

Reflecting on the Broader Themes (for D-Group on September 23)

For you to consider about this week's story and broader theme: This story opens the door to reflect on FAITH and mysteries associated with God's sovereignty and providence. He is not only "in control," but also at work in this world, moving events toward His desired goals and working things out according to His purposes. This is a key part of the Joseph narrative in Genesis. ***Up front, it's appropriate to recognize that our human minds are inherently limited in striving to comprehend such infinite and divine realities; yet, through Scripture, God has revealed Himself so that we can know Him, even if not fully yet.*** So, we want to try to grasp the fullness of what God's Word reveals about Him, His sovereign will and His providence amidst what Scripture also reveals about what we experience on earth, including human free will.

- **Our CONFIDENCE** - overall, these truths about God can and should give us great assurance about His activity in the world, even in our lives, and His eternal purposes.
- **Yet, a CAUTION** - about the reality of hard things more broadly: ***We need to guard against thinking that everything that happens is somehow God-ordained (as the common phrase "everything happens for a reason" seems to suggest).***

Sometimes, these truths about God can lead people to believe that He is a Heavenly puppet-master pulling all the strings in life. The result? Whatever happens is what He has divinely ordained to have happened (there is a big difference between God knowing all things in advance and God directly causing all things). Further, He's somehow directly bringing about even the bad things in life. It is true that nothing happens without God's "permission" - what is called His "permissive will."

However, taking that too far eliminates Scriptural realities like these: (a) we live in a fallen world where bad things happen as part of the current order + (b) there is the influence of evil and the evil one + (c) because of human free will as part of His creative design, there are significant earthly consequences from human folly in general, and specifically, human sin (both our own or from others - *this is not to turn specific "bad things" into God's punishments, just to note that such human choices can lead to disastrous realities in life*). When Jesus teaches us to pray for His Kingdom to come and His will to be done ***"on earth as it is in Heaven,"*** it's a reminder that what happens here *can, in fact*, fundamentally go against God's truest intentions. That doesn't mean He's not sovereign; it seems to mean that He has chosen to self-limit His sovereignty.

- **Another CAUTION** - about God's promise to be working in all things for good, as we see in Joseph's story: ***The promise of Romans 8:28 is a great one, but we should guard against making it a guarantee beyond what it actually promises.***

As a result of reading a story such as Joseph's and a text such as Romans 8:28, we often develop expectations for what it all means. That's not at all inappropriate. The problem comes when we take those further than intended. For example:

- ✓ If we turn His promise into an *expectation* that we'll always be able to see the "good" personally here-and-now; sometimes those results aren't seen this side of eternity.
- ✓ Or, if we develop an *expectation* that we'll always understand how God is working in His sovereignty and providence; true faith keeps trusting even when it doesn't make sense.
- ✓ Perhaps even further, if we have an *expectation* that we'll always personally come to this recognition that what God has done has made the hard things "worth it." Joseph was able to see the "good" that God did even through the "evil" that came his way, but that doesn't mean that he stopped viewing these experiences as bad and hard. That God creates good out of evil/bad doesn't allow us to avoid the "hard things." Don't forget, even for Jesus, the "GOOD" for God's purposes and plan to be accomplished required His death!

Incidentally, the same principle is true with Jeremiah 29:11-13 - when we take and apply a promise to guarantee something it never was intended to guarantee, we're at a loss when life happens in a contradictory way and tragedy strikes! God's promises are GOOD and the GOOD NEWS is truly GOOD NEWS ... as they are!

- **A REMINDER: *One of the clearest ways God answers these mysteries and questions is through the reality of eternity.*** Whatever unfolds on this earth, one day, He will move history and life as we know it to His conclusion (ironically, an "end," that ushers in a new/renewed "beginning"). No one or nothing can thwart His plans. One day, we will see Him and His purposes clearly. To borrow from imagery of Corrie ten Boom, one day, we will see the right side (the Heaven's-view) of the cross-stitch, that is our life's story, not just the gnarled knots we see from here below. One day, the promises He's made will reach their full and final fulfillment as we take up residence in a restored creation, what we call Heaven, God's presence. Then, we will no longer have to pray "Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven" because Heaven and earth will have become one! One day, He will right what is wrong. **Such an expectation of eternity is the only way to make sense of the Good News, how God works and what He's promised.** Living a life of faith - just like with those we read about in Hebrews 11 (see 11:13-16) - means living in anticipation for a promise that will only truly be fulfilled beyond this world and life as they are. Until then, we can trust that He is at work, even when it's not obvious to us.

