

A Fitting Conclusion

Genesis 50:19-21

This is my 88th sermon on the book of Genesis. We began this study the beginning of February, two years ago. Likely you remember how the book begins, how the whole Bible begins,

Gen. 1:1 “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.”

We studied God’s work of creation, with those concluding words,

Gen. 1:31 “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.”

We studied the creation of man: Adam first, from the dust of the ground. Then Eve, his wife, formed from the rib which God had taken from Adam. We studied the fall of man into sin, and that first, great promise of redemption found immediately after the fall, the first prophecy of the saving work of Jesus, when God cursed Satan appearing in the form of that serpent,

Gen. 1:15 “And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.”

We studied Cain and Abel, then Noah and his children saved in the great and awful universal flood, then the tower of Babel, when the Lord “confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.”

Then came Abraham, and the covenant promise of a great people to live in a great land. We studied Sarah, Abraham’s wife, including some of Abraham’s foolish foibles and a sins. Then the next generation, when the chosen line of God’s people was established through Isaac and Rebekah. Then Jacob, along with his brother Esau. And finally the twelve sons born to Jacob who would together comprise the whole nation of God’s chosen people, Israel. We studied many things with regard to Joseph, the beloved son of Jacob and Rachel, including the sinfulness of his brothers selling him into Egypt, which became the occasion for God’s providence in elevating Joseph to prominence in Egypt that the whole family of Israel would be brought to Egypt. All of which would set the stage for the second book in the Bible, when God would deliver his people out of Egypt in that great event which we call the Exodus.

Last time we finished the chronological events of Genesis, through the end of chapter 50, concluding with Joseph’s death, but I wanted to preach one more sermon on Genesis in an attempt not only to summarize all of that which I just recounted, but to put all of those narratives into the proper context in our continuing relationship with God today. Thus I wanted to focus our attention today on verses 19-21 of this last chapter, chapter 50. Those verse describe the final encounter recorded which Joseph had with his brothers, and remember that they had sold Joseph into slavery and allowed his father Jacob to think he had been dead all those years. So we read,

v.19 “Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? 20 But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. 21 Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.”

“You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good.” In a certain sense, that is the summary of this whole book. In an even broader sense, that is a summary of all that God does in our lives to this day, reflecting upon the true nature of both God’s sovereignty and our good. “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good.”

As we focus upon those words this morning, let me begin with an emphasis upon what those words don’t mean. I’ll begin by identifying a wrong and even harmful use of those words, which is to use these words to somehow justify your own bad actions. In other words, if you are the one who has sinned, you are not the one to say, “Well, God meant it for good!” Simply put,

I. THERE IS NO EXCUSE FOR SINFUL ACTIONS WHICH CAUSE HARM TO ONE ANOTHER.

All too often, it seems, in our day, that the one guilty of causing harm finds an excuse in the idea of God’s sovereignty to minimize the harm they have done. Even, at times, by utilizing a simplistic and cheap formula of words substituting for true repentance for sin, then blaming the victim of their sin for not forgiving, or not “getting over it.” So the one harmed becomes the one accused of bitterness, the one harmed becomes the one who is made to feel guilty for the effects of harm and trauma that has been done to them. I see that over and over again, and have been on the receiving end of that as well. And there is nothing here to justify that position.

It is not the brothers of Joseph who make this claim to the good purpose of God’s sovereignty. It is Joseph who does so. What his brothers present to us, so very appropriately, is...

A. The necessity of repentance and personal ownership of sin.

I have emphasized that as we have studied their response to

Joseph on several occasions. We read here,
v.15

They acknowledged their own evil. They acknowledged the right of Joseph to demand a recompense from them. I don’t believe they are ascribing anything improper or sinful to Joseph at all, for I believe the “hatred” to which they refer would be a righteous response to their evil. And even when they quote their father’s request for Joseph to grant forgiveness, they are not demanding their own rights but pleading for mercy.

v.16 So they sent messengers to Joseph, saying, “Before your father died he commanded, saying, 17 ‘Thus you shall say to Joseph: “I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.” ’ Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.”

They are owning their own sin in all of that, not making any excuse for it. They are owning their own guilt and responsibility rather than demanding from Joseph this gift of forgiveness. Rather, I believe, in seeking his forgiveness, they are pleading for his mercy rather than presuming upon his obligation to forgive.

Ownership of sin is so crucial in all of this. The willingness to admit wrong, to admit and confess your own actions that have caused harm, actions which are accurately described as evil. There is no excuse here to do anything but that. And consistent with that, Joseph’s brothers demonstrate,

B. The duty to offer restitution in the effort to bring about reconciliation.

Restitution means that where you cause harm, to the extent that you cause harm, you make it right. So the brothers, having sold Joseph into slavery, offer themselves to him to be his servants.

v.18 “Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, “Behold, we are your servants.”

