

## Not Home Yet

### God Meant It for Good, Part 5

Genesis 46-47

David Sunday

July 2, 2017

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We've been going through Genesis and are almost to the end today. We've been in the narrative of the life of Joseph, which is also a continuation of the life of Jacob that we looked at quite a while ago. Today we're in Genesis 46-47, a passage that might seem a little more subdued than what's gone before it. But think a bit about what this story is telling us—what it's all about. Last week we saw there's been forgiveness and reconciliation. There has been an amazing reversal of fortunes in the relationship between Joseph and his brothers.

Now Joseph says to his brothers, "You need to go tell my father that I, whom he thought was dead—his loved and favored son—am alive. I am exalted over all of Egypt, and I bid him come to me." When you think about that, what does this story remind you of a little bit? There is a loved and favored Son Who once really was dead and now is alive—risen from the dead, exalted and ruling at the right hand of the Father. And He bids His brothers to go into all the world and tell people, "Come to Me." When we come to Him, He lavishes us with all bounties of His Kingdom.

What I want to do is look at this story in Genesis 46-47 from three different perspectives. First, I want to look at it from the view of the original readers—the people who first heard this story. Second, I want to consider the man on whom this story most focused—Jacob. Then third, I want to think about our perspective. So we'll take three journeys through the story, looking at it from three different angles.

#### **The story from the perspective of the original hearers**

Who were these original hearers of Genesis 46-47? The children of Israel under Moses, over 400 years later. Moses is recording this narrative for those who have already been in Egypt and have experienced harsh slavery and bondage there. It was a time marked by great and terrible suffering. Now he has led them out of Egypt and they have crossed the Red Sea on dry ground. They've seen God's mighty power to deliver them. They were about to enter the Promised Land, but instead are wandering in the wilderness for forty years. It was during this time that Moses, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, recorded the words we read in Genesis.

What is his purpose in these writings? As the children of Israel are coming to the land of promise—the same land Jacob left hundreds of years earlier—they could be wondering, “Why did Jacob leave to begin with? Why didn’t he just stay in Canaan? Why did he go to Egypt? Why do we have to go through all this suffering and hardship? Was it all a big mistake?” Moses is telling them, “No, it wasn’t a mistake.” He’s giving them the perspective of God’s providence over their history, saying, “God has had a purpose in all of this: to turn you, as His people, into a peculiar nation, a people for Himself.”

As long as they were living in Canaan, intermarrying with Canaanite women, they were adopting the practices of the Canaanite people. They were not a distinct people. But when they got to Egypt that had to change. Why? Because the Egyptians didn’t like the Hebrews. Remember how Potiphar’s wife, back in Genesis 37, talked about Joseph almost with a racist kind of slur, “That Hebrew”? Remember what we were told in Genesis 43 last week, when they had the dinner at Joseph’s house. Verse 32 says, *“The Egyptians...ate...by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.”* They didn’t even want to eat with Hebrew people.

Then look at this section of our passage today, Genesis 46:33-34. This is when Joseph is telling his brothers how to prepare to go to Pharaoh: *“When Pharaoh calls you and says, ‘What is your occupation?’ you shall say, ‘Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers.’”* Joseph knows what Pharaoh is going to think when he hears that. “We’d better put these people in their own place.” So Pharaoh sets them apart in Goshen, which is the farthest eastern part of Egypt, a place where they can have a lot of freedom and will be secluded from the rest of the Egyptians. It is here that they become a peculiar nation and a holy people.

How had they acted in Canaan? They had adopted what someone has termed a “fuzzy spirituality” which included a lot of bad behavior. It didn’t cost them much to follow Yahweh during the time they were in Canaan. But when they come to Egypt, there would be a cost. They would have to learn to be devoted to Yahweh during all those years in what Deuteronomy calls “the smelting furnace of Egypt.” Here God’s people would be purified and become holy.

