

Closure

I was never a great chess player, but a few people around me were, like my brother, one of my best friends, so I played now and then. My strategy was usually to just keep moving pieces around and try not to be checkmated in the first ten moves. As I learned a little more, I learned how brilliant the Grandmasters of chess were, such as Gary Kasparov, who would sometimes play against 25 opponents simultaneously, going from board to board, and would end up winning all 25 games. If you are a novice or average player, to play chess against a Grandmaster is to be vastly outgunned. Grandmasters have memorised hundreds, if not thousands of moves, strategies and games, whereas the novice is just trying to make one more good move.

The life of Joseph has taught us that God is like the grandmaster, and we are like beginners. We are making choices, making moves, but we are in a game where the other person not only knows all the moves we could make, but all the moves we would make in another arrangement, as well as the choices we should make. He can move his pieces around to prevent us from making some moves, to allow us to make others, and to make sure we make others. All along, you are perfectly free – you are making your own moves. But when you are playing God, He gets His way 100% of the time.

This doctrine of providence, seen in Joseph, and seen more broadly then in the redemptive history of Israel is summarised for us in the last chapter of Genesis, where the lines draw together, and we have closure. There are two deaths in the last portion, and in between them, the summary of this whole story: God is in control of good and evil for His glory and His people's good.

Let's begin with the first death, that of Jacob.

²⁹ Then he charged them and said to them: "I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite,"³⁰ "in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite as a possession for a burial place."³¹ "There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife, there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah."³² "The field and the cave that is there were purchased from the sons of Heth."³³

One more time, Jacob reminds his sons of where he wishes to be buried: in the one parcel of land in Canaan that he and his family legally possess: the cave in the field of Machpelah. Jacob has been a pilgrim, like Abraham and Isaac, but he will not have his body buried in the sands of Egypt. He wants to be laid to rest in the land of promise, and identify with the covenant made to Abraham. Not that he thinks it will influence his destiny after death – notice the phrase “I am to be gathered to my people”. That is a phrase used not to refer to burial, but to life after death. Jacob fully expects that after death, he will be conscious and be with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

*And when Jacob had finished commanding his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people. **50:1** Then Joseph fell on his father's face, and wept over him, and kissed him. ² And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel. ³ Forty days were required for him, for such are the days required for those who are embalmed; and the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days.*

Jacob's soul passes into God's presence, and Joseph feels the piercing sting of death. As we have seen so many times before, and will see again in a few moments, Joseph is a man of tenderheartedness, and he immediately embraces his father's lifeless body, knowing that this will ritually defile him. But his affections compel him, and he weeps and kisses his father. He immediately commands the Egyptians to use their expertise in embalming to do so with his father.

Why did he do this? First, it was a sign of reverence and respect. Joseph was royalty and so treated

his father with the accoutrements of royalty. Second, Jacob had requested to be buried in Mamre. From where we think Goshen was to where Mamre likely was, was a distance of over 400 kilometres. In the desert heat, you cannot possibly travel that far with a dead body without horrendous decomposition. Why did Jacob bury Rachel where he did and not in the cave of Machpelah? Because even though it was a journey of about 50 kilometres, he knew he wouldn't make it there without Rachel's body severely affected by the elements. So embalming would be a means of ensuring that Joseph could keep his oath to Jacob, and to bury him in Canaan.

It took them forty days, but the period of mourning was an additional thirty days. Seventy-two days was the period of mourning for an Egyptian king, so it seems that Pharaoh had declared this period to honour Joseph and Jacob greatly, essentially treating him like royalty.

⁴ And when the days of his mourning were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, please speak in the hearing of Pharaoh, saying,⁵ 'My father made me swear, saying, "Behold, I am dying; in my grave which I dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me." Now therefore, please let me go up and bury my father, and I will come back.'" ⁶ And Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear."

Why doesn't Joseph just go to Pharaoh directly? It is possible that it is because Joseph touched Jacob's body and he is now ritually defiled and unable to come into Pharaoh's presence. So he sends a messenger to explain the oath he made to his father. He leaves out any negative reference to Egypt and emphasises that Jacob prepared his own burial place, lest Pharaoh object that Egypt has far finer burial places than a dusty cave in Canaan. But an Egyptian would have respected a man's own chosen burial place. And then Joseph adds the words that Pharaoh really wanted to hear, "I will come back" Pharaoh needs the assurance that Joseph is not about to emigrate now that his father has died. Pharaoh gives permission, and with that permission came many resources.

