

God meant it for good

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[0 : 0 0] Now I want you to turn back with me to the passage we've read this evening from Genesis there, right at the end of Genesis chapter 50 and verses 15 through verse 21.

And as you're turning there, and you will find it helpful, I think, to be turned to that passage this evening, let me say what a privilege it is to be able to share in a very small way in the ministry of the church here, and especially in Dr. Campbell's ministry.

I have long admired and tried not to covet his gifts, and you here think of him as your minister, and that is the best possible relationship. But there are multitudes of us outside of the island who gaze on this part of the island with a little envy. And we are grateful to you that you share him beyond this corner of the Lord's vineyard, as Christians used to say. You would have guessed from our scripture reading that the text of the message this evening would be these tremendously well-known words that Joseph speaks to his fearful brothers, speaking about their treatment of him, and doing so remarkably in a context that emphasizes that after all his dream did come true. They bowed before him as his servants, and he said to them, do not fear, for am I in the place of God. As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, or saved we might even say, as they are today. I did not have the privilege of being reared in a Christian home. I was a post-war baby, days of privation that some of you will well remember, even rationing I can remember. And there were very few books in our house, but my parents taught me to read before I went to school.

My parents owned my grandmother's Bible, and these were days, of course, before central heating systems, so as a bright youngster I invented my own central heating system, which was my parents' bed after they had left it.

Since there was so little to read, I would take there, it now seems, looking back in the amazing providence of God, my grandmother's thick but very small print Bible. And there were two stories I read again and again. One was the story of Daniel, not easy to find for a four-year-old boy who has just learned to read. And the other was Joseph. And I think about 50 years later, it dawned on me that in those early days, as I read and reread the story of Joseph, the Lord was preparing me for what I came to think of, actually, as the Joseph question, which is one of the most common questions Christian ministers are asked. Why are these things happening to me? Why is life taking these twists? Why are all my expectations and hopes being dashed? And why, if I am seeking to serve the Lord, is life not more straightforward than it actually seems to be? And if you have never asked those questions, there is very little doubt that someday someone will ask you the Joseph question, or you yourself will ask another, or ask God himself the Joseph question, why on earth are these things happening to me?

[4 : 34] Because at the end of the day, we understand that as we look upon our lives, for so many of us, they seem like a hundred pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that have been thrown down on a table. And it is difficult to the point of impossibility for us to put the pieces together, and then to stand back and say, now I know exactly what God has planned and what God is doing in my life. And when we ask this question, we are simply asking the question that Joseph must have frequently asked. Otherwise, he would never have been able to come to and to share the conclusion that he draws here, and not for the first time. After long meditation, he is able to say, these things that you brought upon me, along with others, were meant, humanly speaking, to harm me, even to destroy me. But I see now, looking back, putting together the jigsaw puzzle pieces, that there is a single word written over all of these hardships, all of my disappointments, all of my confusions and perplexities. And it is the divine word, good. In a sense, this is Genesis version of Romans chapter 8, isn't it, that God works everything together for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. It is the principle to which believing people pledge themselves when they cannot see or understand how God is working things together for good.

And Joseph's life, I think, and his testimony here, gives us a number of very significant principles that are applicable to each and all of us and create for us a sense of God-given stability in our Christian lives when the jigsaw puzzle pieces seem to be awry on the table of our life.

I am not a jigsaw puzzle doer, or perhaps more precisely, I am a failed jigsaw puzzle doer. But I have watched people do jigsaw puzzles, and I have noticed that the most successful always do exactly the same thing right at the beginning. They look for four pieces, unless of course the jigsaw puzzle is round. Those corner pieces, and put them in place. And they understand that when those things are in place, then the whole of the jigsaw will gradually be put together. And they will be able to see the whole picture. And it's those four pieces, we might say, of the jigsaw puzzle of Joseph's life that are applicable to our lives, that seem to me to be so helpfully laid out before us in the story of his life and the ways in which we can reflect on it. The first corner piece is this, that we need to learn from Joseph's life, indeed from the whole of scripture, that God is always working together a variety of circumstances. If you read through the story of Joseph and isolate all of the incidents in it, one of the things you will notice is there is not a single incident in

Joseph's life that actually makes sense on its own. And that's a hugely significant thing to learn. There are no isolated incidents in your life in the economy and providence of God. There are only incidents that God links together, and in his linking together, in his working things together, that he brings significance to each part of the puzzle that that part of the puzzle lacks in itself.

