

The Story: What You Intended For Evil...

By Jason Huff

1 Peter 1:3-9, Romans 8:23-28, Selections from Genesis 37-50

Today's final Scripture readings are selection from Genesis 37-50. Listen now to God's Word. "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more...his brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said...so when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe -- the richly ornamented robe he was wearing -- and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it...when Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt...Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there...now it happened at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream...so Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires." ... Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you." So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." ... When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ... But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them."

In 1967, a diving accident left a young woman named Joni Eareckson paralyzed from the neck down. At first, she asked friends to help her commit suicide...but then God began to transform her. She became an extremely successful writer and artist who uses a brush in her mouth to paint. She founded "Joni and Friends," a ministry to show those in the disability community the love of Jesus Christ. Her books and message have touched countless lives over the last forty years. Yet the story doesn't end there. For several years now, she has faced agonizing chronic pain -- so severe she would pray, "Lord, I can't live like this for the rest of my life! At least I don't think I can." Her recent book ends saying she has "many more good days than bad." But since June, she's faced another challenge: breast cancer. Chemotherapy thrives on lean muscle, something that's extremely low in quadriplegics. Yet she does more than survive. A recent article in *World Magazine* describes how this has opened a new world to her, how she is able to share God's love with others who are going through the same thing. Her thought about it? "God's up to something big. How can I showcase Him to others?"

Her story points us to the question of human suffering and the existence of evil in the world. Why would a benevolent God allow them? The Bible deals with that problem up front. We understand that suffering and evil were the result of Adam and Eve's free choice to disobey God. God's intent ever since has been to rescue and restore us. But God's timetable is not our own, and sometimes suffering goes on a long time before we see a glimmer of how God is using it for good. Joseph is proof early on in the Bible that God works through the sufferings of His people in order to bring about His perfect plan of redemption.

Joseph is an all-around nice guy, but his brothers hate that their father dotes on him. His one major flaw is that, like a lot of us when we were teenagers, he doesn't know when to shut up. He rats out his brothers when they sin, and then he tells them a dream he's had that they will one day bow down to him. Their jealousy becomes full blown hostility. They plan to kill him but decide they'd be wealthier if they sold him to slave traders, who cart him off to Egypt.

At first, the situation looks decent. God's hand is on everything he does, and he excels so much that his master Potiphar places him over his entire household. But then, trouble. Joseph's so handsome that Potiphar's wife gets a wandering eye. When he continually rebuffs her, she gets revenge by accusing him of attempted assault. Potiphar has Joseph thrown in prison, but this shows Joseph's integrity...as a slave, Potiphar had every right to have Joseph killed for his supposed crime. That he didn't tells us he believed Joseph over his own wife...yet in his anger, he left Joseph imprisoned.

Even then, God remained with Joseph. Because God blessed everything he did, the best thing the jailer could do was to hand over the keys and say, "go to it!" Now two of Pharaoh's servants were imprisoned and had dreams. God gives Joseph the ability to interpret them, and one of the servants is restored. Though he promised to mention Joseph's plight to Pharaoh, he does nothing for two years. The injustice against Joseph continues.

Finally, Pharaoh has disturbing dreams and Joseph is called to interpret them. Through God, Joseph understands that seven years of plenty are coming followed by seven years of severe famine. Pharaoh is so impressed by Joseph and his reputation that he's put in charge of the whole country. Joseph's work winds up making Pharaoh unbelievably wealthy as he sells food to all the surrounding nations.

When famine arrives, Joseph's family travels to Egypt in order to buy food. After a long process of testing them, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. He forgives them and welcomes them. By the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob and all his sons are living in Egypt, blessed as the family of the man second only to Pharaoh in all Egypt.

This story makes us examine the question of suffering. Joseph is a righteous man who trusts in God; unlike his great-grandfather Abraham or his dad Jacob, there's no blatant sin in his life. The worst we see from him is youthful arrogance spurred on by dreams given to him by God. With all his faithfulness, he should be blessed, right? But he was 17 when he was sold into slavery, and it wasn't until age 30 that he began to serve the Pharaoh. It was another eight years before he saw his family again. Why does God allow this to happen to an innocent man?

