

God's plans are greater

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Date: 14 May 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Good morning. It is lovely to be here with you this morning. We're going to have our Bible reading just now, so if you have a Bible with you, can you open it up with me please to Genesis chapter 50. Genesis chapter 50, right at the end of the book of Genesis, and we'll be reading from verse 15 down to the end of that chapter. We're skipping right to the end of the story. Hopefully you're familiar enough with the story of Joseph, but if not, I'll cover it briefly later on. So reading Genesis 50 from verse 15 onwards. 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? So they sent word to Joseph saying, your father left these instructions before he died. 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. His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. We are your slaves, they said. 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 for your children.

And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. Joseph stayed in Egypt along with all his father's family. He lived 110 years and saw the third generation of Ephraim's children. And the children of Machir son of Manasseh were placed at birth on Joseph's knees. Then Joseph said to his brothers, I am about to die, I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And Joseph made the Israelites swear an oath and said, God will surely come to your aid and then you must carry my bones up from this place.

So Joseph died at the age of 110. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt. Amen. I wonder what you would say this morning if I asked you what the spirit of our age is, what the spirit of our world is, if you had to try and summarize it with a single word.

Because I think the word that I would go for is hopelessness. The word that embodies the spirit that permeates our culture is hopelessness. There was a recent study that asked young people whether they felt in that moment down, depressed or dissatisfied with life and 51% of them said yes.

The mental health services in this country are absolutely overrun by people who are just feeling drained of hope. We live in a world that is hopeless. And that can be true in the church as well.

[3 : 3 0] And you notice it when you ask somebody how they are and the answer is a kind of, oh, I'm doing fine. I'm just getting by. Maybe that's something that you're feeling at the moment, hopelessness. Maybe you're feeling hopeless because of a situation that's going on in your life.

Maybe you keep making plans of what you'll do, where you'll go, who you'll see, but your plans just never seem to work out. Nothing that you set before you seems to be coming to. Maybe you feel hopeless this morning because of your health. Maybe you or a close family member is facing an illness that just doesn't seem to be getting better or that you know will not get better.

Maybe you feel hopeless this morning as you look out at our world, as you see so many things to be worried about, as you see situations that seem to be spiraling completely out of control.

Maybe you feel hopeless. Maybe you feel hopeless this morning because of your sin, because you feel in yourself that disgrace of not living God's way. And you feel that struggle that try as you might, try as you sincerely do to live obeying God, you cannot escape sin's hold over you.

We have to ask then, where can you turn in a world that seems so without hope? Well, this morning we're going to look at the Bible and we're going to look specifically at the end of this book of Genesis to try and find an answer to this question of hopelessness.

[5 : 09] As I said before, this is the end of Joseph's story. It's been an incredible story. If you read through the book of the last few chapters of Genesis, you'll get it. But to summarize, Joseph was the son of a man called Jacob. He was one of 12 brothers. And Joseph started to have all these amazing dreams.

He had dreams that seemed to predict the future, that seemed to predict that one day his brothers would come and bow down before him. Surprise, surprise, his brothers didn't like that. So they contrived a plan where they would sell Joseph into slavery and get rid of this dreamer.

Eventually, the story is quite complicated, but he gets sold into slavery. He ends up in a place called Egypt. He spends some time in prison, but eventually ends up as the right-hand man of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, just in time so that when a great famine hits that country, Joseph is in place to save many people through his management of the food.

As he's living in Egypt then with all this food to spare, his brothers come to him, having been afflicted by that same famine. And they don't recognize him at first, but they come before him, they ask him for food, and eventually they realize that this is their long-lost brother, now so high up in the power systems of Egypt. And there was this amazing description a few chapters ago of the reunion of the brothers. As these people who hadn't seen each other in years, these family members came back together, and eventually the whole family came down and they lived in Egypt, Joseph was able to take care of all of them. But now as we come to verse 15, we read those words, when Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead. So Jacob has now died, the dad, and the brothers suddenly think to themselves, ah, do you remember how we sold Joseph into slavery? Do you remember how we sold him to those foreigners and pretended that he was dead to our dad? I know that Joseph said that he forgave us. I know that he's been taking care of us all these years, but maybe that's just to keep dad happy. Maybe he was only doing that because he knew that that's what our dad wanted. Now that dad's dead, maybe Joseph is going to take revenge.

Maybe actually Joseph's had this anger at us bubbling away for years, and now dad's dead, he's really going to let us have it. Now that dad's out of the picture, we're for it.