One other thing that happens to God’s people in Egypt is they multiplied greatly, which was God’s promise to Abraham way back in the beginning. He said, “I will multiply your descendants to make them as many as the stars in heaven and the sand on the seashore” (Genesis 22:17). We see that starting to happen in the narrative before us. If you take a look at Genesis 46, beginning with verse eight, you see a list of names. I remember listening to a sermon in England one time where a British lady read through all those names with precision—and it

sounded so good with a British accent. I don't think you'd want to hear me try names like Tola, Puvah, Yob, Shimron, and on and on.

But God is telling us something in this list of names. He's telling us that this is real history taking place here. It's not just a made-up story. These are real people in a real place in time. He's telling us, "I know My sheep and I remember them each by name. Their names are graven on My hand and written on My heart, and I care for them personally and individually" (John 10:27, Isaiah 49:16). He's also telling us that there weren't a whole lot of Israelites that went with Jacob into Egypt when he made this journey. Look at Genesis 46:26-27, and you'll see the number:

*All the persons belonging to Jacob who came into Egypt, who were his own descendants, not including Jacob's sons' wives, were sixty-six persons in all. And the sons of Joseph, who were born to him in Egypt, were two. All the persons of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt were seventy.*

There are only 70. This is a sign of completeness and that there's a real nation being formed here. If we're going to get to the number of the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore, there's going to have to be a lot of multiplication. And that's exactly what starts to happen. Egypt becomes like the womb in which the nation of Israel is being multiplied.

It's already starting to happen in chapter 47. Let's scan that chapter to get a handle on what's happening in this chapter. Joseph goes to Pharaoh and tells him about his brothers all arriving with his father and that they're herdsmen. Then Joseph brings Jacob in and Jacob stands before Pharaoh. We're told in verses 11-12 that Jacob and Joseph's brothers were settled by Pharaoh in a plentiful land. God was being very generous to them through Pharaoh.

Then in verses 13-26, we read about how Joseph administrated the land of Egypt during the famine. He did it in such a way that resources were allocated for the Egyptians so they had everything they needed during this time. At the same time, Joseph was building Pharaoh's power and his kingdom, which made Joseph's boss very pleased with his administration during the famine. In other words, Pharaoh is pleased and the people of Egypt are grateful. In verse 35 the people of Egypt tell Joseph, "*You have saved our lives.*"

But look at what is happening to the children of Israel this time. All their needs are being taken care of, they have abundant provision and they're growing. Genesis 47:27, "*Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. And they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly.*" This takes us back to God's instruction in Genesis 1:28, "*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.*" Then fast forward to Abraham, to whom God said, "I will make you a blessing and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you.

You're going to have a great number of descendants" (Genesis 12:1-3). And here in Egypt, God is telling us that mandate He has given and the promises He has made to His people are taking place and being fulfilled. They are fruitful and they are multiplying greatly.

So God had a purpose in sending His children to Egypt. It was all part of His plan and promise to Abraham. Now as they make their way on foot back to the Promised Land, Moses is writing Genesis 47-48 and telling them these stories so that it would have a similar effect on the Israelites' life. The effect on them would be similar to the effect these lyrics have on us today:

Even what the enemy means for evil  
You turn it for our good, You turn it for our good and for your glory  
Even in the valley You are faithful  
You're working for our good, You're working for our good and for your glory

Your plans are still to prosper, You have not forgotten us  
You're with us in the fire and the flood  
Faithful forever, Perfect in love  
You are sovereign over us

[Sovereign Over Us by Aaron Keyes]

God wanted the people of Israel, under Moses, to understand the truth that we understand in Romans 8:28, "*We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*" Even through 400 years of slavery in Egypt God was working His purpose out.

This point might be the more "dry" point of the sermon with lots of history and details. But it's important for us to understand the big picture, to see His faithfulness to fulfill His purposes in the workings of God in history and to know that there's a big picture going on in our lives too. We're part of a grand narrative that God is carrying out with great wisdom. We're in a certain leg of a relay race. We take the baton and carry it a little way. Even if we're the generation in which Jesus comes again—may it be so—we still are just carrying that baton in a little part of the relay race. There are a lot of generations who have carried that baton before us and if the Lord continues to wait for His return, there will be generations who come after us who will keep carrying that baton forward. But God will be faithful to work His purposes out. That's the first perspective we need to get.

