

SESSION #20

Introduction

- we continue the story of Joseph, now in the broader context of the family of Israel, to see God's divine purposes still at work

["God's Divine Purposes"]

Philip Yancey writes about how he took pride in his ability to play chess during his secondary school years. "I joined the chess club, and during lunch hour could be found sitting at a table with other nerds poring over books with titles like Classic King Pawn Openings. I studied techniques, won most of my matches, and put the game aside for 20 years.

"Then, in Chicago, I met a truly fine chess player who had been perfecting his skills long since high school. When we played a few matches, I learned what it is like to **play against a master**. Any classic offense I tried, he countered with a classic defense. If I turned to more risky, unorthodox techniques, he incorporated my bold forays into his winning strategies. Although I had complete freedom to make any move I wished, I soon reached the conclusion that none of my strategies mattered very much. His superior skill guaranteed that my purposes inevitably ended up serving his own.

"Perhaps God engages our universe, his own creation, in much the same way. He grants us freedom to rebel against its original design, but even as we do so we end up ironically serving his eventual goal of restoration.

"If I accept that blueprint – a huge step of faith, I confess – it **transforms** how I view both good and bad things that happen. **Good** things, such as health, talent, and money, I can present to God as offerings to serve his purposes.

And **bad** things, too – disability, poverty, family dysfunction, failures – can be redeemed as the very instruments that drive me to God."

- in Joseph's story we see how the good – and especially the bad – are used by God to further His divine purposes
- late in Joseph's story he makes a climax statement to his brothers revealing the transformation which enabled him, like Yancey, to view even the 'bad things' as part of God's purposes at work in the life of his family:

Gen 45:7

God has sent me here to keep you and your families alive, so that you will become a great nation. Yes, it was God who sent me here, not you!

So now let's go back and discover how...

A. God and Joseph Work to Change His Family

- in our last session we left the story at the point of Joseph's appointment to the powerful position of Prime Minister in Egypt
- 7 yrs later the famine hits, and Genesis gives us a series of stories involving Joseph and his brothers
- notice how GOD is at work in this family at the same time as JOSEPH is at work too

1. God wakes up their conscience through a physical problem

- the famine predicted in God's dream to Pharaoh quickly becomes so severe it affects all the Middle East, including Jacob & his large family in Canaan
 - they begin to worry about bankruptcy & starvation!
- they hear about grain being available in Egypt – but notice their reaction

Gen 42:1-2

When Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, Jacob said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" ² And he said, "Indeed I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down to that place and buy for us there, that we may live and not die."

- the Living Bible uses the phrase, "Why are you *standing around* looking at one another?" – why? ...as soon as they heard the word 'Egypt' their consciences surely reminded them about Joseph & what they had done to him: they had sold him as a slave into Egypt!
- God uses this problem of famine to begin to work on their consciences

2. Joseph tests their HONESTY

Gen 42:6-12

...and Joseph's brothers came and bowed down before him with *their* faces to the earth.

⁷ Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he acted as a stranger to them and spoke roughly to them. Then he said to them, "Where do you come from?"

And they said, "From the land of Canaan to buy food."

⁸ So Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. ⁹ Then Joseph remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them, and said to them, "You *are* spies! You have come to see the nakedness of the land!"

¹⁰ And they said to him, "No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food.

¹¹ We *are* all one man's sons; we *are* honest *men*; your servants are not spies."

¹² But he said to them, "No, but you have come to see the nakedness of the land."

- the famine forces them to go to Egypt where they have to appeal directly to Joseph in order to buy grain,
 - bowing down before him without recognizing who he is
- seeing his brothers bowed before him must have been encouraging to Joseph as a proof that his teenage dream was from God
- but why is he so tough on them?
 - ...Joseph doesn't know what kind of men they have become – are they still the same wicked brothers he knew as a teenager some 22 years earlier?
- in order to be the godly founders of the tribes of Israel these brothers will need to come to genuine repentance and a measure of spiritual maturity
 - so *God* goes to work on their consciences
 - and *Joseph* goes to work in giving them experiences which will test them
 - ...checking to see if they have become true followers of God
 - ...& preparing them to be a united family living as the people of God

- Joseph's first test concerns 'honesty'
- the brothers have protested that they are "not spies" - "Your servants are honest men" (42:11)
- ... so Joseph responds, "If you are honest men" leave one brother here in prison, go home and bring back the youngest brother (vs. 19)
- ...i.e. can their **word** be trusted?

3. **God stirs up their conscience by arousing guilt**

Gen 42:21

Then they said to one another, "We *are* truly guilty concerning our brother [Joseph], for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us."

