

“God Is Working For Good”

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Families are messy.

3 Short stories from my week.

On Tuesday, I went for a walk and met a really nice woman who is 78 years old and she has had almost no contact with her adult son for over 20 years, primarily because he is addicted to drugs. And when she stopped sending money, he shut her out of his life.

20 years.

Another friend of mine, who is also in his 70's, said to me this week, “I'm glad I'm not raising a family in today's world.” There are so many challenges. Things are so complicated and he pointed to social media. You used to only have to worry about a few bad influences in the neighborhood, but now there are millions of influences in the palm of their hands. He went on to say our entire social fabric seems to be unraveling. Higher education, as well as lower education, appears to be in deep trouble.

Then just last night, I talked to a friend, a Godly Christian woman, whose first child is in high school and it is very difficult. The drama. She said, “Things are just so different from when she was a kid.”

Raising a family is hard. Families, when they work well, create people who are wise and courageous. By grace, families are places that make us wise about God and the world. Families, when they are at their best, are loving and secure and that allows us to take risks and be brave.

But that is the ideal and in the real world families too often become places that make us more foolish and fearful. This is what happens in our story this morning. Families are messy.

Last week, we studied the story of Abram and how God met him at the place of his deepest desire, his desire to have a family. Because of Abram's act of trust, God promised him a family.

But even this family which was promised by God turned out to be a mess.

After waiting 11 years, Abram grew tired of waiting for God to give him a child and in his impatience for an heir took Sarai's servant and had a child, Ishmael, with her. Sarai who originally came up with the plan, became jealous and angry, violent and cruel. When Abram and Sarai ultimately conceived a child, Isaac, Sarai made sure that Ishmael and his mother were exiled. If it were not for God, Ishmael and his mother would have died in the wilderness.

The next generation of Abram's family is not any better. Isaac and his wife had twin sons, Jacob and Esau, and they fought against each other their whole lives starting the womb. Sibling rivalry at its fullest. Jacob twice cheated Esau out of blessings and Esau had murder on his mind. So Jacob ran for his life. Jacob hid from Esau for 20 years. While he was hiding in another country, Jacob was tricked into marrying sisters. He despised his first wife and loved his second. Jacob is a spectacularly bad parent, who does not seek justice for his daughter when she is the victim of sexual violence. This family is a mess. And the mess only continues into the life of Jacob's Sons.

Jacob's favored wife is unable to conceive for many, many years until she has a son named Joseph, and Joseph, the main character in our story today, was dad's favorite. Jacob dressed Joseph like royalty and Joseph, who was young and proud, made an enemy of his 10 brothers. So much so his brothers made a plan to kill him, but ultimately sold him into slavery in Egypt at 17 years old.

This was evil. Did I mention this family is a mess?

To fast forward through an incredible story, Joseph goes from servant, to falsely imprisoned, to second in command in Egypt, only behind Pharaoh. Joseph saved Egypt and the surrounding land from a famine. And at the height of his power, Joseph's brothers come and bow down before Joseph (who they don't recognize) to beg him for food.

My, my, my how times have changed. The people who meant to kill him, who sold him into slavery, are now here at his mercy.

Imagine this moment.

In our day, we would describe Joseph's story like this: Joseph grew up in a dysfunctional family. At a formative age, he experienced a traumatic family wound and then not long after is victim of the misuse of power and is wrongly imprisoned. He is lied to and forgotten for years. Until overnight, he is given more money and power and influence than anyone in the world, save Pharaoh. The text describes him as exceedingly handsome. If a rich, powerful, and handsome man with deep woundings from his family of origin and miscarriages of justice was put in a place to get even with those who hurt him, of course he would do it. This has all the makings of a crime novel or a podcast series, the rise and fall of the family of Jacob.

In fact, Genesis 45 starts out like this,

*Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!"*

*So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.*

*3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.*

*4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! 5 And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. 6 For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. 7 But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.*

We will come back to this, but, instead of being angry or getting even, Joseph weeps and says, "God has sent me ahead of you to save your lives. Joseph ultimately has his dad, Jacob, and his brothers and their families moved to Egypt to live with him. And they lived together for 17 years and then Jacob, their father, died, and now this...