### **The story from the perspective of Jacob**

Our second perspective puts the spotlight on the main character in this part of the narrative—not Joseph, but Jacob. He is being called out of Canaan—the land God promised to

give him and his forefathers. It's the land where God promised to make him fruitful. But now God is saying, "Leave this land and go to Egypt." It's a big move for Jacob.

When I think of Jacob at this point in his life, here's what I picture: a very weary, very forlorn and beaten down old man. If you go to visit him and you look on his bookshelf, he's got John Piper's Don't Waste Your Life sitting on the bookshelf. While he walks away to get you a drink, you open up that book, and you can see its pages are well-read. You look at the last page, where there's a blank space at the end, and he's scrawled out in pencil, "What if I already have? What if I've wasted it?" That's what Jacob is wondering. "Is my life wasted?" He's been wondering that for over 20 years.

Remember his inconsolable grief when he saw his son Joseph's robe covered in blood, torn apart. He thought Joseph had been eaten by animals. You remember what Genesis 37:34-35 says he did after he saw the robe:

*Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him.*

He thought, "That's it. My life is over. Nothing remains for me but Sheol, the place of the departed dead, and it's going to be grim. I'm going to go there in mourning." Anyone who has lost a son or daughter will tell you that you never get over this loss. Never ask someone who's lost a child, "Have you gotten over it? Have you moved on?" Because they don't. There's healing in God's mercy for the pain, but it's the kind of healing that learns to absorb the pain. It doesn't rid you of the pain. There's a wound that remains. Sometimes people experience such trauma in this life that the pain they've experienced becomes the story of their lives. It becomes what defines them.

As we read the story of Jacob from the death of Joseph onward—or what he thinks is the death of Joseph—it seems like that is what happened to Jacob. For over 20 years, he's always on edge. He's always talking about death. When his sons return from their first trip to Egypt to get food during the famine, they want to bring Benjamin back with them to Egypt so they can get more food. What does Jacob say in Genesis 42:38? "*My son [Benjamin] shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is the only one left. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.*"

See, there he is again. He hasn't stopped this sense of "I'm just about to die in horrible grief and sorrow. My life is a waste." Even in Genesis 45, when he hears that Joseph is alive, his heart is numb. That's understandable. It's almost like he needs to be given CPR here—it's such a

shock. Then he sees the wagons full of provisions that Joseph had sent to him, and he hears the words that Joseph said, and he realizes, “That really is my son.” Look at Genesis 45:28.

Remember, Israel is another name for Jacob. “*And Israel said, ‘It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.’*” Yet he’s still thinking, “I’m about to die.”

But there’s a little more hope here. Something is changing now in his attitude toward death. Verse 27 says Jacob’s spirit revived when they told him all of Joseph’s words and he saw the wagons. He’s still convinced he’s close to the end, and that’s when he takes this huge step of faith. Then we’re at a major point of transition in Jacob’s life when we get to Genesis 46:1 and read these words, “Israel took his journey with all that he had, came to Beersheba and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.” He’s got something wonderful to look forward to—he’s going to see Joseph there. But he’s leaving a lot behind too. It’s a big change for Jacob.

So he goes to Beersheba, where God had met Abraham and Isaac before. He’s desperate to meet God here too. This is the southernmost edge of the Promised Land. There’s a place in The Lord of the Rings where Sam Gamgee stops in the journey and he tells Frodo, “This is it. If I take one more step, it will be the farthest away from home I’ve ever been.” That’s where Jacob is right now. When he makes this next step beyond Beersheba, he’s leaving the past behind and is launching into an unknown future. All he needs to know is what God shows him in this vision in the middle of the night.

