

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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GOD MEANT IT FOR GOOD

Genesis 50:15-26

We have now arrived not only at the final chapter of the Book of Genesis, but the final chapter in the life of Joseph as well. What a remarkable life it was! One of the TV networks (CBS) has a show called “The Amazing Race.” In the case of Joseph, his story could be called “An Amazing Life.”

With all its ups and downs, the life of Joseph was like a lifelong roller coaster ride. Some people – including some of you, I’m sure – really like roller coasters and the excitement of a roller coaster ride. I don’t. Kings Dominion is not my kind of place. That’s just me. But sometimes life is like a roller coaster, whether we like it or not. And that is the way it was for Joseph.

He was pampered, protected, and given special privileges by his father as he grew up in a household with ten older brothers who resented him to the point of hatred. They had so much bitterness and envy toward him that they thought about killing him, but decided to sell him instead to slave traders who took him to Egypt, where he was sold to a high-ranking official named Potiphar. Joseph found favor and gained stature in the house of Potiphar, but he also caught the eye of Potiphar’s wife. When Joseph rejected her advances out of loyalty to his boss and to God, she falsely accused him of attacking her, and Joseph ended up in prison. God once again gave him favor in prison, but though he correctly interpreted the dreams of two of Pharaoh’s officials, he remained in prison for more than two years and seemed to be a forgotten man. But then, in the providence of God, he was released from prison and overnight – literally – became the prime minister of Egypt. Second only to Pharaoh in all the land of Egypt. From prison to the palace according to the plan of God. Finally, after being separated from his family in Canaan for more than 20 years, Joseph was reunited first with his brothers and then with his father Jacob in Egypt, at the same time he was managing the crisis created by seven years of famine which had afflicted not only Egypt but the whole world.

Chuck Swindoll describes Joseph’s roller coaster life this way: “Despair. Triumph. Heights. Depths. Dreams. Dungeons. Promotion. Rejection. Gain. Loss. The ups and downs, the ins and outs, the powerful reality of this man’s life was enough to eclipse anything you and I have ever experienced. Sometimes such contrasts cause men and women to forget God ... (or to) turn against their own family. Not so with Joseph” (*Joseph*, see pp. 190-191). Through all the ups and downs and ins and outs of his life, Joseph learned to trust in God. He learned to see the hand of God in both the hardships and the blessings of life. Which is something I believe God wants each of us to learn.

Jacob was 130 years old when he came to Egypt and was reunited with Joseph (Genesis 47:9). He knew his days on earth were numbered, just as yours and mine are. In the providence of God, he would live 17 more years in Egypt, reaching the age of 147 at his death (47:29). Jacob gave Joseph and the rest of his sons explicit instructions not to bury him in Egypt, but

to take his body back to Canaan and to bury him with his ancestors – with his grandparents Abraham and Sarah, with his parents Isaac and Rebekah – and with his wife Leah, in the cave of Machpelah (47:29-32). They did as their father instructed them to do (50:1-13). They took his body to Canaan and buried him there. Then, as it says in Genesis 40:14, “After burying his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, together with his brothers and all the others who had gone with him to bury his father.”

An important chapter in the family history of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob came to a close with the death of Jacob. But for the ten older brothers of Joseph, their father’s death created a crisis situation. Why? Because with their father now out of the picture, their fears resurfaced that Joseph would now at last try to get even with them for the way they had mistreated him. They were still haunted by guilt over what they had done. And they feared retribution from Joseph.

So, did you notice what the brothers did? They huddled together and called a play designed to defuse any anger and bitterness Joseph may have been harboring against them. They made up a story that their father Jacob had left instructions with them to ask Joseph to forgive them and treat them with kindness on his (Jacob’s) behalf (50:15-17). They thought they had to deceive their brother in order to prevent him from seeking revenge after all these years.

But they were wrong. They did not realize that Joseph had already forgiven them. They did not understand that they had already been forgiven. Joseph expressed his forgiveness in Genesis 45 when he revealed his identity to his brothers. But they couldn’t bring themselves to believe it. Though Joseph treated them with mercy and kindness, they were plagued with doubts. Their guilt had done a number on them. So far they had failed to appropriate the grace they had been shown. And they wondered how (or if) Joseph could ever really forgive them.

