

God's Intention in Our Suffering: Lessons from Joseph Genesis 37-50

Introduction

The problem of evil and suffering in this world has been a problem people have been trying to solve for millennia.

The problem goes like this: If there is a God who is omnipotent (all-powerful) and omnibenevolent (all-good) and omniscient (all-knowing), then how could there possibly be evil and suffering in this world?

Different people have tried to solve this dilemma in different ways. Harry Kushner, Jewish Rabbi and author of a New York Times best seller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, writes, "I believe in God. But I do not believe the same things about him that I did years ago...I [now] recognize his limitations. He is limited in what he can do by laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom. I no longer hold God responsible for illness, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make [people] suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason." (Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*; taken from myjewishlearning.com).

What's he saying? His ultimate explanation of the existence of evil and suffering in this world is this: "God can't stop it. He's limited in power." Now, those are the words of a Jewish Rabbi and not a Christian. So only non-Christians believe these kinds of things, right?

Clark Pinnock, a former *Bible College* professor who died in 2010, argued that God doesn't so much lack the power to prevent evil, but he lacks the sure knowledge of all future events. So, because he doesn't know the future, he can't stop the evil from happening. He wrote, "Many believe that the Bible says God has exhaustive foreknowledge, but it does not." He goes on to say, "The future is not fixed like the past, which can be known completely. The future does not yet exist and therefore cannot be infallibly anticipated, even by God." (Pinnock, "Systematic Theology" in *The Openness of God*, 121&123)

See what he's saying? The way he solves the problem of evil and suffering is by concluding: God doesn't know the future because the future doesn't exist. It's open, even to God.

I don't know how you make sense of all the suffering and loss in this world (and in your life), but limiting God's power and God's knowledge of future events is not only dangerous, it is woefully unbiblical.

So I want us to see from the life of Joseph that there is real hope and real purpose in the suffering and loss we've experienced. Joseph experienced immense loss and suffering, but he knew God had a purpose in all of it. Why? Because he knew GOD'S intention behind it. God didn't lack knowledge or power that kept him from preventing Joseph's suffering. God had a plan...and as difficult as Joseph's suffering was, he knew God's plan was good. That's where we're going in this sermon.

The life of Joseph can be broken down into 3 main PARTS that lead us to the overarching theme of this story, which we find out at the end.

PART #1: The plan of God set in motion [37:1-4]

So, this is where it begins. The seed of jealousy and hatred towards Joseph takes root in the hearts of his brothers. "They hated him and could not [even] speak peacefully to him." But it gets worse. [37:5-8]

They rightly interpret his dream. So if it's not frustrating enough that their father likes Joseph the best and gives him a really nice coat (which indicates that Jacob is giving Joseph the privileges of a first born son), then it just adds to the frustration of the brothers when Joseph feels the

need to share with them that one day they're going to be subject to him.

Not long after this, Jacob tells Joseph to go and check on his brothers who were pasturing his father's flock. And when he arrives, his brothers are up to no good. [37:18-20]

What are they doing? They are doing whatever they can to make sure his dreams do not become a reality. In short, *they're trying to thwart the plan of God*. They thought, "Surely if we kill him, then there is no possible way he can rule over us." But notice, *their* plan changes: [37:23-28]

At first, they wanted to kill him, but when Judah, one of the brothers, sees an opportunity to make a little profit, he convinces his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery. Then they cover their tracks: [37:31-36].

It was a failsafe plan. Joseph was as good as dead—no, he was better than dead. In the eyes of his brothers, there was no way in a million years that Joseph could ever rule over them—he had become a slave HIMSELF!

And it appears at this point that God's plan has been thwarted by these wicked brothers. But what they don't realize is that THEIR plan to thwart GOD'S plan is what

actually set God's plan in motion. That's where Part #1 comes to an end. And we move to...

PART #2: The plan of God carried out

This section draws heavily upon two themes: 1) Joseph suffers because of the sin of his brothers, but 2) God is present in the midst of his suffering. [39:1]

There's his suffering. He's a slave. He was bought by Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and the captain of the guard. He lost EVERYTHING he knew—his family, his home, his life as a knew it. But notice [39:2-6a].

There is an obvious link between Joseph's commitment to the Lord and the Lord's presence with Joseph. But Joseph's commitment was about to be tested [Read 39:6b-10]

So he's doing what's right. He's holding fast his integrity. He is fully aware of God's presence with him which is his strength to resist temptation. And where does that get him? More blessing, right? [39:11-15]

So she's accusing him of rape. And then she tells Potiphar, her husband, the one who trusted Joseph, and he is not happy [Read 39:19-20].

