

## **“When the Plan Goes Wrong”**

*Reading: Genesis 37:17b-36; Romans 6:1-14*

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Maybe you're familiar with the classic board game “Mouse Trap,” in which you build a complicated contraption designed to try to trap your opponent's mouse-shaped playing piece by turning the crank to snap the plank to boot the marble down the chute and so on until a cage falls to trap the mouse. If you're *very* lucky, you might even have gotten the trap to work once or twice. It's a familiar example of a Rube Goldberg machine, an absurdly complicated device that uses a chain reaction of deliberately over-engineered mechanical steps to accomplish something simple, like flipping a light switch or making toast or trapping a mouse. The joy in watching them work is that they're unpredictable and surprising: they use all kinds of unrelated things to accomplish their goals, so it's unclear at the start what the result will be, and because they're so complicated, it's unclear if they'll work at all.

And of course that's life, too. We live our lives as one huge chain reaction of events rebounding off of other events, and it's hardly unusual for us to see reactions and results that were anything but what we planned for or predicted. Unintended consequences are just a part of life, and if we could always accurately predict the outcomes of all of our actions, the world would be a very different place.

That's one of the morals of our story in our reading for this week. It's the story of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, who was renamed Israel in our story last Sunday. Joseph's story is a great rags-to-riches tale: he's sold into slavery, but ends up second only to the most powerful king on earth. And it's a morality tale, as well: his wicked brothers plot to get rid of him, but he ends up saving them and his entire family from starvation during a famine. It's a story with a good reversal in it that leaves us with a happy ending, which we like.

But it's also a tale of unintended consequences. The epitaph of the story is something many of you are probably familiar with: Joseph's statement to his brothers that “you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” His brothers had no idea what the consequences of their actions would be, and in fact their intent was entirely opposite what ended up happening. And make no mistake: what these brothers did was truly despicable. We've been following the developments of God's plan to redeem His fallen creation by building a relationship with this one family of descendants of Abraham, and with each generation, we've seen some really awful actions.

But this is not a crime of passion, like Cain's murder of his brother Abel. This is not a premeditated con committed by one man, like Jacob's plot to steal his brother Esau's inheritance. This is a group decision, all of the brothers deciding together that their own flesh and blood is so annoying that he deserves to be gotten rid of. They begin by plotting to kill him, toss his body out to be left to rot — which would have been an extreme disgrace in that culture — and then lie to cover it up. The oldest brother, Reuben, appears to have at least some pity on Joseph, and he convinces the others not to kill him, but to leave him in a pit. Reuben apparently was going to let him out later. So they capture Joseph when he arrives, throw him in a pit, and then sit down for a nice lunch, because kidnapping is hungry business.

And while they're eating, Judah, one of the brothers, says what may be the most appalling part of the whole affair: "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." Murder is not enough for Judah; he wants to get something out of it. His plan, then, is to sell Joseph into slavery, because "after all, he is our brother." This is a man who has a sickening view of morality. And if you remember Abraham's story, you'll remember that the Ishmaelites were also descendants of Abraham, so Joseph's brothers are selling him as a slave to his cousins, so that they can then sell him again. This is as messy of a family as I've ever heard of.

In fact, it's one of those places where sin is at its worst. How badly affected by sin do you have to be to sit down to lunch after you've just thrown your own brother in a pit, presumably to die of exposure, starvation, or thirst? How steeped in sin do you have to be to decide that murder for its own sake just isn't profitable enough? But as is so often the case, when sin is at its worst, God is at His best: they intended evil, but God used their plot to bring about the salvation of His plan for humanity. Joseph's brothers wanted to dispose of him, but he eventually ruled over Egypt and prepared for a seven-year famine, so that when Joseph's family was in need, he could provide them with food. They intended evil, but God planned for good. We never really know what the outcome of our actions will be. The consequences we intend are often not the consequences we receive.

"You intended to harm me," Joseph says to his brothers, "but God intended it for good." From one perspective, that's a reassurance, because it reminds us of the fact that we can't see the future. We don't know what God's plans are. The situation might be terrible from our perspective, but we cannot know what God will do out of those circumstances down the road. We don't know how God will grow us in our times of trouble. We don't know whose heart will be softened and receptive as a result of our faithfulness in a time of crisis. We don't know how the pit we find ourselves in right now might one day lead to us being the savior of others when they're in need. We cannot know how or when God plans good in our times of evil. And that gives us some comfort. Evil does not have the last word when God is around. "Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning," the psalmist tells us.

But there's a troubling theological flip-side to Joseph's insistence that though his brothers intended him harm, God intended it for good. If that's the case, and if God can bring good out of any circumstance, then what do our actions matter? If I can do bad things and have good things result, are my actions really bad? Aren't we getting kind of close to the idea of fate, that what will be will be, and I can't really impact the plan God has? I can do bad things, and as long as God plans for good, shouldn't I be okay? Were Joseph's brothers accountable for what they did, since it ended up saving God's people from starvation in the end?

And what's more, doesn't it make God kind of a monster to suggest that He works in this way? Did He really need to put Joseph through all of that to provide for his family twenty years later? Does God really need to make me sick, or kill my loved ones, for me to grow in my faith? Does that really make the suffering worth it? What sort of God is that? What does Joseph's story tell us about God and our actions?

Centuries after Joseph's story, the apostle Paul wrote about something like this in his letter to the Christians in Rome. He was arguing that we are not included in God's family by following God's

law, and that in fact God graciously took the initiative in making the way available for us through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is Christ who marks us as being in God's family, not our own actions in accordance with God's law. Some people thought that this logically implied that, if God's grace is demonstrated by the fact that He loves us even when we break His law, then therefore we ought to sin even more to make God's grace even greater. Let us go on sinning so that grace may increase!

Probably not many people really take the time to examine their actions to that degree; I doubt very many people are theologically reflective enough to justify their sinful lives that way. But what we might be more likely to do is to say that well, if God's capable of bringing good things out of the bad circumstances of life, then surely my sin isn't really that bad, is it? Surely God can't get that worked up over my sin if He's capable of intending good things to come out of evil. And so we fall into the age-old trap of thinking that it's just not that big of a deal. If I really screw things up, can't I just pray to God and ask Him to make it right by bringing something good out of it? I promise I'll learn a really important lesson and be a better person! Doesn't that make it all right?

You intended evil, but God intended good. Let us go on sinning that grace may increase. If we look back at that story of Joseph, we're reminded of those Rube Goldberg machines: there are unintended consequences to our actions. We can't see the end from the beginning. God's ability to bring good out of bad choices does not make the bad choices any better. Sinful choices are still sinful, in part because they are more likely to do damage to ourselves, others, and our relationship with God. Righteous actions are always righteous, because they are more likely to do good to ourselves, others, and our relationship with God. It's inherent in the actions, regardless of the unforeseen consequences. So as we look at Joseph's story, we're reminded that we can't predict the outcomes of our actions, so part of living a godly life is choosing those actions that are more clearly in line with what God intends.

And as we look at what Paul had to say on the subject, he reminds us that a godly life has to do with more than action and consequence, it has to do with identity. When we are baptized into Christ, we are buried with Him, and as He was raised to new life, we also live a new life in Him. We are set free from sin, no longer slaves to it. We are different people who relate to God differently. We do not look at sin and try to figure out ways to do as much of it as we can before we get caught, like we gamble with how much over the speed limit the State Trooper will let us drive before we get pulled over; we don't rationalize our sin by keeping score to see when God will smite us. We relate to God differently: we're not concerned with angering a righteous Judge, we're concerned about hurting our loving Father.

God does not work through our sinful actions, He works in spite of them, so that when we are in the darkness and catch a glimpse of the light, we will be so dazzled by it that we desire it with all our hearts. He does not cause evil to happen so that good may result, He invades the strongholds of evil in our fallen world so that they may be shaken by His goodness, and the plans of evil might be foiled. The reality is that our sin is worse than we think it is, and at the same time, God's grace is greater than we think it is. We do not know what the results of our actions will be, but we do know that we serve a God who calls us to holy living, to faith, to repentance, and to a life transformed in Jesus Christ.



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