And you see this remarkably in Joseph's life, don't you? Most of us are familiar with the story from our childhood. The arrogant and ill-disciplined young man who comes down to breakfast one morning, and over the conflicts. And over the conflicts, he announces to his older brothers and to his parents that he has had this vision of his own great significance in which they have come, and in the symbolic form of his dream which he interprets, they have bowed down before him. It's always one of the mysteries of God's workings to me that he seems in history to give gifts to individuals who lack the maturity to cope with the gifts that he's given to them. And there is no doubt, as you follow this story through, that this was a God-given intimation that would sustain him into the future.

[10 : 20] But the impatience and the unwisdom of coming down to breakfast and announcing to your brothers and to your parents. My guess is many of you are like me that I have made such an announcement at breakfast time to my parents. I would have been in bed with a very sore anatomy by the end of the day for the impudence and the arrogance. So Joseph is presented to us at the beginning of this whole narrative as an extraordinarily gifted young man. And in a sense, unfortunately for him, he was a very handsome young man. He was one of those young men that all the other boys in secondary six loved to hate, because life seemed to just flow for him. He was obviously his father's favorite son, and he had this famous coat. But he lacked wisdom. He lacked patience. He lacked maturity. He lacked understanding. He was a walking potential disaster. And then in his life, God begins to put all these pieces together. In which, interestingly, Joseph must have asked where God had got lost in the process, and why God seemed to be so slow in fulfilling the vision. And at the end of the day, we understand that it was God's apparent slowness that was his perfect timekeeping. And it was because of God's patience that Joseph was transformed.

It's the most amazing story, isn't it? How he takes this young man who at the beginning of his life is so desperately impatient, he is not able to hold in his speech. And before the end of the story, he is in the highest conceivable emotional moment of life in the presence of his brothers.

And he is able to be restrained. And at the end of the day, he becomes the one who will teach Pharaoh what it means to be patient. And it's only because God has been working in a variety of circumstances in his life. Indeed, we see in Joseph's life what I sometimes think about as the cul-de-sac, the dead-end avenue principle that God so often uses, that now I've seen time and time again in the lives of God's people, when it seems as though God takes them out of the highway and the traffic of life where they felt that there was spiritual significance in what they were doing, and there was a sense of drive and purpose. And then he puts them down a dead-end alley. And they feel forgotten figures.

Remember how this was true of Joseph when he was in the prison, forgotten figure. And everything is passing him by, and others are passing him by. And of course what God is doing is moving on the traffic of his providences in order to bring Joseph right into the center of his purposes at just the right time for them to flourish. That's how God works. God is never working in just one thing in your life.

And we have this tendency, don't we? You know, we go through life, and it is a matter of relative indifference to us whether God suddenly comes and interferes. But when things go wrong, we ask him why he is so slow.

[14 : 30] And we need to understand that it is not a moment in God's providential, sovereign watch care over my life in which he fails to work together everything for good. That language is significant actually.

Things don't work themselves together for good. People may say to us in difficult times, things will turn out all right in the end. But things don't of their own turn out all right in the end, even for the Christian believer. It is because we have a God who, as it were, rolls up his sleeves and bears his right arm and bends the deeds of men and women and our own deeds to his gracious purposes. It is only because he is always working in a variety of circumstances.

That Joseph was able to look back and say, I see now that in all this God meant it for good. But there is a second piece here, another corner piece.

