

Happy Families

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 3rd of December 2000.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Happy Families and is from Genesis chapter 50 verses 15 to 26.

Let's pray. God our Father you speak to us through the words of scripture and we pray that you'll do so tonight. That you'll edify us, encourage us, challenge us, rebuke us, train us in righteousness.

That we may be equipped for every good work and word. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Bad things happen to good people. An Australian missionary and his sons were burned alive in India last year.

A vicar in London was bashed unconscious while the intruders raped his daughter in the vicarage. And an upright and honest teenager was sold into slavery by jealous brothers.

[1 : 14] And yet the missionary widow publicly and sincerely forgives those who murdered her husband and children.

The vicar on television forgives the assailants who bashed him and raped his daughter. And the teenager forgives his brother.

For all the grief they'd given him. How can it be that in such evil acts people can be so forgiving?

And why? Joseph had copped more than his fair share of problems. He's the teenager. At age 17 he was sold into slavery by his brothers who were jealous of him because he was his father's favourite.

He had a fancy coat and he had a few fanciful dreams. Then, having made good, as we've seen in recent weeks, he refused the sexual advances of his master's lustful wife.

[2 : 16] As a result, he was thrown unjustly into prison where he languished. Unfair. And then his pleas of innocence to one of Pharaoh's servants, a cupbearer, who is released, fall on deaf ears or at least a short-term memory loss.

And not only does he stay in prison, but he remains forgotten. If anyone had any excuse for being bitter with God, or with his brothers, or with anyone else for that matter, Joseph did.

If anyone had good reason to get back at his brothers if he had the opportunity, Joseph did. And now he's got the opportunity. An extraordinary turn of events bring Joseph and his brothers together again.

You see, as we've seen in the last couple of weeks, dreams have been fulfilled. In the prison, the cupbearer's dream is fulfilled. He's released and restored to office. The baker's dream is fulfilled, as interpreted by Joseph also, and he loses his head.

Pharaoh's dreams are fulfilled. That leads to Joseph not only being released from prison, but being elevated in the Egyptian government to become, in effect, the prime minister. Pharaoh's dreams were of seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine.

[3 : 32] And that, too, came true. The only dream, in fact, that remains unfulfilled, as we saw last week, was the very first one of the story, back in chapter 37, which we saw four weeks ago.

Joseph's own dream. Now, seven years of plenty have been and gone. The grain stores are full.

Joseph, as prime minister, has managed the storage of the grain, so there is plenty of reserve supply for the years of famine, as predicted by the dream given by God to Pharaoh and interpreted by Joseph.

And now the years of famine begin. Back in Canaan, or what today is Israel, or the Palestinian territories, the famine is hitting hard.

And so 11 brothers, or 10 men, 10 brothers, Joseph's brothers, as they happened, set off to Egypt because they'd heard on the grapevine, or except the grapevines were all withered in the famine, but they've heard that there is food or grain stored up in Egypt, so they head off south to Egypt to try and buy grain to bring back to their family and their village, presumably, as well.

[4 : 46] And so they come to Egypt, and they come before the man who is, in effect, the prime minister, to ask to buy some grain. So in chapter 42 of Genesis, we read that Joseph was governor over the land.

It was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves down before him with their faces to the ground. Do you get a sense of déjà vu?

Do you remember back four weeks ago to chapter 37? The dream that Joseph had that led to the jealousy and hatred of his brothers?

Joseph had boasted that he had a dream where he was a sheaf in the field, and all the other sheaves that were his brothers were bowing down to him. As he told that dream to his brothers, they were filled with jealousy and rage and hatred.

But here at last, after all those years, probably after 20-something years, the dream is fulfilled.

[5 : 54] And the brothers, completely unwittingly and unknowingly, they don't recognize Joseph, come down and they bow down as a mark of respect to the Egyptian prime minister as they seek to offer grain, or buy grain.

And when Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them. Well, they didn't recognize him. He's dressed as an Egyptian now. That means he's shaved rather than have a beard and so on.

But he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. Where do you come from, he said? And they said, from the land of Canaan, to buy food. And although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him.

Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. At the very point they bow down before him, the dream comes true.

They don't recognize him and he doesn't tell them who he is. They go back to Canaan with their grain. Time passes.

[6 : 55] The famine still continues. We know it's going to last for seven years. They don't know that. Their grain runs out again. They seek to return to Egypt. And this time, skipping some of the detail of the story, they bring back the youngest.

Only ten of them had gone. Jacob had twelve sons. Joseph was number eleven. Benjamin number twelve. Both born of Jacob's favoured wife, Rachel, who died in childbirth when Benjamin was born.

That's why Joseph was the favourite son of Jacob. That's why Jacob wouldn't let Benjamin go when the others went down to get grain in the first place. But through various means, now Benjamin accompanies the ten older brothers to go down to Egypt to ask again to buy grain because the famine has continued.

And that's what happens in chapters 43 and 44. Now when they get there, the same sort of thing happens. They come before Joseph and various negotiations happen.

And in the end, we get to the beginning of chapter 45. And there, Joseph reveals his identity to them. It's a shock.

[8 : 03] The brothers are dumbfounded with fear. They're stunned with shock. Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him.

And he cried out, Send everyone away from me. So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. That is all the officials and the courtiers and the accountants who were writing down who was buying what for how much.

They've all gone. It's now the brothers and Joseph, the prime minister, alone. And Joseph wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it. And the household of Pharaoh heard it.

Presumably next door. Joseph said to his brothers, I am Joseph. Is my father still alive? But his brothers could not answer him.

So dismayed were they at his presence. So dumbfounded, it's hard quite to get the sense of the word that's translated dismayed here. They're speechless with shock, in effect.

[9 : 08] And you can understand why. You think your brother's dead and gone. You've sold him into slavery over 20 years before. You've never heard anything about him again. You don't actually care about him. You've probably forgotten all about him in the first place.

He's gone. And then all of a sudden, he turns up as the powerful prime minister of the world empire of the day. Doesn't happen to many people, that sort of thing.

Family reunions are not usually this bad. Joseph's words, though, to his brothers are rather extraordinary. Come closer to me, he says. And they came closer and he said to them, I am your brother, Joseph.

He's repeating it because they're just speechless. They don't quite know whether it's true or not. But it is. Whom you sold into Egypt.

And you can imagine now that if you were one of these brothers, you would be afraid for your life. Because you realize that the boy, your brother, whom you sold into slavery, having plotted, in fact, at first a murder, is alive.

[10 : 16] And he holds all the cards. He's in control. He's the prime minister. And he's accusing you of selling him into slavery in Egypt.

And then Joseph says, 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 five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors.

So it's not you who sent me here, but God, he has made me a father to Pharaoh, that is, a person of authority, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

Joseph doesn't excuse the evil of his brothers. He doesn't say, Oh, what you did is all right because that's what God wanted. They're guilty of selling him into slavery and plotting to murder him.

[11 : 23] Their guilt is not exonerated by the fact that God's involved in all this. They're guilty. Their guilt still stands. They acted freely.

They acted with responsibility. They're responsible for their evil actions and intent. But the bigger truth that encompasses all of that is that God is the one ultimately who sent Joseph to Egypt, not the brothers.

Three times in that little speech, Joseph says that. God sent me here. God sent me here. It wasn't you who sent me. It was God who sent me here. And it's God who's made me father to Pharaoh.

You see, here is a little snippet of what's true throughout the Bible. Human beings are always responsible for their actions and not least their wrong actions or sinful actions.

But God is still sovereign. But his sovereignty and our responsibility are not incompatible. They mesh together. Maybe in ways that we can't quite comprehend or rationalize.

[12 : 28] But nonetheless, from beginning to end of the Bible, it's true. We are responsible agents. We are guilty and responsible for our wrong actions. But nonetheless, God is sovereign over everything.

And what we might do and intend as a wrong action, God might in fact intend for other purposes, as we see here. The two things, divine sovereignty and human responsibility, do not annul each other.

They don't cancel each other out. When we rationalize the two, we shouldn't try and end up with some amalgam in the middle that is neither one nor the other. Both extremes are fully true.

