

Genesis 50:20

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[0 : 00] Well let me ask you to turn back again in your Bibles if you will to these closing verses of Genesis chapter 50.

A seven year old knew that the Apostle Peter was also a prophet because you'll remember there are very specific prophecies that Peter makes about exactly how the world is going to end. So next week there will probably be a question where the answer is hidden in the book of Revelation. So it's excellently encouraging to me as I feared I might be turned into a pumpkin for not getting back to Scotland on the Sabbath day.

And that's been a blessing to me. Well you would guess that the particular verse I want to draw your attention to this evening is the famous words.

Very familiar words in Genesis chapter 50 and verse 20 where Joseph is addressing his fearful brothers.

[1 : 28] Who are obviously concerned that perhaps now out of respect for his father he has been gracious and kind to them.

But now that their father is gone the real Joseph will emerge and they will get their comeuppances for the way in which they have treated him.

And he speaks to them with such kindness. 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 your little ones. I did not have the privilege of growing up in a church going family.

And I'm a post war baby. We did not have much in the way of literature in the house. My mother had relatively little education although I think she was a highly intelligent woman.

[2 : 36] And she taught me to read very very early on. And the one book that I remember we had in the house although we were not church goers was my grandmother's Bible.

Looking back now I think what phenomenal eyesight these people must have had. These thick Bibles and tiny print. And since we also had no central heating I simultaneously devised a way of satisfying my reading habit and enjoying central heating.

When my parents got out of their bed in the morning I got into their bed with my grandnana's Bible. And it was the story book of my childhood. And there were two particular stories that I always loved to read for some reason.

One was the story of Daniel whom I always found difficult to find because he was kind of lost away somewhere in my grandmother's Bible.

And the other was the story of Joseph. And I could never remember there was not a book of Joseph in the Bible. So sometimes I was scrambling around in order to read it.

[3 : 48] And in much later life I looked back on those early childhood memories of reading this story again, again, again and again.

And realized I think God was preparing me to be a minister of the gospel. To be a pastor of the flock of God.

Because one of the most frequent questions that comes up in conversations ministers have with people and people with ministers is the question, Why is this happening to me?

And that is what this whole narrative is about. This narrative that begins in Genesis 37 ends here in Genesis 50 is a narrative of tracing the pattern of God's working in a man's life until he is able to look back and he knows why these things were happening to him.

You meant it for evil to harm me. God meant it for good. And I'm pretty sure all of us here this evening know the story.

[5 : 05] Joseph is his father's favorite. And his foolish father gives him special treats. His brothers are jealous.

They express that jealousy. He is sold into slavery. God is with him in that slavery. And yet in that God presence with him, he finds himself going further downhill.

He is faithful to God. But he is betrayed by Potiphar's wife. He is given the gift of the interpretation of dreams. And those whose dreams he interprets find their interpretation comes true.

And then he is forgotten in prison. And then eventually, years later, actually 14 years later, inclusive reckoning.

17 through to the age of 30. Eventually at the age of 30, he is raised up to become, for all practical purposes, the prime minister of Egypt and ultimately the human savior of the whole Mediterranean basin.

[6 : 16] Because he has this wisdom to harvest the seven years of plenty in order that they may be used for the seven years of famine.

In the providence of God, his brothers appear. He becomes part of God's instruments in eventually bringing the whole family together.

There is a glorious reconciliation. And here, in the end of chapter 50, we read that this reconciliation was the real deal. And the brothers are united together again here in the land of Egypt.

And it becomes clear from, at least from chapter 45 onwards, that Joseph has long meditated on the ways of God in his life.

My mother used to say to me when I was seven, Sinclair, there is no substitute for experience. And it used to infuriate me.

[7 : 24] Because at seven, you don't have much of it. And it made me see that this was a very unjust world. That at seven, you couldn't have much experience. But there is no substitute for experience.

And here now, he's old enough to look back on God's ways and to see the pattern of God's working in his life. So much so that what he says here summarizes what is a kind of dramatic version of what Paul says towards the end of Romans 8, isn't it?

That God works everything together for good for those who love him and who are called according to his purpose. We cannot read God's purposes in advance.

But often in retrospect, we are able to see how the various elements in the experience of the Lord's providence that we have.

He has been working together in order eventually to bring us to this place at this time. As these particularly carefully shaped people to serve him for his glory.

[8 : 37] And that's all I really want to point out from these verses this evening and from this whole section. That Joseph is now able to look at the jigsaw puzzle of his life with the major pieces in place.

