

The Thread of God's Plan in the Tapestry of Our Lives

From the sermon series: The Mystery of God's Sovereign Grace

Text: Genesis 50: 19-20

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good... Genesis 50: 19-20

It is the very nature of our human experience that we can live it only one day at a time. The present moment can be understood in the context of the past to the present and such an understanding lends perspective; however, the future is open and unknown. Consequently, while we are living our lives the meaning of the whole is not available to us and because the whole is not available to us, neither is the final meaning of any particular period or event. Thus, not only in regard to our lives as a whole, but even in regard to single events or limited periods, the jury is still out.

That may seem unsettling; perhaps we simply don't think about it. Nonetheless, it is true. Yet we are told that critical for our human wellbeing is meaning and purpose. The crisis of Western culture, many believe, is precisely a lack of meaning in human existence. But if we are truly historical creatures and the meaning of the whole and even the parts is not available to us, from whence can we derive a sense of meaningful and purposeful existence?

That is the question this series of messages is addressing. We are focusing on the mystery of God's sovereign grace and such a focus is already an affirmation of faith as well as an acknowledgement of our human situation. It is an acknowledgement of our human situation as limited and finite in the fact that we are speaking of mystery. That is, the meaning of our lives in relation to God's gracious purpose is not accessible to our human investigation. Human reason is not competent to unravel the mystery of God's sovereign grace as it embraces our lives and gives them meaning.

But the very idea of a sovereign gracious purpose of God is already an idea which rests on faith; it is a statement of fundamental trust. It is a faith claim that our lives find meaning and purpose by resting in and being caught up in a plan and purpose of God Who is sovereign and gracious.

The specific theme of this message is that the tapestry of our lives is determined by the thread of God's plan woven through it.

We are often "spooked" by the phrase, "plan of God." Some speak of it too glibly, too easily as though they are fully informed as to the Divine design. Some speak of it defensively as though any such plan must reduce human freedom and responsibility to insignificance. Some speak of it despairingly wondering how in the world one can ever find it out and fit into it.

Because of the difficulties it raises we have too often been silent about the plan of God; knowing not how to deal with it, we have simply not dealt with it. Yet what is more important to our spiritual peace and human wellbeing than a sense that our lives are meaningful as they are caught up in the plan and purpose of God?

My contention in this message is that one can trust in, if not discern, the thread of God's plan in the tapestry of our lives. That contention is based on the conviction that God is working His purpose out *in spite of, through and against* every human effort. God does His own work and executes His own sovereign, gracious purpose at the same time that He fully honors the work of His creatures. This is a mystery and we honor the mystery; we do not attempt to dissolve it or to rationalize it. But the contention is essential if we would let God be God and at the same time reckon with our own freedom and responsibility. Neither the freedom of the creature nor the gracious sovereignty of God is canceled. They are not in conflict nor are they to be equated. God's will makes use of all human action but is domesticated or limited by no human decision or action.

Recall the image of the river. Humans blast away at rock and run bulldozers through forests and hills to make a canal. God makes the river which meets resistance and flows another way, but eventually reaches the sea.

The purpose of God may be delayed; it may be held in abeyance; it will not be defeated. Through every human action and effort runs a transcendent purpose according to a plan of God, which he will sovereignly effect for salvation and life.

We could soon get bogged down in abstract debate were we simply to argue this point. This unfortunately has too often been the case in the history of theological discussion. The Bible does not engage in abstract speculation. Rather, it tells stories. The narrative of God's going with His people through their history is told and retold in order to keep memory alive and stimulate hope. The classic story of God's providence is the narrative of Joseph. It is a familiar story and Joseph is a favorite Bible character.

The story brings to a close the history of the Patriarchs, the history that brings us up to the Exodus and the creation of the nation Israel. Abraham was given the initial covenant promise. It passed to Isaac and then to Jacob. Jacob's name was changed to Israel. He had twelve sons, one of whom was Joseph. He loved Joseph above the others and showed his partiality openly, giving Joseph a long robe with sleeves, a mark of his special favor. This offended the brothers and engendered their hatred.

But Jacob's special favor was not all. Joseph further alienated his brothers when he related his dreams. While binding sheaves in the field, Joseph told how his sheaf stood up and the brother's sheaves bowed down to his. It took no special insight to get the meaning. They hated him!

In another dream, the sun, moon and eleven stars bowed down to him. This was too much even for Jacob. He reprimanded Joseph.

One day Jacob sent Joseph to see how his brothers were doing with the flocks out in the field. The brothers saw him coming and decided to do away with him. Rather than kill him, they sold him to traveling merchants who brought him to Egypt and sold him as a slave. The brothers ripped his beautiful cloak, stained it with blood and took it to their father, claiming a wild animal had killed Joseph. Jacob grieved and would not be comforted.

In Egypt Joseph prospered for the story tells us God was with him. He endured many trials, but finally was raised to the rank of Prime Minister over all Egypt because he interpreted a dream of Pharaoh. He said there would be seven years of plenty and then seven years of famine. He suggested that a plan should be put into effect to prepare for the lean years. Pharaoh put Joseph in charge and he proved a wise administrator.

When the famine hit, Jacob and his sons, too, were without food. They went to Egypt to secure provisions and to whom did they appeal but to Joseph whom they did not recognize, but who recognized them. In the end, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. They were fearful that now Joseph would get his revenge, but instead he reassured them, saying:

Now do not be distressed or take it amiss that you sold me into slavery here; it was God who sent me ahead of you to save men's lives...God sent me ahead of you to ensure that you will have descendants on earth... So it was not you who sent me here, but God... Genesis 45:5-8

He then sent them back to fetch father Jacob and there was a moving reunion. Joseph settled his family in a district of Egypt where they were preserved and prospered.

