

Feeling Perplexed? – God of Providence – Genesis 50:20

Scripture Reading: Genesis 50:15-21

Introduction

Two little boys were walking down the sidewalk when they faced a very large dog blocking their path and looking straight at them

The braver of the two boys told his companion there was nothing to be afraid of because the dog was wagging its tail and when a dog wags its tail that means it won't bite you

To which the other little fellow replied, "Well, that mean look in his eyes says he wants to eat us alive... Which end do you think we should believe?"

Have you ever felt that way about your life as a Christian?

You know God's Word says that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose [**Romans 8:28**]

But like those two little boys we often find ourselves confronted by a big, ugly situation and we don't know whether to trust the wagging tail of God's promises or what we see coming at us

Because, sometimes, we find that the situation comes right up and takes a hunk out of us

And while we know that **James 1:2** tells us to count it all joy when we *meet* trials of various kinds we might well wonder if we're also supposed chalk it up in the good column when the trial bites us

The Christian life can be perplexing because we know that not everything that happens is good and some experiences rightly inspire sorrow rather than joy

This morning we are starting a sermon series I have titled "But God..."

That little phrase "But God" occurs 43 times in our ESV Bibles and when it does, it makes a big difference because it stops one's flow of thought and reverses it

We will be looking at just 11 of the instances of the phrase but, in those 11 instances, we will see that God getting involved changes everything

We are going to begin by looking at what may be the most well-known instance of "but God" in the Bible found in **Genesis 50:20** when Joseph famously said to his brothers,

As for you, 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.

We need to pull back a bit and refresh our memories as to what Joseph was talking about here

As a boy, Joseph's brothers hated him so much they plotted to kill him and ultimately sold him into slavery instead

As a slave in Egypt Joseph dutifully toiled for years in menial labor until his master promoted him and put him in charge of his entire estate

Then his master's wife tried to seduce him before directly and forcefully soliciting him into having relations with her and when Joseph fled from her she falsely accused him and had her husband throw him into Pharaoh's prison

Then the cupbearer who had also been imprisoned and whom Joseph befriended cruelly forgot all about Joseph and left him to languish in jail until Joseph's services were needed to interpret Pharaoh's dreams

And when Joseph successfully interpreted Pharaoh's dreams he elevated Joseph to second in command over all of Egypt

And that's when Joseph again faced his brothers who had despised him and cruelly sold him causing him years of suffering and their anguish over what they had done led Joseph to utter the comforting words of Genesis 50:20

Genesis 50:20 is the verse everyone tends to remember but it wasn't the first time Joseph had expressed the truth found there

Turn back a few pages and look with me at Genesis 45:4-8 when Joseph first revealed himself to his brothers –

*So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 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 yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And **God sent me** before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So **it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.***

The first thing we want to take note of is that God is always in control

I. God Is In Control

Joseph had a very clear understanding of God's sovereignty and providence and it's vital that we understand it as well

Sovereignty speaks of God's supreme position and power while providence speaks of God's provision and preparation. In fact, the English word, providence, means "to see in advance" or "to see before" and that explains God's view of the world and everyone and everything in it

That certainly fits with our understanding of God being omniscient or "all-knowing"

But knowing is different from controlling so we need to determine whether we also understand it to be true that God controls everything that happens and every outcome that proceeds from what happens

That would certainly be the understanding we would reach when we read in **Ephesians 1:11** that God "*works all things according to the counsel of his will*"

We readily accept that all good things come from God as we read in **James 1:17** but what about the things in life that we know are not good – can we say that God is in control of them also?

To help us answer that question let's look at **Amos 3:6** which says –

Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?

God is even in control of those things that seem to be chance events like the flipping of a coin or the rolling of the dice

We see that clearly stated in **Proverbs 16:33** which says –

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

I think we would have to agree that God is in some way responsible for everything that happens whether good or bad and every kind of event that comes to us individually or collectively is ultimately from the Lord

The Bible also tells us that God also controls the outcome of everything done by mankind regardless of the plans and intentions people have and the actions that people take

Look at **Proverbs 19:21** –

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.

And there are many other verses we could look at that tell us the same thing and we really have very little problem with the idea of God being in control until we consider evil people whose intention is to deliberately cause harm

Again, we can look to many accounts in the Bible where God used the actions of evil men to further his purposes

Consider how God used the wicked nations to chasten Israel or how Job was grievously harmed by the Chaldeans

I believe we have to come to the conclusion that God was in full control of those events and the people involved

I want you to understand that I am not saying that God was or is the **cause** of everything that happens and, in some sense we can say that God only **permits** the evil that happens in the world

We obviously see God permitting what we would consider to be evil in the case of Job when God allowed Satan to torment Job but set limits on the torment

But even when we say that God permits things we have to recognize that God is permitting by design

God in his providence and wisdom knows what the outcome of what he permits will be and how it fits into and furthers his overall plan