At some point, I will send an e-mail to everyone a file that has a few supplements - if you are interested in using them (as if you'll need anything more, but still). They might help in reflecting on and applying these themes. These are the first two pages of that file.

John Piper - a book called *A Sweet & Bitter Providence* (reflecting on God's SOVEREIGNTY, etc. in the midst of our lives ... troubles!!).

Life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven.

Life is a winding and troubled road. Switchback after switchback.

And the point of biblical stories like Joseph and Job and Esther and Ruth is to help us feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that God is for us in all these strange turns.

God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up.

He is plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the words of Romans 8:28 ... "For we **KNOW** that in all things, He is working for the good of those who love Him/have been called according to His purpose."

Some words about God's PROVIDENCE to help us understand what it is:

*God is the creator of Heaven and earth, and that all that occurs in the universe takes place under **Divine Providence** – that is, under God's sovereign guidance and control. According to believers, God governs creation as a loving father, working all things for good.*

*... divine **providence** refers to **God's** preservation of creation, his cooperation with everything that happens, and his guiding of the universe.*

Providence ... is the sovereign and divine superintendence of all things, guiding them toward their divinely predetermined end in a way that is consistent with their created nature, all to the glory and praise of God. This divine, sovereign, and benevolent control of all things by God is the underlying premise of everything that is taught in the Scriptures.

A DEFINITION ...

God's PROVIDENCE is His ongoing ability to be sovereignly at work in the midst of all that is happening – GOOD and BAD – in the world He created ... guiding things towards His desired ends and working things out according to His purposes.

God's PROVIDENCE means that while He is not micro-managing everything, everything is happening under His awareness and He is able to move things in the direction He desires.

Our focus is specifically on the way that He brings GOOD out of BAD in the midst of life!

An analogy by one author to emphasize God's working:

In high school, I took pride in my ability to play chess. I joined the chess club, and during lunch hour could be found sitting at a table with other nerds poring over books with titles like Classic King Pawn Openings.

I studied techniques, won most of my matches, and put the game aside for 20 years.

Then, in Chicago, I met a truly fine chess player who had been perfecting his skills long since high school.

When we played a few matches, I learned what it is like to play against a master.

Any classic offense I tried, he countered with a classic defense.

If I turned to more risky, unorthodox techniques, he incorporated my bold forays into his winning strategies.

Although I had complete freedom to make any move I wished, I soon reached the conclusion that none of my strategies mattered very much.

His superior skill guaranteed that my purposes inevitably ended up serving his own.

Perhaps God engages our universe, his own creation, in much the same way – He grants us freedom to rebel against its original design, but even as we do so we end up ironically serving his eventual goal of restoration.

If I accept that blueprint – a huge step of faith, I confess – it transforms how I view both good and bad things that happen. Good things, such as health, talent, and money, I can present to God as offerings to serve his purposes. And bad things, too – disability, poverty, family dysfunction, failures – can be redeemed as the very instruments that drive me to God.

Bryan Wilkerson – sermon on Romans 8:28

Suppose you are a parent who has decided in your heart that your child will be an outstanding athlete. You came up with that purpose before the child was even born; before he was even conceived, you said to yourself, "My kid is going to be a star!"

So, from day one you worked with that child, giving your best time and energy and skill and know-how and training to develop his abilities, and you give the child every opportunity to be that athlete you're dreaming that he will be.

But there are other factors at work that you can't control – the coaches of his team, his teammates, his physical body, and the injuries he may receive, the outcomes of games. And you certainly don't want to run on the field and play the game for him! It's his game. No, you can't control all those things.

So what you do is you take what the game dishes out, and then you work it together to an advantage to developing that child into the athlete you purposed he or she should become.

On a much grander scale, that is how God works in our lives. I realize God is sovereign, all-powerful and all-wise. But He has put parameters on His work in the world. He has limited himself. He allows Satan to roam the earth, and He gives men and women the freedom to choose even when those choices are foolish and hurtful to themselves and the world. He doesn't control and manipulate everything.

HERE'S THE KEY: Instead, He works with the things that happen, working them together in his strong hands so that his purpose is accomplished.

Think of it this way:

It's impressive to see an artist make something good/beautiful out of a blank canvas.

Somehow, it seems even more impressive to see an artist take a canvas upon which has been scribbled and messed in all kinds of ugly ways ... and make THAT into something good/beautiful!

CORRIE TEN BOOM - like with the underside of a cross-stitch vs. what is only cohesive when seen from "above" ... from our earthly perspective, we cannot fully grasp what is happening in our lives. It's only once we have Heaven's full perspective that the picture becomes clear.