I believe that was a legitimate offer, one which Joseph could have accepted, in terms of justice. He didn’t accept it, of course, but the point is that they offered it. This principle and practice is so needed in our day, when words often are cheap, even words seeking forgiveness. Reconciliation isn’t accomplished by the recitation of a certain formula of words, it isn’t accomplished by the imposition of pressure and manipulation by the one speaking those words, demanding something of those whom they have harmed. Reconciliation because when the offender, the one who has caused harm, does whatever is necessary to make right the harm he has caused. So Joseph’s brothers “fell down before his face, and they said, “Behold, we are your servants.”

One more thing in this context, before I move on to the glorious encouragements of Joseph’s words to his brothers. There is a need to demonstrate,

C. The willingness to grieve with those harmed by the sins of others.

We’re not shown any of Joseph’s griefs here in Genesis, but that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. Nor does it mean that we can use Joseph’s words to ignore the grief that those who are sinned against experience. Joseph is honest, and the words to his brothers are personal—“You meant evil against me...” God meant it for good, and that is where we are going this morning, but we ought not to ignore the context and skip over the painful reality of these words. “You meant evil against me.”

So no excuses for the evil, sinful actions of Joseph’s brothers. No gaslighting, as people say today. But let’s move on to Joseph’s actual words. “You meant evil against me; but God

meant it for good.” I’ll begin with the obvious implication of those words, which have reference to what we commonly identify as the sovereignty of God. Sovereignty means that God is not accountable to anyone outside himself. He does not answer to anyone, for there is no one above him.

In a certain sense, though, it’s actually more than just sovereignty. It is more than just God acting as he chooses without accountability to anyone else. What we see is also his ability to do so! His ability, his power, to accomplish whatever he wishes or chooses. His sovereign power. Thus Joseph speaks to his brothers with...

II. THE EARNEST AWARENESS OF THE SOVEREIGN POWER OF GOD.

“God meant it for good.” Not just that God somehow manipulated the situation so that something came out of it. But rather, he meant it for good, from the beginning. He determined it for good. He decreed it for good. And as soon as you think of it in those terms, the broader biblical principle rises to the surface with this knowledge and conviction,

A. God works all things according to the counsel of his own will, even the sinful acts of men.

For some people, the second half of that sentence is the struggle. How can the counsel of God’s will include the sinful acts of men? Doesn’t that make God the author of sin? Isn’t God, then, responsible for sin? Clearly, the answer to those last two questions has to be “no,” but not at the expense of denying God’s eternal decree, what the Bible call “the counsel of his own will.”

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons

by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.”

God predestined us to adoption, to salvation. That language is as clear as it can be. But note what I just read further, “according to the good pleasure of His will.” In other words, his eternal decree. His eternal purpose. Paul goes on in,

Eph. 1:11 “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.”

Paul is piling up synonyms to make his point so unmistakable. God has a purpose, a predetermined and predestined purpose. And he has a counsel, a determination. And a will, the determination to act. God “works all things according to the counsel of His will.”

Even the sinful acts of men. Let me give you an example of how that works. Consider Jesus’ crucifixion. Clearly that was an evil act of sinful men, for which they bore guilt and even condemnation. But this is what we read in Acts 2, speaking of Jesus,

Acts 2:23 “...being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; 24 whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.”

They took Jesus and put him to death, by their own lawless hands. They were the immediate cause of that sin, they were the author of their own sin. But still, nevertheless, we read that Jesus was delivered over to death “by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God.”

That of course, is far greater example of what we find in Genesis 50 with Joseph’s words to his brothers. God works all thing according to the counsel of his own will. That’s what the Bible says. Even the sinful acts for which sinful men are guilty and held accountable.

This is what God says of himself,

Is. 46:9 “For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, 10 Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure,’ 11 Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it.”

Or more simply,

Prov. 19:21 “There are many plans in a man’s heart, Nevertheless the LORD’s counsel—that will stand.”

Only God has that power. Only God has that sovereignty. Only God...is God! Only God can do this, not us, for we are but creatures. So note how Joseph expresses himself in,

v.19 “Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God?”

The answer, of course, is no! That’s the point. Joseph knew of God’s sovereign power. Joseph understood what we call the decrees of God. Joseph understood that there is infinite and abiding distinction between God the creator and man the creature. And he wouldn’t claim the sovereign power that belonged to God alone. He understood what Isaiah would later declare,

Is. 45:5 “I am the LORD, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me,

6 That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting That there is none besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other;
7 I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things.”

So we remain responsible for our own sinful actions, for God does not sin nor tempt us to sin. But still, even when we sin, God works “all things according to the counsel of His will.” In Joseph’s words, responding to his brothers’ sins, he recognizes the overarching purpose of God’s eternal counsel. They meant it for evil, but God meant it, God designed it, God decreed it for something else. God meant it for good.

Thus what stands out in these verses is that,

B. God works all things together for good for his people.
v.20 “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good.”

