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Working for Good
Genesis 50:15-21

The story of Joseph begins in Genesis chapter 35 and continues through Genesis 50—it's an *incredible story* of jealousy, pride, pain, and forgiveness.

Jacob (Esau's brother) had 12 sons, but *Joseph* was his favorite. So much so that he gave this son a *special coat* so that all the other boys would really be jealous.

Joseph didn't help matters, because he had a *dream* that his brothers were bowing down to him, and he told them so.

So, brothers being what they are, and jealousy being what it is, they ended up throwing him into a pit, and then selling him to Ishmaelites.

He ended up in Egypt with *Potiphar*, one of Pharaoh's officials.

He gained the respect of the Egyptians, and rose in power until Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him and then accused him of assaulting her—so Joseph went to *prison*.

It was there he learned his gift of interpreting dreams, which he did for two prisoners, and then he interpreted for Pharaoh, which got him out of jail.

Soon he was appointed *governor* over Egypt, and all the grain--during years of famine.

It was during this famine that *Joseph's brothers come to Egypt* looking for grain, not knowing that their brother was in charge of the land and the grain.

Because they don't recognize him,

Joseph demands that they bring back the baby brother Benjamin.

Then he frames them for stealing,

and finally he *reveals* his identity in a wash of emotion and tears.

Joseph then brings his whole family to Egypt to be saved from the famine, and his father Jacob dies.

It is after his death that we see this scene of *forgiveness and grace* in Genesis 50.

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?" 16 So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 17 "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. 18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." 19 But Joseph said to them, "**Do not be afraid!** Am I in the place of God? 20 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. 21 So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. WORD OF THE LORD—PRAY

Talk about *life-changing words*:

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

Have *you* ever *said* that?

Or *thought* that?

I can definitely say that about some of the pain in my life,
some hurts that cut so deep...
but that **led me to be** the pastor and person that I am today.
What about you?
Has God used pain in your life for good?

I have so many friends who have suffered—one is a **survivor** of sexual abuse.
She feels God calling her to use her experience, to work with other survivors.
She believes what happened to her was meant for evil,
but God intends to use it for good.

My best childhood friend was **Nancy** Norton.
We grew up doing everything together.
Toddling around, riding bikes, exploring the neighborhood, then driving, and
dating, and when I went off to college she started teaching preschool.
When we were 21, on June 25, 1993 a guy we went to high school with got drunk,
and then got behind the wheel of a car.
That Friday night, he drove right into Nancy's car, killing her instantly.

Her **parents** were incredible.

You know what they said—just days after her death?

They told the newspaper that they would forgive Paul,
and that God would use this to help them warn others of the dangers of drinking
and driving. And that is exactly what they did.

What he meant for evil, God intended for good.

Joseph had every reason to hold a grudge against his brothers.
But somehow God helped him see a ***greater plan***,
And move toward forgiveness.

*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.*

Joseph saw a greater story.

What about us?

Do we allow God to show us the whole story, not just the pain?

Do we ***trust that God knows*** the whole story?

Probably one of the most powerful books on forgiveness and grace is
A Grace Revealed by Jerry Sittser.

In the fall of 1991, a car driven by a drunk driver jumped its lane and smashed
headfirst into a minivan driven by Jerry.

Sittser and three of his children survived,

but his wife, four-year-old child, and mother died in the crash.

Over the years Sittser has offered some profound reflections about loss, grief, and
suffering. In his book, he shares the following story about how his son David
responded to the tragic accident.

*My son David is quiet and reflective. After the accident, he was the least likely to
talk about it; but when he chose to, he usually had something significant to say or
ask. ... "Do you think Mom sees us right now?" he suddenly asked.*

*I paused to ponder. "I don't know, David. I think maybe she does see us.
Why do you ask?"*

*"I don't see how she could, Dad. I thought Heaven was full of happiness. How
could she bear to see us so sad?"*

*Could Lynda witness our pain in Heaven? How could that be possible? How
could she bear it?*

*"I think she does see us," I finally said. "But she sees the **whole story**, including
how it all turns out, which is beautiful to her. It's going to be a good story, David."*

Sittser wrote: I would not hazard to estimate the number of times I have been asked, "How does Christianity address the *problem of suffering*?" ... The Christian answer to suffering [is] Christ's suffering [and] Christ's resurrection *God knows* pain within himself; God knows joy within himself. God knows the *whole story* as one, including how it all turns out, which is glorious. Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Revealed* (Zondervan, 2012), pp. 138-139

When have you learned *profound lessons* through suffering?
When have you seen something good come out of evil?

Have you ever *looked to the Psalms* for help in your suffering?
Those 150 prayers in the middle of your Bible?
The Psalms are so amazing because you can literally find *everything* in there.
It's full of prayers—*surprising* prayers.
Shocking prayers.

In the Psalms you can find *pain, sorrow, lament, Anger, jealousy, and even a deep desire for revenge and vengeance!*
When David was writing Psalms, he held nothing back from God.
Talk about total *honesty*!

The Psalms reveal just how much *God cares* about every human emotion, situation and circumstance,
Every type of suffering or injustice.

Try the Psalms.

Just open them up this week.
They are some of the best verses *to read, and to memorize.*
The ones I know by heart, I learned during hard times.
Psalm 42, 121, 34, and 23 are just a few of my favorites.
Psalms are easier to memorize because of their poetry,
and you can start with just a few verses!

