



WHERE IS GOD WHEN THINGS GO WRONG?

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GENESIS 45:3-8,15

“Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still living?” But his brothers were not able to answer because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt and now do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land. For the next five years there will not be ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save lives by a great deliverance. So then it was not you that sent me here but God.” Genesis 45:3-8,15

You are sitting alongside the road after an accident. You’ve some broken limbs but you’re O.K. Several others, however, lost their lives in that accident. Where was God when that accident occurred?

You’ve been hard done by, the victim of abuse. What’s God’s hand in that?

You’re sitting in prison. You shouldn’t be there because you’re innocent, the victim of gross injustice. Where is God when you’re sitting there in prison?

In general, **WHERE IS GOD WHEN THINGS GO WRONG?**

The message of our text is the climax in the episode between Joseph and his brothers.

Here were the brothers who had murdered Joseph.

- They had put him into a pit to die
- They had sold him to slave traders
- They had gathered his coat of many colours and dipped it in blood and took it home to his father. ‘Look, Dad, wild animals must have got him’ is their inference.

But Joseph, the victim of these injustices, now offers the right hand of fellowship. He could be a member of Good Shepherd, Hamilton, offering the right hand of fellowship to those from whom you believe you have received an injustice.

- Joseph offers reconciliation
- He offers pardon and forgiveness
- He cries. Openly and broken-heartedly he cries.

There's no thought of pay back. No thought of retaliation. No thought of permanently holding a grudge or even temporarily holding a grudge. Only reconciliation.

Let me pin-point a number of things, three specifically, in the background to this episode which will help make it clearer to us.

1. Joseph is his father's pet. It's amazing how even such ordinary every day things as a parent's favourite comes into play in the Joseph story. His father's pet.

But the mature Joseph is unaffected by the spoiling he receives as a child and deals with his brothers with love and maturity.

2. Joseph lives in a secular society, a society which looks to the stars, to signs, to portends, to dreams, as the guiding influences in life. Where there's no knowledge of God, or very little knowledge of God, then portends play a very important part.

And this surely is one of the reasons, if not the main reason, for the rise of such things in our time as the New Age Movement or looking to the stars and living by your horoscope.

But guidance doesn't come from the stars nor does it come from the New Age Movement nor does it come from dreams. It comes from the living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who guides us in and through his word, the sacred Scriptures.

3. Joseph is the victim of injustice. First of all, he's sold by his brothers after being put in the pit. Then when in Egypt in Potiphar's house, even though he had led an impeccable life, he's accused unjustly by Potiphar's wife of attempted rape. As a result he's put in prison.

And yet Joseph avoids all self-pity and patiently endures a long imprisonment confessing that God is with him. A few chapters prior to our text we are told, **BUT WHILE JOSEPH WAS THERE IN PRISON THE LORD WAS WITH HIM.**

- We're inclined to think that the Lord is with us only in the good days of life and not at other times.
- We're inclined to think that the Lord is with us only when we come out of an accident unscathed not at other times.
- We're inclined to think that the Lord is with us only when we recover from an illness, not when we are in the illness or getting worse.

The Bible tells us that God is with Joseph when his father beams on him with pride and when his brothers sell him into slavery. God is with Joseph when he's sitting there in prison in Egypt and God is with Joseph when he's sitting on the throne in Egypt or virtually on the throne.

And it's now, when Joseph is virtually on the throne in Egypt that we have this incident when his brothers are in the presence of Joseph and Joseph reveals himself to them as Joseph, their brother. And he says, **IT WAS NOT YOU THAT SENT ME HERE, BUT GOD.**

'You're filled with guilt, my brothers,' Joseph in effect says to them, 'You've got the consciences of murderers. You know darn well, and it's plaguing you isn't it, you know darn well that you threw me into the pit and sold me into slavery and that I was hard done by. And that's why you can't even speak to me. That's the kind of consciences you have. **BUT NOW** (and I quote from our text verbatim) **DON'T BE DISTRESSED AND DON'T BE ANGRY WITH YOURSELVES FOR SELLING ME HERE BECAUSE IT WAS TO SAVE LIVES THAT GOD SENT ME AHEAD OF YOU. FOR TWO YEARS NOW THERE HAS BEEN FAMINE IN THE LAND. FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS THERE WILL NOT BE PLOUGHING AND REAPING. BUT GOD SENT ME AHEAD OF YOU TO PRESERVE FOR YOU A REMNANT ON EARTH AND TO SAVE LIVES BY A GREAT DELIVERANCE. SO THEN IT WAS NOT YOU THAT SENT ME HERE BUT GOD.**

We have to be very careful when we deal with the guidance and the providence of God.