I know, not by happy experience, but by observation usually of my wife, that the way you begin to solve a jigsaw puzzle, if it's square or rectangular, is to look for the four corner pieces.

And once you've found the four corner pieces, you begin to build the rest of the picture together.

And I want to suggest to you that in the jigsaw puzzle of Joseph's life, there actually are four corner pieces that are not only in his life, but they're really to be found in the life of every believer.

And I want simply to pick them out one by one and emphasize their importance. The first is this, that our God is always working in a variety of circumstances.

You know, when we ask the question, what is God doing in my life? We're almost always thinking about one particular thing. One particular thing goes wrong. And it's usually when things go wrong that we ask this question, what is God doing in my life?

[10 : 14] And we need to understand that God's purposes are not like individualized words.

They're like sentences. And when we focus on particular incidents and become, as some of us tend to do, obsessed with particular incidents, we will never be able to unravel the answer to the question, what is God doing in my life?

Because God is never working merely in one particular incident, one particular circumstance in my life.

He is creating a mosaic. And his purposes are seen when the pieces of that mosaic begin to fit together, and never before.

That's why John Flavel, the 17th century English minister, said that the providences of God are like Hebrew words.

They're always read in what we regard as reverse order. We can't interpret them looking forward. We can only begin to see the picture as he gives us, as it were, more dots.

[11 : 35] And eventually a face begins to appear, and we understand a little of what he is doing. Because certainly earlier on in Joseph's experience, he must have felt quite lost.

He must also have felt that whatever God was doing in his life, and we're told that when he was in Potiphar's house, the Lord was with him.

Whatever God was doing in his life, he was doing it far too slowly. And I'd be surprised if you have not been there. Where you're waiting for God to catch up with what your idea of his will might be in your life.

And what he eventually learns is that as God works in a variety of circumstances, as the dots begin to be joined, and the picture begins to become clear, is that God's ways are perfect, God's purposes are perfect, and God's timing is perfect.

I think as I look at Joseph's life and think about servants of God I've known, that he and they shared in what I have come to call the divine cul-de-sac principle.

[13 : 01] The divine cul-de-sac principle. Because I've noticed how actually quite regularly in the lives of men and women that I have later seen God use in particular ways, there have been times in their lives when they seem to have been shunted into a cul-de-sac, and whatever God is doing seems to have passed them by.

And on occasion I've sat with some people like that and said, what we need to do under these circumstances is to recognize God has not passed you by.

God is simply getting you ready for the place in the traffic flow of his purposes in which he intends to use you for his glory.

Because he is concerned with timing. And he is concerned that you should learn what it means to experience waiting on the Lord.

And do you know how the scriptures use those two expressions that we might think mean the same thing, but they don't mean the same thing. Waiting on the Lord and waiting for the Lord are related to one another.

[14 : 26] But what Joseph had learned to do was to wait for the Lord until in his providences he began more fully to disclose where he was really leading Joseph.

There's a very interesting illustration of the same principle in the life of the Apostle Paul in the Acts of the Apostles in chapter 16. You'll remember the tale end of this experience even if you don't remember the beginning of it.

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia. So why were they doing that? Because they had been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

Now that clearly means they intended to speak the word of God in Asia, but they had been forbidden from doing what they intended to do. So they came to Mycenae.

And they attempted to go into Bithynia. Now here's the paradox. They were attempting to do what God's sovereign will did not want them or purpose them to do.

[15 : 40] They were not sinning because they were seeking to be wise. But Luke tells us here in the Acts of the Apostles that when they came up to Mycenae and attempted to go into Bithynia, the spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

So, passing by Mycenae, they went down to Troas. Everything they've sought to do thus far.

Everything they've laid before the Lord and said, Lord, show us if this is not your purpose.

Every, every move they've made has been frustrated. And what is the result? Well, you know what the result is. The next verse is about the Macedonian call. It's about the gospel coming to what we call Europe.

It's about the gospel coming to people like us. And you see what the story is. That they were able to look back and realize if we hadn't been prevented there and forbidden here, we would have never ended up here in Philippi.

Where in God's mercy, there had been a preparation of a woman who went to a prayer meeting at the riverside. And in God's mercy, a girl who was oppressed by wicked men.

[17 : 03] And a jailer who would never in a thousand years have imagined he would ever become a Christian believer. And that's how it is. The fact of the matter is, they did not know what God was

doing.