Another favorite poet of mine is *Annie Dillard*.
She says, "You do not have to sit outside in the dark.
If, however, you want to look at the stars,
you will find that *darkness* is necessary."

Dillard, Annie. *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*

My favorite Pastor, Barbara Brown Taylor writes about how much we learn walking through darkness, and suffering.

Sometimes we ONLY see God's light in the darkness, right?

But how can we walk through the darkness of life,
And believe that God can bring good from it?

I know that sometimes we get so down,
We don't care how it will all work out--we just want the pain to stop!

I once read a quote about God being a little bit like a ***basketball coach***,
who might call a time-out for any number of reasons.

Maybe for a new play, or to stop some momentum,
or to stop the clock near the end of the half.

He might use it to force an instant-replay of a questionable call.

Those options are all determined by what the coach knows about the game, and the individual players. Andreas Kostenberger, Darrell Bock, and Josh Chatraw, Truth Matters: Confident Faith in a Confusing World (B&H Publishing, 2014);

Could God be a little bit like that?

Could God call 'time out' in our lives, to get us to stop and listen, or learn?

I feel like my illness these past several months has been a gigantic "***Time Out!***"

Maybe I wouldn't have stopped at all without it!

We don't always know why things happen,
maybe we'll never know this side of heaven,
but can't we still believe in a ***greater story***?

And don't we believe as Christians,
That pain and evil are NEVER the end of our story?

I think this is what Paul meant in Romans 8:28:

*For we know that all things **work together for good** for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

Not that all things are good, or God causes all things—

But that God can bring good....out of anything!

St. *Augustine* once said, The omnipotent God, ... being supremely good, could not permit anything evil in his works, were he not so all-powerful and good as to be able to bring good even out of evil.

St. Augustine, *Faith, Hope, and Charity* (Enchiridion), translated by Louis A. Arand (Newman, 1955), pp. 17-18

Now, at times words like these have been *used against us*—
in the wrong time, wrong way, and wrong spirit.

At times people have told us ‘everything works together for good’,
because they just want us to quit hurting.

But God doesn’t want us to just put on a happy face.
Truth is, it’s very hard-to *find ANY meaning* in our tragedies.

And GRIEF-- is very real.

We need to grieve when we lose people or opportunities...or when life goes bad.

It’s important to work THROUGH our grief, just not skip over it.

If we ignore the process of working through our suffering,
we end up with some *painful and destructive emotions and behavior*.

When we ignore our grief and pain, we can easily give into the temptation
to drink, take drugs, smoke, or overeat—because we hurt!

We want to do anything to *stop* the pain,
instead of feeling it—and working through it.

But remember, it was *YEARS later that Joseph* saw and forgave his brothers.

He’d had a lot of time to think, and talk to God about it.

It would NOT be the same story if his brothers had seen him one year after they
sold him into slavery!

But if we *allow God to help us work through* our pain,

Our lives can be transformed. Literally.

In a book entitled, *The How of Happiness*, researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky learns
that people who find some kind of *benefit* from trauma and tragedy live longer and
find more happiness than those who don’t see any benefit in their trials.

She gives the following example:

In one study researchers interviewed men who had had *heart attacks* between
the ages of 30 and 60. Those who perceived *benefits* in the event seven weeks after

it happened— for example, believing that they had grown and matured as a result, or revalued home life, or resolved to create less hectic schedules for themselves— were less likely to have recurrences and more likely to be healthy eight years later. In contrast, those who blamed their heart attacks on other people or on their own emotions were now in poorer health. Sonja Lyubomirsky *The How of Happiness* (Penguin Press, 2007), page 157

I don't think we can *force ourselves* to forgive someone, or see the bigger picture.
But we can *surrender* that desire, and process, to God, over and over again if needed!

And forgiveness is *not about forgetting, or allowing more abuse*.
And it does not mean just *move on*.
It's actually ok to *admit* when we can't forgive.
God doesn't 'guilt us' into forgiving!

Forgiveness, and seeing the bigger story—
is a **gift of grace** that we request and receive from Jesus.
Remember Paul's words in Philippians 4:13?
I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me.
It does not say WE can do it all.

The only way we can *forgive is* through Jesus' power, his grace, his mercy.
And it's a process, a journey.

Why is it so important?
Because it's the only way to *freedom*.
A grudge can kill if we hold onto it.
Joseph was *free* when he forgave his brothers,
when he did not return evil for evil.

I once read: *To triumph fully, evil needs two victories, not one.*
The first victory happens when an evil deed is perpetrated;
the second victory, when evil is returned.
After the first victory, evil would die if the second victory did not infuse it with life.
Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory* (Eerdmans, 2006), p. 9

We can let evil go, with the help of God.
Why? Because Jesus has the victory over it—on the cross!

And Jesus is the one who enables us to forgive and show grace.

How we respond to life is *not just up to us*.

It's up to Christ in us.

God helped Joseph forgive his brothers,

and *God enables us* to move forward,

to forgiveness, and to see the whole story.

God is the one who gives us the *grace and forgiveness* in our hearts for those who have harmed us.

This is the *Good News* of the Gospel

The *pain* we experience in life is *not the end* of our story.

God has a *greater* story.

Even what was meant to harm us, God can use for good.

Because ours is a *beautiful story*.

To that, all God's people said,

Amen.