

“God Can Use Everything”
Selections from Genesis 42-45

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My father once told me a story about a friend of his who took his family on vacation to Hawaii. They had packed up all their gear, rounded up their children and had headed to the airport the morning of their flight. Wanting to make things go more smoothly for his family, my dad’s friend pulled up to the gate, unloaded everyone and checked the bags with the outside gate attendant. It was much easier than finding parking with everyone and toting all that luggage to the gate.

They made their plane without a hitch and had a great time in Hawaii. A week later, when they returned home, they walked out of the terminal toward the parking garage, looking for the car. And my dad’s friend began to think... “Where did I park the car?” It was then that he realized that he didn’t. He didn’t park the car at all. He had planned to drop off his family at the gate and then go park, but in the excitement of it all, he had just gone in to the airport with them—and left the car out front... running!

Well, of course, the car had been towed. So he called the impound department and, sure enough, they had the car there, keys and all. When he went to pick up the car, they presented him with a bill for \$80. Here’s the best part—long term parking at the airport, for the number of days they spent away, would have totaled \$120. They got the car valet parked for \$40 less than it would have cost to park it themselves!

Here’s why I tell that story. Good things came about for this family, but none of it was because of their good planning or careful decision-making. The good that happened to them was not because of but *in spite of* their own foolishness.

We read in Genesis 50, the last chapter in Genesis, a thematic summary of the entire narrative of Joseph and his brothers. And what Joseph says in those verses is something similar—good has come about, but it’s not because of your actions but *in spite of them*. What you meant for harm, God used for good. Your actions, which were not just foolish but wicked, were used by God for his good redemptive

purposes. God, though your actions were sinful, was drawing straight with crooked lines. He was using your sin to accomplish his good plans. You meant it for harm. God meant it for good.

That is the thread that runs through this story. So, let's look at that story now. When we get to chapter 42 in Genesis, we find Joseph at the top of the power heap in Egypt. He is Prime Minister, and only Pharaoh is more powerful. The LORD has used him to correctly interpret Pharaoh's dream and he has managed the seven years of fruitfulness and plenty and has stored up for the seven years of famine. And that's where we find ourselves in Chapter 42. Famine has come upon the known world and everyone is coming to Egypt to buy food, including Jacob's family. The ten brothers who had sold Joseph into slavery have now been sent by their father to buy grain in Egypt. We pick up reading at verse 6...

“Now Joseph was governor over the land.” He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. “Where do you come from?” he said. They said, “From the land of Canaan, to buy food.” And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them. And he said to them, “You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land.” They said to him, “No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies.”

He said to them, “No, it is the nakedness of the land that you have come to see.” And they said, “We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan, and behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is no more.” But Joseph said to them, “It is as I said to you. You are spies. By this you shall be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of you, and let him bring your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. Or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies.” And he put them all together in custody for three days.

On the third day Joseph said to them, “Do this and you will live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined where you are in custody, and let the rest go and carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, and you shall not die.” And they did so. Then they said to one another, “In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.” And Reuben answered them, “Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.” They did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. Then he turned away from them and wept. And he returned to them and spoke to them. And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. And Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, and to replace every man’s money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. This was done for them.

Then they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed. And as one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money in the mouth of his sack. He said to his brothers, “My money has been put back; here it is in the mouth of my sack! At this their hearts failed them, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, “What is this that God has done to us?””

Joseph has his brothers in a trap. They don’t know who he is but he knows them. And it’s now that their sin is weighing heavy upon them. We are guilty, they say, and God is surely going to punish us.

The brothers travel back to Canaan and to their father Jacob and tell him all that has happened and how Joseph has kept Simeon and requested them to bring Benjamin. And Jacob is inconsolable. First Joseph, then Simeon, and now they want him to let Benjamin go? Benjamin, the child of his old age, the only other son of Rachel, the favored wife? Benjamin, the new golden boy, Dad’s favorite? No way. But it’s famine. And desperate times call for desperate measures. So Jacob finally agrees to send his sons back to Egypt, and this time Benjamin is with them,

and also double their money and some gifts he hopes might appease Joseph. We pick up again in 43:15...

