

All Things Work Together
Genesis 37:3-8, 18-20, 28; 50:15-21
Romans 8:26-30

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Genesis 37:3-8, 18-20, 28; 50:15-21

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, 'Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.' His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?' So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.' When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

...

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Romans 8:26-30

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

We've heard the story of Joseph, haven't we? Abram and Sarai's great-grandson. Jacob's youngest son. Jacob's favorite, given a fancy coat, that, whether it was long-sleeved or Technicolor,¹ made it clear that his brothers were manual laborers and he was management.

Joseph was sold into slavery by his own brothers. He made it big in Egypt, due to God's help and his own skills.

Finally, when there is a famine in Canaan and some of Joseph's brothers come to Egypt in search of food, he's in a position of power. He could have his brothers killed or sold into slavery, but he doesn't.

¹ It's a translation thing – what is clear in the original Hebrew is that it is fancy.

He refuses to take vengeance on them for how they treated him. I mean, they not only told their father he was dead, but they sold him into slavery in a far-off land. They tried to get all the benefits of killing him, and money as a bonus.

Joseph forgives them. And he says something that is often misquoted and quoted out of context.

“Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, ...”

God did not make Joseph’s brothers want to kill him. He did that all too well on his own, taunting them and showing off.

God did not make them fake his death. They did that on their own. To their credit, they do not try to cop out and blame God or someone else for their own actions.

God did not break Jacob’s heart with the story of Joseph’s death. The brothers did that all on their own. And they own that. They take responsibility and confess their sin.

God did not do these things. They were not God’s ideas.

Unfortunately, translation is a difficult job, and it’s often more of an art form than a science. Many words in Hebrew are not exactly the same as any word in English, so you have to try to get the closest one.

The Common English Bible does a better job of translating this verse than the NRSV does. It says that “You planned something bad for me, but God produced something good from it, ...”²

Paul says in his letter to the Romans that, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God...” This is another of those verses that many people quote out of context to say something different from what it means.

Not everything that happens in this world is exactly according to God’s will. There’s a name for the place where everything happens according to God’s will – Heaven.

God did not plan evil things to happen to Joseph. Human beings did that.

God did not plan slavery. Human beings did that.

God did not plan the Holocaust. Human beings did that.

God does not plan murders, or rapes, or domestic violence, or the abuse of power. God does not plan the sins of racism, or misogyny, or tribalism that often lead to these kinds of crimes. Calling these things “God’s plan” is blasphemy – a word that literally means “to slander God.”

² Genesis 50:20, *Common English Bible*.

God does not plan evil things. Period.

They are never part of God's plan.

I'm not talking about natural disasters here – floods, earthquakes, and the like. Those happen, too, but they are not humans' fault, and Jesus said that God "makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."³

I am talking about evil things.

Evil things happen in this world. Things that are contrary to the will of God. Anyone who is paying attention can see that, and you should be wary of anyone who anyone who tells you otherwise.

Evil things happen in the world.

But the same God who made everything there is out of nothing, can do amazing good, even with evil things that have happened.

God can take the evil things that human beings do, and pull good out of the jaws of evil.

God does this all the time. It's part of God's amazing grace.

Joseph, for example, was able to save the extended family that became the Hebrew people. He would not have been in a place to do that,

³ Matthew 5:45.

had his brothers not done these evil things. Had Joseph not been there, though, God was fully capable of finding another way to save them.

And God walks with us when we suffer the effects of evil. God walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death.

None of this justifies those evil things.

None of this makes those evil things okay, or less important.

They were not okay, and they are not okay.

Human beings are responsible for evil things that we do in this world. Period. Full Stop.

The person who was not hurt saying, "All's well that ends well," or, "the ends justify the means," is always just making an excuse. And not a good one.

Don't blame the evil that people do on God. Or dismiss it, because God made a good thing happen that is in some way connected to it.

No, when people do evil in this world , we need to do three things:

1. Hold people accountable, including ourselves. Don't blame evil on God, or say something lame like, "mistakes were made." All who do what is evil in the sight of God must confess their sins and repent.

2. Remember that God walks with us through the worst that this world can dish out, and God will never abandon us.
3. Look for ways that God can use the situation, however messed-up it is, for good. No matter how bad the situation is, God is already working on that. Chances are, we can be part of that solution.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.