⁷ So Joseph went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt,⁸ as well as all the house of Joseph, his brothers, and his father's house. Only their little ones, their flocks, and their herds they left in the land of Goshen.⁹ And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen, and it was a very great gathering.¹⁰ Then they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, and they mourned there with a great and very solemn lamentation. He observed seven days of mourning for his father.¹¹ And when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning at the threshing floor of Atad, they said, "This is a deep mourning of the Egyptians." Therefore its name was called Abel Mizraim, which is beyond the Jordan.¹² So his sons did for him just as he had commanded them.¹³ For his sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite as property for a burial place.

Now to imagine the size of this group, you have to picture all the Israelites without some of the smaller children and their mothers, which by now are a few hundred, all their servants, along with dignitaries from Egypt sent by Pharaoh to pay royal respects to a royal person. These all would have had their retinues. And when you have this many important heads of state making a several hundred kilometre journey, you have a large military escort, a large supply chain to provide food for what will take a month or two. I don't think we're exaggerating to imagine a group of a few thousand.

Now the interesting thing about this group is that they stop at this place called Atad. It is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, and the only thing we are told about it is that it is beyond the Jordan, a phrase which often means "East of the Jordan." If that's the case, then this entire retinue did not take the direct route, but followed the route that the Israelites would take during the Exodus, travelling directly east, south of Canaan, then travelling north, and then west, crossing the Jordan. Why they did this, we don't know, but it is fascinating that four hundred years later, their descendants would essentially follow their footsteps.

Once there, they keep the customary mourning of seven days. To see a few thousand Egyptians with heads and feet uncovered, some with torn clothes, some with ashes, some mourning with lamentations would have been quite a sight to see. The Canaanites now give what was a pretty non-descript area a name: mourning of Egypt. Joseph and his brothers honour their father, keep their promise, and Jacob is fully identified with Abraham, Isaac.

But as deaths in families so often do, they reveal what was silently at work in hearts for a long time leading up to that moment.

¹⁴ And after he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers and all who went up with him to bury his father. ¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him." ¹⁶ So they sent messengers to Joseph, saying, "Before your father died he commanded, saying, ¹⁷ 'Thus you shall say to Joseph: "I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.'" Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father."

Once they all return to Egypt, Joseph's brothers begin fretting. They cannot quite believe that Joseph has forgiven them. They suspect that he forgave them mostly for Jacob's sake, to see his father again, and bring his father down to Egypt. Perhaps Joseph was merely behaving like a benevolent peacemaker out of respect for his father, to add no more burdens to his already tired heart. They wonder if all this goodness was merely a front for hatred that had been suppressed all these years.

Consider what is going on in these men's hearts. First, guilt is apparently still haunting them. Guilty hearts have a habit of reading into other people, the motives of one's own heart. They are not as generous as Joseph, and perhaps it is they, who were the tables turned, would now exact revenge since Jacob is gone. Though forgiveness was freely granted by Joseph, their consciences have not been fully relieved. All these seventeen years, a fear had perhaps lingered, saying "It's all very nice now, but what happens when Father dies?"

Not only was there still guilt and fear, but consider the suspicion in their hearts. What are they saying about Joseph? The implication is that he is not honest, he has ulterior motives, he is not transparent, he is actually nursing bitterness. They are irrational, because had Joseph wanted to exact revenge on them, he had had plenty of opportunities to do so in the past. We could justly say to these men, "What more could Joseph do to prove to you that he is not bitter?" But these men are in the grip of fear, driven by unrelieved guilt

So they send a messenger with an account of a meeting they had with Jacob, in which he said, "Please forgive the sins of your brothers." And to that they add their own – in fact the first and only time in Genesis we read of a full and unvarnished request for forgiveness from them. And notice how they identify themselves: servants of your father's God. They are claiming spiritual identity with Joseph.

Did Jacob actually say that? It is impossible to know. Jacob, ever the peacemaker, may well have had conversations with the brothers, where they told him their fears of retribution from Joseph, and he may have said, "When I die, ask Joseph on my behalf to forgive you.", knowing that Joseph would forgive for Jacob's sake.

But then, we know that these men have had a fairly casual relationship with telling the truth. They may well have been concocting a story, or embellishing one, because the whole thing drips of fear and self-protection.

Now this is in some ways, Joseph's last recorded trial. He is being tested with a kind of accusation, a kind of suspicion, when all he has done is forgive and repay good for evil. Joseph could have certainly responded with anger, with frustration. He could have said, "You know, I actually had forgiven you, but since you think so little of me and my motives, I have now decided to deport you and your families to the Wilderness of Sinai."

