

This week, we continue a three-week series on the life of Joseph and the will of God in our lives.¹ If you have any questions, feel free to email me at benjamin.j.williams@gmail.com

Sermon Outline

“Is God’s Will for Me Good?”

1. The Issue
 - a. Romans 8:28 “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”
 - b. This is a simple enough answer, and sometimes it is useful. However, at many times it is not at all apparent how this could be true.
2. Life of Joseph
 - a. Outline
 - i. Thrown into a Pit (37:18-24)
 - ii. Sold into Slavery (37:25-28)
 - iii. Portrayed as Dead (37:29-35)
 - iv. Falsely Accused and Imprisoned (39)
 - b. If we believe that this life was according to God’s will, how can we reconcile these events with the idea of “good”? Once again, I have no answers, only observations.
3. Observation #1
 - a. *Saying that, “All things work together for good,” is not the same as saying, “All things are good.”*
 - b. Is the crucifixion of Jesus evil or good? The crucifixion of Jesus was a wicked act. It was a lynching, the murder of the innocent by a mob. The crucifixion, though itself the greatest evil, worked out for me as the greatest good.
 - c. Christians do not believe that everything we see or experience is good, though it exists in God’s world. There is real evil in the world. What we are asked to believe is that God’s good purpose is accomplished despite evil, triumphing over it.
4. Observation #2
 - a. *God is good, but He may not be nice.*
 - b. A “nice” neighbor leaves you alone and occasionally does you a favor. God is not “nice” in this sense. He is intrusive, demanding, jealous, powerful, and dangerous.
 - c. C.S. Lewis perhaps explained this best when he created his fictional character Aslan as a representation of Jesus. Aslan is a lion. The children in Narnia ask Mr. Beaver if he is safe, and Mr. Beaver replies, “Safe? ... Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”
5. Observation #3
 - a. *Not all the good in the world is for me.*
 - b. Is it unreasonable that I must sometimes experience hardship so that others may experience something good at my expense? Parents know that this is good.
 - c. Joseph comes to this conclusion at the end, acknowledging that his family and kin were saved from famine only because of the hardship he endured (Genesis 50:20).

¹ My first book read in preparation for this series was John C. Lennox, *Joseph: A Story of Love, Hate, Slavery, Power, and Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

6. Observation #4

- a. *Pain is not necessarily evil. Events which cause pain can produce great good.*
- b. Leprosy kills the nerves so that lepers cannot feel pain. They are not better off, often losing limbs in accidents because they did not have pain as a warning.
- c. Struggle has value, and pain in some sense is part of struggle.
- d. Once again, parents know this best of all (Hebrews 12:11).

7. New Question: Can I like a God who runs the world this way? Can I love Him?

- a. The logic problem of a life like Joseph can be managed, but the emotional tole of such a life is another matter.
- b. I suspect that if God were a distant god, requiring suffering from us without explanation or sympathy, we would be unable to love Him.
- c. God became us to suffer with us. He has shown us that the hardships which His will demands come at a cost that He Himself is willing to pay (Hebrews 5:7-9).

8.

Bible Class Outline

A Small Disclaimer and Explanation: The Gospel Project has chosen not to emphasize the tales of three significant women in Genesis: Hagar, Dinah, and Tamar. I understand why, as their stories are sad and sometimes a bit obscene, making them awkward for the public pulpit which we try to keep PG-rated. However, we would be cheating the text if we completely skipped over these stories. Thus, for adult classes this week, I'd like for us to pause for a moment and consider the difficult story of Judah and Tamar (not to be confused with David's daughter of the same name in 2 Samuel). I know parts of it are awkward, but the fact that Genesis devotes an entire chapter to this story is significant.