[7 : 40] Remember, these are the guys who sold him into slavery, who left him for dead. They left Joseph in an absolutely hopeless situation. You can understand why Joseph would or might want to take revenge. People can do that. They can plan revenge for years. If you think of the person in your life who has hurt you the most, maybe you know what it is to plan away in the back of your mind for years and years, here's what I'd do to them if I got hold of them. Here's how I would get back at them for all the ways that they've hurt me. Maybe you felt that long burning feeling of planning a revenge, planning what you could do. That's exactly what the brothers are afraid of, and so they send this completely made-up message to Joseph. If you read through the rest of Genesis, it's nowhere suggested that Jacob ever said this to his sons. They are completely making it up, going, right, we'll send a message to dad saying, we'll send a message to Joseph saying, dad told us to tell you, don't do anything to us. Right? If you even just follow that through, it doesn't make sense.

It's pretty clear that they're making it up. But in the face of their brother and the revenge they think they're about to face, they have been brought to this hopelessness. And so as Joseph gets that obviously fake message, he bursts into tears as he realizes what his brothers have been scared of all this time is him. But Joseph tells his brothers wonderfully not to fear that he has already forgiven them. Joseph knows that righting wrongs is God's business. And in fact, he trusts in one big fact that shapes his life and that transforms his hopelessness. One big fact. Are you ready? If you take away nothing else from this morning, take away this one big fact. It is this. God's plans are greater than my plans. God's plans are greater than my plans. Joseph trusts completely in that. And so he can forgive his brothers. He trusts in the fact that it is God's world and that God is the one who runs it. And so it is not for Joseph or for any of us to take revenge. And although we often want to solve every problem, we often want to fight every injustice that is carried out against us, the final say is ultimately God's.

And Joseph knows absolutely that he is not God. And so revenge is not for him to take. God's plans are greater than my plans. So Joseph doesn't take revenge on his brothers, even though by all human counting, they deserve it because he trusts God through the mess that has taken place and through all of that hopelessness.

Just look at what he says to his brothers in verse 20. He's forgiving them. He says, 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. Isn't that amazing that throughout the mess of Joseph's life, God has been constantly at work. His plans are greater than my plans. Now Joseph spent years sitting in a jail cell and things must have looked utterly bleak. Humanly speaking, there was no way Joseph could have seen how he could get out of prison. But God was working through even that situation to rescue the family that he had chosen. And that's amazing to see if you look at Joseph's words, that it's not just that God uses the mess, God actually planned the mess of Joseph's life.

We sometimes think that God in these terrible situations is going, right, how can I fix this? What can I do that will make this all better? That's not the case. God planned all this to happen, to bring the situation to exactly the point that he wanted it to be at. Just compare even the brother's plan in selling Joseph into slavery and God's plan. See, the brother's plan was no more complicated than, right, our brother is annoying us, so let's sell him. We'll get rid of that problem. We'll tell dad he's dead. That'll take care of that. And we'll enjoy a wee bag of money. Simple, right? What is God doing in that plan? Well, he is orchestrating this incredible set of circumstances so that when the famine that God knows is going to happen comes, the family does not starve to death, but instead Joseph has been lifted to this high place of prominence in a land where food is going to be readily available. He is going to use that situation to save Jacob's family, this family that he has chosen to be his representatives and ultimately used them to bless the whole world. Because remember who is going to come from? Jacob's brothers. It is the Lord Jesus Christ. God works through this situation to save this family ultimately so that Jesus can be born. God didn't use the mess. He planned the mess.

[13:32] And so Joseph, seeing how God has been at work, as the brothers bow before him, Joseph looks back on his life and he sees how God has been working through the situation and how God has done far greater things than Joseph ever could through what has happened. God has been constantly working for that good.

Now, to be clear, this passage is, it's not a promise that all of our situations will get sorted. It's not a promise that every mess we experience will get fixed in our lifetime. We might not live to see the solution. God's plans can take time to come. Even just through the book of Genesis, we've seen men who have had to wait so long to see God's plans. Earlier on, there was a man called Noah who God told to build an ark. But between God telling him to build the boat and the first drops of rain falling, Noah had to wait 120 years for God's plans to come together. Abraham, Joseph's grandfather, God promised him that he would have a son, but it would be 25 years until he would hear his child's cries. Even Joseph himself had to wait 22 long years between the moment when he had that dream of his brothers bowing before him and seeing the reality come together. Even in the New Testament, we read of a man called Simeon who waited an entire lifetime to see the Messiah, Jesus. Those are long times to wait, but in all of those, God was at work. God knew what he was doing and his plans were greater. And through the Bible, this is something that we keep on seeing. God keeps working through the mess. Just listen to this prayer that is prayed by two men called Peter and John in Acts chapter 4. Listen to what they pray. For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the people of Israel. He's talking about the crucifixion to do whatever your hand,

God's hand, and your plan, God's plan, predestined to take place. See, talking about the crucifixion there, Peter and John recognize that there was Herod's plan going on. Herod's plan, kind of like the brothers, he wants to remove Jesus from the picture. Jesus has become a bit of a nuisance.

They want to get rid of somebody who's been causing disturbance and stay in control. But what is going on through the crucifixion in God's plan? Well, God is working through Jesus' death on the cross to bring forgiveness to his people. And that, in fact, that had always been his plan, since before the beginning of time, to draw people to himself and that Christ would willingly lay down his life in the place of others. So you tell me which plan was greater, Herod's wee plan to get rid of Jesus, or God's eternal plan to save a people for himself. God's plans are greater. And in fact, we see this again and again, that through what seem like the darkest moments in the Bible story, God is working to accomplish his purposes. His plans are greater than my plans.

That is why Joseph can forgive his brothers. And that is why he can even say to these men who have hurt him so much, I am going to take care of you for the rest of your lives. Look with me at verse 21.

[17:34] So then don't be afraid, I will provide for you and your children. And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. Just imagine how the brothers felt as they heard this. Remember, they had walked into that room to throw themselves before Joseph. The thought in their head being, Joseph is probably going to kill us. If we're lucky, he might have us as slaves. They are going into that room expecting death, thinking slavery would be lucky. Instead, Joseph says to them, no, I'm going to take care of you and your children forever. Just imagine how that felt to receive that forgiveness, that life of being cared for, having your children cared for. Joseph showed them forgiveness and generosity, trusting in God's plan. And by the way, that forgiveness that Joseph shows them, that is grace.

And it is what God is still showing people today. Now you might be sitting there this morning thinking, that's great. I can see that God's plans are greater. I can see that God has a bigger picture going on and that my plans come second. But if I'm honest, I still really want to live according to my way. I still really want to do the things that I want to do. I can accept mentally that God's plans are better, but in my heart, I still think, ah, but I want to do these things. But the truth we have to face up to is that our plans are totally out of our control. One of the things that struck me most about the situation in Ukraine has been seeing young people interviewed on TV, young people who had plans about what jobs they were going to do, where they were going to live, who they were going to marry, how they were going to spend the rest of their lives, plans that have been utterly thrown away. Our plans are totally out of our control.

And it's not wrong for us to make plans, but we have to see that we cannot be in control of what is going to happen. Which is a shame because as human beings, we really crave certainty.

We really like to know what we're getting, where we're going to go, what's going to happen. That's why we always take the same thing in a cup of tea, right? Because you know what you like, you know what you want to get. It would be mad if this evening for a cup of tea, you went, I'll try a pinch of salt in that, right? You don't know what you're going to get. It's going to taste horrible. So you take the same thing that you've always taken because you know that you like it.

We crave certainty. Here is the truth. God's plans are certain. God's plans are set in stone.

[20 : 36] He alone can make plans and know that they will happen. And as we finish this section, that is the hope that Joseph leaves his family with, of God's certain plan. On his deathbed, speaking to his family, he speaks with certainty about the future. And he leaves them with this certain promise that God will come to your aid. Essentially, that the plan is still in motion. All through the book of Genesis, the plan has been for Abraham's family to go to this special place, the promised land that God has chosen for them, where they will live in perfect relationship with him. So all of Genesis is looking forwards to that moment. And on his deathbed, sitting in Egypt, presumably surrounded by his riches, Joseph says, that's still the plan. God is going to come to your aid. You are going to the promised land.

Now just think for a moment, our wisdom would probably say to Joseph, stay in Egypt. It's nice in Egypt. You're a rich man. You're an important man. Your family is taken care of. Why go to this place that you don't know? Why not stay? But remember what Joseph trusts. He trusts that God's plans are greater than my plans. And that is why Genesis ends with this kind of tension, where Joseph's body stays in Egypt.

I'm surprised as we finished reading, I didn't see people kind of trying to flick the pages apart at the end. Because the ending is really weird, right? It finishes with Joseph saying, you have to promise me, you're going to take my bones up to Egypt, up to the promised land rather.

You have to do that. And then it says, and Joseph's body was put in a coffin in Egypt. And we're kind of going, well, where did this happen?

When did that happen? Right? Because just earlier on in this chapter, they made such a big procession of taking Jacob's body up. Why not do the same with Joseph's when that's what he told them to do?

[22 : 55] Obviously, it's because it calls for more to the story. I'm not surprising any of you by saying that Genesis is not the end of the Bible. There's a lot more to come. It calls for more to happen.

And in the narrative of the Bible, it would be another 400 years until a man called Moses would lead the descendants of Jacob's sons out of Egypt.

And that would be 400 years of increasing hardship and eventually slavery at the hands of the Egyptians. But when Moses did finally lead the people out of Egypt, he brought the bones of Joseph with him.

Just listen to the fulfillment of Joseph's words from Exodus 13 verse 19. Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, God will surely visit you, and you shall carry my bones up with you from here.

That's why I think it's significant at the end of Genesis that Joseph's body is put in a coffin, not a tomb. What do you think of when you think of Egypt?

