Joseph
Gen 45:1-15; Gen 50: 15-26

Introduction

I love to plan. From selecting which meals to cook for the week to figuring out where to stay and what to do on holidays, I like working through all the little details to develop a clear plan for how to proceed.

Now there are some people who like to take things as they come; to be spontaneous and carefree to see where the day takes them. I admire those people, but that's not me. Instead, I subscribe to the catch-phrase of a character from the famous 1980's American action TV show the A-Team: I love it when a plan comes together.

How about you? Are you a planner? Or do you like to "go with the flow" as they say? And why do so many of us spend so much time planning? For me, I think it's about managing expectations and limiting surprises. In some ways, it's about trying to exert control. I like to know what I can expect, and a successful plan is one in which things go pretty much as expected.

But what's the problem with that? Well, the problem is that things rarely - if ever - go as expected, do they?

There's a famous expression used by those in the military that says, "A plan never survives first contact with the enemy." What does that mean? It means that there are almost certainly going to be things outside of our control that will change our plans in unforeseen ways; ways we cannot predict. And we are inevitably going to be required to react and adapt to these changes.

In fact, just last week we had some good friends in town from the Middle East - seven of them, in fact - and I had a brilliant plan to take them to our local centre sportif for dinner. Can you guess what happened? As we are getting ready, I phone ahead to the restaurant to reserve a table only to find out that it is closed for two weeks for summer holidays. Well, there goes the plan.

Now we were able to adapt the plan and found another place to eat, but it did show that I did not have all of the information and that other people and events had a say in my plan's success, didn't it?

In fact, that is exactly what we've been seeing as we've been examining the life of one of the patriarchs of our faith, Joseph, over the past two weeks. And as we'll see, it turns out there has been a plan for Joseph's life all along and there is one whose plan - unlike ours - never changes and can never be thwarted. And as we'll discover, one of the most profound mysteries of the universe will lead to one of the most profound truths for our lives.

Background

So if you have your bibles with you, I invite you to turn with me to the book of Genesis 45:1. For those of you who may not be as familiar with the bible, the big numbers are the chapter numbers, and the small numbers are the verse numbers. Genesis is the very first book of the bible - right in the front - and we will be looking today at the end of Genesis. That's Genesis 45:1. We will be jumping around a little, so you will likely benefit by keeping your bibles open as we examine God's word together.

As we turn there, let me remind us of where we are in the story of Joseph's life. As we heard from Tom two weeks ago, Joseph was the favored son of Jacob, who was also known as Israel. Joseph was one of twelve brothers, but he wasn't very popular with his siblings, was he? In fact, he was downright despised to the point that his brothers sold him into slavery. Maybe it was because they were jealous of the way their father, Jacob, preferred Joseph. Or maybe it was because at one point, Joseph - clearly without a lot of self-awareness - felt the need to tell his brothers about two dreams he had in which he saw all of them bowing down to his authority.

Whatever the reason, Joseph finds himself utterly betrayed by his family and carried out of Canaan down to Egypt as a slave.

Then last week, Vincent told us of the incredible lows and highs that punctuate Joseph's life in Egypt. From being given amazing responsibility by his master, Potipher, to run his household - to being falsely accused of assault by Potipher's wife and thrown in jail - to being placed in charge of the prison but then forgotten - to finally being given supreme control over all of Egypt and second only to Pharaoh himself - one thing in all of this was constant: Joseph never lost faith and continued to trust in God.

Now, as we conclude Joseph's story, we see that there has been a family reunion of sorts. Joseph's brothers have come to Egypt seeking relief from the deadly famine that is plaguing the entire region. And they appeal to Joseph for aid, but they do not recognize him. What will Joseph do? Now is his chance for revenge - will he take it? How will his brothers respond? What would you do?

I think what we will see is that Joseph is a man who has been shaped by knowing God, and this allows him to do things and behave in ways that we find extraordinary. Through the life of Joseph, I want us to see three things. And for you notetakers, this is the outline of our sermon today:

1) God is Sovereign Over All
2) We are Responsible for Our Actions
3) We Can Trust God's Plan

So let’s now look at what Joseph does starting in Genesis 45:

> Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, “Make everyone go out from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.
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> So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

God is Sovereign Over All

First we see that God is sovereign over all things. "Sovereign" means that He possesses supreme power and ultimate authority over the entire universe and everything in it. And on one level, this makes sense to us, right? After all, the book of Genesis begins with showing us that He created everything out of nothing.