And it is this. The God who is always working together in a variety of circumstances is always working patiently in a variety of lives.

When things go badly wrong for us, the question we usually ask ourselves, others, and the Lord is, why is this happening to me?

[16 : 07] And we need to learn from what Joseph says here about what happened to him. in order that many might be saved.

That what God is doing in your life may actually have very little to do with you. That can be hugely challenging, can't it?

But God doesn't exist for you and for me. God exists to fulfill his own glorious purposes. And it is so often true, isn't it, in Scripture and in the lives of the Christians of whom we read in history.

That many of the things that we see God doing in their lives were not at the end of the day for their benefit, but because he wanted to work in them and through them for others.

And so, for example, we suffer as Christians. Perhaps we are overtaken with an illness and the secular friends around us say, I can't understand why it is that such a thing should happen to such a Christian as she is.

[17 : 21] And the answer is, it's not happening to such a Christian as she is for her own sake, primarily. How many people have been brought to Christ over the years because they have seen a believer go through a season of suffering with a grace and a patience and even a touch of glory that has drawn them to Christ and led them to understand that in the economy of God this darkness was given to that brother or sister not merely for their own sake but for your sake to bring you to the Lord Jesus.

And that's what Joseph experiences in his life. And it takes place really in a very remarkable way in his life, doesn't it? In what happens to his brothers.

In what happens to his father. In what happens to Pharaoh. In what happens in the ancient Near East. You remember how Paul grasped this principle.

Remember how he speaks about it in 2 Corinthians 4. I think he learned it probably from Stephen. He says, you know, as I look at all that I go through and try to try to see what the picture and the jigsaw puzzle of God's ways in my life are, this is what I conclude about all of my sufferings.

Death works in us in order that life may work in you. And you see that is the way to live the Christian life, isn't it?

[19 : 11] That's what transforms this question that we ask God. Why is this happening to me? And we need to sense in Scripture that he often wants to say to us, my child, I am doing something in your life.

But this is not mainly for you. This is mainly for me and largely for them. I'm doing this.

Remember how Paul puts it again in Philippians 1. There he is in jail. He's concerned that the Philippians should be discouraged. He says, I want you to understand that what has happened to me has turned out for the advance of the gospel.

And the brothers are being strengthened. And the Roman soldiers are hearing the gospel. It's not about me.

I remember the daughter of a colleague at Westminster Seminary, Dick Gaffin, who died as a young woman of cancer, telling her minister one day as she left the church wrapped in order to keep warm.

[20 : 22] As her body wasted away, she turned to her minister and she said, I think I'm beginning to see it now. It's not really about me, is it?

You know you could say that of the Lord Jesus, couldn't you? Why is this happening to me? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

my son, it's not really about you. It's about them. And the picture begins to become clear.

The pain remains the same, but you know what everyone looks for in the midst of pain and darkness and tragedy. They look for something that will make sense of it.

God is saying to us, he is well able to make sense of it all. How appropriate in the providence of God that we were singing earlier on this evening, Psalm 40, I waited for the Lord, my God, and patiently did bear.

[21 : 32] If they'd stuck Joseph down the pit as they did when he was 17, he could never, I'm sure he didn't sing anything like Psalm 40, I'm sure that those words would never have been instinctive to him, even if they had been written.

But then later on, I waited patiently for the Lord. I waited for the vision, even if it tarried, because it would come.

This may be exactly where you are this evening, in whatever tension or frustration, or even darkness, or tragedy, or the things going wrong, and you're saying, perhaps you're saying for the ninth, the tenth time, oh God, why is this happening to me?

And although it can be painful to bear, he wants to say, yes, I am doing something for you, and I am doing something in you, but I chiefly want to do something in somebody else.

So bear the pain, because the pain is the pathway to my glory. So, what we discover in Joseph is that God is working together a variety of circumstances, that God is working in a variety of lives, and he's doing it simultaneously.