But instead, what we read next is certainly the climax of the entire story of Joseph, the summary statement and the meaning of it all.

And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, "Behold, we are your servants." ¹⁹ Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. ²¹ "Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Joseph weeps. Perhaps in compassion for these men, still so far behind spiritually, still living in fear, still living in the torment of their own consciences. Perhaps in sadness that they still feel this, and have not come to a place of joyful fellowship with him. And perhaps out of joy, that these men, even if for carnal reasons, are genuinely humbled, repentant and desire forgiveness, nearly 40 years after their vicious acts towards him. Having sent the messenger ahead of them, they now appear before him as a group, to kneel and seek forgiveness. One more time, the dream of the sheaves bowing down to his sheaf has come to pass.

Joseph's answer is an answer of comfort, of why they should stop fearing. Twice he tells them not to be afraid. They are not to fear Joseph himself, they are not to fear even their own actions done to him all those years ago.

Why not?

First, Joseph says, I am not God. I do not judge for sin, bringing reward or punishment. As powerful as Joseph may be, he does not take to himself the role of taking vengeance. Vengeance belongs to the Lord, the Lord repays, and Joseph submitted to that, a long, long time before this meeting.

Second, Joseph understands the big picture. He sums up the doctrine of providence in this marvelous sentence, the Romans 8:28 of the Old Testament:

²⁰ "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.

In the Hebrew this verse is exactly parallel. You planned against me evil; God planned it for good. In other words, God did not do evil, but God controlled and used the evil. God knew the brothers would do evil, God permitted and allowed the evil, God channeled and used the evil because God had a good that He would achieve through it. The good is that many people's lives would be saved: the lives of the brothers and their families, Jacob's life, Joseph's life, and the lives of hundreds of thousands of Egyptians and people in Canaan.

Now we've seen that in detail as we've walked through the story, but now we see it from the bird's eye view, flying high over this whole story. The brothers hated Joseph. In hating Joseph they wanted to get rid of him. In wanting to get rid of him, they seized on an opportunity, when Joseph had been sent to check on their safety, to grab him and murder him. But a passing band of Ishmaelites had given Judah a better idea – what if we can permanently get rid of him, without the blood on our

hands, and we can make some cash out of it too? Let's sell him to some unscrupulous merchants on the way to Egypt.

That evil got Joseph into Egypt, where he was led into the house of the chief of the guard. There he excelled, but God wanted him in the palace. So God used the evil of an adulterous, ravenous woman to seek to prey on him and then falsely accuse him. That got Joseph in the king's prison, a step down in life, but a step closer to the palace. And there he met two men, both of whom were staff members of the palace, in detention until what seems like a palace conspiracy could be solved. More evil that God used. They had dreams, which God gave Joseph the power to interpret. And then as one was executed, and another promoted, God used the evil of a man's forgetfulness to instill more patience, and more knowledge of Egyptian culture into Joseph, before sending a Pharaoh a dream. When the butler remembered, Joseph was brought in, and interpreted the dreams perfectly. Those dreams foretold both good and evil, and how to use the time of prosperity to prepare for the famine. That set Egypt up to not only survive the famine, but to grow in power, provide for other nations, become a world power.

The evil of the famine brought the brothers down, brought about repentance, and reunion. Most importantly, because of the family connection between Egypt's prime minister and Jacob, it provided a lush and fertile place for Israel to grow into a strong nation, away from the corruption of Canaan, but also so strong that a future king would harden his heart, allowing Yahweh to display His mighty power.

Romans 8:28 says *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28)*

Now that doesn't mean that all things are actually good, if we look at them from a different angle. Nor does it mean that things by themselves work together for good, which is just a sentimental wishfulness: everything will be happy in the end. It means God actively causes all things to add up to, to result in, to work together for good.

But be aware, not good for everyone. Paul is clear: *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28)*

Those called to salvation, those who love God, it is to them that this promise is given. All things, from the most vicious evil, through to the sweetest blessings, are being sovereignly guided, included, controlled, for an ultimate good.

What is the ultimate good in the life of a believer? ²⁹ *For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. (Rom. 8:29)*

God works all things together so that those called, those foreknown would be conformed to the image of His son, so that Christ would be glorified as the ideal older brother of all the adopted children in God's family. The good that God uses evil towards is the Christlikeness of His children, because that will bring Him ultimate glory, and it will bring us ultimate joy.