But then old Jacob died and again the brothers were fearful. Had Joseph only restrained his anger until his father died? Would he now wreak vengeance on his

brothers? So they came to him, pleading forgiveness. The text tells us they bowed down before him. (The dream was realized). But again Joseph proved gracious. In the words of our text he says,

Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You meant to do me harm, but God meant to bring good out of it by preserving the lives of many people, as we see today. Do not be afraid. I will provide for you and your dependents. Thus he comforted them and set their minds at rest.

The Joseph narrative could better be handled in a series of messages for the richness of teaching that lies embedded therein cannot possibly be handled in the compass of one message. But let me simply point you to some areas for reflection.

To begin with, note that *Joseph speaks of the contrast between the intention of the genuinely human action of the brothers and the action of God.*

You meant to do me harm; but God meant to bring good out of it...

The word for "meant" in Hebrew is *hasab*. An alternative translation is "plan."

You planned ... God planned...

The reality of our human situation is that we make plans; we plan. It cannot be otherwise because we are by our very nature creatures open to the future. Some of us make long-range plans; some of us more or less bump along; still it is a rare individual who does not at some time think, "Someday I will..."

The scriptures affirm that God plans, too. God is a purposeful Being. Here we bump into that scary idea of Predestination. Listen to St. Paul.

He has made known to us his hidden purpose – such was his will and pleasure determined beforehand in Christ – to be put into effect when the time was ripe; namely, that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ. Ephesians 1:9-10

God is a God with a plan. Created in God's image, we, too, have the capacity, the inevitability of planning. It is in the conjunction of our plan and God's plan that history moves on its way.

Now I could give you a whole list of citations from scripture speaking of God's plan and human plans. Let me simply say this:

Human planning is a genuinely human action of free and responsible persons. Those plans are not crushed, tossed aside, treated with derision by God. They are our acts; they stand. They create their own reality.

God's plan works in, through, in spite of and against our plans.

God's plan will finally have its way; sometimes delayed, sometimes detoured, sometimes held in abeyance; yet God will have God's way.

This the Joseph narrative teaches us.

We must take care holding this truth,

not to claim too much. We must be careful not to picture a God in some ethereal heaven swooping down and rescuing his people when the going gets tough - a God who always intervenes to make things right.

That is naive and simplistic and it may create a cozy feeling for some of the time, but it cannot stand up before the tragedy and suffering of human experience. It cannot be maintained in light of the experience of Jesus in crucifixion. God is no "quick fix" for human suffering.

not to claim too little, falling into the trap of a humanism that removes God as major actor in the human drama, claiming God "has no hands but our hands."

A humanism embarrassed about faith will also miss the point of the biblical teaching and the confidence and comfort that comes from trusting the working out of the sovereign, gracious purpose of God. God's rule is no vacuous sovereignty, the assertion of some absolute but irrelevant power quite removed from the arena of life and history.

God has a plan. God is working out that plan; we can be certain of it; we can rely on it. God is working out that plan in and through human willing and planning and action. God's plan will ultimately have its way.

The text teaches us further, that *God plans for our good.*

God meant (planned) to bring good out of it.

The series title is "The Mystery of God's Sovereign Grace." Not raw sovereignty, not absolute power, not a coercive, crushing, all-mightiness. No, rather a gracious plan and purpose that will prevail - "for good."

You recognize that word "good." God surveyed the creation He had fashioned and said, "Very good!" (Genesis 1:31) That is where this book of beginning begins. Now at its ending, once again we have the affirmation of *God's purpose for good* that reminds us of St. Paul's classic faith statement:

God works all things together for the good of those who love him.

When the curtain rings down on the whole cosmic drama, the whole human story, God will have only one word to speak:

Good.

And we shall be wrapped in the eternal praise of God's sovereign, gracious purpose, finally brought to fruition, and we shall echo the word:

Good. Alleluia!

Thus in our human existence, caught between a world tending toward death and a God intending life, we live with

Realism - about our human place, its fragility, its peril, its pain. There is no Pollyanna view of things. Sometimes it is very dark; sometimes it hurts so bad.

Certitude - about the outcome of the whole drama because of the faithfulness of God.

Realism alone leads to despair because it focuses only on the danger and peril. Certitude alone leads to romanticism, focusing only on victory and failing to reckon with battle as though one is immune to the tragedy. Biblical faith is unflinching in its realism, undoubting about the outcome. Where does that leave us? Go again to the text; hear Joseph say to his brothers' urgent pleas for mercy,

Am I in the place of God?

Joseph's faith enabled him to wait on the Lord, to commit his way unto the Lord, to be patient as the drama of his life unfolded. Such a confidence in the overarching purpose of God enabled him to trust in faith and love.

It saved him from anger, that dissipating emotion that drains one of energy and creative living, that spoils everything, souring life. How many of us live with unresolved anger - anger at God, anger at others, anger at ourselves?

It energized him for meaningful action. His administration in Egypt spared the nation and his own family. God's plan is not the end of human planning, but its foundation. His life had purpose. Joseph trusted God's plan. Joseph worked the plan.

As we leave this story, so vivid in its portrayal of God's hidden gracious, sovereign purpose in and through human purposing, let me leave you with Joseph's application for our lives. His first word to his brothers was, "*Fear not.*"

That is the word Abraham heard when God called.

It is the word Second Isaiah heard when in Exile in Babylon.

It was the word Mary heard when encountered by Gabriel.

It was the word shepherds heard at the birth of Jesus.

It was the word of the resurrected Christ on Easter morning.

Dear friends, hear it; it is for you. Fear not. Whatever you are facing - fear not.