

Main Idea: Genesis 50 teaches us something basic and vital concerning the relationship between God and the things that happen in our lives, namely, that whatever happens in our lives, *God meant it for good*. Pain. God meant it for good. Hardship. God meant it for good. In Genesis 50, we see the difference God's presence made in two very painful (and contemporary) situations in Joseph's life.

- I. We see the pain of release (1-14).
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    3. He reminded them that God can use the pains from the past to accomplish His purposes in the present (20).
    4. He extinguished their regrets with deeds of kindness (21).
  - C. Look at God's favor (22-26).

The Bottom Line: When life gets hard, it makes all the difference if you know that God meant it for good.

*Scripture Reading: Romans 8:22-30*

Nobody here today is exempt from it. If you are not a Christian, you face it. If you are a Christian, you likewise are not shielded from it. What is it?

I'm talking about *suffering*. All of us either are having, or will have, painful situations in life. ALL of us. The sorts of pain are varied: Job terminations, broken marriages, memories of childhood abuse, regrets over foolish decisions and wasted opportunities.

None of us are exempt from suffering. So that's why we need to know something we're going to see powerfully illustrated for us in Genesis 50,

*God meant it for good*. This is one of the most important phrases in the book of Genesis, and we find it in today's text, Genesis 50.

To what does “it” refer? The homerun you hit in yesterday's little league game? Yes. And the called third strike too.

Whatever it may be, *God meant it for good*. Pain. God meant it for good. Hardship. God meant it for good.

In Genesis 50, we see the difference God's presence made in two very painful (and contemporary) situations in Joseph's life.

There are few individuals more qualified to teach us about God's purpose in pain than Joseph, for two reasons. First, he faced plenty of painful situations in his life. And secondly, his conviction that *God meant it for good* made a God-honoring difference in the way he handled each painful experience.

Such was the case in Genesis 50 where we see two types of pain.

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\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> This message is adapted from two series at WBC in 1992 and 2002.

## I. We see the pain of release (1-14).

We left off last time with the event recorded in 49:33. Jacob “breathed his last.” Jacob was “gathered to his people.” Jacob, the father of Joseph, died.

After 147 years of life, the patriarch passed from this world. With his 12 sons around his bed, he lay down and breathed his last breath.

How did Jacob's death impact his son Joseph? Notice verse 1, “Joseph threw himself upon his father and wept over him and kissed him.” Joseph felt the chillful pain of release. His dad was gone. There would be no more father and son chats. He would never see his beloved father again in this life.

How did Joseph deal with the pain of release, the pain of parting, of death? Watch the sequence of events that surrounded his father's burial.

### **A. Notice the burial (1-13).**

I'd like to make a pastoral observation. As I've helped grieving families work through the loss of loved ones, I've noticed something that's not surprising. There's a world of difference between people who know Christ and people who don't know Him, when it comes to the way they handle death.

Knowing God makes a significant difference in the way we handle the pain of release. Watch the steps Joseph took.

#### *1. The experience involved grief (1).*

Verse 1 says that Joseph threw himself upon his father. He wept. He kissed him.

I marvel at how expressive some Bible characters were in grieving. David fasted and lay all night on the ground when he learned that his illegitimate child would die (2 Sam 12). Here Joseph broke down, and lay across his father's lifeless body, and shed many affectionate tears. He unleashed his emotions in an unrestrained expression of love.

Listen. Even Christians grieve. Jesus Himself wept when Lazarus died. It's OK to grieve. It's even healthy physically to express grief, to show emotion, when confronted with the pain of release.

We'll say more about this later, but let me point out now that there is a difference in the grieving process for Christians. Paul put it this way in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, saying that we “do not sorrow as those who have no hope.” We have hope in Christ, hope that is victorious over death.

Soon Joseph collected himself. There were a host of arrangements to make.

What do you think of first when you think of ancient Egypt? For many, it's pyramids and mummies. We see the latter in Joseph's next step.

#### *2. The experience involved an embalming process (2-3).*

Verses 2-3, “Then Joseph directed the physicians in his service to embalm his father Israel. So the physicians embalmed him, <sup>3</sup> taking a full forty days, for that was the time required for embalming. And the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days.”