Genesis 46:2 says, “*And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, ‘Jacob, Jacob.’*” If you ever hear a voice calling out your name twice in the middle of the night, say, “Here I am, Lord. Your servant is listening.” Jacob is being called to attention by God. He said, “Here I am.” And look at what God told him: “*I am God, the God of your father.*” He’s the same. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). The God Who led my Nana Gert through her life from 1895 to 1988, 103 years, is my God. He’s the same God yesterday, today and forever—the same God Whom our ancestors worshiped.

The second thing God tells Jacob is this: “*Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation.*” In other words, “Jacob, I know that I told you that you’re going to be a blessing here in this land, that you’re going to multiply. That is true, but I’m going to carry that promise out by taking you on this circuitous journey down to Egypt. There I’m going to make you into a great nation. Trust Me. It’s okay for you to go. I will fulfill My promises to you.”

Thirdly God says, “*I myself will go down with you to Egypt.*” Thank You, Lord. I need that. I need to know that wherever You lead me, You will go with me, that You will not leave me nor forsake me.

Fourth, “I will be with you even unto death and beyond.” I love these words in verse four: *“I will also bring you up again, and Joseph’s hand shall close your eyes.”* In other words, “I’m going to carry you up”—whether that’s talking about his bones or about his translation into heaven when he dies. First, God’s going to do something, and then Joseph is going to close his eyes. There is going to be peace in his death.

As I read these words, it reminds me of that hymn, “Be still my soul,” and that line, “In every change He faithful will remain.” I think if you’re facing a great change or a great transition in your life, if you know this truth you know everything you need to know. You need to know God is your God, the same yesterday, today and forever. He will fulfill His promises to you. He will go with you where He leads you. He will carry you even unto death. And if you are in Christ, you will never taste death. He will carry you up into His presence and then your eyes will be closed in peace. If you know that, what else do you need to know? It’s enough. God is with you.

So with this knowledge, Jacob sets out from Beersheba with his family and we see their names.

Then let’s skip down to the reunion with Joseph beginning in Genesis 46:28. I have to confess, this reunion is a little bit anticlimactic to me. Jacob sends Judah ahead to Joseph to say, “We’re coming.” They get into the land of Goshen. Verse 29: *“Then Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen.”* He’s excited. You can just imagine Joseph presenting himself.

I love the emotional life of Joseph. I love how he doesn’t hide his emotions. I love how he just cries when he needs to cry. It’s such a good thing. He falls on his father’s neck and weeps for a “good while.” And when a grown man weeps, it’s just heart-wrenching. He sobs from the depths of his being. You can just picture this son seeing his father. Israel’s first words are these: *“Now let me die.”* I can just imagine Joseph thinking, “Wait a minute, Dad. You just got here. ‘Now let me die’? Couldn’t we go get a cup of coffee or some ice cream or spend some time together? Let’s get to know each other again. What do you mean ‘Now let me die’?”

As you think about it, God is transforming Jacob’s attitude toward death. There’s peace here now. I think of Simeon, holding the baby Jesus in his arms (Luke 2:22-35). He says, “Now you can let Your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared in the sight of all the nations.” That seems to be happening in Jacob’s life. Since he has seen the face of his son and knows that he is still alive, he’s ready to go to heaven now.

But what I’m wondering about Jacob is this: what about his life? Does Jacob understand that God still has a purpose for his life, that God is not finished with him yet? For 20 years now Jacob has been talking like he’s going to die at any time. If Mark Twain could have a word with

Jacob, I imagine Mark Twain would say to him, “Now Jacob, the reports of your demise are greatly exaggerated. God is not done with you yet.” There’s going to be 17 more years of living in Egypt, but Jacob didn’t anticipate that.