We again see evidence of God's "upper story" and humanity's "lower story" in the tale of Joseph. In God's story, we are given insight into two key things – we see *why* God is working in Joseph's life and *how* God stood by Joseph.

Why is God doing this? God is busy fulfilling His promises to Abraham. First, God paves a way for Abraham's promised nation to survive. Had there been no preparation for the seven years of famine, Jacob's family would have starved. The famine was so bad, the brothers had to make the trip to Egypt twice. Everything they bought the first time ran out. God placed Joseph in Pharaoh's path at a particular place and time to save the nation He had promised Abraham. God also saved countless thousands more people.

Second, God leads His nation into a place where they could thrive. Even at this early point, intermarriage with the Canaanites was creating a strain on Jacob's family. There was pressure on his sons to worship the gods of their wives; we'll read over and over again how it's a problem throughout the nation's history. But it's not as big a problem in Egypt. Egyptians hated shepherding, which is what the Israelites did. Egyptians were agriculturalists. The Israelites live in Egypt as guests of Pharaoh, but the Egyptians wouldn't marry them. This meant the Israelites weren't led into Egyptian religion. Now God said that anyone could become an Israelite by following the Law; it's not an exclusively ethnic group. But God made a way so His people would not be scattered to the winds by their worship of other gods. God also sets the stage to reveal Himself through His people's captivity in Egypt, which we'll read about next week.

Now that we've seen *why* God did what He did, we need to see *how* God stood by Joseph. Joseph makes godly choices only to be rewarded with imprisonment and to be forgotten by those he helps. His righteous behavior just adds to his own troubles. But the text repeats something over and over – "the LORD was with Joseph." When he works for Potiphar, the LORD was with him. When he was in prison, the LORD was with him. As a slave, as a prisoner, he winds up running everything. God gives him the ability to interpret dreams. By the time he has explained Pharaoh's dreams to him, Pharaoh says, "Can we find anyone else like this man – one in whom is the Spirit of God?" The LORD is the one who places Joseph in charge of the entire nation. Through all the heartaches and suffering, God is right alongside him.

I can't think of anything more critical to our understanding of suffering than seeing these two points as not only true in Joseph's case but in the case of every Christian. God is working out plans for future generations through us that we cannot even hope to fathom...and in the middle of the sufferings and problems of this life, God is ever-present. The reasons for God bringing the Israelites to Egypt don't become clear for well over 400 years...yet they are there. When we suffer, is it possible that God will speak to our descendants through our suffering?

I am moved still by stories of Christians who chose to suffer rather than to forsake our LORD. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian who died at the hands of the Nazis during WWII rather than to stand by making things worse as the German church did. I think of Chinese pastors who sit in prison for preaching the gospel. I think of folks like Joni I talked about earlier, who show incredible courage in the face of disability and pain. I think of their caretakers who give of themselves with little reward, who do their jobs to show the love of Christ. I am inspired by the apostle Paul, who endured countless hardships so we might know God's love for us.

If God speaks to us through the suffering of those who have come before us, He may still use our sufferings in this lifetime to inspire still others. And if, as the Bible says, God disciplines those He loves through suffering to make us more like Him, then suffering can ultimately bring us great and profound joy as we find ourselves being formed into the image of Jesus Christ, who suffered so that we might be saved from sin. Even if we don't see it, God has a purpose for our suffering. As Joseph says to his brothers, "God intended this for good."

But just as important, God will not leave us. God is there through it all. The reason that the biblical account tells us over and over again that the LORD was with Joseph is to reassure us. God actually dwells within the believer through the Holy Spirit. His presence is always with us. While it might sound counter-intuitive, God is often most real to us in the midst of our trials. The history of Israel tells us that when things were going well, the Hebrews forgot about God; only when they were in trouble or exile did they turn back to Him. When we endure hardships, we glimpse God working in ways we don't see when our lives are going well.

And that leads us into the "lower story" of the week, the details of Joseph's life and what they tell us. In the midst of what God is doing, the individuals wrapped up in these events are not insignificant – what they do and the choices they make are vital. I see two major points in the details of the earthly story going on – the call to accountability and the need for forgiveness.