Now let me ask, if you were in Joseph's shoes, how would you respond? "So this is what I get for trying to fight sin and live blamelessly before you, God? I get thrown in prison? Some reward for pursuing holiness." But that wasn't Joseph's response. He continued to live with an awareness of God's presence. [39:21-23].

So, thus far, Joseph was sold into slavery, but God was still with him. He was falsely accused of rape, but God was still with him. He was put into prison, but God was still with him. Think that's gonna change?

Don't ever forget that in your suffering. *God NEVER leaves you. Ever!* In fact, in the middle of your suffering, that's one of the key truths you need to cling to. Sometimes it's really hard to cling to the truth that he's working things for good, because it doesn't look like it! But you can always cling to this: God WILL NOT leave you alone.

Now, chapter 40 describes the account where the chief cupbearer and the chief baker—two servants of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt—commit an offense against Pharaoh and are thrown in the *same prison* as Joseph. And guess what happens? They both have dreams and Joseph offers to interpret them. He says to the chief cupbearer in [40:13].

That was good news for him. And so, the chief baker hears it, and thinks to himself, “Wow, I want to hear what my dream means!” And so, he asks Joseph to interpret his dream...though he probably wishes he hadn’t! [40:18-19]

So one will be restored and one will be killed. BUT to the one who was gonna be restored, Joseph presents a small request, [40:14-15].

“Put in a good word to Pharaoh and get me out of here.” Do you think the cupbearer remembers Joseph when he gets out? [40:20-23]

Joseph was forgotten. And in 41:1, it says that Joseph remained in prison for “two whole years.” You can imagine him waiting; waiting to hear the words from the prison guard, “You’re free. The cupbearer remembered you.” But there was nothing. 2 years!!!

Sometimes that is the hardest part in our suffering... WAITING. Waiting for some reprieve. And in the meantime, we’re tempted to believe God has forgotten us. Is it true? Did God forget Joseph?

“Out of the blue,” Pharaoh has a dream and has no one to interpret it for him. This jogs the memory of the chief

cupbearer and he tells Pharaoh about this Hebrew kid named Joseph who was in the same prison with him who accurately interpreted both his and the chief baker's dreams. So Pharaoh says, "Find that boy." And Joseph is brought to the king and Pharaoh explains his dream to Joseph saying, "There were seven fat and plump cows stuffing their faces with lots of grass. Then came along seven thin and ugly cows who ate the seven fat cows, yet they remained skinny." Then his second dream: "Seven plump ears of grain were swallowed up by seven withered and thin ears of grain." Joseph responds: [41:25-32]

Notice, Joseph is telling Pharaoh about GOD'S PLAN. He's saying, "This is what God is about to DO, and his plan is FIXED, so it's definitely gonna happen!" So Joseph wisely counsels Pharaoh to stock up food during the first seven years of plenty so that they will be prepared for the second seven years of famine. And what does Pharaoh do? He puts Joseph in charge [41:39-40].

In a moment, Joseph became the second most powerful person in the known world. And sure enough, the seven years of plenty came, and Joseph rallied the people to store up as much food as they could. Then the famine struck, just as God had revealed to Joseph. And what happens as a result is staggering [41:56-57].

You know whom “all the earth” includes? The people in the land of Canaan...the land from where Joseph came...the place where his family is from...the home of his brothers... the ones who sold him into slavery, nearly 20 years earlier.

And so, guess what happens? His *brothers* travel to Egypt to find food. And this is where PART #3 begins.

In PART #1, the plan of God was set in motion; in PART #2 the plan of God was being carried out, and now in...

PART #3: The plan of God [is] fulfilled [42:1-3]

Now, if you were entirely unfamiliar with this story, I’m sure your response to this part would be, “No way. This is incredible.” And just in case we forgot who it was that everyone had to go to in order to buy food, we are reminded in: [42:6]

Sound familiar? Remember the beginning of the story? Where was God in Joseph’s suffering and loss? He was working out his plan all along. His plan never changed. His plan was never thwarted. Joseph’s brothers did exactly what God told Joseph they would do, even though they tried to do everything to stop it.

And what we’re finding out now is that even their attempt to STOP God’s plan was, in fact, a PART of God’s plan. And

that's why they bow before Joseph...because God said they would and he orchestrated everything in Joseph's life to see to it that they would, even though it took 20 years.

Think about it: His brothers sold him to slavery when he was 17. Then, when Joseph got out of prison, he was 30yrs old (so that's 13 years), and then there was 7 years of famine. So that's a total of at least 20 years since his brothers last saw him. He was 17; now he's about 37. 20 years of a "normal" life with his family in his hometown... GONE, LOST!