Let’s look now at the passage where Jacob meets Pharaoh, beginning in Genesis 47:7. *“Then Joseph brought in Jacob his father and stood him before Pharaoh.”* The story of two kings: Pharaoh, the ruler of the less-than-free world, and Jacob, this old patriarch. In the Bible it’s always the greater who blesses the lesser, and in this passage it’s not Pharaoh who’s blessing Jacob. It’s Jacob who’s blessing Pharaoh. Even though Pharaoh looks like he is the mighty ruler of the world, Jacob is the bearer of the Messiah Whose reign will extend “from sea to sea and shore to shore until moons shall wax and wane no more” (from “Jesus Shall Reign” by Isaac Watts). His reign and His Kingdom are forever.

So Jacob is the greater of the two and Jacob blesses Pharaoh. It’s a wonderful picture of the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that He will make his descendants a blessing to the nations. And that’s when Pharaoh asked him this question in verse eight: *“How many are the days of the years of your life?”* This is a great question to ask because our lives are not measured by years, but by days. And every day matters. “So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12).

As Pharaoh asks this question, I think it’s a great opportunity for Jacob to give praise to God Who has been faithful to him all his days and to thank the Lord for His abundant blessings in his life, which have been innumerable. But instead, look at what Jacob says to Pharaoh in verse nine: *“The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning.”* It’s a puzzling answer. “How many are the days of the years of your life, Jacob?” “Well, I haven’t lived as long as my ancestors—just 130 years. When I think on my life, how would I describe my days? Well, few, evil and full of trouble. Yeah, that’s a pretty good summary of my life. Now, let me bless you again.”

That’s what’s going on here. Does Jacob sound a bit disappointed to you? Here’s a man who’s been scheming and cheating his way through life, trying to fulfill his dreams through his own conniving, trying to grasp the blessings that can only be given by grace. His behavior has led him into a lot of trouble. He’s shown favoritism to his son Joseph, which led to rivalry among the brothers and then led to treachery, which led to Joseph’s betrayal and rejection. There’s been all this grief and sorrow that Jacob has carried all these years. And you get the sense, as he stands before Pharaoh, that even though he’s grateful to see Joseph, he still is just wrestling with a sense of disappointment. “Few, evil and full of trouble have been my days.”

I'd like to ask him, "Jacob, are you more aware of your hardships and losses than you are of God's blessing and His goodness in your life? Is that what you're focused on? Have the truths of the vision God gave you in chapter six left your mind, only to be replaced by the bitterness of the sorrows you've endured?" Jacob does get a couple things very right in his answer to Pharaoh. He understands life here is a pilgrimage. "This world is not my home; I'm just a passing through. I'm an alien and a stranger here. I'm looking for a city that has foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God. It's just a sojourn."

It's like when you get stranded in a snowstorm and you have to stay in a cheap hotel. You don't get too bummed out by the 1970s décor all around you, because you know, "I'm just here for a night. This isn't my home." Or conversely, when you get to stay in the executive suite of the Drake Hotel and get all that plush treatment, you don't get too attached to it, because you know, "I'm just here for a night. I'm just passing through." Jacob has that kind of understanding. "I'm on a pilgrimage." Another thing he gets right is he understands it's his role to bring blessing to the world, that the God Who's been with him wants him to share and convey his blessing to the nations. He gets that right.

But I want you to notice that by the end of this chapter, in verse 28, after spending 17 years in Egypt, in the land of Goshen, Jacob has mellowed. He's more at peace within himself. He's really ready to die now. And in verses 29-31 he makes arrangements for after his death to be buried in the Promised Land as a sign of his faith in the covenant promises of God. Then jump over real quickly to chapter 48, verses 15-16, and see what he says when he blesses Joseph in the sight of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. This is just beautiful.

*And he blessed Joseph and said, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys."*

I think, "Oh, how sweet it would have been if 17 years earlier he would have talked about God that way to Pharaoh, if he would have said, 'God has been my shepherd all my life long to this day. He has redeemed me from all evil.'" Seventeen years later, that is Jacob's understanding of his life as he comes to the end. This is what he's thinking: "Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come. God's grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home. He's shepherded me. He's redeemed me from all evil."