[23 : 02] And the third thing I want you to notice in this narrative is this, that God is always working out a variety of consequences. He can see the end from the beginning, and he knows the best possible means to employ for the best possible ends.

Think, for example, in this context of how God was working in his father. isn't it amazing when you read the narrative of Jacob's life, that despite all that God did in his life, despite the amazing experience of being transformed as he wrestled with the angel at the Wadi, Jabbok, and all that followed from that, that Jacob repeated the same mistake that his parents had made.

Isn't that amazing? You know, go through an experience and say, thank God he has taught me that, I'll never make that mistake again, and two weeks later you're making the same mistake.

And here was this twister, who had been twisted by his parents, and had been such a twister, and then had been twisted, of course, by his uncle, and then in a sense he had been twisted straight by the angel, and then there was this amazing level of reconciliation with his brother, what does he do with his own family?

He does exactly the same thing as it happened to him. He makes this youngest son, he makes it so clear. No wonder Joseph was so dim for all his gifts, because his father was still so twisted in his favoritism of the younger son.

[25 : 02] And what does God do through Joseph? You can see how Joseph is growing in the wisdom of God by what he does. Remember, what does he do? What's his aim? His aim is to engineer that the father who had showed favoritism for the youngest son would be challenged just at the point of his failure and sin through the loss of his youngest son.

Benjamin, the son of his right hand, the prized child, given the prized name, the new favorite.

And in God's economy, through Joseph, through the ministry of Joseph, perhaps even through what Joseph had learned, and through what God had done in his life, he goes down to breakfast as a 17 year old, and now 14 years later as a 30 year old, he has learned this wisdom, and he wants to minister to his father.

And he doesn't do it in a block-headed way, he does it with the divine wisdom, that if my father is going ultimately to be untwisted, if there is going to be real reconciliation in my family, then it needs to begin with my father.

And so he takes, as it were, out of his father's grasp, the son of his right hand, in order that his father might be emptied of all ambition, of all engineering process, in the life of his children, rather than committing them to the Lord.

[26 : 51] What a painful thing for Joseph to do. What patience he must have learned. It's almost unimaginable what strain he must have been willing to take in his emotions to put his father through this, whom he loved and cherished, and whom he hadn't seen so long.

And yet in the process also to engineer as the instrument of God's providence his father being brought down to Egypt, and for the family reconciliation at last to take place.

And it's the same with the brothers. Indeed, I think it's even clearer with the brothers, how Joseph tests them just at the very points they need to be tested.

They come down, and if you follow the narrative through again at your leisure, you will notice how they are increasingly convicted of sin.

And then Joseph does a very daring thing. He gets them sat down at a table, at a separate table, in the order of their ages.

[28 : 13] Now, if you're a mathematician, you'll be able to tell me at the end of the services, the chances against that happening randomly. And the brothers are passed. How on earth can this have happened?

What is happening to us? And then he says to his steward, pile the food onto the youngest boy's table. Make him special. And you notice in the narrative, two things are happening.

The first thing that is happening is that increasingly the brothers come to confess their sin. At first it's just a matter of, oh God has found us out for what we have done.

But then they're willing to confess their sin. And Joseph is the extraordinarily wise instrument of bringing them to the confession of their sin and guilt for what they had done to him.

Because he recognizes there can only be real reconciliation. He can only unveil his face to them as it were and say I am your brother Joseph whom you sold into slavery when he knows they are willing to embrace him having repented of their sins so that they now have empty hands to take him and to say to him, Joseph be reconciled to us.

[29 : 38] And at the same time he's doing something else, isn't he? And he discovers that God is working in their lives because the food is piled onto the plate of the younger son just as the special robe had been given to Joseph that had evoked so much jealousy and hatred in them.

And it's almost now as they don't Baton Island that they're willing to accept it, that the envy and hatred has gone.

