

Joseph – In God’s Hands

May 3, 2020

Our Savior’s Way Lutheran Church

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“In God’s hands, intended evil becomes eventual good.”

Max Lucado, *You’ll Get Through This*

Last week I introduced you to Joseph whose story comprises 25% of the book of Genesis – more pages than the story of his grandfather, Abraham, the Father of the Chosen people. Of all the stories in the Bible, one might ask, “Why this guy?” Well, as I pointed out last week, the narrative of Joseph’s life is a living illustration of what Paul wrote to the Romans in chapter eight: ***“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose”*** (v.27). Everyone suffers. Tests, trials, and tragedies are part of our life, this side of heaven. The good news we see in the story of Joseph is while God does not protect us *from* circumstance, He does protect us *in* the midst of them!

In Joseph’s story, Max Lucado summarizes God’s advice as we face suffering:

You’ll get through this.

It won’t be painless.

It won’t be quick.

God will use this mess for your good.

Don’t be foolish or naïve.

But don’t despair either.

With God’s help you’ll get through this!

So, if you have your Bibles with you, I invite you to join me at Genesis 37:12.

“Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem. And Israel told Joseph, ‘Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.’ And he said to him, ‘Here I am.’ So he said to him, ‘God now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word.’ So, he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, ‘What are you seeking?’ ‘I am seeking my brothers,’ he said. ‘Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.’ And the man said, ‘They have

gone away, for I heard one of them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.' So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.' But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, 'Let us not take his life.' And Reuben said to them, 'Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him' – that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it."

Yes, Joseph was Jacob's favorite son. Yes, he had tattled on his brothers because he was focused on doing the right thing in life. And, yes, his dreams had a habit of angering his brothers although they originated from God. It did not matter to them that Joseph was their brother – granted, a "half-brother" since they were all fathered by Jacob but born of different mothers. They despised him. They loathed him. They wanted him dead and now, the opportunity presented itself to them.

Judah: *"Here comes that little twerp. Let's kill him! All in favor, raise your right hand. All opposed, same sign. Reuben, why don't you agree?"*

Reuben: *"I don't think we ought to kill him; we don't want his blood on our hands. Let's throw him into this pit and leave him to die."*

Judah: *"Yea, maybe you're right. I accept your friendly amendment. Here's a pit without water. This will work." And as Joseph approaches, "Hey, Joe, what ya' know?"*

Unsuspecting Joseph is attacked, stripped of his robe and thrown down into a pit. It if were you or I, we'd be wondering what was happening and where was God in all of this, right? Fair question. When "stuff" happens and life hits the fan, where is God?

Even when things spin out of control, God is still in charge. Sin has affected us all; my sin, your sin, a nation's sin, it doesn't matter. Sin in any and all of its shapes and forms has affected the whole of God's creation. St. Paul describes the situation to the Romans this way: ***"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in***

hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:20-23).

When things spin out of control, we tend to believe that it is out of God’s control. However, God is not shocked or dismayed by what takes place. No, He sometimes permits troubles and tragedies because they are the things that get our attention and test whether we love God or just the things He does for us.

Alistair Begg, in his book, *The Hand of God*, puts forth this proposition: *“All the evil in what happened to Joseph was the responsibility of his brothers. God was not contaminated because he determined to use their evil activities to achieve an overarching purpose he had for his servant.”*

Some people refer to this as God’s “sovereignty” or His “providence.” This is simply the idea that God is in control of things. We cannot always understand why things happen the way they do, but we trust...we believe...we have faith that God is working for us, in us, and sometimes through us to accomplish something He wants done.

Martin Luther once wrote to a struggling believer about God’s steadfast love and providence, saying: *“To accept it as true and certain that God provides for us and loves us as His children calls for faith, which alone is the master who looks aright at God’s Word and works and teaches us thoroughly to understand them. Now the Word clearly testifies that God chastens those whom He loves and scourges every son whom He receives, as Scripture everywhere proclaims...Faith holds to words such as these, directs its course accordingly, allows God to manage and provide, and says with Job, ‘Though God were to slay me, yet I will hope in Him and rely on His grace’* (StL 9).

I love what Max Lucado adds, here: *“God is not sometimes sovereign. He is not occasionally victorious. He does not occupy the throne one day and vacate it the next.”* What this means, is this: *If God is unchanging and good, then He is good all the time, whether we are getting what we want or not. If God has not changed, then it is our perception of Him that must be at fault. Thus, when God fails to meet our bottom-line expectations, we are left spinning in a tornado of questions. ‘Is He good at all?’ ‘Is God angry at me?’*

'Stumped?' 'Overworked?' 'Is His power limited?' 'His authority restricted?' 'Did the devil outwit Him?' When life is not good, what are we to think about God? Where is He in all this?' Begg answers that *"The center of God's will may take us into the eye of the storm. We should not seek, therefore, to confirm God's will by the absence of adversity."*

Joseph is languishing at the bottom of a dry pit. Picking up at verse 25: ***"Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.' And his brothers listened to him. Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt. When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes and returned to his brothers and said, 'The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?' Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, 'This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not.' And he identified it and said, 'It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.' Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.' Thus his father wept for him. Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, the captain of the guard."***

If God is good all the time, then what happens when life decides not to be?

People make a secret contract with God. It goes something like this: If I am a good and decent person, God must do everything that I want Him to do – to give me pleasure, keep me comfortable, and never let me struggle. The problem with this contract is that it was written by us but never signed by God!

While God is not the author of pain and tragedy and suffering, He permits terrible things to happen for all His work to be accomplished. God uses both the good and the bad to bring Himself glory and help you mature. Suffering is a result of sin. Better to never suffer *at* God's hands; best to suffer *in* them.

Scripture has something important to say to us. Again, from Paul's letter to the Romans: ***"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"*** (Romans 8:31-39).

So, we once again consider the advice we glean from Joseph's story:

You'll get through this.

It won't be painless.

It won't be quick.

God will use this mess for your good.

Don't be foolish or naïve.

But don't despair either.

With God's help you'll get through this!

Amen.

Sermon Notes: Joseph – In God’s Hands

1. *In God’s hands, intended evil becomes _____.*
2. *Even when things spin out of control, God is _____.*
3. *All the evil in what happened to Joseph was the responsibility of his _____.* *God was not _____ because he determined to use their _____ to achieve an overarching purpose he had for his servant.*
4. *God is not sometimes _____.* *He is not occasionally _____.* *He does not occupy the throne one day and _____ it the next.*
5. *If God is _____ all the time, then what happens when life decides not to be?*