

Vision That Cannot Be Stopped

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in an eight-part series

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Genesis 50:15–21 (CEB)

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers realized that their father was now dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge against us, and wants to pay us back seriously for all of the terrible things we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they approached Joseph and said, "Your father gave orders before he died, telling us, ¹⁷ 'This is what you should say to Joseph. "Please, forgive your brothers' sins and misdeeds, for they did terrible things to you. Now, please forgive the sins of the servants of your father's God." ' " Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

¹⁸ His brothers wept too, fell down in front of him, and said, "We're here as your slaves."

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I God?" ²⁰ You planned something bad for me, but God produced something good from it, in order to save the lives of many people, just as he's doing today. ²¹ Now, don't be afraid. I will take care of you and your children." So he put them at ease and spoke reassuringly to them.

Romans 8:28 (CEB)

²⁸ We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Yes, all things work for good for those who love God.

Robert Burns, the Scottish poet of the late eighteenth-century, got it about right when he wrote, "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley," meaning "The best laid plans of mice and men oft' go astray." We plan and we forecast and we predict and we plan some more . . . and then we're shocked when it all seems to go wrong. That's how it is with us; but not with God.

God's purposes move inexorably forward. How is often not clear to us, but God's vision cannot be stopped. Out of our wreckage, God can bring good. Out of our pain, God can bring love. Out of our hope, God can bring assurance. This isn't to say that all things in our lives work out well; there is much suffering and loss in this world. But it is to say that, as Paul wrote, "God works all things together for good for the ones who love God." All things? Even when we harm others? The answer is an emphatic "yes," as today's story from Joseph's saga in Genesis shows.

A special coat

Abraham was the father of Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, who was the father of twelve sons, from whom God would grow the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph was the youngest of Jacob's twelve sons, the long-awaited child of Rachel, Jacob's true love. If you've seen the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, you know the basics of the story.

Joseph's life begins with great hope. He has a gift for dreams that reveal much. He is his father's favorite. Jacob gives him a beautiful coat to wear and frees him from the hard work assigned to his eleven brothers. But there is a darkness present as well. Jacob's favoritism and Joseph's dreams create an explosive family situation.

The brothers' envy and anger eventually boil over. They consider killing the boy, who is perhaps seventeen or so. Instead, they sell him to some passing Ishmaelite traders, which is nonetheless tantamount to killing him. Indeed, the brothers make up a story about his violent death for their heart-stricken father, even using Joseph's beautiful coat to embellish their account.

Joseph ends up in Egypt, a servant to the captain of Pharaoh's guard, Potiphar. Joseph has to reject the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife, who accuses Joseph of trying to rape her and has him tossed into prison. Joseph's gift for interpreting dreams gets him out of prison and, remarkably, he rises to become chief administrator of Pharaoh's empire.

Joseph's dreams reveal to him that there will soon be a lengthy famine in Egypt. Armed with this foresight, Joseph saves Egypt from starvation. When the famine threatens Canaan, Jacob's sons make their way to Egypt to buy food. There, they stand before Pharaoh's right-hand man . . . Joseph!

The brothers don't recognize him, but Joseph sure recognizes them. He accuses them of being spies and says he will sell them grain, but they must bring the missing brother (for they have traveled without Benjamin¹) to show that they have told the truth about their predicament. Joseph hangs on to one brother, Simeon, to ensure their return. But, of course, the question is whether they will return. Or will they abandon Simeon as they abandoned Joseph?

Though it will become clear that Joseph wants to heal the breach with his brothers, it is understandable that he would set things up so that he can observe his brothers and see what comes of it all. The brothers claim to be "honest" but are they? Have they learned anything since their sale of the young Joseph? Also, by his questions, Joseph is able to learn about the family circumstances.

There are many twists and turns in the story, and Joseph has a lot of trouble keeping control of his emotions through it all. It is a well-told tale and I hope you'll grab a copy of Peterson's *The Message* and read the whole thing (Genesis 37-50). It might even be a little hard for you to remember that you are reading the Bible!

At last, the truth

Finally, the brothers do return to Egypt to buy more grain. And, in the end, too overcome with emotion to go on with the deception, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers. Can you imagine the shock of the brothers when the "prime minister" reveals himself?! Their shock quickly gives way to fear. The brothers have every reason to expect that Joseph will exact revenge for their evil deed and that their family's cycle of treachery and hostility will roll on.

But the brothers do not know what we, the readers, know. God has been with Joseph in all things and Joseph knows it. Upon the births of his own sons, Manasseh and Ephraim,² Joseph said "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house³ . . . For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortune" (41:51-52, NRSV).

