

God Meant it for Good

**A Sermon Preached by
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We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Romans 8:28-30 NRSV

One of the lies that many of us believe is that if we just do this or that thing in life painful things won't happen, not to God's chosen. I call it the Protestant Fallacy, this idea that if we go to church, say our prayers, pledge, work hard, and follow the Golden Rule, everything will be smooth sailing in life: God will bring us safe, successful, and happy to port. We in the Carlisle area may seem to be proof of the lie's truth. Many here have come from relatively modest beginnings—children and grandchildren of immigrants, farmers, and factory workers. We now find ourselves in homes and surroundings that we never thought possible. Despite the economic challenges we are facing in America today we have to admit that we are truly blessed and favored people. "God has rewarded us well for our hard work," we think.

But what are we to think when the tide turns against us? What are we to think when people who do everything right, work hard, and play by the rules lose their jobs at the worst possible time, or get a fatal illness, or find themselves married to an unfaithful spouse? Are we no longer among God's chosen? Has God forgotten us? Are we being punished?

If you are one of those people asking God, "What happened? I thought I was one of your favorites," then Joseph's story is for you. You can find it in the closing chapters of the book of Genesis. It's the focus of our weekly children's church this summer. By the end of the summer they will know an awful lot about Joseph and his journey from prison to palace. By the end of this sermon, you will, too.

His life tells us that even when everything is going all wrong, we can be sure that in the end it's going to be alright. Meet Joseph: son of Jacob, grandson of Isaac, great-grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Joseph lived about 400 years before Moses. We think of him as one of the Patriarchs, the founding fathers of Judaism. When we meet him he is 17 years old and Jacob's favorite of 12 sons. He is so talented that he doesn't have to

work as hard as his 10 older brothers. And his father trusts him so much that his Dad lets him supervise all the others. Remember the special many-colored robe that Joseph received from Jacob? That was Jacob's way of "passing the mantel" of his fatherly authority to Joseph, skipping over all the older brothers. Joseph has done everything right and by the book. And his father has noticed.

So where does this get him? Tell me. What happens to the kid the teacher loves? The one with perfect attendance, the one who doesn't throw the spitball when everyone else does, the one the teacher calls on when she wants to know who threw the first punch? Teacher's pets are vilified, scorned, resented, and abused. So it was with Jacob. One day while they are all out in the field his brothers gang up on him, throw him into a pit, and leave him there to starve. Then they realize that they can turn a quick profit on this deed by selling him to some slave-traders for twenty pieces of silver. But before turning him over they take that despised robe, that symbol of Joseph's "chosen" status, tear it up, soak it in blood, and prepare to tell their dad that his beloved son, Joseph, was eaten by wild animals. This is only the beginning of the trouble that Joseph, God's BFF, ends up in.

The slave traders sell Joseph to an Egyptian officer, Potiphar, to work on his estate. Just as in his father's household, Joseph does everything right, proving himself a capable administrator and trusted worker. Soon he is running Potiphar's whole estate and enjoying all the privileges that come with such power. On top of all this, he's a handsome bachelor. He's got everything going for him; it's as if the Lord is blessing everything he touches.

That's when trouble begins again for Joseph. Potiphar's wife isn't going to let this catch get away. She tries to lure him into bed. He resists her advances and pulls away. He leaves his tunic in her hands and nothing to her imagination. While Joseph runs around naked looking for help, Potiphar's wife goes to her husband and tells him that *she* was the one who was assaulted. Joseph, the golden boy, ends up in prison.

These nasty plot twists aren't the kind we would expect in the life of such a faithful guy. We would expect everything to go well for Joseph. In his letter to the Romans Paul asks, "If God is for us, who is against us?" But at just about this time in Joseph's story he must have been tempted to ask, "With friends like God who needs enemies?" But the amazing thing is that Joseph doesn't ask that question. He doesn't engage in philosophical questions about whether God exists or even why bad things happen to good people.

Instead, even within the walls of Pharaoh's prison, Joseph sets out to do God's work. Joseph knows God has a plan and that he is part of it.