The reality of guilt and the need for forgiveness are universal human experiences, aren’t they? Unless we have killed off our conscience (which some people seem to have done), each of us lives in the awareness of our guilt before God and our need for forgiveness. Hard as you may try, you can never successfully wash away the stain of your guilt. You can’t do it. But God can. And the good news is that He has done it by the death of His Son, Jesus Christ our Savior, on the cross. Jesus took your guilt and mine upon Himself.

There may be people in your life who will never forgive you for something you’ve done, or something they think you did. But with God there is forgiveness for all who come to Him – for all who come to Him in true repentance and sincere faith. It is too bad the brothers of Joseph were so slow to understand that. They could have known the blessed freedom of forgiveness much earlier and much more fully in their lives. I hope you know that blessed freedom today. Whatever you have done, whatever you have failed to do, you don’t have to be haunted by guilt. With God there is forgiveness. Confess your sin to Him and receive the gift of forgiveness. God desires to be gracious to you.

In addition to this there are two more important things I want you to see from this passage today.

1. DON'T BE AFRAID

Do you know how many times we find this command in the Bible? I didn't count them all, but trust me, it is in there dozens of times. Here are a few examples:

Genesis 15:1: The Lord appeared to Abram in a vision and said to him: "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your very great reward."

Genesis 26:24: The Lord appeared to Isaac and said: "I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you (and) I will bless you."

Deuteronomy 31:6: Moses gave this charge to the people of Israel: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified . . . , for the LORD your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you."

Deuteronomy 31:8: Moses then gave essentially the same charge to Joshua, his successor as the leader of Israel: "The LORD Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."

Isaiah 43:4-5: The Lord said to His people Israel:

"Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
And because I love you,
I will give men in exchange for you
And people in exchange for your life.
Do not be afraid, for I am with you."

Turning to the New Testament:

Luke 1:13: The angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah the priest in the temple and said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son" – a son who would be known as John the Baptist.

Luke 1:30: When Gabriel appeared to Mary to tell her that she would give birth to the Savior, he said: "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God."

Matthew 1:20: An angel came to Joseph the carpenter in a dream and said to him: "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Luke 2:10: On the night Jesus was born, an angel appeared to the shepherds outside Bethlehem to announce the birth of the Savior. The angel said to them: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

Matthew 10:26-31: Jesus Himself said to His disciples: "Do not be afraid of (those who persecute you)... Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.... Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from the

will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

Don't be afraid. Twice in today's passage, in verse 19 and again in verse 21, Joseph said to his brothers: "Don't be afraid."

Yet they were afraid. And, so often, so are we. What do we fear? All kinds of things. Joseph's brothers were afraid of retribution. They were afraid they might actually get what they deserved. That may or may not be your fear. Maybe you're afraid someone will find out about some secret sin you committed a long time ago, even though you have confessed it to God and He has forgiven you. Maybe you're afraid of losing a loved one. Afraid of sorrow or suffering. Afraid of cancer or the flu or unemployment or poverty. Afraid of terrorism. Afraid of flying. Afraid that people won't like you. Afraid of loneliness. Afraid of failure.

In a book on leadership, Blaine McCormick and David Davenport write: "Thomas Edison filed an impressive 1,093 patents with the U. S. Patent Office, and behind each of those 1,093 successes lay hundreds and sometimes thousands of failures. Edison mastered the art of recovering from failure with lessons in hand and sought to pass it on to his workers. Near the end of his career, a former worker, Alfred Tate, penned the following letter to his former boss: 'Above all you taught me not to be afraid of failure; that scars are sometimes as honorable as medals.'" Failure, as Edison came to understand, can lay the groundwork for success. In any area of life.

More than anything else, I think, most people are afraid of death. It is an undeniable fact of life that, unless Jesus comes back first, each one of us is destined to die. And every day we live is one day closer to the day of our death. I don't say this to be morbid, but because it is true. Every one of us is one year nearer to our death than we were a year ago. That is a sobering thought, but it doesn't have to be a frightening thought.