That's true even of the things we look at and chalk up to mere coincidence

God sees everything with perfect clarity; he is God of the telescope and God of the microscope and nothing escapes his notice and his care as he lovingly and graciously superintends everything that happens anywhere in the universe

It's important that we understand that God is in control of everything that happens – not just the good things or the big things but also the things we know are bad and the small things of life – even the evil things that people do are under God's sovereignty and a part of his providence

Nothing is outside of God's control and he will work all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose

And that's our second point on our note sheet –

II. God Works for Good

Let's look back again at Joseph and how his father sent him to find his brothers and to return with a report on them

When you read the account in Genesis 37 you see that Joseph's brothers weren't where they were supposed to be so Joseph had to inquire of a stranger who told him they had moved their flocks to pasture them near Dothan

So Joseph followed along to Dothan where his brothers ganged up on him and threw him into a pit intending to kill him right after they had a bite of lunch

But as they were eating the Midianite caravan just happened to pass their way and they sold him into slavery spoiling Reuben's plan to rescue Joseph and send him home to their father

Then the Midianites sold Joseph to Potiphar who just happened to be the captain of Pharaoh's guard which brings us back around to the recounting of Joseph's account I stated a bit earlier

I can't imagine what was going through the mind of 17-year old Joseph as he trudged along in the caravan all the way to Egypt

However, I doubt that he was thinking at the time how wonderfully God had worked things out to put him on his way to Egypt where he would eventually rise to power and be in the right place and position to save his people

No, he was probably thinking about his rotten luck and how things had gone so badly because all of the things that had happened to him *seemed* bad or at least not exactly good

I'm reminded of the old television show Hee Haw where two of the characters had a routine where one would tell a story and after each detail was revealed the other character would say either "that's good" or "that's bad"

And the storyteller would correct him and say the event was just the opposite of what it seemed and continue on with the story and it wasn't until the end of the story that the whole narrative made sense

For instance the first guy would start out "Not long ago, I was walking down the street and a car ran off the road and knocked me flat" (Oh that's bad)

"No, that's good because I got an insurance settlement that was worth more than 10 years of my wages" (Oh, that's good)

"No, that's bad because now all my creditors found out and won't stop hounding me"

Anyway, you get the point... we aren't always able to tell what's good and what's bad when it happens

Scripture doesn't tell us when Joseph recognized exactly what God was doing but I suspect it might not have been until he saw his brothers again many years later and he was ultimately able to say "God meant [all the bad stuff that I went through] for good"

Most of us have no problem seeing and attesting to God's goodness when things are going well and we are the obvious recipients of God's blessing

But it's a bit more difficult to see God's goodness when life hands us lemons; when we're in the midst of a trial and suffering

It's not at all unusual to hear people question God's goodness and God's sovereignty because, they reason, a truly good God would not permit the evil that we see all around us if he could stop it

Therefore, if God is good he must not be sovereign and if God is sovereign he cannot be good

But we have God's Word to guide us with accounts like that of Joseph and King David and many others so we can see how God worked in and through the difficulties of their lives for their ultimate good

And we can know that God is purposeful in the doing because of passages like **Jeremiah 29:11** where God told the exiles who had been carried off by Babylon into captivity –

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

It's entirely possible that our biggest problem with recognizing God's working in and through difficulties and trials is that we don't have a right idea about what is good

We often quote Romans 8:28 and call upon God to work all things together for good for us but we neglect Romans 8:29 where God defines the good

Let's look at those two versed together [**Romans 8:28-29**] -

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those 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 among many brothers.

What God means by "good" is not living a life of ease without difficulty – it's being conformed to the image of his Son

And to see us conformed to the image of Jesus is not going to be pain free

The author of Hebrews writes about that in Hebrews 12 where he writes of God's discipline toward those he loves and says in verse 10 [**Hebrews 12:10**] that he disciplines, or trains, us "for our good, that we may share his holiness" – that we will be conformed to his image

And in verse 11 [**Hebrews 12:11**] he acknowledges that we aren't always going to like what God takes us through but that it will be worth it and it will be good

I came across this account concerning pastor and author Andrew Murray in 1895 when he was suffering with a very painful back that was the result of a past injury

One morning when he was eating breakfast his hostess came to tell him of a woman who was downstairs in great trouble and wondering if he had any advice for her

Murray handed her a sheet of paper he had been writing on and said he had been writing this for himself and perhaps it would help the woman – this is what he had written:

"In time of trouble, say, 'First, he brought me here. It is by his will I am in this difficult place; in that I will rest' Next, 'He will keep me here in his love, and give me grace in this trial to behave as his child.'" Then say, 'He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me lessons he intends me to learn, and working in me the grace he means to bestow.' And last, say, 'In his good time he can bring me out again. How and when he knows.' Therefore say, 'I am here (1)0 by God's appointment, (2) in his keeping, (3) under his training, (4) for his time.'"