“So the men took this present, and they took double the money with them, and Benjamin. They arose and went down to Egypt and stood before Joseph. When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, “Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon.” The man did as Joseph told him and brought the men to Joseph’s house. And the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph’s house, and they said, “It is because of the money, which was replaced in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may assault us and fall upon us to make us servants and seize our donkeys.” So they went up to the steward of Joseph’s house and spoke with him at the door of the house, and said, “Oh, my lord, we came down the first time to buy food. And when we came to the lodging place we opened our sacks, and there was each man’s money in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight. So we have brought it again with us, and we have brought other money down with us to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks.” He replied, “Peace to you, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your money.” Then he brought Simeon out to them. And when the man had brought the men into Joseph’s house and given them water, and they had washed their feet, and when he had given their donkeys fodder, they prepared the present for Joseph’s coming at noon, for they heard that they should eat bread there.

The brothers return to Joseph and bow before him (which they do at least 4 times in this narrative, fulfilling Joseph’s dream when he was a boy). For the reader, we are still wondering what might happen. Will Joseph execute them? Is he going to get his revenge? Are we in the middle of a Liam Neeson movie? These are his brothers, the ones who wanted to kill him, who threw him in a pit and then sold him to slave traders. And they are here before him, some 20 years later. But Joseph is overwhelmed not with hatred but compassion. Still, he’s not finished with his brothers. He devises another plan. As they leave, he puts his special cup in the grain bag of Benjamin, the youngest, his full-blooded brother. He sends his steward out after them to search for the cup. One by one each man is searched,

beginning with the oldest and finally falling on Benjamin. And just when the brothers thought they were in the clear, the cup is found in Benjamin's sack. Every man loaded up his donkey and returned to the city. We pick up again in Chapter 44, verse 14...

“When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there. They fell before him to the ground. Joseph said to them, “What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination?” And Judah said, “What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord's servants, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found.” But he said, “Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my servant. But as for you, go up in peace to your father.”

Judah now speaks up. Judah, the one who had come up with the plan to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelite traders. Judah, the one who had so abused and mistreated his daughter-in-law Tamar. This Judah stands up and begins an impassioned plea to Joseph on behalf of Benjamin and their father Jacob. He realizes his guilt; not in taking the cup, for they were innocent of that crime, but for their great sin against their brother. And Judah now begins to plead for the life of his brother and his father. Picking up again in verse 30 of chapter 44...

“Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.’ Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father.”

Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, “Make everyone go out from me.” So no one stayed with him

when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”

It’s beautiful, isn’t it, to see the change in Judah here. But even more beautiful to see the amazing working of God through this story. His sovereign plan of redemption unfazed by the wicked actions of the men involved. To see him weaving together the broken threads into something beautiful. And it’s here that we see the main thrust of this passage: God is working good for us and for this world. Even in the midst of the brokenness of this world. Even through family favoritism and brothers hating each other and selling others into slavery, God is at work to bring about his redemptive purposes. Even through prison sentences and false accusations, God is at work bringing his good purposes to bear in the world. Even through famine that threatens to extinguish God’s people, the LORD is still at work. That is a helpful and encouraging thing to remember. What was meant for harm, God used for good. This is a ringing proclamation of the LORD’s sovereign work in the universe. The Westminster Confession of Faith says that “God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeable ordain whatsoever comes to pass.” And what he ordained was the redemption of the world. That is good news. But it’s also mysterious, so we need to add a bit of nuance. Here are—briefly—three implications of this glorious truth. Three things that I think we have to keep in mind as we meditate on God’s good and sovereign work even in the midst of sin in the world.

First, we need to remember that we are responsible for our actions. Sin is still sin, even if God has the ability to use it according to his plan. God’s sovereignty

does not eliminate man's responsibility. Listen again to what Joseph says to his brothers—"...do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life." Did you hear both God's sovereignty *and* man's responsibility there? You sold me here... God sent me here.

