How Did God Mean It?

"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Genesis 50:20 (ESV)

The same event can involve very different intentions.

Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery because they wanted to be rid of him. They resented him, hated him, and seized an opportunity to remove him from their lives. What followed for Joseph included separation from his father, servitude in a foreign land, false accusation, and imprisonment.

None of that was imaginary suffering. Neither was his brothers' guilt imaginary.

Years later, when they stood before him afraid of what he might do, Joseph did not pretend their actions had been innocent. He said plainly, "You meant evil against me."

Faith does not require us to call evil good.

Cruelty does not become kindness because something beneficial eventually follows it. Betrayal does not become faithfulness. Those who deliberately harm others remain responsible for what they intended and what they did.

But Joseph's statement did not end with what his brothers meant.

"But God meant it for good."

Notice that Joseph did not merely say that he had managed to find something positive in a terrible experience. He spoke of God's purpose. His brothers had acted with one intention, while God was accomplishing something their hatred could neither understand nor finally prevent.

They wanted Joseph gone. God placed him where he would preserve life.

That does not mean Joseph could see the whole purpose while he was living through it. The pit did not come with an explanation. The journey into Egypt did not include a written account of what God would accomplish years later. Prison offered no obvious evidence that Joseph was being prepared to help preserve his family.

He had to live through days whose meaning he could not yet understand.

So do we.

We would prefer to know immediately why God has permitted a painful circumstance. We want the explanation while the wound is fresh. We want to see how the pieces fit before we are asked to continue walking by faith.

But God has not promised to explain every chapter while we are still in it.

Joseph's history gives us reason to trust God's wisdom. It does not give us permission to invent explanations for every person's suffering. We should be careful about telling someone exactly why God allowed a loss when God has not told us.

Sometimes the faithful answer is simply, "I do not know."

Yet not knowing His purpose is different from having no reason to trust Him.

At the cross, human wickedness and God's saving purpose met in a way no observer could fully comprehend that afternoon. Those who condemned Jesus were responsible for their evil. God was accomplishing redemption through the death of His Son.

The darkest intentions did not defeat His goodness.

Perhaps someone has meant you harm. Perhaps you are still living with the consequences. You do not have to deny what happened, excuse the wrong, or pretend that it no longer hurts.

But neither must you conclude that the person who wounded you has determined everything your life can become.

Their intention is not the measure of God's purpose.

Joseph could eventually look back and see how God had preserved many lives. We may not receive such a clear explanation in this life. Still, the God Joseph trusted has not changed.

You may know what someone meant by what they did.

How did God mean it?

You may not yet know. But you can trust His character while the answer remains beyond your sight.

JOSHUA HOUSE BOOKS

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