entire world* were not thwarted by the family feud existing in Jacob's household. God remained in control of things – He brought good out of evil and suffering. *That's God!*

There's a verse in the Book of Romans that pretty much says the same thing. Remember the verse? Romans 8:28. Here are some different translations of this marvelous verse: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (*New International Version*). "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." (*New Revised Standard Version*). "Moreover we know that to those who love God, who are called according to his plan, everything that happens fits into a pattern for good." (*Phillips translation*).

How can we interpret this Scripture? How does it play itself out? Will you think with me on this profound verse of Scripture.

There have been times when I've plainly seen this - God took something bad that happened and brought good out of it. I've been able to look back at an experience, or a time of my life, that wasn't very pleasant at the time – but see later how God was working in that for good. No doubt many of you can share experiences where that's been true. Sometimes God does this kind of thing in a remarkable way!

Back in the 1800's, William Cowper wrote a hymn that has brought hope and encouragement to many. "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform". William Cowper was a Christian, but he had sunk into a deep depression. One foggy night he called for a horse drawn carriage and asked to be taken to the London Bridge on the Thames River. He wanted to commit suicide. But after 2 hours of driving through dense fog, the coach driver reluctantly admitted he was lost. Disgusted, Cowper got out and started walking to find the London Bridge on foot. After walking only a short distance he discovered that he was on his own doorstep. The carriage had been going in circles!

Right away he recognized the hand of God in this. Convicted by the Spirit, he realized that the way out of his troubles was to look to God. With gratitude he sat down and wrote these words:

"God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.
O fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds you so much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head."

Life is full of inspirational stories of people who have lost a job, only to find another one they like so much better; had an accident and wound up in the hospital, only to meet someone there who became a dear friend, or even a marriage partner; had to wait extra long to sell an item, and in the end got a far better price; done a foolish thing or made a big mistake, and it was catalyst that led this person to a spiritual transformation, or finding relationship with Christ. Sometimes we can see clearly how God works everything – even evil - into a plan and a purpose for good.

But frankly, many times we can't clearly see how God is working everything into a purposeful plan. Early in my life as a young adult, I was appointed to pastor a certain church while still in seminary. It was a hard time, pastoring a church, going to school fulltime. But some great things began to happen in my personal life. I thought, "Wow, I can see God is setting things up perfectly! This is why He brought me to this church." The problem was, after a while it all came apart. It left me crushed, trying to figure out how it all fit together. God's ways are not always neat and tidy. God's plan and purposes are not always obvious and easy to figure out!

Noted author and Bible teacher Chuck Swindoll, in an issue of the devotional magazine *Our Daily Bread*, told a how a Christian providentially escaped death. An unexpected delay in New York kept him from boarding Flight 191 in Chicago, which crashed and killed all 254 people on board. Someone read that devotional reading and then wrote this to Chuck: "I just had to let you know about one of God's great saints who ran to make Flight 191 – and made it!" His name was Edwards E. Elliott, beloved pastor of the Garden Grove Orthodox Presbyterian Church in

California. His plane from Pennsylvania was late, and a friend who had accompanied him to Chicago said he last saw Elliott dashing forward in the terminal to make his connecting flight. Chuck Swindoll says, as I read about Pastor Elliott's fruitful ministry, I had to now ask myself, "Was Divine providence operating only in New York and not in Chicago?"

It's awesome when we can look at a misfortune or a bad experience and see clearly how God brings good out of it! Thank God for these times! But remember, there are many times in life when bad things happen, and we *can't see any good* coming from it.

This is where faith comes in! Can we still trust in the goodness of God when the bad things that happen just make little or no sense? I believe that *often it takes eternity* for God to weave the bad things in life into His purposeful plan for us and the world.

In the J.B. Phillips translation, Romans 8:28 reads, "Moreover we know that to those who love God, who are called according to his plan, everything that happens fits into a pattern for good." Let's me say just a couple more things about this intriguing verse of Scripture

Perhaps we need to point out what this verse is *not* saying. *This is not saying that everything works out for good for everybody.* This is not a general life principle that says no matter what happens, it will all come out good for everybody. There's a kind of cheery determinism that suggests, "Don't worry, it will all work out." "If it's meant to be it will be." Like, don't sweat it, everything will come out OK in the end. That's not true! There are accidents and tragedies that serve no good or redemptive purpose. People do dumb things and pay the consequences and no good comes out of it. Some choose to reject Jesus and the gospel and wind up in hell. Not everything turns out good!

Who's this promise for? Those who love God, and are called according to His purpose! This is a promise for us *if we love God*. What does it mean to love God? To seek Him first, above all other things in life. To obey His word and commandments.

This is a promise for those *who are called according to His purposes*. For those who have surrendered to the call of Christ upon our life, to surrender ourselves to Him and His will. It's not saying that everything will work out *so we can be happy!* The purpose of life is not to be happy. The purpose of life is to do God's will. This is a promise that *for those who love God*, everything will work out so that *God's purposes can be fulfilled* (that's not the same as saying everything will work out so that we can be happy!).

We're dealing here with the sovereignty of God – that no evil can ultimately defeat God's good purposes. And nowhere do we see this truth demonstrated more fully than in the cross of Christ, that God could take the worst (executing His Son), and bring the greatest blessing one can imagine: the offer of eternal salvation to all!