But he was working in a variety of circumstances in order to bring about the fulfillment of his will. And he always is. He always is. So God was working together a variety of circumstances in Joseph's life. But we ought to notice also that God was working in a variety of people in Joseph's life.

My tendency, and I imagine some of you at least share it, is when the Christian life and how we are looking to serve the Lord becomes frustrating, then the way in which we frame the question is usually, why are these things happening to me?

Why are these things happening to me? Now what Joseph clearly came to understand was many of these things that involved him were not about him.

[18:19] And that's a particularly important lesson for our self-obsessed, narcissistic age in the way that self-obsession and narcissism has profoundly influenced not just the Christian church in general, but the evangelical subculture in particular.

You only need to listen to the songs that are being written and sung to catch a sense of the self-obsession that has been encouraged in the atmosphere of the late 20th and early 21st century. But you see, this isn't just about Joseph. This is about others. I mean, ultimately it's about the whole Mediterranean basin.

But it's also about his father. And if you go back to the beginning of this narrative in Genesis 37, what do you see?

You see that Joseph's father is repeating the very same mistake his own parents did in bringing him up. He's got a favorite.

[19:33] And all of that needs to be divinely torn out of his soul. And God is using the situations into which Joseph is brought in order to do something at distance, as it were, to his father.

In order to bring about a restoration and a reconciliation between the father and all his other boys. And the same is true of the brothers.

It is true. I mean, it's very interesting that Joseph is clear to them about this. You meant evil against me.

But you see, in God's amazing providence, he had used this in order to do something to the brothers. And if you, if you're like, you'll read through the narrative.

Don't just keep your eye on Joseph. Keep your eye on what is happening to these brothers. And the way in which God slowly deconstructs them. Until, instead of selling their brother, they're embracing their brother.

[20:55] It is amazing the way in which God does this. So, if earlier on in the narrative, it would be perfectly understandable if Joseph was saying, God, why is this happening to me?

The answer is, Joseph, this is only partly about you. It's about them. I'm doing this in you for them. And the person who grasps that that is the way God works will be a happier, contented, more stable, and indeed more fruitful Christian believer.

Of that I have no doubt whatsoever. And you see this repeated time and time again, don't you, in the pages of Scripture. Let me just use Paul as an illustration again.

There he is in jail. And he's writing to the Philippians. What's his concern about the Philippians? His concern about the Philippians is that the Philippians are concerned that the whole project of preaching the gospel is going to die because the Apostle Paul is in prison.

[22:08] And Paul underlines for them that he is a prisoner for the sake of Jesus Christ. And that because of that, there has been fruit in the Roman artillery.

And there has been fruit in the Christians who have been bold to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. And he realizes this did not happen to me for me.

This happened to me for the sake of the gospel and for their sake to do something in them. And that's the way God works, isn't it?

I remember hearing at the memorial service for the daughter of a colleague that she had said one Lord's Day after worship just bare bones of a young woman.

And she had said to him as they greeted one another at the end of the service, she said, I realize this isn't just about me. It isn't just about me.

[23:17] Very moving, isn't it? But you see, it's true. It's true of everything that happens to us. We're not the center of the universe. So God, in his mercy, works together a variety of circumstances.

He works together in a variety of lives. And he also works out a variety of consequences. And I've already alluded to this, really, in Jacob's life, the reconciliation.

There's this beautiful illustration of it, isn't it? When the brothers are seated by Joseph. They come and they don't recognize him, you remember.

And he seats them all just the way they should have been seated and maybe were seated at home. We have four children. And of course, we were all together for years.

And then you get this age. And you're never together in the same way. Except on the rarest occasions. And the last occasion, my wife and I, and just the four children, none of their attachments of any kind, their spouses or children, the last time we were all together, our first son, as we went to the table in a restaurant to have a meal, he insisted we sit around the table the way we sat around the table.

[24 : 40] Which was immovable. It was the law of the Meats, the Persians, and the Fergusons. We always sat in the exact same place. It moved me profoundly that he even remembered that.

And Joseph does the same thing. Now some of you are probably mathematicians and you can work out the statistical probability of accidentally placing a whole bundle of brothers in the right age order around a table.

And they're stunned. And then you remember when the wee boy arrives, Joseph says, pile his plate high.

Put the best steak on his plate. Now why is that? You see what he's doing? He's kind of, he's like a surgeon, just, well not a surgeon, he's like your family doctor that you go to and you know, he knows where to press.