*15 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?"*

Death changes things. Death and grief still today can bring up family pain and family tension. It has been 40 years since the brothers sold Joseph into slavery. That is a long time, but that old adage, "Time heals all wounds" is just not true, especially around family pain. Family wounds linger. Remember, the woman I met this week, it has been 20 years. Drugs have ruined her family.

Think just from your own life, where have you experienced family pain, broken relationships between family members?

What does that look like in your story? I hope you haven't experienced this kind of pain, but almost every family has a broken relationship between a parent and a child or siblings who no longer talk to each other. Time does not heal these wounds.

Now maybe for a while there is a peacemaker in the family. Someone who holds your family together, but what happens when that person passes away?

Joseph's brothers fear that their brother will finally get his revenge.

*16 So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 17 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.*

That introduction "So they sent word to Joseph..." this is what "your" father said. "Your" father, not "our" father. Remember "your" father who "you" love so much? These are his last words, please, please, please (3 times that word is used) forgive your brothers.

And it is here that the idea of forgiveness is introduced for the very first time in the story of God.

What can heal this broken family? Family pain goes back further than Abram, all the way back to Cain and Abel, the first family on earth experience's fratricide. One brother kills the other and it doesn't get better. Every family from the first up until this one is horribly dysfunctional. They hurt each other, avoid, neglect, show favoritism, and live in fear of each other. Is this all there is? What can heal a broken family?

The answer presented here is forgiveness. The word, translated forgiveness here in Hebrew is the word, *nasa*, and it has a range of meaning, like most words do. *Nasa* most often means to lift, carry, take. It is as if Jacob with his final words asked, "Will you forgive? Will you lift the weight of your brothers' guilt and shame off of their shoulders? Will you take away the consequences of their choices? Relieve them of their fear of death? Will you forgive them for God's sake?"

This fall, we are studying the Old Testament and looking for Jesus. Jesus has always been the plan and forgiveness is an indispensable part of the plan.

There is a way to heal the world, to restore broken relationships. Forgiveness is possible for this family and ultimately for everyone in the person of Jesus.

Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, Jesus took the consequences of our harmful choices upon Himself and freely offers forgiveness to those who trust Him.

Weeks ago now we talked about this, but we live in a world created by God, that God loves. And sin and evil has gotten into our families and gotten into us. And forgiveness in Jesus is how God is bringing healing to the world, to our families and to us.

Back to the story, when Joseph read this message, this plea for forgiveness, Joseph wept.

Now the story doesn't say why, so we are invited in to try to interpret why.

Maybe he weeps, because these were his dad's last words to him. That would be enough reason.

Maybe unforgiveness was in his heart, but his father's words cut to the quick and changed his heart.

Maybe he doesn't believe this letter is from his dad. It is rather convenient and that text even hints that the letter is a fabrication. Why are his brothers still lying and manipulating?

My guess is that Joseph weeps, because he is still misunderstood by his brothers. Joseph has taken care of his brothers for 17 years and still after all this time, they are not sure that he loves them. Joseph loves his brothers and they are still too consumed with guilt and shame to trust him. It is painful to not be fully known and loved by your family.

*18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.*

They are afraid and they come and throw themselves down at his feet, like they did 17 years ago. It has been two decades and here we go again, they are afraid.

And honestly they should be. Remember, Joseph's story could easily have made him cold, angry, and vengeful. They should be afraid except God has been working for good in Joseph in spite of his brothers' evil.

*19 But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. 21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.*

"Don't be afraid" is classic bible language. When God or one of his messengers shows up to give good news, to give a message of deliverance or salvation, you will find these words, "Do not be afraid." Famously, when the angel appears to Mary and says she will give birth to Jesus, the angel says, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. (Luke 1:30) or later when the angels appear to the shepherds in the field, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." (Luke 2:10). Finally, when the angel appears to the women at the tomb, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here; he has risen."

Do not be afraid Joseph said. Am I in the place of God? I am not your judge. In the language of Genesis, you are people made in the image of God and I will not use my position and power to harm you. I am second only to pharaoh, but there is a God and it is not me.

