

Father Abraham Had Many Sons (And Daughters): The Mosaic of Life

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Genesis 50:15-21

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. Genesis 50:15-21

Let us pray. Gracious God open us up to whatever it is you have for us in the midst of these words. That your word, your living word, might come to us in this time. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear and then open up our hearts, God, that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.

Last weekend I went to the carwash and drove through the little carwash thing, then pulled into the vacuum bay. As I pulled in to one of the slots there was a lady across on the other side of the vacuum and she was speaking to one of the carwash employees. She was upset, you could tell that. I stepped out of my car and she recognized me. She said, "Dr. Pace! I was standing here, and I was just vacuuming my car mats. I was right here, and someone came in the other side of the car and stole my purse, right here as I was vacuuming my car. My keys are in it and my phone and my wallet and all my credit cards are in it."

Apparently, this type of theft is common today and it's called "sliding."

I let her use my phone to call her husband and stayed with her until the police came. She was so upset. She kept saying, “I was just so stupid, so stupid to do this.” She explained that she’d even wrapped her purse strap around the car gearshift and they somehow got it off. She said, “I didn’t even seem ‘em!”

I told her, “You’re not stupid, you’re a victim of a crime.”

Man, bad things happen! I don’t know if you’ve ever been that close to a crime, even one where no one was hurt, and it only involved canceling credit cards and getting a new phone. You also have to have locks changed on your house. But the closer you are to it the more it gets to you, and just sort of upends your sense of security. Bad things happen.

I guess in the scheme of things this wasn’t a terrible, terrible thing. She wasn’t hurt. I spoke recently to someone whose entire retirement savings – everything they’d saved – was taken by a swindler in a Ponzi scheme. Also, I spoke to someone who had a back injury and has found themselves just three weeks afterward addicted to opioids. That’s not to mention all those people we meet who are dealing with poverty, or war or all of that. It’s just that bad things happen.

It seems to me that there are three categories of bad things and they all sort of interact and intersect. There are those where you’ve done something wrong. Maybe you made a mistake so it’s your fault. You can say, “If I hadn’t done this, then that wouldn’t have happened. I wouldn’t be in this mess.” So that’s one kind of category.

Another category is where it’s someone else’s fault and you can say, “If that person hadn’t done that, or that person betrayed me, or that person cheated me.”

Then there are things where it’s no one’s fault. Hurricane Harvey comes blowing through and your house is flooded, and you wish you had someone to blame. But there’s no one to blame. Bad things happen. We live in a broken world.

As God’s servants, we have broken lives. We are sinful people. So bad things just happen.

Our story today is full of all sorts of bad things. In all of those categories. Joseph is thrown by his brothers into a pit and then sold off to slavery in Egypt. Maybe he had it coming because of his arrogance and by being such a jerk to his brothers. His brothers clearly did something wrong when they threw him into a pit and then sold him off to slavery.

Then Potiphar’s wife comes on to Joseph and he didn’t respond, but he still finds himself in jail. There are all sorts of bad things.

Then there's a famine and whose fault is that? There's just lots of bad things. What do we do when bad things happen?

When I look at this story, I see five things. So that's two more than I'm supposed to have in a sermon. So we're going to have to be efficient and if you're taking notes, you're going to have to write fast and small.

So here's the first thing that we do that I see in this story. We keep on keepin' on. When bad things happen, we can't quit.

Joseph was a dreamer. He explained his dreams to his brother, and it got him into trouble. He was sold off into slavery and ends up in prison. But what does he do? He keeps dreaming. And he keeps explaining his dreams and he keeps talking about that. You've just got to keep going. You get up in morning, you put one foot in front of the other, and you face the world.

I have an old friend named Robert. He was in church in Sugar Land. I'm privileged to be his friend. He's had his share of great things, but he's also had his share of challenges.

Many years ago on New Year's Eve my wife and I were together and received a call that his wife, a wonderful woman of God named Celinda, had a heart attack. So we went over to the hospital and she passed away there. Robert was heartbroken.

At the same time he had a disc in his back that had exploded. He was a competitive golfer who played in amateur championships all over, so he wasn't able to play golf for many years. Later he had surgery that let him resume playing golf. Then a couple of years ago they diagnosed him with bone cancer in his shoulder. So they did radiation and ultimately surgery removing his shoulder blade. That meant that his arm isn't operable, which means that he can't move it himself – he has to use his other hand to move it. He wondered if he could ever play golf, but then he figured out how he could get this glove that had Velcro on it and put that other hand onto the grip that had Velcro on it, and basically played golf one handed. Just stayed at it.