But in another sense, it's important to note that He is not simply the Creator of the universe, He takes an active hand in all things that happen. Fundamentally, this means that God is involved in our lives - whether we acknowledge that involvement or not.

It also means that everything that happens is God's will and that nothing happens outside of God's control.

In the case of Joseph, it means that all of the calamity and disaster that has befallen him was decreed and ordained by God. We see in this passage that Joseph mentions three separate times that God "sent" him.

Here I want to underscore that this is not simply God taking terrible circumstances and turning them to His purposes, like some surprise twist ending to a movie. Nor is it merely God stepping aside and turning his back to allow evil deeds to take place. No, God meant for all this to happen.

He even sent the famine that plagued Egypt and the region. Not just "allowed" it to happen; He brought it. We see this in Psalm 105:16-17:

> When he summoned a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread, he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave.

God designed all of this - even the evil that befell Joseph and the region - as part of His master plan.

So this means that evil is not pointless even when we think it is. And as we'll see, God not only planned the famine, He planned the solution.

Still, this can be a very difficult concept for many of us to accept, can't it? In philosophy, this is called the "Problem of Evil." In short, the question arises "How can a perfectly good God who is all powerful allow evil? Either He must not be perfectly good, or He must not be all powerful.

But as Christians, we know He is both.

I imagine each of us struggles at times with this issue, especially when bad things happen. When these struggles arise, and doubts creep in, which way to you tend to fall? Are you more likely to wonder about God's goodness or His omnipotence, His sovereignty?

If you wrestle with these weighty issues and want to learn more about how to understand these difficult theological concepts, I would commend to you our Sunday class series on Christian apologetics, where you will learn to identify some of the key objections many have to the Christian faith and learn to apply theological arguments to clarify our beliefs against those objections. The series starts next Sunday at 9am right across the street.

Likewise, our limited minds cannot plumb the depths of the riches, and the wisdom, and knowledge of God, but we can take our cares, our concerns, and our confusion to Him in prayer. We can approach Him with our struggles and pray He comforts us in those times when we doubt either His goodness or His sovereignty.

As noted African pastor Conrad Mbewe has put it...

> God is sovereign over evil, but is not the author of evil.

Which brings me to my second point... we are responsible for our actions.

We are Responsible for Our Actions

Turn with me a few chapters later to Genesis 50:15.

At this point, a lot has happened since Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. His brothers returned to Canaan and told their father, Jacob, that Joseph was alive. Then Jacob, his sons, and all of their massive enterprise of flocks and herds and people

migrated to Egypt to escape the famine - sixty-six people in all. Over those years, the famine worsened, but Joseph was able to manage it so that those in Egypt survived and then thrived after the famine subsided.

After seventeen years in Egypt, Jacob died at the age of 147. Before his passing, however, he not only blesses each of his sons, he blesses Joseph's two sons and also makes Joseph promise to take his body back to Canaan to be buried. You see, Jacob (Israel) did not forget that Canaan is the land God promised to Abraham and Issac and gave to Jacob and his children.

After Jacob's death, an enormous funeral procession went up to Canaan for the burial, including all the servants of Pharaoh and all the elders of the land of Egypt. After the burial, all who had gone to Canaan returned to the land of Egypt, including Joseph's brothers.

That brings us up to Genesis 50:15:

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you."' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph 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, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Seventeen years living in Egypt and Joseph's brothers are still worried about reprisal for their evil deeds. No wonder Joseph wept. We do not know if this was because he was sad that his brothers still had lingering doubts after all he had done for them, or because they actually ask forgiveness and acknowledge their sins. Either way, it's clearly an emotional event.

And did you catch the part where they fall down before Joseph and proclaim, "Behold, we are your servants?" I cannot help but wonder in that moment whether Joseph recalled back to his seventeen-year-old self, whom we saw in Genesis 37, and the recounting of those dreams in which he told his father and brothers that he saw all of them bowing down to him. If so, this must have been further evidence to Joseph of God's work in his life.