- the brothers sincerely confess their sin to each other in front of Joseph, not realizing he could understand their language!
- "He who covers his sins [whitewashes them] will not prosper: but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy"* (Proverbs 28:13)

4. **it's Joseph's turn again as he tests their COURAGE**

- as he sends the 9 brothers home he secretly puts their money in sacks (vs. 25)
- i.e. can their **will** be trusted?
- ...are they willing to face fear (maybe death sentence for stealing the Governor's money?) and return with Benjamin?
- if they do return, with Benjamin, in spite of concern about being charged with stealing, it will show an important change of character compared to earlier years when they hated their brother Joseph & sold him for... money

5. **God sharpens their conscience by arousing fear**

- on the way home one of the brothers opens his sack and discovers the money

Gen 42:28

Then their hearts failed *them* and they were afraid, saying to one another, "What *is* this *that* God has done to us?"

- they recognize *God's* hand in this, increasing their sense of fear
- the family finally run out of food again & must return to Egypt
- and they do exactly what Joseph had asked them to do – come back with Benjamin
- when they stand before Joseph now, this is the first time all the brothers have been together in more than 20 years!
- moreover, they have passed a test of character: they did what they said they would do, and they showed courage in coming back to 'face the music'

But the tests are not over yet!...

6. **Joseph tests their AFFECTION**

- Joseph hosts a meal for them, & shows favoritism to Benjamin

Gen 43:34

³⁴ Then he took servings to them from before him, but Benjamin's serving was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him.

- would they respond with jealousy as they had years ago about Joseph?
- or do they love their youngest brother enough to rejoice in the blessings he receives?
- quarrels etc between brothers & sisters in any family are quite common
- reminded of a Sunday school teacher who was giving a lesson to primary 3 students on the commandment, "Honor thy father and mother."
- "Now, does anyone know a commandment for brothers and sisters?" she asked.
- One clever little girl raised her hand and said, "Thou shalt not kill."
- the sons of Jacob haven't been good followers of the commandments, generally; but here, no apparent bad reaction – they all go on enjoying the meal
- ...evidently they had become more accepting & caring of one another than they had been 22 yrs earlier!

7. but Joseph has still another test – this time a test of their **LOYALTY**

- ...loyalty to their father Jacob whom they had wronged so badly long ago – selling Joseph & then telling their father some wild animal had probably killed him!
- he tests their loyalty by hiding his personal silver **cup** in Benjamin's sack
- it is soon discovered & they are all brought back again to Joseph in great fear & sorrow to face criminal charges against Benjamin
- but Judah had personally guaranteed Benjamin's safety to their father Jacob before they came to Egypt with him this time
- so he steps forward with this very significant confession

Gen 44:16

Then Judah said, "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how shall we clear ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; here we are, my lord's slaves, both we and *he* also with whom the cup was found."

- he acknowledges that God has been at work in their hearts & they all offer to become slaves
- what a tremendous change in character from the Judah described in chap. 38! ...again, remember that the Genesis record is following the development of the family of Jacob in this whole section and their preparation to be the carriers of the Promise

- but Joseph has one final test: how do they really feel about their **father**?

Vs. 17

But he said, "Far be it from me that I should do so; the man in whose hand the cup was found, he shall be my slave. And as for you, go up in peace to your father."

- Judah responds with a long speech showing their concern for their father Jacob; and since he was the personal guarantee to Jacob concerning Benjamin's safety he offers to pay the penalty for his brother

Gen 44:32-34 (NLT)

My lord, I guaranteed to my father that I would take care of the boy. I told him, 'If I don't bring him back to you, I will bear the blame forever.'

³³ "So please, my lord, let me stay here as a slave instead of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. ³⁴ For how can I return to my father if the boy is not with me? I couldn't bear to see the anguish this would cause my father!"

- ...remember it was *Judah* who had originally persuaded the rest of the brothers to sell Joseph into slavery! – now *he's* the one offering to be a slave in place of Benjamin!
- this speech marks a radical change in the life story of the man who becomes the father of the royal tribe of Israel; and it proves that the brothers are now very **loyal** to their father, and men of different **character** indeed

 - **God** worked in the hearts of the brothers to bring them to recognize their **sin** (only *God* can do that)
 - **Joseph** worked to bring his brothers through the painful process of testing **character** and rebuilding **trust**
- ...the result will be a transformed & reconciled family!
- God is still in the habit of working with his people, and in the business of reconciliation
 - these chapters ought to be a stimulus for **us** to be “workers together with God” (1 Cor. 3:9) in the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18)