Actor Jack Nicholson said not long ago: "We all want to go on forever, don't we? We fear the unknown. Everybody goes to that wall, yet nobody knows what's on the other side. That's why we fear death."

Friends, with all due respect to Jack Nicholson, if you know Jesus, if you love Jesus, if you have put your trust in Jesus for your salvation, you don't need to fear death. And you know that there is a place in heaven for you. You know that on the other side is Jesus Himself. You know that by His grace you will be welcomed into the very presence of God. So you do not need to be afraid. For there is nothing – not life, not death, not angels, not demons, not the present, not the future, not any powers, not height, not depth, not anything in all creation – that can separate us from God and the love He has shown us in Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

I doubt that any of us will live that long, but sooner or later, like Jacob at the age of 147 and Joseph at 110, we will all have to cross the bridge from this life to the next. With Jesus as our Savior and Friend, we don't need to be afraid. If, as David says in Psalm 27, the Lord is my light and my salvation, whom (or what) shall I fear?

2. GOD IS SOVEREIGN

The last thing I want to call to your attention is the extraordinary affirmation of God's sovereignty Joseph made in verse 20. He said to his brothers: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." What they did to him, throwing him into a pit, then selling him to the Midianite slave traders who took him to Egypt, they meant for evil. It *was* evil. May we never minimize the evilness of evil. What his brothers did to Joseph was evil. What Potiphar's wife did to Joseph was evil. Joseph did not deserve the treatment he received or the suffering he experienced. They meant it for evil. And it was evil.

But evil does not have the last word. God used it for good. He used it for good, first of all in Joseph's life, to teach him what he needed to learn, to refine his character, and to prepare him to fulfill God's purposes for his life. And then God used Joseph for good as His chosen instrument to provide food for the people of Egypt during the seven years of famine, and to provide for his own family as well.

We live in a world where evil abounds. We are reminded of it every day. What happened at Fort Hood on Thursday was evil. There was nothing good about the shooting rampage which took place there. Thirteen people were killed and 38 wounded. There is nothing good about that, unless we take comfort that the numbers were not higher. It was evil and meant for evil.

We may be inclined to ask: Where was God? And why didn't He stop it from happening? They are good questions.

We may not like it, but sometimes God allows things to happen that we think should never happen. Whether it is a shooting rampage in Texas or a setback of some kind in our own lives, sometimes God, in His sovereign wisdom, allows things we wish He wouldn't.

Sometimes God declines to do what we ask Him to do or think He should do. He does not always answer our prayers the way we want or give us what we ask for. He does not always protect us from the evils of this life. Still, He is sovereign.

And sometimes God does not act when we want Him to act. His ways are not our ways. His time is not always our time. His purposes and ways sometimes become clear to us only in hindsight. Still, He is sovereign.

God was sovereign in Joseph's life in all the ups and downs of his roller coaster life. Though it was not obvious at every moment, God was in control. And He is in control today. He is sovereign in your life and mine. He is sovereign everywhere, including those places where His sovereignty is not acknowledged or recognized. I don't know what good will come out of the tragedy at Fort Hood, but I believe God will redeem it in some way. I believe God will bring some good out of the evil that would not have otherwise occurred. But that does not mean that there was anything good in what Major Hasan did.

I don't know what good God will bring out of the disappointments and difficulties of your life, but I believe He is at work for your good and for His glory. I hope you believe that, too.

God *is* in control. He is sovereign in all things at all times. In good times and hard times. Which come into every life. Someday it will be plain for everyone to see.

Chuck Swindoll offers this theological truth, which I commend to you:

God is in control of the times and seasons.
Some times are hard, and some seasons are dry.
Therefore, God is in control of hard times and dry seasons.

Joseph would say "Amen!" How about you?

In the hard times and dry seasons, in all our times and seasons, as Joseph discovered, God's grace and power are enough to get us through.

May it be so in us, to the glory of His name. Amen.