And now piece by piece they're ready for the great reconciliation that takes place. And it's taken 14 years.

And it's very interesting isn't it? You remember the dreams Pharaoh's dreams, they're about 14 years aren't they? The seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine.

And so right here in the middle of Joseph's life he's 17 and he's sold into slavery, he's 30, he becomes prime minister of Egypt and there's another 14 years.

[30 : 58] There's 14 years and 14 years. What's happened to Joseph? Well in a sense it's taken God 14 years to prepare Joseph to be able to serve for 14 years.

It's taken 14 years to deal with Joseph's unwisdom and impatience in order to make Joseph supremely wise and supremely patient.

it's astonishing. You look at this corner piece and you think I think I can see how all the pieces are beginning to fit together here.

I see God has not just been working in one circumstance but a variety of circumstances. I see God has not been working just in one person but in a variety of people.

I see that God has been working towards a variety of goals, fruits of fruit in these different people's lives so that ultimately this whole story is going to end with this magnificent reconciliation of the family and this wonderful embrace so that 14 years later the dream will come to fruition in an entirely different way from the way in which Joseph could ever have imagined.

[32 : 25] No wonder he's reflected on it earlier you remember in chapter 45 and now in chapter 50 and all he can say to his brothers is you need to have no fear.

May the shalom of God be yours because this I now see. Yes, you notice he doesn't camouflage the truth.

He says I know you meant this to harm me and you've confessed to the Lord that you meant it to harm me. But God meant it all for good.

And now you see as the needs of people in their famine have been satisfied. And think about it this way. You know what a stabilizing thing it is if the devil hammers home at the sin of your past life to see that it was part of the fruit of the brother's sin.

Not as sin but as caught up in the providence of God that multitudes were saved from death in these days of famine. It's breathtaking what God can do.

[33 : 36] The picture as it builds up this jigsaw puzzle as it builds up is simply breathtaking. But there's a fourth corner piece.

God is always working in a variety of circumstances. He's working in a variety of people. He's working towards a variety of consequences.

And he's always working with a single eye to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now you might say where do we find that in the text?

We find it actually in more than one way. We find it in a kind of obvious way don't we? That we can't think about this statement that Joseph makes without thinking about the way it's true of Jesus.

That the sufferings through which he went these years think about the fact that he was 30 even when he stepped on to the stage of history and how Luke underlines that.

[34 : 43] Yes, that was the age of entering into full priestly ministry, but is he also thinking about Joseph? Is he thinking about the way in which it is because of the afflictions that came to Jesus that many are saved?

So, you see, there's a kind of Jesus pattern in Joseph's life. faith. It's almost as though the shadow of Jesus as the sunshine shines upon it, so the shadow of Jesus falls upon Old Testament figures and molds their lives into a kind of Christ shape so that suffering precedes glory, so that humiliation precedes exaltation, so that pain precedes joy, so that discipline precedes wisdom, so that affliction becomes the pathway to glory.

But you see, there's another sense in which this is true, because what happens here is an integral part of the promise that was given to Abraham in the covenant with Abraham, isn't it?

You remember that strange experience Abraham has in the covenant God makes and as he falls into that deep sleep and he has this amazing experience of the light of God passing through the dismembered animals as though God were saying, if I fail to keep my promise to you, let me become as these dismembered animals, God stakes his own reputation on keeping his covenant promise that in Abraham's seed the nations of the earth will be blessed.

Part of that covenant promises that the day will come when they will go down to Egypt and it's what his brothers had done to Joseph that was the instrument God used to bring his people down to Egypt so that he might bring them up from Egypt in the exodus into the promised land and there sustain his people until the time would come when the seed of Abraham would appear on the scene so that what happens to Joseph is an integral part of what God is doing in the long term.

[37 : 13] Could Joseph see that? He could have seen a little of it. He could see surely God is keeping his covenant promise because we are exactly where God said we would be.