Is it sore here? No! If you're a man, you're relieved, there's nothing wrong with me. It's not a really serious doctor. And then he, are you sore here? And you go, oh! And that's what he's doing.

[25 : 51] This is exactly the sore point. They were jealous of Joseph because he got the best. And here God is using Joseph to discover whether they're going to be jealous of the wee boy again because Joseph is giving him the best.

And what begins to emerge is that God has so worked in the lives of these brothers that they are prepared to make sacrifice for the sake of their youngest brother.

And it's all, it's all sourced back to what God was doing here in their formerly younger brother's life. And yes, God was working in Joseph's life. I have never understood why God does things this way. But both Scripture and the history of the church teach me that God gives people gifts even when they're not able to handle them.

And I think it's pretty clear God gave this boy, age 17, an extraordinary gift. He did give him a revelatory dream that actually came true when he didn't have the wisdom to contain it.

[27 : 19] And so when he came down to breakfast in the morning and he put his cornflakes into his bowl and he poured the milk out and one of the brothers said, did you sleep well Joseph?

Instead of saying, yeah it was okay. And keeping it all to himself. He blurted it out. And nobody was in any doubt what he was saying.

The arrogant 17 year old teenager. The favourite of the father. And yet, given this extraordinary revelation that came true, he blurted it all out and the message was, I'm the man.

You'll all be coming and bowing down before me. And what is so amazing, what is so apostolic in this is, this foolish act of his in the hands of a gracious, loving, heavenly father becomes, as it were, the raw materials out of which this elongated process of transforming this whole family and reconciling them and it's so interesting, it's so interesting this connection that when you read through the whole narrative you meet Joseph when he's 17, when he becomes prime minister he is 30.

Okay, so that is 14 years by the kind of inclusive reckoning that Bible writers use. And that's significant, isn't it?

[28 : 56] Because what he's now going to deal with is the next 14 years. He is at 14 years in which he has learned patience and wisdom.

And those are exactly the two gifts he needs in order to accomplish what he accomplishes.

Patience. Patience to handle those seven years of plenty and wisdom to use those seven years of plenty so that he may be a blessing to the world in the seven years of famine.

And it's taken 14 years to make him that. So that when he becomes prime minister of Egypt he's not only in the right place at the right time but he's the right man for the right place and the right time.

And I don't know why God does it this way as I say but he was not the right man at the age of 17. And when he spoke it wasn't the right time. And yet in his you know maybe maybe some of you are thinking I have been exactly there.

I have so messed up. And God is in the mystery of his wisdom and providence he's taken all that rubbish you've kind of landed on his plate and he's made something of you.

[30 : 28] And you realize that the wonder of his working is that he has been working out his own purposes in this way because he's able to not only work in a variety of situations and to work in a variety of people but he's able to work out a variety of consequences and how often it's true in our lives that he does that through pain and difficulty and challenge.

John Flavel again has a lovely saying when he he says that afflictions are like frosty weather on garments they change their hue and whiten the sheet.

If you're under 30 you've no idea what that is all about because you use washing machines and tumble dryers. But my generation I still remember as a little boy in those rare days in winter when the sun shone and it was frosty my mother would say this is going to be a great day for bleaching. And that's it isn't it? The frost in Joseph's life had been used by God to make him the right man in the right place at the right time.

Now there's a fourth corner piece I want you to notice and it's not a corner piece that is stated in the text but it's really written all over the story of Joseph and that is that in our lives God is always working through a variety of circumstances he is working in a variety of people he's working a variety of consequences and the fourth corner piece is this and it's the one to hold on to that he's doing all this in order that Jesus may be glorified he's doing all this in order that Jesus may be glorified now you know there's some very artificial preaching of Jesus from the Old Testament you know where suddenly you leap from the text to Jesus and you don't know how you got there but it's pretty evident how you get to Jesus from Joseph it's because all those men and women of faith in the promise of God in the Old

[33 : 00] Testament scriptures are united by that faith to the Jesus who is to come just as we are united to that Jesus on this side of his death and resurrection they were united by faith to Jesus on their side of the death and resurrection and as the New Testament makes clear one of the great implications of that is that if you are united to Christ in his death and resurrection your life will be shaped in small ways perhaps in very great ways your life will be squeezed into the mold of his death and resurrection you will be united to remember how Paul puts it what I want to do with my life is to know Christ the power of his resurrection share the fellowship of his sufferings become like him in his death and attain to the resurrection the lenses through which he viewed what it means to be a