[24 : 09] You can shout out, it's fine. Pyramids, well done. That was good. What is a pyramid? It's a tomb, right? So rich Egyptians, kings, their bodies would be put in really expensive tombs.

And I'm not surprising you by saying that pyramids are really difficult to move, right? You can't pick one up and move it to a different place. So if you have your body put in a tomb, you are saying, this is where I'm staying.

I will not move. My body is going to remain here forever, right? Joseph was a rich guy. He could have had his body put in a tomb that was immovable, but he doesn't.

He has his body put in a coffin, a simple box that can be picked up and moved somewhere else. And I think that is because of the promise that he has given to his brothers, that you will go to the promised land and you will take my bones with you.

Therefore, I'm not having my bones put in a tomb where they will stay, but in a coffin where they can be lifted up and taken away. It was a sign that his body was going to leave.

[25 : 22] And so throughout the next 400 years, Joseph's coffin was a sign of hope for the people, a sign that we are not going to stay in Egypt forever.

One day, God will come to our aid. We will go to the promised land. And by the way, you're taking Joseph's bones with you in that coffin. So do you see that the coffin was a sign of hope for the people?

The coffin was a visual reminder that God was going to come to their aid. So that even through the darkest days of oppression and slavery, the coffin reminded them, God will come to your aid.

A visual reminder that God's plans are greater than my plans. That is a hope that we still have today, that God surely has come to our aid.

It's a hope we still have that it was always God's plan to come down himself in human form and lay down his life in the place of sinners like us. Jesus came to rescue us from our greatest need and he has completed that work.

[26 : 34] And in fact, we can use the language of Genesis. In Jesus' life, God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

This is the truth that any sinner, no matter what they have done, no matter how big a mess their life is, can put their trust in God and be saved. Without any cost to them, salvation is offered, full and free.

God is still doing that work. The plan is still going. And so just as the Israelites had a coffin, a slightly morbid sign of their hope, today Christians have the cross and the empty tomb.

Not signs that God will rescue, but signs that God has rescued and that his plan is greater. So then what is Jesus' invitation to us this morning?

What is Jesus' invitation to you in the face of hopelessness? It is this. Will you put God in the place of God?

[27 : 50] Will you say no to your plan and trust instead in what he is doing? Will you believe that his plans are greater than our plans?

Maybe for you this morning, it means turning to him. Maybe for the first time, you need to admit before God that you need to be forgiven and accept the forgiveness that he freely offers to you.

I know there are people here this morning who would love to tell you more about what Jesus has done for you. Maybe like Joseph for you this morning, putting God in the place of God means forgiving somebody.

Somebody who has hurt you tremendously. Maybe it's trusting that God's plans are greater through that situation. That he is God and we are not. Maybe this morning, putting God in the place of God means facing dark days ahead with renewed hope that God's plans are greater than my plans.

Maybe it is simply an attitude change to speak and live as if we have hope. Remember, Christians should be the most joyful, optimistic people in the whole world.

[29 : 09] We know that there is a God in heaven looking out for us. That should make us overflow with joy. We should trust in difficult situations that God is always working.

He is calling us this morning to put God in the place of God. I'm going to give us just a minute of silence just now to think about how we are being called to put God in the place of God.

I'll count it out, but just in the silence, think of one thing really specifically. How is God calling you today to put him in the place of God? Thank you.

Thank you.

Whatever you have thought of. You should say yes. Because God's plans are greater. Because no plan of ours. Could ever. Be as amazing as what God is doing.

[31 : 00] In the world today. And you and I get to be a part of that. You and I get to be a part of the plan. Of the creator of the universe. And you should say yes this morning.

Because it is God's plans. That will ultimately happen. And we can. And we can. Fight his plans. We can try and go our own way.

We can desperately try and force. What we want to happen. Or we can simply rejoice. In whatever he does with us. Knowing that his plans. Are always working for good.

Trusting that his plans. Are greater than my plans. Let's pray. Heavenly Father. We thank you. That your plans. Are greater than our plans.

That Lord. We can trust in this truth. No matter what we are facing. Father. We thank you. That it was your plan. To send the Lord Jesus. To die on a cross. So that we could be forgiven.

[32 : 01] Lord. We never could have come up with that plan. But in your wisdom. You made a way for us. To be forgiven. At no cost to us. Lord. Please forgive us. Those times when we have.

Tried to force our own way. When we have doubted. Your plans. Please help us to live. In full confidence. Of that. And to put you.

In your right place. Over our lives. We ask this. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. We're going to sing. Our final song.

We'll just finish. With these words. From first Peter. And the God of all grace. Who called you to his eternal glory. In Christ. After you have suffered. A little while. Will himself restore you.

And make you strong. Firm and steadfast. To him. Be the power forever. And ever. Amen. Amen.