But you see we can see it so much clearer can't we? It's always that way. I think of that often in the case of Naomi in the book of Ruth. There she is in this far country and she is bereft of husband and of sons.

And she has no idea as the book of Ruth eventually tells us that all of this is part of God's plan to continue his covenant promise and bring on to the throne King David who is of course a descendant of Ruth and Boaz.

And could she conceivably have had any conception? She didn't have a New Testament. She didn't ever turn over the blank page to the first chapter of Matthew to discover that the family tree of Ruth and Boaz was actually the family tree of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ. And that what God was doing in the darkness, in the tragedy, in the incomprehensibility of what Naomi was going through in Moab was purposing and planning and bringing to pass the promise that would lead to Jesus.

[38 : 47] And my dear friends, whatever the jigsaw puzzle pieces of our lives may be, that is what God is ultimately doing. He's taking us up into his purposes because he wants to point to Jesus.

And here's the good news here. He's not limited to this week in his purposes. He's not limited to this year in his purposes. This story spans 30 years, but he's not limited to 30 years in his purposes for Joseph's life.

He's not limited in his purposes in Joseph's life to bring them to Egypt. The only thing that limits God's purposes here is that in everything he does, he wants to point men and women, boys and girls, to the Lord Jesus, to see him in his glory and in his majesty and in his power and in his grace.

It is the most amazing story. No wonder in God's providence I was attracted to this, I think, as a young man. Years later, only because someone else was not able to do it and the tickets had been bought, I took my daughter in Edinburgh to see Joseph and his amazing Technicolor dreamcoat.

I don't know if any of you have seen it. I think I was the only person in the theatre that held about 3,000 people that didn't know what the story was. And in the middle of it, Pharaoh turns into Elvis Presley.

[40 : 31] And I let a guffaw out in a silent, large theatre that caused my 13-year-old daughter great embarrassment. She's never forgotten it. But we were so far forward, it was so interesting.

We could see the action on the stage and we could see the orchestra in the pit. And the conductor of the orchestra had done this, no doubt, 2,000 times.

And before the thing began, he walked into the pit and he pulled out of his pocket a little pack of Smarties. He put them on a little bowl and as he conducted the orchestra for the next couple of hours.

Every so often, he would pick up one of these Smarties and, undisturbed, put them in his mouth.

Now, I'm not suggesting that our God is undisturbed. But I am saying, whatever circumstances you find yourself in, he has conducted this orchestra a hundred thousand times.

- [41 : 47] And he knows every single note in the score, every part that we play upon the stage.
- And he has not only promised to work everything together for good in his word, but he's given us illustrations of how utterly reliable that promise is.
- And one of them is in this amazing story of Joseph. You know William Cowper's poem, Light Shining Out of Darkness?
- Many people sing it as a hymn. God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. And how it says, he plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.
- There is a problem for us with a God who plants his footsteps in the sea. It's a very obvious problem. Footsteps in the sea instantaneously disappear.
- [42 : 55] That's our problem. But that's the very thing of which the psalmist speaks, isn't it? He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.
- Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take. The cloud ye so much dread is big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head.
- The Joseph question. Why is this happening? God because he's working in a variety of circumstances. Because it's about more than you.
- He's working in a variety of people. Because he's working out a variety of goals. And because what he has a passion to do is to set forth Jesus Christ as the only Savior.
- And in order to do that, he was prepared to go to any lengths with his Son. And it may well be that it seems he is prepared to go to any lengths with you too.
- [44 : 08] But he means to take you up and show Jesus to others through you. You give your life to that Lord.
- And yield to him. And say to him, Lord, I see so little of the significance of this jigsaw puzzle, but I know you are its maker and its master.
- So whatever man seeks to do to me, work it together for my good. But also for the saving of many people.
- whether I live to see it or no, Lord, do it with me. And I will bless you for all eternity and trust you for all time.
- May we be more and more such a people. Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father, Amen. Amen.