Pastor Murray obviously understood that God is always in control and that God always works for good in all that he does and so he knew he could trust him even in the midst of pain

And trusting God permits us to experience true joy in spite of our circumstances

III. Trusting God Permits Joy

Now, that doesn't mean we'll be profoundly happy and laughing all the way through our trials because that's not what biblical joy is

Biblical joy may well involve feelings of happiness but it's actually the emotion that is generated by either presently possessing or by having a rational and reasonable expectation of realizing that which is good

Having a clear understanding and acceptance of God's providence – his sovereign control over all the events and circumstances of our lives – will allow us to have the **proper perspective that protects us from bitterness**

Like I said earlier, I can't imagine what was going through Joseph's mind as he trudged toward Egypt in bondage

No doubt he had many occasions to wonder why his life had turned out the way it had as he toiled as a slave and languished unfairly in prison during the 13 intervening years before Pharaoh elevated him to a position of power

And even when he rose to power under Pharaoh he was still not living a life that was exactly free and I suspect he thought from time to time what his life would have been like back home

But, I believe the evidence of the account of his life shows that he understood something of God's sovereignty and control over the events of his life because we never read of him expressing thoughts of bitterness or even a lament

Do you remember those Magic Pictures that were all the rage a few years ago?

The ones that contained a 3D image under a pattern of colors and shapes and you had to look at them just right in order to see what the pattern hid?

Those things could be so frustrating because you'd look at them for a long time and then all of a sudden the picture would emerge and you'd wonder how you could have missed it for so long

I think that's how Joseph lived; knowing that God's invisible hand was directing his life, he knew that this all had to make sense so he just kept looking for the picture to emerge and when he saw his brothers come to buy food in the middle of a famine he finally understood

I believe it was Joseph's proper perspective that God was working in some yet unknown way that kept him from allowing bitterness and thoughts of revenge from taking root in his heart

And I'm certain it was his understanding of God's working behind the injustices of his life that enabled him to endure through the decades as God worked out his provision to preserve the nation of Israel

Even though James wouldn't pen these words until centuries after Joseph had died, I'm sure Joseph would testify to the truth of them as his life demonstrated that he lived in the light of them [**James 1:2-4**] –

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Understanding and accepting the providential control of God over every facet of our lives is important in maintaining a joyful attitude through trials because, honestly, it might take years for God to reveal what he has been doing

Or he might choose to not reveal specifically how he is using our trials to bring about good to us at all this side of heaven

But we can still possess an abiding sense of joy no matter how bad things get because we can indeed have a rational and reasonable expectation of realizing that which is good because we know that God is in control and God has promised to work all things together for good and the knowledge that the good God promises is that we will be conformed to the image of his Son

Conclusion

God has told us that he is in control and he has told us what he is doing

Our part is to trust God and what he has already told us even when the details aren't known and what is happening seems contrary to our expectations

And trust is a decision – we must mentally commit to submitting to God's providence in our lives regardless of whether he has led us into a place of pleasure or pain

We rarely question the good and pleasant parts of our lives and wonder why God would choose to be so good to us but we almost reflexively question the hardships, difficulties, and trials that come our way

There is much of life that is painful and difficult to understand no one should even try to deny that

But when we recognize, accept, and submit to God's providence we can look to the "But God..." and gain a proper perspective and gain victory over the trial as we maintain an expectant attitude of joy

No matter how bad things get we can have confidence because we can say,

"Yes, this painful thing is happening, **but God** is in control of it and is directing it to fulfill his divine will for his glory. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise, and always good so I can trust what he is doing even though I don't understand it."

Pastor Murray actually gave us a pretty solid framework for facing difficulties, trials, and tragedies

First, acknowledge that you are in this situation because God has placed you here

Second, recognize that you are never outside of God's care and provision because you are his child and he loves you

Third, accept that God is using the situation – no matter how bad it is – for some good purpose

Fourth, know that God will resolve the situation and reveal the good from it at the exact right time

God doesn't expect us to deny reality and say that the bad we experience in our lives is actually good

There are things that we go through that we know beyond the shadow of a doubt are bad

Cancer is bad, death is bad, abuse is bad, addiction is bad, and the list goes on and on – we know it and God knows it

But we can also know beyond a doubt that God is using those bad things for some ultimate good and wait and trust that the good will be evident one day because God has said so

If you think about it, trust doesn't really exist unless and until doubt is a possible, and perhaps the most plausible, reaction because that's when trust is needed and when it's needed its presence is either revealed or refuted

I want to leave you with this thought –

Regardless of whether the specific picture of what God is doing in and through the trials you face is revealed in this life, every Christ-follower will one day look back over the entirety of their life and acknowledge that God never made a mistake and he never left them or forsook them [**Hebrews 13:5**]

You can trust God and no matter what difficulty you may be in today or what trials you may face in the future you can say with confidence, "This is bad but God is the God of providence and he is using it for good."

Let's pray