We can go through Scripture after Scripture to see this principle. Pharaoh meant it for evil, but God meant it for good to deliver Israel through the Red Sea. Saul meant it for evil against David, but meant it for good to prepare him for the throne. Haman meant it for evil, but God meant it for good for the Jewish people through Esther and Mordecai. Judas meant it for evil, but meant it for good, to get Messiah into the hands of his persecutors. They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, to get His Son on a cross that would reconcile sinners to Himself.

No matter how the heathen rage, no matter how Satan fights, God ends up using it for His purposes, for His glory, and for His people's good. Those who fight God end up fulfilling His purposes, but without the good and the reward given to the redeemed. To rebel against God is not to thwart God's purposes; it is only to make yourself a different kind of instrument for God, one that He will use

exactly as He pleases, and then throw into the fire for its implacable hatred and self-will.

The believer who, like Joseph, sees life through this lens need never live in the fear of man, need never live with continual anxiety, worry, need not fret over evildoers and their ways, need not brood over injuries done, or injustices unpunished. Why? Because he or she is convinced that the very thing which harms and spoils and corrupts and destroys, is under the hand of God. Even your past sins, repented of and forsaken, become part of what God weaves together for your Christlikeness, so you need not live as the brothers did, haunted by their past.

But the lesson of Joseph is twofold. First, you want to be one of the called, one of those who love God. For the unbeliever, there is no comfort, and no promise to soothe when evil afflicts. If you want to remain a child of Adam, then you live with the curse, and all the consequences of it without hope, and when you die, it is worse. You want to be in the family of God.

Second, you want to be a believer who lives a Spirit-filled life, so that in every circumstance, you remain useful to God. Joseph's life does not teach us that Spirit-filled people will avoid trouble and trials and live smooth and unruffled lives. But it does teach us that you can go through those trials with joy, remain useful, be God-centred, and look for how God will vindicate His righteousness in you, and bring you through. Had Joseph given himself to bitterness and resentment, God's plan would have been to use another man and another means to save many lives.

Joseph, still Spirit-filled, comforts these men, speaks kindly to them, and promises to keep providing for them. And perhaps here Joseph is, for the last time, a mighty shadow of Christ. Because one day, God will say to the redeemed regarding our own sin against God: fear not, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. Through My Cross-death, you have become trophies of grace, and I will nourish you and take care of you forever.

And so the book of Genesis closes with how this godly man finished his race.

²² So Joseph dwelt in Egypt, he and his father's household. And Joseph lived one hundred and ten years.

²³ Joseph saw Ephraim's children to the third generation. The children of Machir, the son of Manasseh, were also brought up on Joseph's knees. ²⁴ And Joseph said to his brethren, "I am dying; but God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."²⁵ Then Joseph took an oath from the children of Israel, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here."²⁶ So Joseph died, being one hundred and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

Joseph reached the ideal Egyptian age of 110. He saw his great-grandchildren through Ephraim, and Manasseh. The reference to Machir's children being brought up on his knees refers to the same thing that Jacob did with Ephraim and Manasseh. Some of these Joseph adopted.

When the time came, Joseph spoke to his brothers. We don't know if his older brothers outlived him, and how many, or if this refers to the Israelites in general. Given his hard and painful life, we shouldn't be surprised if he lived a decade or two less than some of his older brothers. And like Jacob, he places them under oath, an oath that will be passed down from father to son, to carry his bones up to the promised land. He is not going to ask for an immediate burial in Canaan – but he so trusts in the promises of God that he knows somehow there is going to be a huge transplant of Israel back to the land which is theirs. And he asks, when you do that, you take my bones there and you bury them there. So he dies, is embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt, not buried in a sealed tomb.

Now which book of the Bible records how Israel entered the land, conquered it, and re-took their inheritance? The book of Joshua. Turn to the very end of Joshua, chapter 24:

³² *The bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel had brought up out of Egypt, they buried at Shechem, in the plot of ground which Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for one hundred pieces of silver, and which had become an inheritance of the children of Joseph. (Jos. 24:32)*

When Joseph is buried, it is as if the account is complete. Israel now has the land promised to Abraham. Joseph has shown us how God moved in redemptive history, to get his people out of Canaan, into Egypt, so as to grow them and then get them out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and into Canaan with a terrible swift sword. Joseph has shown us the doctrine of providence, God ruling over all for His glory and His people's good. Joseph has shown us the person of Christ, shadowed in his life and events.

God will have his way, not only in past history, but in future history. He is the Grandmaster who will win 100% of the time. The question for you and me is, are you one of His, walking with Him?