

God Meant It for Good

HN/SS 14/11/04 am

Reading: Isaiah 53, Acts 2:14-39

Study: Genesis 50:15-21

Palms : 40:7-10, 141:1-4, 22:21-24, 141:8-10

Revenge is a very powerful emotion. Some people's lives are governed by revenge. 'If it's the last thing I do I will get back at her, I will destroy him'. It eats away at people, destroying their own life. We don't have to look far to see the effect of revenge do we?

We see it daily in the news, especially in the Near East – for every killing there is a revenge killing and so it goes on and on. It may even be in our own family. It is often between family members – 'I am not talking to them because of what they have done'. When we are hurt or wronged, revenge is the response that is too often arises in our hearts.

We see in the Bible what happens when revenge rules in the heart. Esau hated his brother Jacob because he stole his birthright. He threatened to kill him, so Jacob had to flee to Haran. Even after 20 years Jacob still feared his brother would try to kill him.

Maybe Jacob told his sons this story – although they did not really need to be taught about revenge. They hated their brother Joseph and sought to kill him. In the end they sold him as a slave. But when they discovered that Joseph was still alive and was a powerful ruler they feared his revenge. While their father lived it was OK – they thought Joseph would respect his father, just like Esau, and not repay them while he was still alive.

Our text today is most amazing for it reveals the wonderful truth that revenge can be overcome. There is something that can defeat revenge. Revenge does not have to go on and on ruling in people lives. Joseph knew the secret to overcoming the powerful and destructive rule of revenge.

What is that secret? Forgiveness!

Pardon/forgiveness

Joseph was just 17 years old when he was sold into slavery by his brothers. This was the crime, the sin, they felt guilty about and for which they feared Joseph's revenge. Joseph was now around 60 years old but still they feared. The death of their respected father re-ignited this fear.

By proxy they sent a message to Joseph, purported to be the dying command of their father. *Please forgive the trespass/crime of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you* was the message. They soon followed in person and prostrated themselves before

Joseph. This was not the first time they had done this, but it was the first time they had actually asked forgiveness.

And Joseph wept. Why did Joseph weep? Was he moved by their humility and their repentance? It is true that they use the word ‘forgive’ for the first time, but they had expressed their guilt back when Joseph was testing them and had offered to be his slaves (42:21, 44:16, 33). Joseph had accepted them saying *do not be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here for God sent me before you to preserve life* (45:5). He settled them in Goshen and provided for them.

But now they feared Joseph would hate them and repay them for their evil. Why did Joseph weep? Surely they were tears of sadness that his brothers were still burdened by guilt and fear. They were ‘tears of sorrow for their suspicion’ writes Matthew Henry. Joseph was himself grieved and hurt that they could think he would exact revenge after he had forgiven them. How could they think that he would repay them when he had told them not worry or be angry with themselves!

Do not be afraid said Joseph. *Am I in the place of God* He did not want his brothers fearing him but fearing God. All sin is against God and it is His prerogative to take vengeance. *Vengeance is mine says the Lord, I will repay.* Joseph knew that, just as well as David and Paul. Joseph had tested his brothers under the direction of the Spirit of God. It was not his place to exact revenge.

Let us be clear on this matter. We are not to judge one another. We are not to take revenge upon someone who wrongs us. We must forgive unconditionally. We can speak but must wait for the Holy Spirit to work in the heart. How amazing is the grace of God that Joseph knew, for it is only by God’s grace that we can forgive one another.

All sin is first and foremost against God, and it is God who forgives. He forgives because of the Cross; the blood of his Son Jesus Christ was shed for the remission of sins – *Whom God set forth as a propitiation by his blood, through faith* (Romans 3). He promises to forgive all come to him repenting of their sin.

Do you know this forgiveness of God? Do you believe that God truly forgives, that he removes your sin completely – as far as east is from the west (Psalm 103)? Some Christians find it difficult to believe this. They confess their sin but continue to carry the guilt and walk in fear that God will punish them one day. They are like Joseph’s brothers who did not really accept Joseph’s forgiveness.

Such fear, fear of retribution from God is not pleasing unto him. He wants us to accept his forgiveness, to know his grace and to walk in His ways. How can we show grace to others if we do not know his grace in forgiveness?

Purposes of God

You meant evil against me but God meant it for good. What a tremendous declaration of the sovereignty of God. The whole story of Joseph can be summed up in this one

statement – you meant it for evil but God meant it for good. Furthermore it sums up the story of Jesus, the story of the Cross – you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

Isaiah (53) spoke of one who was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows who was oppressed and afflicted. But at the same time it pleased the Lord to bruise him as he bore the sin of many. And then at Pentecost (Acts 2) Peter declared *Him...you have taken by lawless hands and crucified and put to death...but he was delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God.* What man intended for evil, God in his sovereign and eternal purpose worked for good at the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The evil done to Joseph God worked for good, *for saving many people alive.* He used Joseph to save the Egyptians and many nations – to be a blessing to all nations. But it was the salvation of his chosen people, the family of Jacob, which was the main focus of God's sovereign work. For it was through them that he would bring greater salvation, salvation from sin and death, to all the nations.

This is surely an announcement of the gospel in advance, here in v.20. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:8 *And Scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand saying, In you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.* Is this not what we see here in these historical yet prophetic words of Joseph?

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Jesus suffered and died at the hands of cruel men, *to save many people alive.* This one life, a life of righteousness, was sacrificed for the sin of many. By that sacrifice we have received life. *For if by one mans (Adam) offence many died, how much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one man Jesus Christ abounded to many...that they might reign in life* (Romans 5:15).

Provision

Not saved to be slaves but to reign in life. To have abundant life. *Do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones* said Joseph. What wonderful words of comfort. He spoke kindly to them and promised to provide for them in the future, for them and their families. These were the men who had hated him and tried to get rid of him.

Is there a prefiguring of the work of the Holy Spirit here in v.21? Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, the Comforter (*Paraclete*) to abide with us forever after he rose from the grave and ascended into heaven (John 14). *I will not leave you as orphans* said Jesus. *Let not your heart be troubled nor let it be afraid.*

The wonderful story of Joseph comes to an end. Joseph was an upright man, even if somewhat proud in his youth. He was hated and sold as a slave by his jealous brothers. Jesus was without any sin. In innocence He suffered and was crucified by violent men. God was with Joseph during his suffering. The Father was with his only begotten Son all his days upon this earth and did not let his body see decay.

At the highest level this remarkable story demonstrates the sovereignty of God, his overruling in the affairs of men, wicked men at that, and of nations, mighty nations at that, for his eternal purpose. What they meant for evil, God meant for good. And what was his purpose – to save many people alive. It was God's eternal purpose that his only Son, Jesus Christ, give his life a ransom for many. Do you know the grace and the comfort of this sovereign God?

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon