

meeting God
on the
ASH
H+E+A+P

Biblical Voices on God's Presence in the Face of Tragedy

Session One: April 13, 2010

God Reserves the Right

The Voice of Joseph (Gen. 37-50)

Series Introduction: Meeting God on the Ash Heap

Christians believe God is good, and that God is sovereign over the universe. Christians also live in the same world as everybody else: a world with earthquakes and sickness, violence and hatred, betrayal and loneliness. And there's the trouble—we can get two of those three pieces to go together, but not all three. Either God is good, but can't do anything about all the evil and tragedy in the world, it seems, or God is all-powerful and must have willed the evil in the world, and therefore can't be really considered good. Or, to try and resolve it the way some Eastern philosophers have tried, we could say that evil and pain are just an illusion, but that somehow feels like cheating, especially if we have endured any real tragedy in life. **So how do we make sense of these competing claims**, especially as people who take the Bible seriously? This is the main focus of the following six-week series—listening to Scriptural voices for some signposts and direction as we face tragedy in life, whether on an individual or international level. We will not get easy answers—the Bible never lets us get away without wrestling with us first, after all. But we will find wisdom and hope in a chorus of voices from biblical writers who have either seen or lived through tragedy and found that God is present even there, a God who is both *great* in power and *good* in character.

food for thought...

Joseph to his brothers: *"Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear..."* (Genesis 50:19-21)

From the movie *Charlie Wilson's War*

Gust Avrakotos: *There's a little boy and on his 14th birthday he gets a horse... and everybody in the village says, "How wonderful. The boy got a horse!" And the Zen master says, "We'll see." Two years later, the boy falls off the horse, breaks his leg, and everyone in the village says, "How terrible!" And the Zen master says, "We'll see." Then, a war breaks out and all the young men have to go off and fight... except the boy can't cause his legs all messed up. and everybody in the village says, "How wonderful."*

Charlie Wilson: *Now the Zen master says, "We'll see."*

Rolling Stone: *Are you truly happy?*

Bob Dylan: *Those are yuppy words, 'happiness' and 'unhappiness.' It's not happiness or unhappiness. It's blessed or unblessed."*

The Joseph Story—Genesis 37-50

We will be making our way through the narrative of the Bible in this series, so our first stop is to the story of Joseph, great-grandson of good old Father Abraham, and one of twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob. We probably know the basics of Joseph's story, and his famous coat makes him a favorite of both children and theater fans, but here is a summary of Joseph's story:

- **Gen. 37:1-11**—Joseph is the favored son of Jacob, receives the coat from his father, and begins to have dreams of future greatness.
- **Gen. 37:12-36**—Joseph's brothers plot to kill him but settle on selling him to slave-traders into Egypt.
- **Gen. 39:1-23**—Joseph prospers in the house of Potiphar, his master in Egypt, but refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife, who then accuses him of rape. Joseph ends up in prison.
- **Gen. 40:1-23**—Joseph interprets dreams of two prisoners in Pharaoh's service, but is forgotten.
- **Gen. 41:1-57**—Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream, and rises to prominence in Egypt, helping to prepare for a famine
- **Gen. 42:1-50:24**—Joseph's family comes to Egypt

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Does It Just Depend On Where You End the Story?

The Joseph story has some similarities to the story of the boy and the Zen master (see front page); it really does depend on what comes next in the story and where you end it whether you will think of this as a happy or unhappy story. On the one hand, Joseph gets to reconcile with his brothers in the end, and because he is in Egypt in a position of power, he is able to save his family from starvation when the famine comes. On the other hand, it is at least indirectly because of Joseph that his family comes to be enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years. And then on the other hand... it is only because of the Egyptian slavery that the Exodus and entry into the Promised Land happen the way they do. So how do we tell if this is a "happy" story or an "unhappy" story? Is it just a matter of cutting off a story that is still in progress at a high point rather than a low point? And does a happy ending *justify* all the suffering that it might take to get to that ending? Does the fact that Joseph's family gets to live in the end excuse his brothers' actions selling him into slavery (or excuse his "golden-child" arrogance at the beginning, for that matter)?

The story of Joseph seems to say that things are more complicated than that. Joseph faces real suffering and hardship, which can't be swept under the rug just because there is good that comes out of his story in the end. And the reconciliation at the conclusion does not take his brothers off the hook for their responsibility for what they did to Joseph. It's not a matter of *either/or*, as in "Either God set this all up, *or* the brothers are responsible for their actions." As is so often the case in matters of faith, *both* are true. Human beings do horrible things to one another, and we live in a world with forces beyond our control that sometimes have tragic consequences (like famines). And yet without denying those things, the Scriptures speak of a God who is yet able *and willing* to reserve the right to bring good out of what had been intended for evil. God does not speak audibly in this story at all, but Joseph is able to see God's hand bringing good in the midst of evil, even though Joseph still recognizes the malicious intentions of his brothers for what they were.

In many ways, then, Joseph's story illustrates Bob Dylan's quote very well: the question of moment by moment happiness or unhappiness is a rather vain question—the real issue, according to the Bible, is about being *blessed*, which can be true whether or not circumstances seem particularly happy. Joseph is not particularly happy in slavery or in jail, but he is *blessed* there, and God's presence and blessing on him makes him a blessing for others, too—Potiphar prospers, and Joseph's cellmates are helped by his mere presence. And in the end, God finds a brilliant way to save not only his own budding covenant people (the family of Abraham) but also the Egyptians and others who are preserved through the famine because of Joseph. That is what it looks like to be *blessed*—to be used as a power for life and wholeness in such a way that it flows through you and out to others, regardless of whether present circumstances look "happy" or not.

What Does Joseph's Story Say To Us?

For starters, the story of Joseph teaches us that it is fair for us to name tragedy and hardship for what they are in our lives. We do not have to sugar-coat things or pretend we can always see what God is "up to" when we are enduring difficulties. Joseph sits in jail for two years not knowing what God is doing, after all. Since events in our lives are not *either/or* (as in, this is *either good or bad*, or this is *either God's will or my responsibility*), we can be honest about what we see from our side of things, and still leave room for God to be doing something that we cannot see. Joseph's story, then, teaches us to recognize that *God reserves the right* to use our tragic experiences for *blessed* purposes. That does not absolve us of responsibility for our actions or whitewash over the pain we endure from sickness or sadness or loss, but it does mean that God can at least *do* something with those. A closing thought, then: in his novel *The Shack*, William Paul Young has his main character Mack protest to God that the pain of human history seems to far outweigh any good God could bring out of it. "I just can't imagine any final outcome that would justify all this," he says. And God's response is, "*We're not justifying it. We are redeeming it.*" What is the difference?