God is sovereign. We are responsible. And any rationalization by limited human minds to try and bring the two perfectly together, almost invariably, it seems to me, fails at some significant point.

And what's God's purpose in all this? To preserve life, he says in verse 5. Or in verse 7, to preserve a remnant keeping alive for you many survivors.

[13 : 33] That is, it's about the preservation of life. The purpose for which God intended Joseph or sent Joseph to go to Egypt was so that the family line would stay alive.

You might think God might have had an easier way of doing it. You know, let Joseph get a few years older and have his year off university and do some traveling around the world sort of thing. And happen to find a nice girl in Egypt and say, I mean, that would be a bit nicer, wouldn't it?

We don't know why God intended it this way, but he did. And the purpose of it was so that the family line would stay alive. But it's more than just keeping people alive.

God's not just on about saving people from death through famine. The purpose of keeping these people alive is that this is the promised line.

It is to Abraham, Joseph's great-grandfather, that promises were made that through Abraham's descendants, the promises of God would find their realization for world history.

[14 : 33] Now, those promises are in jeopardy when the land of Canaan faces such severe famine that people cannot stay alive with food. So God, in order to preserve that line, that promised line, has orchestrated the events we've seen in recent weeks to bring that about through Joseph becoming prime minister in Egypt.

Interestingly, of all the people who deserve to die, Joseph's at least 10 older brothers are fully deserving to die.

They've plotted to murder him. The Bible tells us that intent to murder is as bad as the actual act in effect. Basically, they're guilty of murder. Murder requires capital punishment in the Old Testament.

And yet here is God seeking to preserve alive murderers. You'd think God would sort of do away with them and keep the goodies. Let's get rid of the baddies and let's have some sort of moral cleansing, if not ethnic cleansing.

But no, such is God's grace that people who do not deserve it are kept alive. And such is God's faithfulness to his promise that he keeps even murderers alive.

[15 : 46] Human sin will not thwart God keeping his promises. They deserve to die for their evil intent to Joseph back in chapter 37. But nonetheless, God who is faithful to his promise and gracious keeps these sinful men alive.

The other extraordinary thing about this little scenario here of Joseph revealing his identity to his brothers is there is not a drop of vengeance that spills from Joseph's lips.

Because he knows that God is sovereign. Joseph knows that God is in control. That despite the evil intent of his brothers, God intended it for good.

There's no place for human vengeance when we know that God is sovereign. Whenever you see we seek vengeance because somebody wrongs us in some way, whenever we harbour bitterness against somebody because they've treated us badly, then we're in effect saying to God, God, you've got it wrong and you need me to get things right.

But when we trust that God is actually sovereign and so the events that happen in this world happen under his divine and sovereign hand, there's no place for us to be full of vengeance at all.

[17 : 05] And Joseph is an illustration of that as well. Vengeance is a natural reaction when somebody plots against us, when somebody gossips about us behind our back, when somebody scores points off us.

But there is never any place for any Christian ever to exercise any vengeance at all. Joseph sends his brothers back to his father in Canaan to get his father, Jacob, and bring Jacob back, which happens in chapter 46, and then over the course of the next three chapters, Jacob dies, an old man rejoicing that he's been reunited with his long-lost and favourite son.

He dies with blessings on all his children in chapters 48 and 49 and then he is buried back in Canaan in chapter 50, the first part before tonight's reading.

Now if you were like me when you were growing up, you tend not to pick on your little sisters when your mum and dad are around. Now I was clever enough to know that law. So when they were out, mum and dad were out that is, that's the time for picking on your sisters.

And of course when mum and dad would come back, they'd blab to mum and dad that I've been picking on them. Usually my parents sided with my sisters. I think that's the way of the righteous. And you get into trouble inevitably.

[18 : 34] But you never pick on your sisters when your mum and dad are actually there. They're a restraining force. It's like you never speed when you see a breathalyser or a police car down the road.

It's a restraining force. So while Jacob was alive, he was a restraining force in the eyes of Joseph's brothers for Joseph. They fully expected Joseph to wreak vengeance as soon as Jacob had died.