## **The story from our perspective**

That brings me to the third perspective, our perspective today in 2017. What do you do when you feel like your life has been wasted? Where do you go when, looking at your situation, you just see a lot of disappointment. Things haven't turned out the way you had hoped. Have you ever felt like Jacob did? "My life's over. I'm ready to die. My best years are behind me. My dreams have not been fulfilled." Maybe you wish you were married, but you're not. Maybe you wish you had kids, but you don't. Or you wish your marriage was better, or your children were easier. You wish your finances weren't always a source of pressure. Your job situation hasn't always been easy. There are just so many things—after we deal with them over and over again—that can make us feel bitter and weary, like life is passing by and nothing's working out the way you want it to. "Does God even love me?" you might wonder.

As you think about all the ways your life has not turned out the way you had dreamed, have you forgotten all the ways God has been blessing you? Have you forgotten the many mercies He's showered upon you, how His goodness and mercy have pursued you all the days of your life? He's a good Shepherd. Think about all the evils He's redeemed you from. You might feel like your life is a lot of wasted days and years, but I want to ask you: do you agree with this sentence by Iain Duguid? He says, "None of your pains, your trials, your frustrated hopes or your difficulties are wasted in God's wisdom."

What does the Bible say? If you belong to Jesus, you have been bought with a price. You are owned by Him. You're not your own. You're His. Your life has been purchased by a great Redeemer, a Shepherd Who redeems you from all evil. That is the story of your life. So can you trust that this Good Shepherd is going to make sure your pains and your trials and your frustrated hopes—and even your worst failures—will be woven together in a tapestry that will result in a beautiful testimony to His grace and goodness? Can you trust that? Can you believe that?

Just think of Jesus. All the days of His life were full of evil and trouble and bitterness. So many things came against Him. Truly Jesus' days were few. He lived only about 33 years. Jacob lived for 147 years. But when do we ever see Jesus bitter? When do we ever see Him less than thankful? And what do we know? "*For the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*" (Hebrews 12:2). Why? So that He can bless us in Him "*with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*" (Ephesians 1:3). That's our Savior. That's our Redeemer. So can you wait through the disappointments and the difficulties with hope that one day you're going to see Him face to face, and everything is going to be all right then?

There's an old story—I checked to make sure it's true, but from all accounts I think it is—of Henry Morrison. He served for 40 years as a missionary in Africa, then returned back home on a ship with his wife. As they approached the dock in New York harbor, they looked out the window and could see a huge crowd out there, and even a band. He looked over at his wife, as they were getting ready to disembark from the ship, and said to her, “Look at the crowd. They have not forgotten us.”

Well, little did they know that on that same ship was the former President, Theodore Roosevelt, who was just returning from a hunting trip. Moments later, as they started getting off that ship they saw Teddy Roosevelt and the band started playing. They realized very quickly, “Those people aren't here to welcome us.” In fact, no one was there to welcome them after forty years in Africa. They went to their one-room apartment in New York City and for weeks this was eating away at Henry Morrison. He was becoming very depressed and very bitter at how forgotten and how wasted his life seemed. Forty years in Africa, and no one could even come and say, “Thank you.”

Finally his wife said to him, “Henry, you can't go on like this. You need to deal with this before God.” So he got before the Lord and came back from that place of seeking God with a smile on his face and peace in his heart. This is what he said: “The Lord settled it for me. I told Him how bitter I was that the President received this tremendous homecoming, but no one even met us as we returned home. When I finished, it seemed as though the Lord put His hand on my shoulder and simply said, ‘But Henry, you are not home yet. You're not home yet. That day is still to come.’”

Friends, that's the perspective that enables us to deal with the disappointments of our lives—even our disappointment with ourselves. We're still being shepherded through this life and carried by One Who redeems us from all evil. When we see Him face to face, then He will reward us for all the work He has done in us—and then we will be satisfied. But we're not home yet.

Will you come to Jesus, Who is so exalted that He is able to take the worst years of your life and the worst things you have done, and not only forgive you but redeem you in a way that brings Him glory and brings you good? That's what Jesus does.

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