And yet Joseph's response is to again comfort his brothers and speak kindly to them. Amazing.

But it is important to note that Joseph's comfort does not in any way imply his brothers did not sin. They very much did. After they themselves acknowledge their sin, Joseph is quite frank in his assessment that his brothers meant evil against him.

At this point, you may be saying, "But wait a minute, Rob, aren't the brothers off the hook here? Don't they get a pass? I mean, we just talked about how God is sovereign and in control; how he's the one who did all of this, right? C'mon, you just said God was responsible."

And indeed, I did. So how do we reconcile God's sovereignty with our free will and responsibility for those choices. Are you ready for the answer?

I don't know.

We don't know.

Again, we see that there is a profound mystery to how these two seemingly incompatible ideas can somehow both be true. But they are.

As famous reformed American theologian John Piper writes in his book "Suffering and the Sovereignty of God" - a book I would highly commend to those wrestling with these ideas:

> We should know that the fact that God has ordained everything, including our free choices, does not remove or lessen our responsibility, our guilt, or our liability to be punished for our sins.

There can be no doubt that what Joseph's brothers did was detestable and indefensible. We are right to condemn that action. And we must acknowledge, at the same time, that our hearts are equally sinful and capable of causing terrible hurts and pain.

And I think in our hearts - as sinful as they may be - we feel like we have agency to make our own choices and control over our thoughts and actions. But our choices - whether good or bad - do not exist outside of God's control. As we read in Proverbs 16:9...

> The heart of a man plans his ways, but the Lord establishes his steps

And yet they are most certainly our choices, and we will undoubtedly answer for them. The apostle Matthew tells us in Matthew 12:36:

> I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak

Such a statement raises a very serious dilemma for us: How can a sinful, disobedient, wicked people be made right with a perfectly good and perfectly holy God?

Because we must recognize that our sin in no way diminishes God's goodness. In fact, as renowned Canadian scholar Don Carson writes...

> God is sovereign, and invariably good; we are morally responsible, and frequently evil

This is a deadly combination. It should disturb us tremendously that our thoughts and deeds are so at odds with what God expects of us; that we have rebelled and fallen so far from the obedience that He requires of us.

Because we are evil and He is in control, God actually uses our wicked actions to bring about his plans. This is what Joseph meant when he said what his brothers meant for evil, God meant for good.

Again, I believe John Piper's comments here are informative for us. He writes...

> The hardened disobedience of men’s hearts leads not to the frustration of God’s plans, but to their fruition.

As we're about to see, this means that there is a plan and that God's plan will never be thwarted by anything we could do.

So let's turn to our third, and final, point... we can trust God's plan.

We Can Trust God's Plan

What is it that allowed Joseph to not repay evil for evil with his brothers? I asked earlier what you would do in Joseph's place. Would you be able to forgive like this in the face of such horrible betrayal? And not only forgive, but then provide for your tormentors?

In many ways, the story of Joseph is a story of forgiveness and reconciliation. And what we see is that it is Joseph's trust and faith in God that allows him to show such grace to his brothers.

What's interesting to note is that, unlike his father, grandfather, and great grandfather, we do not see any evidence in Scripture of God speaking directly to Joseph like he did to Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham.

Sure, we have those infamous dreams, but there must have been times throughout his life where Joseph wondered what God was doing and why he was doing it. Yet, at no point, do we see that Joseph's lack of understanding manifested itself as a lack of faith.

By looking back at his life, Joseph could see some of God's plan, and he clearly sees God's hand in establishing his steps.

He believed that all the trials, pain, and suffering he endured was used by God to put him in a position to then save a multitude of people - even his own family - from starvation and death.

Even as he died, Joseph had faith in God's promises. You see, back during the famine, there was significant concern when Jacob and all the others left Canaan that they were disobeying God by leaving the land He had promised. But we see in Genesis 46:2 that God spoke to Jacob on his journey to be reunited with his son, Joseph, in Egypt saying...

> Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again

This is why Jacob asked to be buried back in Canaan. And, as we see at the end of Genesis, Joseph, too, before he dies, makes his brothers swear to also bury him in Egypt, and he reiterates God's promise in Genesis 50:24:

> And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

Joseph may have believed that this was God's ultimate plan for his life, but we know that there was more. Close to 300 years later, God would raise up Moses to finally bring Israel out from under the bondage of Pharaoh in Egypt and eventually settle them back in the promised land of Canaan.