The ancient Egyptians developed an elaborate and extensive embalming process. Did you catch how long it took? 40 days. Other Egyptian sources mention that sometimes it took as long as 70 days to prepare a body for burial.

What else happened in conjunction with the embalming process? Verse 3 says that the Egyptians mourned 70 days. Wow! That's hard for us to imagine—70 days of mourning.

According to Egyptian custom, the length of mourning time indicated how respected the deceased was. Remember, Jacob was the father of the highest official in

Egypt. Records show that the mourning period for a Pharaoh lasted 72 days. Our text tells us that even the Egyptians participated in the mourning. That indicates their great respect for Joseph.

When the days of mourning ended, the next step occurred...

*3. The experience involved a funeral procession (4-11).*

In verses 4-5, Joseph asked Pharaoh for permission to leave Egypt and honor his father's request to bury him in Canaan. He explained, "My father made me swear an oath and said, 'I am about to die; bury me in the tomb I dug for myself in the land of Canaan.'"

In verse 6 Pharaoh granted his request, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear to do."

So Joseph prepared to leave. But he didn't go alone. Notice verses 7-9, "So Joseph went up to bury his father. All Pharaoh's officials accompanied him—the dignitaries of his court and all the dignitaries of Egypt—<sup>8</sup> besides all the members of Joseph's household and his brothers and those belonging to his father's household. Only their children and their flocks and herds were left in Goshen. <sup>9</sup> Chariots and horsemen also went up with him. It was a very large company."

This was quite a funeral procession! Verse 9 is no exaggeration, calling it "a very large company." Egyptian dignitaries went along. In fact, all the officials of Pharaoh's court were there. There were even chariots and horsemen, perhaps for defense purposes while traveling through hostile territory. And of course, Jacob's twelve sons and their wives joined the funeral procession, too.

But the grandchildren and livestock did not make the trip.

Perhaps you're wondering, "Why wouldn't the grandchildren go to the graveside service?"

How long do you think the trip was? From Goshen to Canaan was some 300 miles. How many days would the trip take? At ten miles a day, we're talking 30 days just to get there, plus a 30 day return trip.

You can tell a lot about a culture by the way it treats its dead. Not far from the farm house where I grew up a discovery was made about 15 years ago. When excavators were digging a basement they exposed an ancient native American burial site. This particular group of Indians actually reburied their dead after the bodies decomposed, painting the bones a reddish color before burial.

In the case of the death of Jacob, they took 40 days for the embalming process, 70 days for mourning, who knows how many weeks (or months) to travel to the proper burial site.

The procession did not take a direct route to the burial site. Verse 10 says, "When they reached the threshing floor of Atad, near the Jordan, they lamented loudly and bitterly; and there Joseph observed a seven-day period of mourning for his father."

So apparently, Joseph and company took a circular route, and entered Canaan through the "back door." The AV says they entered "beyond the Jordan," just like the Israelites would do 400 years later when entering the Promised Land. They traveled around the Dead Sea, and up the east side of the Jordan river, until they came to Atad.

What happened in Atad? As the KJV puts it, "There they mourned with a great and very strong mourning (10)."

Can you picture the scene? The funeral procession arrives at Atad (in the Trans-jordan region). They've finally reached the land of Canaan. So they stop. The entire company mourns for the next 7 days.

The emotion was so great that the local inhabitants gave the location a new name: "Abel-mizraim" which means, "the mourning of the Egyptians." After the 7 days, the procession moved to the place of interment. Step four...

4. *The experience involved the interment (12-13).*

Notice carefully who actually buried Jacob. Verses 12-14, "So Jacob's sons did as he had commanded them: <sup>13</sup> They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre, which Abraham had bought as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite, along with the field."

If I understand this text, the large company did not go to the burial site. Verse 13 indicates that Jacob's sons carried him into the land of Canaan and buried him. Apparently, the Egyptians stayed at Atad. Only Jacob's sons carried his body across the Jordan river and to cave at Machpelah.

It was fitting that family privacy be maintained. It was at Machpelah that Abraham and Sarah were buried. So were Isaac and Rebekah. So was Leah. That cave was the only piece of property Jacob owned when he died. But he died in faith, believing that one day, God would give the entire promised land to his descendants.