They expected Joseph to be on his best behaviour. Didn't want to get his father's back up. Very old man that he was. But as soon as he died, they're afraid of their brother.

That's what we read at the beginning of the reading that was read for us by Esme tonight. Verse 15 of the last chapter of Genesis chapter 50. Realising 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?

That probably means putting them to death. They're afraid. So they pull out all stops to ensure their safety. They send an intermediary to Joseph, some person that they've met in Egypt or perhaps some court official that they send to Joseph rather than going initially themselves to confront him.

[19 : 59] That's what it means in verse 16. So they approach Joseph, is our translation, but literally it's some other people approach Joseph, an intermediary sent by them most likely. They appeal to their father's words.

Probably this is a lie, but there's no way of being absolutely certain about that. But it seems that there's no record of Jacob saying these words and probably they're fabricating a story to try and get Joseph to act rightly.

Your father gave this instruction before he died. Say to Joseph, I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers. So they're appealing to his father. Thirdly, they're requesting forgiveness through this intermediary.

Please forgive your brothers. Twice, in fact, in verse 17 is that mentioned. Fourthly, they acknowledge the seriousness of sin, something that didn't happen in chapter 45. It's a crime, it's a sin, it's wrongdoing.

The words are strong words. They're not abrogating responsibility for that. They are responsible and accountable. They've done wrong. They're acknowledging it in one sense, perhaps even, we might say, repenting of it.

[21 : 05] And then finally, they appeal to God because Jacob is dead. Therefore, at the end of verse 17, please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.

No longer the servants of your father, he's dead. But we are servants of the same God. And it's probably an appeal to the characteristic that God himself is full of forgiveness and mercy.

So therefore, be like God and act with forgiveness and mercy to us, your brothers, as well. And Joseph's reaction? He bursts into tears. Not a very manly thing to do.

He wasn't an Australian male. But he cries. And he cries, I think, because his brothers doubt his word. He cries because over the previous years leading up to Jacob's death, he's acted without vengeance, he's acted honorably, full of reconciliation, restoration, and forgiveness.

And now when Jacob dies, they doubt him. And he cries. And he goes on then to reinforce what he said in chapter 45 as we've seen.

[22 : 12] In verse 19, he said to them, do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? That is, he's in effect saying it is God's place to wreak vengeance.

After all, as later in the Bible it says, vengeance is mine, says the Lord. Their fear is that Jacob will be full of revenge. He says, am I in the place of God?

It's God's business to be full of vengeance and retribution and judgment, not mine. And then he goes on to say in verse 20, even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.

In order to preserve a numerous people as he's doing today. Again, he acknowledges human responsibility. You intended it for evil. But he also acknowledges divine sovereignty.

God intended it for good. Joseph here forgives and he refuses to exercise vengeance because God is sovereign. Vengeance belongs to God.

[23 : 21] It's not a human being's responsibility to act with any revenge or vengeance ever. That's God's business and God's alone. In the same way that Jesus said on the cross when he was put to death unjustly, Father forgive them for they know not what they do.

But note also what's being said in this profound verse I think, in verse 20. Verse 20 is not telling us that God thwarted evil in order to bring about his good.

The evil still happens. Joseph was sold, he was put in prison unjustly and forgotten in prison. God didn't stop any of that evil happening. The evil happened.

But secondly, verse 20 is also not saying that God somehow brings a good result out of a bad act. That is as though somehow God is tidying up the mess that somebody else creates.

It doesn't say you intended it for evil but God has brought good out of it. It says you intended it for evil but God intended it for good.

[24 : 32] That is, the evil itself is part of God's intent. It's not that the people, the brothers intended evil and God says oh look what they've done how am I going to get some good out of this and so he orchestrates some events to bring about a good result.

This is saying something deeper than that about God. God intended the evil for good. That is, the evil actions of the brothers were fully part of God's purposes.

purposes. That is, it wasn't the brothers acting outside of God's purposes and God then having to intervene to sort of clean it up or stop it going its full course.

But the evil itself was part of God's intent and purpose but ultimately to bring good. God is responsible fully for the events that happen here.