So, naturally, his brothers didn't recognize him since they last saw him when he was 17...And he was probably covered from head to toe in Egyptian garb. But eventually, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. [45:1-3]

Utter shock, and probably horror. Joseph could have ordered them to be executed on the spot, and they knew that. But he didn't. Why? Notice the outrageous statement he makes [Read 45:4-8a].

Joseph is not bitter towards his brothers because he believes God is the one who was ultimately in charge of everything that happened. Why would he find comfort in

the fact that it was God who (ultimately) sent him to Egypt?

This is where I want us to jump to the end of the book to find the answer. Joseph, eventually, invites his entire family (including his father) to live in Egypt. And after some time, his father dies. And it's at this point that Joseph's brothers are scared Joseph is going to seek revenge. [50:15-18]

So they are doing whatever they can do avoid punishment. They even lied to him again and conjured up a fake message from their father. But Joseph's response to their pathetic attempt to get out of punishment, once again, demonstrates his deep rest in God's control: [50:19-20].

Look closely again at [v20, "As for you [brothers], you meant *evil* against me, but God meant..." what? "...IT..."]

What's the "it" a reference to? "THEIR evil." "God MEANT [the evil that you committed against me]...he meant it for good." Do you realize what Joseph is saying here? Joseph was...Thrown into a pit...Sold into slavery...Taken from his family, his hometown, and all that he ever knew at age 17... He was falsely accused of rape...He was thrown into prison and waited two years for his release...he spent twenty years of his life in exile.

And he has the boldness to say, at the end of it all, “Bothers, you meant evil against me, but God meant that very evil for good.” God “MEANT” it. There’s *purpose* in that, church. There is MEANING to your suffering that often FEELS MEANINGLESS. Don’t you think Joseph was tempted, at times, to feel like, “What’s the point of all this? It feels totally arbitrary and purposeless.” We must cling, by faith, to these words, “God MEANT it for good.”

And Joseph tells us what the good is: “to bring it about that many should be kept alive.” I don’t know how many lives were saved from this famine because of God’s sovereign work in the life of Joseph. But a lot were. And every detail in Joseph’s life played a pivotal part in bringing about that end.

Just think about it: Take away ANY of the events in Joseph’s life that were pivotal to his rise in Egypt, and millions of people would’ve perished.

- If his dad hadn’t shown him favor and he hadn’t had those dreams, his brothers wouldn’t been so jealous.
- If his brothers weren’t jealous, they wouldn’t have tried kill him

- But if Rueben hadn't intervened, his brothers would've killed him, but instead, because they were greedy, they sold him in slavery.
- If there hadn't (just so happened) to have been Midianite traders coming by at that exact time, Joseph wouldn't have been sold in Egypt.
- If Joseph hadn't gone to Egypt, he would've never known Potiphar who was in charge of the prison.
- And if Potiphar's wife hadn't falsely charged Joseph, he wouldn't have gone to THAT prison.
- And if he hadn't gone to THAT prison at the EXAECT time he did, he would've never been able to interpret the dreams of the two men.
- And if he didn't interpret their dreams, he wouldn't have interpreted Pharaoh's dream.
- And if he didn't interpret Pharaoh's dream, then he wouldn't have risen to power.
- And if he didn't rise to power, his brothers would've never come and bowed themselves before him.
- And if they didn't bow themselves before him, God's plan would've failed!
- PLUS, millions upon millions of people would've died from a famine.

EVERY...SINGLE...PIECE of Joseph's suffering mattered. God was doing thousands of things behind the scenes that Joseph couldn't see.

Conclusion: Suffering and the Gospel

Does this concept remind you of another event of suffering in history over which God was in complete control? There's a connection between the life of Joseph and the death of Jesus. [Acts 4:27-28]

The most horrific sin in the history of the world—the murder of the Son of God—was not only planned by God, but carried out by God. Isaiah says, "...it was the will of the Lord to crush him" (Is. 53:10).

And why did God do it? To bring about the salvation of many. Sound familiar? "As for you [Pontius Pilate and Herod]...you meant evil against Christ, but God meant it [that very evil...the murder of the Son of God]...God meant it for good, to bring about the salvation of many." [Gospel]

Here's the point: *Our salvation depends on the truth that God has purpose in suffering.* If the most horrific form of suffering in the history of the world was part of God's plan and his purpose in it was for our everlasting good, then

whatever suffering we experience WILL be worked for our good.

When we separate God's absolute control over everything from the cross, we might lose sight of God's goodness. So Christian, take comfort in knowing that any suffering or loss you experience is MEANT by God for good and know that he works all things (including suffering) together for your good.

How do we know that? We saw it played out in the life of Joseph. But even more, we see it put on full display in the cross. Find rest there.