So concluded the burial. There's no mention of the Lord in this passage, but He's there. These are His people, and He's doing precisely what He said He would do with them, sustaining them, causing the nations to look with favor on them, connecting them to this special piece of land, eventually bringing redemption to the world through what His Son would accomplish in this land.

While the burial was over, the pain of release was not over for Joseph.

**B. Notice the bereavement (14).**

Verse 14, "After burying his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, together with his brothers and all the others who had gone with him to bury his father."

I like to try to put myself into the dramatic accounts of Scripture. The text says that "Joseph returned to Egypt." I wonder what went through his mind on the way home. Remember it took several weeks to get there. Weeks of walking. Weeks of reflecting. Weeks of reminiscing. Weeks of talking with family members. Weeks of mourning.

How should we respond when we lose a loved one? I know we need to be careful when handling narrative literature in the Bible. God is not necessarily endorsing Joseph's behavior. He's not saying, "Everyone should grieve seventy days when they lose a loved one."

And yet 1 Corinthians 10:6 does say these things "happened as examples for us." When I look at Joseph's example, I believe we see a helpful model for dealing with the pain of release. I observe two principles regarding bereavement.

1. *Be careful not to bury the pain of release too soon.* It is okay to mourn. Death is painful. Why do we have death in the world? Never forget that death is the result of sin's curse. Death is the consequence of mankind's rebellion against the Creator. Death entered the world because of Adam's sin.

Did you notice how Joseph dealt with the pain of release in this episode? Did you see how he grieved? He wept and did so unashamedly. His weeping was not a sign of weakness. Notice again the mourning in this section:

Verse 1 "And Joseph...wept..."

Verses 3-4 "The Egyptians mourned for him seventy days..."

Verse 10 "They mourned with a great and strong mourning..."

By the way, when someone you care about loses a loved one, allow them to grieve. Don't be the stoic who says, "Be strong! You shouldn't cry."

We have a tendency in our society to be too surfcy. We try to "get on with life" too quickly. We don't deal with the pain of death. We try to hide it and bury it and isolate ourselves from it.

The writer of the book of Lamentations won't let us do that. He (I think it was Jeremiah) gave his people five acrostic prayers to essentially *force them* to grieve thoroughly. He wants them to mourn and mourn and mourn and mourn and mourn. And then stop mourning.

That brings us to the second principle. The first? Be careful not to bury the pain of release too soon.

2. *After sufficient time for grieving, don't live in the past.* Joseph mourned, no doubt, for many weeks, if not months. That was OK, even appropriate.

But then he got on with life.

I realize this is a delicate subject. We've already said that grieving is normal, even essential. *For a time.* But there are people who simply stop living. They shut down. They begin to live in the past.

What do they need to do? They need to remember that the God who numbers our days still has more He desires to accomplish in and through them. A great step to break the paralyzing nature of grief is to ask the Lord to bring someone into your life to whom you can minister.

We mustn't live in the past. We have a purpose for living in the present and our purpose is linked to the future. Listen to Jesus' promises:

John 10:10 "I am come that you might have life, and have it to the full."

John 11:25-26 "'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; <sup>26</sup> and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.'"

So when it comes to grief, we mustn't bury the pain of release too soon. But after sufficient time has passed, neither should we live in the past. We can—and must—move ahead.

We've seen the difference God's presence made in one very painful experience in Joseph's life, the pain of release. He did the same with a second kind of pain.

## II. We see the pain of regret (15-26).

Do you have any regrets? Any blots in your life you wish you could erase? Joseph's brothers did. In fact, their father's death was not only a time for reminiscing, but also a time for doubts and second thoughts.

### **A. Look at the brothers' fear (15-18).**

Verses 15-17a, "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?' <sup>16</sup> So they sent word to Joseph, saying, 'Your father left these instructions before he died: <sup>17</sup> 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.'"

This is such a revealing scene. We can learn a lot from it about the paralyzing power of the past, and how to overcome it.

Let's take a close look at the pain of regret. Joseph's brothers are still bound by something in their distant past. And remember, it's been over 35 years since they

committed the wicked deed. And they seem to have forgotten what Joseph already promised them 17 years earlier.