We can't divide the responsibility and say that the selling of Joseph into slavery, that's the brothers doing. The bringing up of him in Potiphar's house is God's doing.

[25 : 38] The unjustness of him going to jail is Potiphar's wife's doing. But God raising him in the prison is God's doing. We can't sort of alternate God and people like that. At every point, bad or good, God is intending what happens in order that ultimately good comes out of it.

God works all things for good for those who love him.

And we think, well, here's a bad event in my life, my curate's just disappearing, but God's going to bring good out of it. This is saying something deeper than that. It is saying that bad things are intended by God for ultimate good for his people.

It's very important, I think, that we get that right, because if we don't get that right, when bad things happen to us, we will blame God or we'll be vengeful or we'll be bitter or resentful.

When bad things happen to us, for whatever reason, God is behind it and God is sovereign. Very important to get that right in practice in our lives because bad things happen to good people all the time.

[26 : 54] And most of us can give some testimony of some bad things that have happened in our life. We cannot blame God for them. God intended Joseph to be sold by his brothers.

God intended Joseph to wallow in prison. God intended Joseph to be forgotten in prison for two more years in order to do good in the end. So we've got to have that world view about us when we think of the world, when we see the disasters and the floods and the famines and the wars, when we see the unemployment or the theft or the murder.

Yes, there is full human accountability and responsibility for such bad things happening in the world. But at the same time, God is sovereign and he's responsible for everything.

We also must remember, of course, that God is working for our good. He wasn't just working for Joseph's good or even Joseph's family's good, but he works for the good of all his people.

That's why he created things in the first place. See, here we are at the very end of the book of Genesis, and one theme brackets chapters 1 and 50 around the book of Genesis.

[28 : 05] God made each thing each day and saw that it was good. At the end of the six days, he saw everything that he made and behold, it was very good. And now we hear Joseph saying God intended this for good, because the work of the gospel, the work of redemption, the work of God's salvation in world history then and today is to work good for God's people and creation.

As he began it with good, so is he working to restore that good at the end as well. Goodness, of course, is part of God's essential character.

The psalmist invites us to taste and see that the Lord is good, words quoted in the New Testament as well. Jesus tells his followers that he is the good shepherd, for example. And we're told that news of Jesus and his death and resurrection is good news, the gospel in fact.

And so here in Genesis, we see that same gospel, that same good news at work. God making covenant promises with his people and keeping those promises.

And he's working them out for the good of his people. The promises that there will be descendants from Abraham, that promise is being worked out here. that there will be world blessing through Abraham's descendants.

[29 : 22] Those who bless you, I will bless, he said to Abraham back in chapter 12 of Genesis. And that's what we find in the story of Joseph. Here is Pharaoh, an Egyptian pagan, blessing Joseph and being blessed by God in return through the storage of grain and the provisions that are there through a time of famine.

And so too the other promise of land. Abraham was promised that he and his descendants would inherit the land. But here we find them all out of the land. But where does the book of Genesis end? Joseph dead, embalmed, but not buried, left in a coffin, awaiting the return to the land, a statement of trust in God's promises, in God's good news, if you like, in God's gospel to Abraham in effect.

And when you get to the end of the book of Joshua, several hundred years later, we find that Joshua and the people of Israel have carried into Israel the coffin of Joseph, and near Shechem, they bury him.

That site incidentally was one that was destroyed, you may remember in the news just a few weeks ago when all these riots in Israel flared up again back at the end of September. The tomb of Joseph was destroyed by the Palestinians when the Israelis evacuated the site just near Nablus.

God is still working things for good for his people. He's still keeping his covenant promises. That's why Jesus came, as fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, as good news and gospel for our good.

[30 : 58] So when bad things happen to good people, you perhaps may be good and incorporated in that statement, don't blame God. Search to see his sovereign hand at work.

Remember that as the New Testament tells us, he is disciplining us for our good, Hebrews 12, that he has begun a good work in us and will bring it to completion on the day of Christ, that he's equipping us for every good work and word.

So pray to him that he may faithfully keep his promises for our good and in the meantime, whatever bad things happen to us, act with faith and with godly behaviour.

Amen.