

Genesis 45:3-8,11, 50:18-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. 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 five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 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. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.'

Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 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.

Romans 8:5-6, 18-25, 28 (New Revised Standard Version)

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Along the shoreline of Israel near Tel Aviv, the Dolphinarium"  
was a very popular gathering place for young Israelis --  
-- until a suicide bomber blew himself up on the crowded dance floor  
murdering twenty-one young adults and wounding many others.

The next day a spontaneous memorial with a defiant message appeared,  
when people brought flowers and other meaningful objects,  
and hung a sign that said, "lachaim – lo nafsik lirkode"  
'Choose life – don't stop dancing'...

... **a bold declaration, we choose life and we will not stop dancing.**

That story raises some difficult and complicated questions,  
**where is God, how is God involved and does he respond  
when evil, disastrous and terrible things happen?**

According to Genesis, Joseph was his father's favorite son.  
spoiled, disliked & resented by his 10 jealous older brothers.

When he was 17, Jacob sent Joseph to check up on them,  
and his brothers decided to get rid of him once and for all.  
So, they sold him to a caravan of slave-traders traveling to Egypt,  
who sold Joseph as a slave to an Egyptian officer named Potiphar.

Joseph was very intelligent and a capable manager, and eventually

Potiphar put him in charge of his whole household and property.  
The Bible also describes Joseph as a handsome and winsome young man,  
who caught the wandering and lustful eye of Potiphar's wife.

Joseph refused to betray Potiphar's trust and rejected her advances,  
so, then she accused Joseph of sexual impropriety,  
which landed him in prison, though he was quite innocent.

In prison, through an amazing and remarkable turn of events,  
Joseph was able to interpret a disturbing dream that Pharaoh had,  
warning him that after 7 years of good and bountiful harvests,  
seven years of severe famine and food shortage would follow.  
So, Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of all the food resources of Egypt.

He was responsible to store food during seven years of abundance  
in preparation for the coming 7 years of terrible famine & hunger.  
Joseph rose to become the chief administrator over all of Egypt,  
in charge of food distribution and second in command under Pharaoh.

The famine spread worldwide, even up into the land of Canaan,  
and eventually Joseph's brothers to come to Egypt to buy food  
from the brother they had sold into slavery so many years before.

When his brothers didn't recognize him, Joseph tested them  
to determine if they have changed and regret what they did to him,  
**destroying the life and future that he had planned and expected.**

The Genesis passage we read earlier describes a marvelous scene,  
when Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers. vs. 4,5, 50:20

He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ... God sent me before you to preserve life. ... 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's focus looked beyond the harm his brothers had done to him,  
but, instead, he recognizes how God had transformed his trauma ---

-- and by choosing reconciliation over retribution and revenge,  
he opens their situation toward hopeful new possibilities.

He does not attribute his brothers' sinful actions to God,

but **trusts that God was working behind the scenes all along**, vs. 8, 20,

So, it was not you who sent me here, but God... Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for  
good...

A surprising characteristic of the Joseph story in Genesis is that  
there is no mention of God or of God's role until the very end.

It is as if God vanishes from this part of Genesis.

That perceived absence of God is the story-teller's technique.

It's a device for telling the story from Joseph's perspective,

to whom it seemed as if God had disappeared and abandoned him.

But Joseph re-interprets his suffering by recognizing at the end,  
that though God seemed silent and invisible along the way,  
yet God had been at work and orchestrating events all along.

In bringing Joseph through all of his troubles, losses and suffering,  
in the end it is clear, there was a larger purpose behind all of it.

God was up to something that Joseph couldn't see at the time,

**to ultimately accomplish the good purpose as God intended.**

The point and message of this passage

is that God does intrude & uses situations & circumstances of life

to bring about gracious good, benefit and intended blessings...

... just as God saved & preserved the people from famine and starvation  
through the harsh suffering and slavery that Joseph had endured.

No doubt all of us could tell stories of terrible wrongs done to us  
that upset, delayed or even destroyed the life-plans we had made.

In my case I was cheated out of a business I'd help build  
and rather than fight my friend's widow, I chose to walk away,  
in bitter frustration, feeling betrayed, angry and disappointed.

And eventually I choose to get over it and move on with my life  
rather than allow my anger and resentment to fester inside.

These many years later, I have recognized and I appreciate now,  
that though I lost the material wealth and future I'd planned on,  
it was really a second chance to live a much more meaningful life,  
a fulfilling life with purpose that does make a difference,  
because **God has more than made up for all that was taken away.**

And nothing that the one who cheated me has, wealth & possessions,  
that I would consider trading for the life I share with Kathy,  
or my sense fulfillment, satisfaction and joy of being a pastor.

I believe my experience illustrates the point of Paul's Romans letter  
as a very clear and concise exploration of Christianity and faith,  
a call to stop, refocus and think deeply and carefully  
because there's more to it than just our present context,  
because God intrudes, which opens up new hope and possibilities,  
as God's grace and loving purpose pours into our life-situation.

The Apostle understands something about suffering and perspective.  
So, he applies this concept of long-term, eternal perspective  
as the way to interpret theologically pain and suffering,  
the concerns and worries that captivate our attention...

... as he writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17,

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure...

His longer perspective views & intentionally lives this mortal life,  
recognizing, as God's way of preparing us the coming eternal life.

For seven chapters Paul explains about God's gifts of grace and life,  
and Rom. 8 highlights how that wonderful grace changes everything.

That change begins in the battleground of our minds & desires, vs. 5-6,

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

The point is, the defective & deceptive values, loyalties & longings  
of our self-centered nature and of this world are in conflict  
with allowing the Holy Spirit, God's gracious presence in us,  
to redirect us toward more Christ-like faithful living--  
**-- two fundamentally different & opposite ways and modes of living.**

By "flesh", Paul is not referring to the flesh on our bones,  
but is used as a metaphor to describe our human tendency  
to seek and possess things of immediate desire and pleasure.

Flesh, as he uses the term, describes when our lives are lived  
under the bondage of external wants, urges and worldly desires  
that can keep us self-centered, mine and me first orientation,  
and endlessly striving to prove our own value and worthiness.

In sharp contrast, the Spirit, refers to the Holy Spirit of God,  
the promised presence of God who indwells all Christians,  
who nudges, calls, speaks in prayer & opens Scripture to us.

It is the Holy Spirit who creates a hunger and longing in us  
to grow deeper toward more authentic & faithful Christian living,  
toward the joyful, meaningful & abundant life God intends for us.

In this passage, Paul's focus is on what motivates and drives us.

Is it our fear, our wounds and desires of this corrupted world,  
or is it gratitude and trust that God will do as promised,  
and accomplish in us what we cannot do for ourselves?

Through the Holy Spirit we have been and are being grafted  
into the continuing love-story of God's grace and blessings...

... which is the gradual process of the Spirit at work in our lives  
drawing us away from this world's defective ways and thinking  
toward entrusting ourselves to God's care, will and purpose.

We tend to focus on the here and now, on our immediate concerns.  
Up close many things seem devastatingly crucial and momentous,  
yet at a distance, and taken in the total context of our lives,  
they fade insignificantly into the fabric of our background.

When I was learning to make quick and sharp turns on a motorcycle,  
my tendency was to focus on my front wheel and what was beside me,  
which made turning quickly & smoothly more difficult and awkward.

I learned in time, not to focus on where the motorcycle is right now,  
but instead, you turn your head toward where you're trying to go,  
and then you will naturally lean and turn in that direction.

Motorcycle riding involves many spiritual truths, such as,  
don't obsess on the now, but look ahead toward the promises of God,  
**for where you are is far less important than where you are going.**

Sometimes we focus on our immediate troubles, fears and failings,  
and seem to doubt or forget the amazing promises, our hope in God.

That's the message, as Paul explains further, vs. 18, 25, 28,

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. For we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Paul is describing the truth of promise and hope amid suffering,  
that is based upon two critical characteristics of God:

- 1<sup>st</sup> God's grace, power, mercy and promises are far greater  
than even our worst wound, defeat, failure or loss.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> God will surely and usefully transform and redeem and use  
even our worst losses & mistakes to produce good blessings.

The Apostle understands something about suffering & perspective.  
He applies the concept of long-term, eternal perspective  
as the way to interpret theologically our pain & suffering.

Paul recognizes that this life is finite, momentary and passing,  
and that even our worst suffering doesn't even come close  
when compared to the glory, promise and joy that awaits,  
that is so much more than anything that we can see in the present.

God never promised that we won't have hard times and difficulties,  
or promised, or even suggested that we would sail through this life  
without any wounds, hurts, troubles, disasters or problems.

**However, God did promise that he will never leave us or forsake us.**

But then Paul explains it even further, something incredible,  
that not only is God always present with us and sustaining us  
but also, somehow God will redeem every situation and loss,

meaning that from even the worst disasters & brokenness of our lives  
incredibly, God will always transform them into good somehow,  
into fulfilling God's purpose & blessing in and for our lives...

**...so that even the worst and most painful that we have to endure,  
God can use for our benefit, for God's purpose – our good & growth.**

Our call is to embrace the present as the place where God has put us,

as the place where God intends working in us and through us,  
whether this is the place & circumstance of our choosing or not...  
**... and today, may God give us the grace and strength, faith and courage  
we need for the journey toward the promise and purpose God intends.**

These are not the easy words, maybe not words that we want to hear,  
- we'd much rather suppose that God's grace and faithfulness  
means that we won't ever have to struggle or suffer loss.

But God's gracious, perfect and eternal good purpose  
takes trust and time to ripen, deepen and develop.

So, take seriously God's promise, as we read in Ephesians 3:20-21,

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or  
imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

**Therefore, we choose life and so we must not stop dancing!**