God is with Joseph throughout his tribulations, but that doesn't mean that Joseph isn't deeply involved in everything God is doing. The service he provides to Potiphar and the jailer and Pharaoh is all labor-intensive. God blessed Joseph as he makes the most of his bad situations. He stays loyal to God despite his circumstances. This isn't to say that Joseph had no dark nights of the soul. Faithful believers are recorded in the Bible asking God why they face trials. God wants to have that conversation with us. He won't reject you for wondering what purpose your suffering serves. But in the midst of suffering, keep the faith. Cry out to Him, wrestle with Him, confront Him in your weakness. He will not let you down.

There's another side to accountability we see, and that's in the story of the brothers. They bear the responsibility of their actions. Jacob is devastated at the loss of Joseph and says, "I will go to the grave mourning my son." The brothers had no idea what grief they would bring to their father. And Joseph does not let them off the hook. He doesn't mince words. He says, "You meant to harm me; you meant it for evil."

What this shows us is that we cannot use God's plans as an excuse to sin. If God's going to clean up the mess we make, does it matter what we do? But no matter how God may work things out, we are still responsible for the suffering we cause and the sins we commit. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul speaks to this very issue. If Jesus' sacrifice brings grace out of sin, then Paul asks, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" Our calling is not to do whatever we want thinking God will mop it up, but to be faithful to Him regardless of the circumstances.

Faithfulness is played out in the final detail of today's story...the need to forgive. Through the tests that Joseph puts the brothers through, he finds out that they have changed. At first, the brothers don't realize who Joseph is. Joseph devises a scheme by which Benjamin, the youngest of the brothers, is found guilty of a crime. Judah, one of the older brothers, begs to take Benjamin's place rather than to see harm come to him and to cause Jacob more suffering. This is a far cry from the treatment Joseph received at their hands. He's so moved that he reveals himself as their brother and forgives them.

Despite this, the brothers are worried. Years later when Jacob dies, they think Joseph will finally take his revenge. But he doesn't. He actually provides for them. The text says, "he reassured them and spoke kindly to them." Joseph wasn't waiting for his day of vengeance. He had every right to be angry, and yet because he knew God, he set aside his wrath and chose the path of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is hard work. It's easy to forgive superficially. We do that every day. Sometimes, we forgive big sins superficially because we don't want to deal with them. But Joseph takes the best path. He holds his brothers accountable – he doesn't minimize their sin in the least – and *then* he fully pardons them. The reason he can forgive them is his relationship with God. He knows God is using him; as he says, "It was to save lives that God sent me here ahead of you." Does his relationship with God erase the sting of their sin? No. But Joseph knows that God is a God of forgiveness, a God who doesn't judge everyone according to what they deserve but instead is incredibly merciful.

In your life, there may be someone who's really hurt you in the past – a son or daughter, a spouse or an ex, a neighbor or even a stranger. You may find it impossible to forgive them. The pain seems too deep. If that's the case, I encourage you to bring it before God and duke it out with Him. Because forgiveness is not a human trait in our fallen state. But it is a trait that God builds and forms in us when His Spirit is at work in our lives. You can forgive. It can happen when you give those hurts over to the One who sent His Son into the world to forgive us.

We started today talking about Joni Eareckson Tada and the way suffering can actually inspire the best in us. I want to leave you with a quote from her today during an interview with Larry King. She said, "I can't wait to go to Heaven...not only will I paint murals, but I'll have back the use of my hands, and I really will jump up, dance, kick, aerobics. And I hope I can take this wheelchair to Heaven with me. I know...that's not biblically correct. But if I could, I would take it with me and I would be standing next to my savior Jesus Christ, and I would say, "Lord, do you see this wheelchair? Well, before you send it to hell, I want to tell you something about it. You were right when you said in this world we would have trouble. And there's a lot of trouble being a quadriplegic, but you know what, the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on you and the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered you to be. Thank you for the bruising of a blessing it was, this severe mercy. Thank you." If we can see God in the midst of our sufferings and realize that God is working out His story through our weakness, molding us into His instruments of service, we will have learned the secret of Joseph and understand a significant piece of the wonderful puzzle that is the Kingdom of God.