On the one hand we must avoid fatalism, the kind of attitude, as the song says, that whatever will be will be. That is to deny human responsibility.

On the other hand, we must avoid the view that virtually rules God out of all human dealings other than those directly related to salvation and to Jesus' presence in our lives through the means of grace.

If four Christian young people are tragically killed in a car accident, we have no right to attribute their death to God. We can't even say it was God's will.

There is such a thing as the permissive will of God when God permits something to happen even though he doesn't want it to happen.

God permits in his permissive will sinners to commit sinful acts, even atrocious acts, even though he doesn't want it to happen. God permitted Hitler and Pol Pot to do what they did even though it was not part of God's will, even though he didn't want it.

So we can't blame accidents, illness, tragedy, or bad things in our lives on the Lord. We must learn to say as did Joseph: it was God who was with me in that. It was God who sent me, who placed me here in this situation.

So, **WHERE IS GOD WHEN THINGS GO WRONG?**

Where was God in that accident? God was with me in that accident being smashed up as I was smashed up.

Where was God in that illness? God was with me in that illness, suffering as I suffer.

Where was God when Joseph was sitting in prison? God was with Joseph sitting there in prison with him.

In general, where was God in the mess created by a world gone wrong? God was in the middle of the mess hanging there on Calvary's cross with the bleeding, suffering body of his son, Jesus, giving his life for the life of the world.

Sometimes in Scripture we find two seemingly different truths or teachings on the same subject. We must simply accept the two of them and let them stand side by side.

Take persecution as an example

1. Scripture says **FLEE PERSECUTION**. It's exact words, **IF THEY PERSECUTE YOU IN ONE CITY, FLEE TO ANOTHER**. So escape persecution if you can.
2. But the second Scriptural teaching is **REJOICE** in persecution. If you can't escape it, rejoice in it.

Flee persecution, yes. Rejoice in persecution, yes.

A parallel to that would be: if you can avoid an illness by all means do so. Use all the skills, all the technology, all the medicine God has given us. If you can't avoid an illness, accept it, see God's purpose in it and give glory to him.

For those of you who have or have had cancer, or who have relatives and friends with cancer, I don't believe its God's will that you have that cancer.

We live in a fallen world, fallen because of human sin, and that has dragged the whole world into a fallen and imperfect state. In this state, God in his permissive will allow those things to happen. And is with us when they do happen.

We see that presence of God with us clearly in Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, who gave his life for us. Otherwise, we are dealing with a God who is an ogre. And not a God of love who comes to us in the person of Christ, who comes to us with his healing presence just as in today's Gospel lesson he came to the troubled disciples and spoke his **QUIET. BE STILL** to the storm.

The sin of Joseph's brothers in selling him into slavery was not God's will. Nor was the sin of Potiphar's wife or the injustice of Potiphar in putting an innocent man into prison a part of God's will. But God in his permissive will used these things for Joseph's advancement and for the good of God's people.

Three times Joseph says **GOD SENT ME**. And the purpose of that sending was also plain: to save life. **BUT GOD SENT ME AHEAD OF YOU TO PRESERVE FOR YOU A REMNANT ON EARTH AND TO SAVE LIVES BY A GREAT DELIVERANCE**.

Joseph's brothers were centred on their own problems.

And isn't that us all over? When things go wrong, when we experience ill health, an accident, hospitalization, issues to face in the congregation –then those things become the centre of our focus. The brothers didn't consider the broader world of need at all. Along comes God and incorporates these experiences into his greater and altogether good purpose of saving life. Saving life.

- God's chosen people, Joseph's father and brothers, are now saved from a famine.
- God's chosen people, Joseph's descendants, are saved from Egypt through Moses and his allies in the Exodus.

- God's chosen people produce Jesus, God's Son, the Messiah, the one who gave his life to save the whole world, the one who is the way, the truth and the life.
- Down to today. God's saving purpose is there in the water of baptism where we are given life, life in Christ. It's there in the bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus in the Sacrament, the body given into death on Calvary's cross, the blood shed there on the cross for our forgiveness – and with that forgiveness life and salvation.
- God's saving purpose is there in the word of God which comes to us still today. That word is a life-giving word, the life that we have with Jesus, and the life that we'll have forever in eternity.

We may not have all the answers. But we can always say: whatever the experience, God is with me.

In a world gone wrong, I find healing in the presence of God in Jesus Christ.

And to our illness or to our tragedy or to our accident or to our broken world or to our problems in the congregation, we can say with Joseph, **IT WAS NOT YOU WHO SENT ME HERE BUT GOD.**

In today's Gospel Jesus speaks his **QUIET BE STILL** to the storm and he speaks that same message to our troubled hearts.

Amen