Look back at Genesis 45. Let's begin in verse 3, "Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph! Is my father still living?'" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. <sup>4</sup> Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come close to me.' When they had done so, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!' <sup>5</sup> And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. <sup>6</sup> For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. <sup>7</sup> But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. <sup>8</sup> So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. <sup>9</sup> Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay.' <sup>10</sup> You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me—you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. <sup>11</sup> I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.' <sup>12</sup> You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. <sup>13</sup> Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly.' <sup>14</sup> Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. <sup>15</sup> And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him."

If we were perfect people we wouldn't struggle with the past. But we're not perfect people. We have all sinned and been sinned against. That's why we struggle with the past.

Time didn't erase the pain of regret from Joseph's brothers. "With dad gone, will Joseph turn on us?" they wondered.

So they conjured up a plan. They fabricated a story and sent a messenger to Joseph. "Dad told us to tell you to forgive us." Then to top it off, verse 18, "His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. 'We are your slaves,' they said."

That's a common reaction. We feel we have to punish ourselves for past blunders. It makes us feel better, for awhile. Sort of a self-atonement. Make yourself pay, and then God won't make you pay.

I used to view prayer that way. When I first became a Christian I would get down on my knees when I prayed at bedtime. If it hurt a little, all the better. No pain no gain.

I'm so glad God's forgiveness is not that way! Psalm 130:3-4 is wonderful, "If you Lord kept a record of sins, who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness. Therefore you are feared."

How did Joseph respond to his brother's fearful plea?

### **B. Look at Joseph's forgiveness (19-21).**

Notice the final words of verse 17, "When their message came to him, Joseph wept." Why did he weep? The text doesn't say, but I think it was because of his God-given love for his brothers. He'd already dealt with the past, back in chapter 45. But apparently they hadn't. He had already told them that he wouldn't hold their transgression against them.

But they were doubting his word. Proverbs 28:1 describes them, “The wicked man flees though no one pursues.”

Watch what Joseph did. Watch how he responded, with four actions.

1. *He calmed their fears (19).* “But Joseph said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid.’” Don’t do it. Don’t let fear find a place in your heart.

Jesus said that often to His disciples, didn’t He? Fear not. Don’t be afraid.

There would be no retaliation. Years earlier the brothers ignored his plea from the pit. When they heard the fear in his voice, they callously bid him good riddance.

Now the tables are turned. Surely Joseph will let them squirm a little. After all, just think of the nerve of his brothers to bring up the past. Yes, he had every right for some pay back.

But because of God and His grace, Joseph didn’t live for his rights. He lived to please the One who hadn’t treated him as he deserved. And when you live to please Him, He will enable you to put the interests of others, even those who have hurt you, ahead of your own.

So he calmed their fears. Next...

2. *He turned their thoughts to God (19).* “Am I in the place of God?” he asks. What a great question! What a vital perspective for living. We are not God. We do not sit on God’s judgment-throne, and we get into trouble when we forget it.

Joseph turned the attention of his brothers to God. He constantly did that with people. He prompted people to get their eyes off of themselves, and put the focus on God.

What a great trait! This is what life is all about. Seek first the kingdom of God.

And this, of course, is why we need a Savior. Because we *don’t* think first of God, but of ourselves. We are self-worshipping idolaters.

That’s why God in His grace sent His Son into the world, who could say, “I always do what pleases Him (John 8:29).” And of whom the Father said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased (Matt 3:17).”

God sent the perfect Substitute, who obeyed where we failed, and who took the penalty for our self-worship when He died on the cross. Then God raised Him from the dead, and now forgives and liberates the self-worshiper who repents and believes in His Son.

3. *He reminded them that God can use the pains from the past to accomplish His purposes in the present (20).* Verse 20 is powerful, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

One thing Joseph never did was minimize his brothers’ sin. He never justified it nor made excuses for it. What they did was evil, and their evil deed originated from evil hearts. “You thought evil against me (KJV),” he told them, and they knew he was right. They couldn’t plead justice for they were guilty. Only mercy would help. And mercy is what Joseph delivered.

How could Joseph respond mercifully to those who hurt him so severely? It’s because he focused on God, not on the brothers. “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.”

Joseph focused on God’s plan, not his personal pain. When in prison he saw God’s plan by faith. Now as prime minister of Egypt he sees it more clearly. God used his brothers’ wicked actions to bring about good.