Judah & Tamar (Genesis 38)

1. Part One: The Problem

a. Outline

- i. Judah married a Canaanite woman and had three sons – Er, Onan, and Shelah (38:1-5).
- ii. Judah arranged the marriage of Er to Tamar (38:6).
- iii. Er was a wicked man and was executed by God (38:7).
- iv. Judah told Onan to raise up sons for Er's line by Tamar, but Onan refused to beget a child. God executed him as well (38:8-10).
- v. Judah then promised his youngest son, Shelah, to Tamar when he came of age (38:11).
- vi. However, when Shelah came of age, Judah did not keep his promise (38:14b).

b. At Stake

- i. Judah has not cared for Tamar and provided for her.
- ii. Judah has not kept his word.
- iii. Judah's succession/heritage is at stake, as his own wife is dead (38:12) as are two of his three sons, all without an heir.

2. Part Two: The Solution

a. Outline

- i. Tamar planned to entrap Judah by disguising herself (38:12-14).
- ii. Judah thought Tamar was a prostitute and offered to pay her for sex (38:15-17). Tamar required proof that Judah would pay up, and so asked that Judah leave his signet ring, his cord, and his staff – the ancient equivalent of ID (38:18-19).
- iii. Shortly afterwards, Judah attempted to pay the "prostitute" as promised, but she was nowhere to be found (38:20-23). The text also clues us in at this point that not only did Judah think he was hiring a prostitute, but that she was also a "cult prostitute," meaning she was in the employ of a pagan cult of some sort.
- iv. Three months later, when Tamar's pregnancy was starting to show, she was accused of infidelity (38:24).
- v. Tamar produced the ID items and demanded that Judah identify them and thereby claim fatherhood of the child (38:25). Judah admitted the facts and acknowledged that Tamar has been "more righteous than I" (38:26).

- b. Outcome: Tamar had twin sons, Perez and Zerah (38:27-30). Perez became Judah's heir.

3. Discussion Questions / Lessons Learned

- a. **Consider the sordid life of Judah. What does this tell us about the kind of people God has chosen as His own?**
 - i. *God did not choose and favor these people because they were such fine individuals.*
 - ii. The history of God's people is teeming with tragedy, evil, and sadness. God loves them anyway.
 - iii. God reminds Israel of this from time to time (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).
- b. **Consider the scene where Judah prepares to condemn Tamar. What can we learn about the way we judge others?**
 - i. *Hypocrisy is always ugly.*
 - ii. Judah paid prostitutes for sex, but wanted to have Tamar burned alive when she was found to be pregnant and unmarried (38:24).
 - iii. Compare this to the well-known scene in John 8:1-11.
- c. **Consider the lie that Judah had told Jacob about Joseph's death. How do we feel about the way Judah is now tricked by Tamar?**
 - i. *Justice loves irony.*
 - ii. Judah had arranged the selling of Joseph into slavery (37:26-28). Afterward, he and his brothers showed Jacob the blood-stained coat of Joseph as part of their deception, saying, "Please identify whether it is your son's robe or not" (37:32).
 - iii. I wonder if Judah recalled those words when Tamar held out Judah's clothes and said, "Please identify whose these are ..." (38:25).
- d. **Can we conclude that Judah will never become a decent person?**
 - i. *Moral growth can take a long time to bear fruit.*
 - ii. Judah sold his brother, lied to his father, ignored his daughter-in-law, and apparently made a habit of consorting with prostitutes. This is not the start of a story about a good man!
 - iii. Later, it is an older and better Judah who pledges his own life if any harm should come to his brother Benjamin (43:9). Judah leads the brothers in confessing what appeared to be theft to the Egyptian ruler they did not yet know to be Joseph (44:14-16). Judah begs for the life of Benjamin and offers to take his place in peril (44:30-34). It is Judah's honesty and sincerity which finally broke Joseph's heart and led to the resolution of the story (45:1-3).
 - iv. When Jacob blesses his sons, he does not give the leadership of the family-clan to Reuben, the firstborn (49:4). Instead, he names Judah as the leader (49:9-10).
- e. **Why does Genesis devote an entire chapter to this strange story? What do we learn about God's overall story from this small tale?**
 - i. *No story is too strange and no action too evil to prevent the will of God in Jesus.*

- ii. Judah's son Perez would have children of his own. In a few generations, his descendants would include Boaz, the husband of Ruth, and later Jesse, the father of King David.
- iii. This connection is mentioned in the New Testament as part of the lineage of Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew 1:3-6).