In prison he works hard, gains the favor of the warden, and ends up as overseer of the other prisoners. Prisoners come to him with their problems—dreams, especially—and Joseph tries to help them. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, Joseph plants seeds of service, not knowing what the Lord would make grow.

One day Pharaoh hears of Joseph's ability to interpret dreams. It turns out that Joseph had once helped Pharaoh's baker, and now the baker remembers that kindness by telling Pharaoh of Joseph's talents. Finally Joseph is called in to hear Pharaoh's dream: seven fat cows are eaten by seven lean cows, and seven healthy buds of wheat are blighted by seven sick ones. It would be interesting to know what Freud would make of the dream; Joseph knew that it meant a famine was coming and that Pharaoh better start saving food now.

Pharaoh recognizes Joseph's skills and places him in charge of the food storage project as the agri-czar of Egypt, the one who stores and sells all the nation's grain.

The famine strikes just as Joseph predicted. It effects lands as far away as Canaan, where Joseph's brothers and father are living on the brink of starvation. They hear from a neighbor that food can be had in Egypt. So they trek down to Egypt and arrange to meet the officer in charge of food: Joseph. But they don't recognize him—so many years have passed; they've all changed so much.

The drama of Joseph's story peaks with long lost Joseph standing before his brothers in the palace court. They treated him so badly and now they need him so badly. But they still don't recognize him.

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, ... Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ... So it was not you who sent me here, but God; ... Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ... God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Genesis 45:1-15 NRSV

Joseph's greatest gift was not his work ethic, or his intelligence, or his integrity—it some ways those things got him into trouble. His greatest gift was that when painful things happened to him—when his brothers betrayed him, when he was left for dead in the pit, when he was sold as a slave, when he was wrongly accused by Potiphar's wife, when he was sent to prison, through it all he clung to the knowledge that God had a plan for his life and he did his best to carry out that plan.

When despite all our good intentions and best efforts we find ourselves in pits and prisons we need follow what I call Paul's Principle: for those who love God, all things work together for good.

I'm not saying that all things are good. No way. Some things are very bad—those pit experiences among them. To say that “all things work together for good” is to say that there is no situation beyond God's plan of good for all humanity. It so to say that no matter how deep the pit or how secure the prison, God has already planned a way out—a way that will serve God's good purposes.

This tough part is this. It may be that God's plan does not include our personal happiness, or wealth, or even our health. God's plan for our lives may not include our becoming financially successful or having children or grandchildren. Not all of us will end up like Joseph in a palace. It may be that the pits and prisons of our lives are meant to be used to help others and not ourselves. God's plans extend beyond the personal. God's plan for Joseph included the saving of thousands of Egyptians—and Joseph's brothers and father, too. That made it worthwhile. What kept Joseph going through the tough years was his faith that his suffering was not for naught: God was working out a plan of good for someone, somewhere.

So what are we to do when we find ourselves in prisons of our own or others' making?

First, remember Paul's principle. So long as you are working for God, no pit is so deep that God can't get you out of it. We can't always see God's plan. It may not even become visible in our life time. But we can have faith that God is with us.

Second, wherever you are in life, start looking for opportunities to serve God. You may not be where you want to be, but that doesn't mean that God can't use you right where you are. Ask, “whom has God placed in my path whom I might serve while I'm stuck here?” Maybe it's a fellow patient, or personal friend, maybe an aged neighbor, or a troubled kid. Plant seeds of service with the confidence that at least one will come up because God has a plan.

And third, when opportunity comes, when those seeds of service sprout, accept the challenge and the responsibility that comes with them. Joseph didn't decline the opportunities to help his dad, or Potiphar, or Pharaoh. We need to say yes to the God opportunities that come our way, too. God uses everyday people like you and me to perform his wonders: expect to be called.

Look back on your life. Can you see how God took Good Fridays and turned them into Easter Sundays? Can you see how time that seemed wasted turned out to be valuable?

Just as we can look at the past and see God at work, we can look at the present moment, each moment, and say, “I know God has a plan of good for me—how can I be part of it right now?” Maybe we would like things to be different in our lives. Can we trust that God is working out his good plan for us and for all humanity even now? It's that attitude of faith that turns prisons into palaces and problems into possibilities. Amen.

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