Did you realize that we are here today because of what happened to Joseph? Because Joseph was sold as a slave he ended up in Egypt, by God's design. Because Joseph was in Egypt, Joseph's family had a place to go when the severe famine hit. Because of Joseph, the chosen family of Jacob was able to blossom into the chosen nation of Israel. It was through that nation that God in the fullness of time sent the Messiah into the world to rescue sinners for His glory.

Yes, God knew what He was doing. And Joseph knew that God knew what He was doing. "You intended to harm me, but *God meant it for good.*" And here is the good, "to accomplish what is now being done, *the saving of many lives.*"

God used Joseph to save many lives from famine. But ultimately, it's not just the famine He had in mind.

We have a Savior today because of Joseph. We can experience God's salvation from sin today because of Joseph. No, Joseph's rejection didn't make sense at the time, but it did later. Jesus' rejection didn't make sense either. It began to make sense three days later when He conquered the grave. And the purpose became even clearer forty days later when He ascended to take His throne in heaven. It will make perfect sense when He returns in splendor and glory to rule the earth with the people He has saved.

This is a wonderful truth. God can use the pain of past events to accomplish His good purposes in the present. How then should we respond? By thanking Him, and trusting Him.

4. *He extinguished their regrets with deeds of kindness (21).* "So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.' And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them."

So forgiveness isn't just an empty promise. It leads to action, deeds of kindness. Joseph provided for their needs, and their children's, and spoke kindly to them.

It's been well said that he who cannot forgive others burns the bridge over which he himself must pass. Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Are you living with the pain of regret today? Perhaps you've been refusing to seek, or accept forgiveness for something in your past? Or perhaps there is someone you need to forgive and release from past sins. Today is the day.

The story ends on a great note. We've seen the brothers' fear and Joseph's forgiveness. Finally we observe...

### **C. Look at God's favor (22-26).**

Verses 22-26, "Joseph stayed in Egypt, along with all his father's family. He lived a hundred and ten years<sup>23</sup> and saw the third generation of Ephraim's children. Also the children of Makir son of Manasseh were placed at birth on Joseph's knees.<sup>24</sup> Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'<sup>25</sup> And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, 'God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.'<sup>26</sup> So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt."

Joseph, like his father Jacob and grandfather Isaac and great-grandfather Abraham, died looking ahead. That's why he, again like his father, was embalmed. He wanted his body preserved (I wonder if his body is still in tact somewhere?) because he died looking ahead.

And of course, he died this way because that's how he *lived*, by God's grace. Joseph lived in light of God's promises. He went to his grave making it clear that he believed God would do what He said He would do for His people in the future.

That's what faith is. Trusting in the person of God and relying on the promises of God regardless how I feel. That's Joseph. Verse 24 again, "God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land **he promised on oath** to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

I love this about Joseph. He grew old free of bitterness. I think it was Hendricks who said, "When people grow old they either grow bitter or better." When Joseph died, he was ready. He was right with God. And he was right with his fellow man.

What memory will your children and others have of you? Which word describes the direction you are heading? Better, or bitter?

**The Bottom Line:** *When life gets hard, it makes all the difference if you know that God meant it for good.*

We've talked about two pains this morning in Genesis 50, the pain of release and the pain of regrets. Let's affirm the truth that whatever we may face in life, God meant it for good, and therefore we may trust Him unreservedly.

I want to finish this sermon and this series with a question. *How did Joseph's brothers respond to his offer of forgiveness?* Did they continue to doubt him and live under the cloud of the past? Or did they accept his gracious offer and experience the reconciliation he extended?

We simply don't know. The Spirit of God didn't tell us.

Because that's not the issue. God didn't give us His Word to inform us, but transform us. The book of Genesis concludes with a picture of the way some people respond to the offer of forgiveness. And now it's our turn to answer the question. How are we responding?

Suppose while driving down the road you came upon a stranded motorist. As you got closer you realized this motorist was your next door neighbor. You stopped and approached the car. Your neighbor was wrestling with his head under the hood. You offer to help. His response?

"No thanks, I don't want help nor do I need it. I can fix it myself."

That's precisely what the natural man says to God. He offers the stranded sinner forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. But the sinner says, "Thanks God, but no thanks. I can take care of the problem myself."

Again, the book of Genesis says, "What about you?" Let's take inventory.