Christian were lenses of being united to Christ and being transformed into his likeness and it's all over his life and it's all over his letters but you see the same is true of the Old Testament saints and you can just run through them in your mind and you see this is the way they share in advance in the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ in this world and they also share in advance in the triumphs of Christ and his resurrection and you can see it here in Joseph what we might call the Jesus pattern of humiliation and exaltation suffering and glory death and resurrection it oozes out of what God is doing in the life of Joseph and in addition to what we might call the Jesus pattern there's the Jesus principle it's through his suffering that blessing comes to the nations it's all over Joseph's life it's through his suffering that blessing comes to the nations and you notice also in the end of Genesis chapter 50 there's the Jesus promise that runs right through his life the promise that was given you remember to

Adam and Eve that there would be a seed who would be the conqueror of the evil one and that as it were grows in the promise that's given to Abraham that in his seed the nations of the world are going to be blessed but in the pursuit of that promise God's people are going to be brought down into a land where they will remain for over 400 years before the next stage in God's movement forward to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ comes on to the horizon and you see Joseph's place there in that timeline the promise of Genesis 315 the promise that's given to Abraham the fact that before that promise given to Abraham is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ the saving seed there is going to be a period when the people will be brought down to a land from which they will be brought up so that in

Joseph without Joseph this does not happen in Joseph God is advancing his purposes that eventually lead to the revelation of Jesus Christ and I think we can apply that to ourselves can't we

that this actually is his purpose in our lives and everything that happens he's wanting to shape our lives in such a way that our lives will be a manifestation to others of the grace of God in our Saviour Jesus Christ and we will be a link in the chain of God's providential purposes as Joseph was such a major link in that chain that eventually would lead history and lead individuals to the foot of the cross to embrace the Saviour and to advance the gospel in the world and maybe the best way to put it is like this that in these chapters between

Genesis 37 and Genesis 50 God puts these principles on the big screen Joseph is a big screen example but you're only an iPad or perhaps you're just an iPhone and that's true of us isn't it not many of us live on the big screen not any of us have lives that are written in capital letters but in small letters but it's the same sentence that's being written that transforms our lives transforms others lives and brings others to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because our God is a master of his purposes we we are we are but members of the orchestra different instruments seeking to play to his glory and he is the conductor who harmonises absolutely everything

[39 : 04] I remember when our daughter our daughter had a birthday I think it was maybe her 13th birthday and she wanted to go and see Joseph and his amazing technicolor dream coat she didn't know anything about Joseph and his amazing technicolor dream coat she knew about Joseph and the Bible and unfortunately for her and for me my wife who was going to take her took unwell and I had to take her we had seats absolutely in the front row I don't know about 3,000 people in the theatre it was the professionalism was spectacular beyond words but I was the only person in the entire theatre who did not know that at some point in this musical Pharaoh turns into Elvis Presley and I left out this kind of wild and daughter embarrassing but the thing about sitting in the front row was that we could see into the pit and so we could see the whole thing on two levels we could see the conductor who was absolute master

I mean he was so master of the score that I watched him walk in and he pulled out a packet of M&M;'s and he poured them into this little cup he had at the side and he was in total control and I sat there thinking this is how it is in the Christian life isn't it although God is a much more serious conductor you know we see the drama being played out but it's being played out according to the score that the conductor has designed from all eternity and he is a master an absolute master of that score yes it's true he moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform it's true he plants his footsteps in the sea and the problem with footsteps in the sea is they're not visible but he does work in the deep unfathomable minds with his never failing skill he treasures up his bright designs he works his sovereign will and his sovereign will is to work in our lives in a variety of circumstances to work through our lives in a variety of people to work by our lives a variety of consequences and most of all to work upon our lives for the glory of our Lord

Jesus Christ those of us who are here for the unique two o'clock service were thinking a little about Simon Peter and the storm and this narrative also makes me think about the words that Jesus you remember spoke to Simon Peter when he was arguing about the foot washing with him that is Peter arguing with Jesus remember what Jesus said the words could be written all over Joseph's life you don't understand what I'm doing now but afterward you will understand sometimes in his kindness that afterward becomes here and now the great thing about being a Christian and being a Christian who is getting older is you know the day is coming when that afterward will reveal the whole of his purposes congregation

I served in Columbia came to know that when I was finding it difficult to land the plane as the sermon went on I tended to finish the same way and I think I'll do that tonight don't you think it is the greatest thing in the world to belong to the Lord Jesus Christ let's pray together