The author of Hebrews puts it this way in 11:22:

> By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

But even that was not the ultimate purpose of God's master plan. It would be another 1500 years after Moses died before God's true purposes would come to light.

As we know, one of those brothers whom Joseph saved was Judah. And it would be through Judah's lineage that God would accomplish the plan he formed from before the world began to resolve that troublesome dilemma about which we spoke earlier: How to reconcile His rebellious people back to Himself. And this book, the Bible, is the entire story of that plan.

In fact, up to this point, I haven't even mentioned the main character of the story. That person is Jesus Christ - the Lion of the tribe of Judah as He's referred to in Revelation 5:5 - and this book and everything in it from start to finish is ultimately about Him.

The true purpose of Joseph's life - which even he did not see - was to point the way to another who would come nearly two-thousand years later and prove to be the ultimate savior of God's people, not just from a famine, but from an eternity separated from God.

You see, this all powerful, perfectly good creator of the universe sent his only son, Jesus, to live a life of perfect obedience to His holy Father - a life we should have, but could not, live because we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. In fact, we deserve death as a just punishment for our disobedience to Him.

But this Jesus was crucified on a cross and died a sinner's death in the place of all of us who would turn from our sin and put our faith and trust in Him. This means that for us there is now no death, and we can look forward with joy to an eternity in God's presence. We know that this sacrifice was sufficient to satisfy God's holy wrath because God raised Jesus from the dead three days later, and he now rules and reigns at the right hand of His Father in heaven.

Maybe you're here and you're not yet a Christian. This good news of God providing a way for sinners to be made right with Him is what we call the "gospel." And it is the best news we could ever have. If you would like to know more, please come find me or anyone around you after the service. There is literally nothing we would like more than to share this gospel with you.

So now we rightly see Joseph's life in light of God's master plan of redemption. As Tom pointed out two weeks ago, Joseph is a biblical "type" - a person who foreshadows the coming of Jesus.

More than Joseph, Jesus is the ultimate example of evil being turned for good. Even his earliest followers recognized that what men meant for evil, God meant for good as part of His master plan.

And Jesus is the ultimate display of the forgiveness that Joseph showed.

Peter in the book of Acts 2:23 tells the people of Jerusalem...

> This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

And again, in Acts 4:27-28 we read...

> 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 peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

Meaning Jesus' crucifixion. Again, we see that all of this was within God's control and part of His plan.

Briefly, as we conclude, what does this mean for us?

First, it means, like Joseph, we can trust God's plan even when we don't fully know God's plan. When trials come; when evil befalls us; when we are betrayed or forgotten, we would do well to remember that all of this is within God's sweet providence, His loving provision as He guides His people through life to accomplish His purposes.

This requires patience and prayer. But, like Joseph, no matters the twists and turns of our lives, we can rest secure knowing the ultimate end of the story.

There is no better text in Scripture for understanding this than what we heard at the beginning of the service from Paul's letter to the Romans in 8:28:

> And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.

Second, it means that we should feel free to show the same grace, mercy, and forgiveness as Joseph to those around us who do not deserve it. And more importantly, as Jesus showed to us in redeeming us from our sins.

Betrayed by a friend? Forgive. Hurt by the church? Forgive. Struggling with anger or bitterness? Forgive as Jesus forgave. Forgive because Jesus forgave. When we learn to suffer well, and to forgive those who hurt us, we show a watching world a small taste of our Savior, and we may be used by God to help lead them to knowing Jesus.

Conclusion

So as we have seen, unlike my carefully crafted, well thought out and detailed plans that don't survive first contact, God's plan can never be frustrated, and His sovereign will can never be thwarted.

As we look back on Joseph's life, let us remember how God used all of it to accomplish His good purposes. And as Joseph's life points us to the sacrificial life of Jesus, let us remember these words from noted theologian Paul David Tripp:

> At the center of the biblical worldview is the radical recognition that the most horrible thing that ever happened ends up being the most wonderful thing that ever happened.

Let's pray.