So here it is not just the power of God that is emphasized, but his goodness. Power without goodness would be a terror, would it not? But while God’s power is sovereign, that he answers to no one, still his power is constrained, by his own nature. His power is constrained by his own goodness. He cannot deny himself.

Joseph shows us such great faith, such great trust. Because remember, he spent years as a slave. He was imprisoned. There was nothing good in that, from a human perspective. There was nothing good in Joseph’s own experiences when he was left for dead in that empty pit. There was nothing good in the evil which was done to him. And it was evil that was done to him. This is where our faith grows mature. This is where our willingness to trust God, to let him be God, is applied. This is where we have to say with Joseph, “Am I in the place of God?” This is where we

have to be humbled in our inability to govern and control our own circumstances, and, at times, to endure with much perseverance great struggle and affliction, great hardship and distress.

These can’t be flippant words, which is why I stressed all that I did in that first point. Joseph endured evil at the hands of his brothers. But this is where the strength of his faith brought him, “Am I in the place of God?” With a resounding “no” in his heart, he is able to recognize not only the sovereign power of God, but also his goodness. “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good.”

That is, I believe, what Paul would have us understand with his great declaration of,

Rom. 8:28 “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

I still remember the Sunday School class when I first studied that verse, as a young believer, still a young teenager, and it so gripped my soul. This reality that even when I am in distress, even when others do evil against me, God is still accomplishing his purpose, and that purpose is to accomplish that good that he has determined in the secret and eternal counsel of his own will.

Sometimes, the “good” is very hard to see, with our own eyes. Sometimes, to be honest, we can’t see it at all. And I hate the expression that is used sometimes that these types of verses are weaponized against people, as if you aren’t allowed to acknowledge the suffering of evil that others perpetuate upon you. I hate it when people use these sorts of verses to beat people over the head when they are harmed, as if they shouldn’t feel the effects of the evil actions of others or simply the hard realities of some circumstances. And I hate that sort of

weaponization of Scripture because it misses the whole point of the encouragement of these verses. That God is, actually, working all things together for good. He defines what that good is, of course. And sometimes we have to wait, even wait long, to have any of our sense of its goodness, but we live by faith not by sight. So here with Joseph is the fullness of a mature faith, and that should be to your encouragement and strength, knowing this about God, his sovereign power to accomplish his own will and purpose, and in so doing, to work all things together for good, for his people.

The full encouragement of all this requires, however, that you nurture and exercise,

III. THE EARNEST AWARENESS OF THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF GOD.

In other words, God's purpose might be your comfort, or even your happiness in terms of this world's experiences. God's purpose certainly isn't limited to your current experiences, and we need to be able to look beyond that, with this understanding of,

A. The ultimate purpose for God himself to provide for his people.

What I mean by that is this, that God's ultimate purpose in our lives includes his work to teach us to depend upon him, not upon ourselves. I believe that trust in God is what Joseph expresses when he says to his brothers,

v.21 "Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them."

I get the sense that Joseph understood that God was providing for his family, God was providing for Joseph's brothers, by raising Joseph up in the land of Egypt. Joseph no longer exalted himself over his brothers, as he did when he first had that

dream regarding his own superiority. But now he becomes God's servant, realizing that he is the means by which God himself will provide for his people. "Do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones."

Even more than that, however, even more broadly, Joseph understand and proclaims to us,

B. The ultimate purpose of salvation.

Again, v.20 "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive."

I believe this perspective is so necessary, especially as we deal not only with the sinful and harmful actions of others, but also the broad measure of suffering we often endure in this world. How can God allow that suffering? How can God be good if we must endure such horrific abuse or persecution? It's not hard to fill in those blanks with specific examples. How can God be seen as powerful, and also good, when he seems to be demonstrating neither power or goodness in any number of situations?

The only answer to that question is built upon this awareness of the ultimate purpose of salvation. Today still is the day of salvation, and the lost are still be saved and redeemed, saved from the condemnation of the judgment of hell. And because that salvation is God's ultimate purpose, he is forbearing.

Peter gives us that perspective when he quotes the question of many who doubt God's power and goodness,

2 Peter 3:4 "Where is the promise of His coming?"

Where is he? Where is God? Where is the display of his power or his goodness? This is Peter's answer,

2 Peter 3:5 “For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, 6 by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. 7 But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. 8 But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

Thus whatever we might endure in this age, it is in the context of God accomplishing his ultimate purpose, as Joseph so clearly understood.

v.20 “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

Thus the whole book of Genesis is really summarized by this reality, that the God of creation is the God who accomplishes his purpose, his purpose of accomplishing that which is good. And ultimately, that purpose of salvation is best expressed in those famous words first spoken to Abraham, “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

May that great hope be your strength and your encouragement. May that great promise be your source of confidence and security in all the circumstances of your life, as you walk by faith and not by sight.