A few years ago, Pastor Bob gave a sermon saying that everyone growing up was either bad and proud of it or good and proud of it. Our choices may be different but being proud was universal. We have to

learn humility and Joseph did. Joseph was a good and proud kid, who became a humble, kind man. That came because God was at work for good this whole time.

When Joseph was sold into slavery, God was with him. When he was falsely imprisoned, “the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden.” (39:21) When Joseph stood before Pharaoh, God showed Joseph the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams. And God made Joseph instrumental in saving tens of thousands of lives or more during a famine. Even before the drought came, Joseph saw so much of the goodness of God, that *51 Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh (which sounds like the Hebrew word for forget) and said, “It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.” 52 The second son he named Ephraim (which sounds like the Hebrew for twice fruitful) and said, “It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.”* (41:51-52) Joseph has seen the goodness of God and it has changed him from the inside out. Hatred and pain were replaced with awe and humility.

Joseph says “Do not be afraid” and then goes on to say, what you intended for harm, God has intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Joseph does not deny their evil deeds. He does not say, “It was no big deal.” He acknowledges the pain and their evil intent and then draws their attention to the goodness of God. God has been working for good all this time.

There is so much we could say here about the nature of good and evil and God’s purposes in it. But I simply want to say, God is at work for good. What do you need to know about God?

God is at work for good. We see this in Joseph, in his family, and ultimately in Jesus.

There is no greater example of something evil that God then turns to good than Jesus’s death on the cross. The Apostle Peter in Acts 2:23-24 said, Jesus “*was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.*”

We live in a world that is loved by God and created for good and yet evil is at work in the world and in us. Yet for all of evil’s work, God’s ultimate plan cannot be thwarted. Joseph experiences great evil. We all do. There are horrible things that have happened to your family and to you and they are evil. And we have not just been the victims of evil, but sin and evil have made their way into our hearts and we have intended evil and hurt those we love. Yet as Pastor Amy said this week, “God deals with evil by redeeming its consequences, not preventing it.” God is at work right now redeeming the consequences of evil. God is always working for good.

As Paul said in Romans 8:28, “*28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*” This does not mean that we will avoid evil and pain and anxious thoughts in the short term, but it does mean that at the end of all things, you and I will say, “it is well with my soul.” God is working for good.

Joseph closes by saying again, “Do not be afraid.” And he promised to take care of them and their children and he spoke kindly to them, or more literally in the Hebrew, “he spoke to their hearts.”

Our story ends by saying the family stayed together in Egypt and that Joseph lived long enough to see his great great grandchildren. And at the end of his life, he reminded his family about the goodness of God and his promises to their forefathers. He said, "When God shows his goodness to you and brings you out of Egypt into the promised land, take my bones with you. I know the promises of God will come to pass."

*26 So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.*

Thus ends the book Genesis. Evil did not have the last word. The family of Abraham was not forever shattered. God was and is always working for good.

Two invitations this week for you to respond to this passage:

First, practice forgiveness. Forgiveness is real and it can heal relationships. This week, confess your sin to God and ask him for forgiveness. Get specific. Or ask a friend or family member for forgiveness. Extend forgiveness to a neighbor. Start small. Apologize to your daughter for eating the last of her donut without asking her. Sorry Kinsey. There is so much more to say about forgiveness. Some forgiveness will take years. I don't want to zoom past that, but look for a way to begin or continue practicing forgiveness this week.

Second, Pay attention to how God is at work for good in the world. How is God working for good right now? If you are in the midst of evil, this may mean asking, "How might God redeem this?" We live in a world where evil is obvious, but God's work in the midst of evil may be much harder to see. In fact, some of us have habits that make it harder for us to see God at work. When we watch the news all day or maybe it's NPR or a news website. To be informed is not a bad thing, but the news is always bad and it can be too much for our souls. So maybe one day this week turn off the tv or radio, go uninformed about the evil in the world and pray. We all can pray and ask God for eyes to see his good work in the world. God surprise us with your goodness over and over again that we might become like Joseph, people humble and kind like Jesus.

God is always working for good. Amen.