Peter says a similar thing to those gathered at Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

God's sovereign working of his redemptive plan does not nullify our responsibility. We can talk of God's will—his eternal decrees—as unchanging and eternal. But we also know that he has given us his *revealed* will — his Word — to show us what he desires of us. We don't know the eternal plans, but we do know the revealed will and we are held responsible for our actions.

So don't call bad things good. The Bible is plain about sin and, even though God is able to use the brokenness of this world to accomplish his good purposes, that doesn't mean it's not sin. If you are a Christian, you are called to live in response to the love that has been shown you in Christ. We call God sovereign, but we don't call bad things good.

Second implication—Seeing God's sovereign work should lead us to repentance and faith. We aren't saying that everything will just kind of work out in the end because that seems to fit our Disney vision of life. When we proclaim that the Lord is working his good plan even in the midst of sin, we are not saying that we just need to look on the bright side. When we see the amazing and mysterious working of God even in ways we can't fathom, it should drive us to our knees. It should show us our need for such a Lord and our requirement to bow to him.

Thirdly, seeing God's sovereign work should give us real and lasting hope. The sin that we see in the world around us will not destroy the eternal redemptive plan of the sovereign Lord. We are not hopeless because of cultural movements or recent legislation or terrorist regimes or global injustice. These things are evidence that we live in a broken world damaged by sin, but they are not evidence that hope is lost. God is at work.

And he's at work in us too. When we see the Lord work for good so much evil, we cannot help but thank him for his work in us. Our sins do not destroy us because our God is loving and faithful. We can hope not because God forgets and sweeps things under the rug but because he has actually dealt with sin in the death and resurrection of Jesus on our behalf. It's beautiful to see Judah's compassion toward Benjamin and Jacob. But it pales in comparison to the compassion of Christ. Just as Judah offers his life for his brother, Jesus ***gave his life for his brothers, so that we might be saved.***

And it's beautiful to see the Lord using Joseph to preserve life for his family, but it pales in comparison to what God has done for us in Christ. As Joseph was sent to Egypt to save his family, ***Jesus was sent to earth to save the world. Someone greater than Joseph is here. Jesus saves not just from famine but from sin.***

Let me close with an excerpt from this article by David Hadju, written in *The Atlantic* years ago. It's about a visit to a small jazz club in New York, where he realizes over the course of the show that the trumpeter playing with this little-known combo is the great Wynton Marsalis. Here is what he writes:

"The fourth song was a solo showcase for the trumpeter, who, I could now see, was indeed Marsalis, but who no more sounded than looked like what I expected. He played a ballad, "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance With You," unaccompanied. Written by Victor Young, a film-score composer, for a 1930s romance, the piece can bring out the sadness in any scene, and Marsalis appeared deeply attuned to its melancholy. He performed the song in murmurs and sighs, at points nearly talking the words in notes. It was a wrenching act of creative expression. When he reached the climax, Marsalis played the final phrase, the title statement, in declarative tones, allowing each successive note to linger in the air a bit longer. "I don't stand ... a ghost ... of ... a ... chance ..." The room was silent until, at the most dramatic point, someone's cell phone went off, blaring a rapid singsong melody in electronic bleeps. People started giggling and picking up their drinks. The moment—the whole performance—unraveled.

Marsalis paused for a beat, motionless, and his eyebrows arched. I scrawled on a sheet of notepaper, MAGIC, RUINED. The cell-phone offender scooted into the

hall as the chatter in the room grew louder. Still frozen at the microphone, Marsalis replayed the silly cell-phone melody note for note. Then he repeated it, and began improvising variations on the tune. The audience slowly came back to him. In a few minutes he resolved the improvisation—which had changed keys once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo—and ended up exactly where he had left off: "with ... you ..."

The Lord can turn ugliness into beauty. Death into life. This is the kind of God we worship today. A God who has taken our sin and has given back something beautiful—his grace.