Then they said the cancer was back. So a few months ago he started his chemo therapy regimens and he said they are tough. They are tough.

About a month ago – or maybe it's longer than that – I sat with him at M.D. Anderson. I asked him, "Explain your philosophy of life."

Now Robert is an oil patch guy, so his language is colorful. Let me share that with you. He's straightforward, fun to talk to, but it's colorful. So I'm going to change it a little bit and you can imagine what words he really used.

Oh, by the way when I told him yesterday, I was going to talk about him in my sermon he said, “Oh, you can’t tell them that!” I said, “Well, I’ll change it.”

So he described his philosophy. “Every morning I get up and I lace up my tail-kicking boots. And I go out during that day and I try to kick some tail. Sometimes I kick tail and sometimes I get my tail kicked. Right now I’m getting my tail kicked. But the next morning I get up and lace up my boots again and I go back after it. You don’t quit – you just keep going. You get up in the morning and take one step and then another and then another and you do your best. And you don’t quit.”

Here’s the second thing I think this passage tells us. Practice the hard work of forgiveness. Sometimes it *is* somebody else’s fault. Sometimes it’s someone else’s fault and the call from God is for us to forgive. Sometimes it’s our own fault and the call from God is for us to forgive ourselves.

Listen to the passage: “And now please forgive the transgressions of the servants of the God of your father....” And how did Joseph respond? He said, “Do not be afraid for am I in God’s place? Am I to be your judge?” Practice the work of forgiveness.

Simon Wiesenthal was one of the great Nazi hunters. He came out of the Holocaust as a survivor and spent his life chasing down Nazi war criminals. He wrote a book that is really significant, called *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. In there he tells this story. He said, “There was a man living in the concentration camps – if you call it living.” He’s abused, terrorized and brutalized by sadistic guards every day with emotional and mental torture. Then they decide that he should be used to work in a hospital as an orderly. Every day they would take him to a military hospital near there and he would clean. One day while he’s there they bring in an SS guard and the SS guard calls him over to him and says, “Can I tell you something?”

Then he began to tell him a story. He asked, “Are you Jewish?” The man replied, “Yes, I’m Jewish.” Then the guard said, “I have to tell you something.” Then he told the story of how he’d been a part of taking an entire trainload of people and cramming them into a house. They locked the doors and threw grenades into the house and burned it down. They watched the men, women and children die.

Then the guard told him about how he grew up and the challenges he'd faced growing up. Then he looked at this man still living in the camps and said, "Will you forgive me? I'm dying. Will you forgive me?"

So here's the essence of the book. He asks that question –what would you do? What would *you* do?

Fifty-three famous people write responses. The Dalai Lama writes a response, Rabbi Harold Kushner writes a response, and Desmond Tutu did also, and this is what I want to point you to. At the time of writing Tutu was leading the South African Commission of Truth and Reconciliation where they were addressing the issue of atrocities from apartheid.

Tutu writes explaining his amazement at the ability of people to forgive. He says, "Many of them claim to be Christians. They say they follow the Jewish rabbi who, when he was crucified, said, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.' I sit and marvel at it all as I preside over the process of seeking to bring healing and reconciliation to a deeply divided, wounded and traumatized nation. It is clear that if we look only to retributive justice then we should just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It's practical. Without forgiveness there is no future."

Forgiveness is not justice. Forgiveness is the way we open up the door that we opened to allow God's healing to pour in. The Scripture says it over and over: "Forgive others as we are forgiven."

Here's the third thing I see here. Move yourself toward gratitude. Here's verse 20: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today."

So Joseph begins by recognizing the issue of evil. He doesn't pretend it's not there. This isn't a "Pollyanna" kind of statement. He recognizes the evil. He says, "You meant this for evil." But then he moves to the point where he sees the good that's around him. This is saving people's lives. And it took it him a while to get there, let's just say that. He toyed for them a while, he wanted revenge, all those sorts of things. But he finally got to the place where he noticed the good.

Kate Bowler is a professor of Christian history at Duke Divinity School. She's an expert at what's called the Prosperity Gospel. Her book is titled *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. She wrote a book tracking this in America and by the way, she spent much of her time in Houston, which she says is the center of the Prosperity Gospel. There are many mega churches here and it's a significant wave.