So Joseph forgives his brothers and embraces each. With everything out in the open, Jacob's whole family will move down to Egypt, where they will live under the protection of Pharaoh and Joseph.

After some time, Jacob passes away. The brothers fear that Joseph will now turn on them but he reassures them, even going so far as to say that God had taken what the brothers had intended for harm and turned it into good, the salvation of Israel, for the family had not perished in the great Canaanite famine.

¹ Benjamin is the youngest of the brothers and is Joseph's only full brother, having been born to Rachel, Jacob's lifelong love. She died during Benjamin's birth.

² Joseph takes a Egyptian wife. Before his death, Jacob adopts the two sons as his own and Joseph's tribal allotment goes to his sons. Thus, in the lists of tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh are included. The books of the prophets can often be confusing because they frequently use the name of one of the tribes to stand in for all Israel. Thus, the prophets will address Dan or Judah or Ephraim, for example, when they are bringing God's word to the people of God.

³ Joseph means that he has forgotten the cycles of deceit and envy in which he was raised.

God's grace and God's work

Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers is God's amazing grace at work in their lives and relationships. It is God who is able to break the cycle of deceit in their family. It is God alone who can enable us to set aside our pride, to overlook the wrongs committed against us. It is God who empowers us to embrace and to forgive, time and again if need be, those in our family we love and those we must learn to love.

And through all these stories of Jacob and his sons, through all the deceit and treachery, God was moving events and people forward toward the covenant that God had made with Abraham, Jacob's grandfather.

So often, our own confidence in God is tested by the difficulties that plague our lives and our world. We wonder where God is in it all. Yet, stories such as Joseph remind us that God is God, able to work all things toward God's good. This doesn't make our evil acts less evil, nor our tragedies less tragic. It just means that God can do what God promises to do . . . God's vision *will* come to pass.

We affirm with Paul that "all things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28). How can Paul be so confident? Well, that would again take us to the meaning and implications of Jesus', birth, life, death, and resurrection. All roads lead not to Rome, but to Calvary, and to the day when *all* the families of the earth have been blessed and reconciled to their Creator and Savior.

Providence

"Providence" is one of those old words that we don't use much anymore. It speaks to the belief that God *provides* for his people's needs. Many theological debates swirl around the question of just how God provides for his people. In today's story, Joseph tells his brothers that what they intended for evil (selling Joseph into slavery), God intended for good. In other words, God took the brothers' evil act and ensured that good would come from it, that God's purposes would be accomplished through it all.

Joseph's statement to his brothers is one of the classic biblical texts on God's providence. Two others are from Jeremiah and Paul:

- "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). This word is brought to the people as they live in exile following the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem.
- "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

In none of these passages, are we told exactly how God accomplishes the good his people, but are simply reassured that God is always working, always moving his purposes forward, always seeking and crafting the good of his people.

You wouldn't think that there would be much left to talk about around a topic like this, yet the most heated debates among evangelical theologians in recent years have been about God and the future. We tend to always say that God knows the future, but is it knowable? Can even God know that which can't be known? Has God created a cosmos in which randomness and free will constrain even God? What does the Bible say? How much of what we believe about God and the future is more indebted to Plato than to Scripture? But if the future isn't knowable, how can we really trust that God can do what God says he will do? As I said, there is still plenty to talk about!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. We'd all be pretty happy if all our bets in life were on a sure thing. But about the only times that life offers us sure things is when it comes to the promises of God. The question is whether we really believe that. Will Jesus really come again? Has God truly rescued us from sin and brokenness? Can I really count on God's vision

coming to pass? How can I even know what that vision is? Spend some time discussing these questions.

2. It is such a striking moment in the story of Joseph when he tells his brothers: "You planned something bad for me, but God produced something good from it." Paul writes "all things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28). Discuss both of these statements. What is your reaction to each? What do they tell us about God's accomplishment of his vision? Have you seen any examples of God making good from bad in your own life?
3. This story of Joseph and his brothers is, in part, about God working behind the scenes to move along his purposes even when they appear stymied by us humans. You might share some stories of times you've seen God working in your own life. Have you ever felt that you might have stood in the way of God's purposes? What is our part in the accomplishment of God's vision for his creation?

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Genesis 22 God provides an animal that is to be sacrificed rather than Isaac.

Tuesday, Psalm 33 One of the classic psalms about God's greatness and goodness.

Wednesday, Psalm 65 God provides through his creation

Thursday, Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus reassures his disciples that God cares for them

Friday, Philippians 4:10-23 Verse 19 is a classic verse on God's provision of our needs.

Saturday, Romans 8:18-39 Here is the whole, memorable passage from Romans.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Simply Good News: Reading the gospels with N. T. Wright*