After she finished the book, at age 35 years of age she's diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. She goes on this journey and she writes a book about it and it's called *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*.

Now let me tell you that Kate is not a Pollyanna type here. She says, "I'm tired of being an inspiration. I don't want to be an inspiration anymore. You can't put that on me." She's not one of those people that say, "It's all going to be okay."

But in the midst of it she catches glimpses that allow her to be grateful. She's grateful for the people who are around her, loving her. She's grateful for the opportunity to spend whatever time is left with her children. She says, "I don't want to be apart from them but I'm not going to skip to the end." She's grateful for the presence of God even in her suffering.

She's a beautiful writer. Let me read to you what she says as she talks about her first days in the hospital. She says, "I felt as if I'd discovered something like a secret about faith. Even in lucid moments I found my feelings so difficult to explain. I kept saying the same thing. I don't want to go back. I don't want to go back. At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating. Floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees bringing notes and flowers, warm socks and quilts embroidered with the words of encouragement. They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus."

It's not easy, it's a challenge to always find something to be grateful for. But to move toward gratitude. It's a process.

Here's the fourth thing. Help someone else. In verse 21 Joseph is speaking, "So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones. In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them,"

There is a parable that a rabbi tells. It goes this way: "A man went to God and said, 'My life is terrible. I have all these troubles. Can I trade my troubles for those of someone else's? Someone whose life is not as bad as mine?'"

Then God says, “Here’s what I want you to do. I want you to go find 100 people and interview them. Find out all about their troubles, then come back to me and tell me which of those 100 you would like to trade with.”

So he does that. He interviews all those people and he comes back to God. God says to him, “So which of them would you like to trade troubles with?” The man said, “Oh, none of them!” Then God asked, “Do you mean you found that their troubles are all worse than yours?” The man replied, “No, not at all, my troubles are much worse than many of theirs. But I found that as I was listening to their troubles, I forgot about my own.”

At some point we have to turn ourselves away from our sort of gazing at our navel. Our sort of self-preoccupation and make that decision to think of others even in the midst of our pain.

Here’s the last thing I want you to see. Seek and claim the purposes of God. Go back with me to verse 20: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result to preserve many people alive.”

There is a famous well-known verse that is the favorite of many people. It’s Romans 8:28 and lots of people have memorized it. “For in all things God works together for good for those who love the Lord who are called according to his purpose.”

Now there two ways to interpret those statements – that what you meant for evil God meant for good, and that everything works together for good for those who love the Lord who are called according to his purpose. Actually, it doesn’t say everything works together for good, it says “*In everything* God works together for good.”

There are two ways to interpret it. Some would say that what he’s saying is that everything is part of God’s plan and when you go through difficult times, that’s God’s plan and it’s there to give you strength, perseverance and all sorts of good things. God’s doing that and its part of God’s plan. That’s one way to interpret it and many Christians do.

But the other way to interpret it is what I find more palatable for myself, what seems to make sense with the God I’ve come to know and love. It’s that God would not will evil upon any of us, but that even in the most difficult, evil, terrible moments, God is still at work for good. That’s where God shows up.

One of my favorite images is that of a mosaic. Imagine that God takes your life and creates you to be this beautiful ceramic pot. Just a beautiful pot shaped by God’s own hands but somehow life shatters it. Maybe some of you have had moments when you felt your life was

shattered. God doesn't walk away. God picks up the broken pieces and makes a beautiful mosaic. He pieces it together and every time something else is shattered that master artist picks up the pieces and makes something beautiful.

The purposes of God are goodness. God is always working toward goodness.

As we close this series, we look back at all these stories, and it seems to me that the overriding message is that God's purposes, that covenant he makes with Abraham, will not be thwarted. It will not be stopped.

This is *the* most dysfunctional family in the world that we've been studying. And even though they lie and are deceitful and make terrible mistakes and make poor decisions all the way along, even though terrible things happen to them, God will not be stopped. And God has promised that they will be blessed and that more importantly, they will be a blessing, and that through them all the nations of the world will be blessed.

That's the kingdom of God. That's the mosaic God is creating out of all of our broken lives. The Kingdom of God. And that won't be stopped.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we all have gone through such tough times, some more than others. We are just thankful that you are right there in the midst of it all. Working for good, showing us how to forgive, loving us no matter what. Making a beautiful mosaic out of our lives. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.