

GOD DOES NOT MAKE A MISTAKE

"But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." Genesis 50:20.

The story from which our text is taken is well known. It is the story of one of the cleanest characters mentioned in God's Word. His name was Joseph. It is also an account of one of the meanest tricks recorded in the Bible --- the story of the selling of Joseph by his own brothers and his consequent suffering. In some respects it is the grandest illustration of the Divine Providence in the whole Bible. To appreciate fully the words of our text let us review some of the great events in Joseph's life.

Jacob had twelve sons, ten of whom were away in the fields, so one day he sent Joseph to inquire about them. The brothers saw Joseph in the distance, and their longstanding jealousy came to a head. They first threw him into a pit, and then later sold him into slavery. From the back of a camel Joseph saw the land of his fathers fade away on the horizon like the sunset of hope, and in all probability he was perplexed as to the purpose and plan of God. As a trusted house slave in Egypt he was tempted by Potiphar's wife, but he refused her solicitations. Because of his honorable repulse of her infatuation Joseph was falsely charged with attempted adultery and cast into prison and left there for years.

What a shock to this young idealist that he should be imprisoned because he retained his purity! Perhaps he was tempted to become bitter, but the record shows that he did not yield to the temptation. Had he not known God, it might have appeared to him that it pays to sin. The secret of his endurance was expressed beautifully in the repeated statement, "The Lord was with him."

In prison Joseph interpreted the dream of the butler, who assured him that he would remember what Joseph had done for him when he was restored to royal favor. Because he was forgotten by this man, I can imagine Joseph being tempted to lose faith in human nature altogether. But his faith in God stood the test and it is significant that Joseph did not again ask a favor from man, not even from the king. Cruelly sold into slavery by his brothers, suffering because he refused to sin, and forgotten by someone whom he had helped were enough trials to shatter his faith had it not been for the fact that God gave him the inner assurance that He was with him through it all.

A turn in the fortune of Joseph came when Pharaoh, the King, had a dream which no one could interpret. Then the butler remembered Joseph as one who could interpret dreams. Willing to consult anyone, Pharaoh sent for the prisoner. He was impressed very much with his modesty and his ability. To the surprise of many, he offered Joseph the second place in the great kingdom of Egypt. As there was soon to be a famine in the land, he wanted someone of exceptional wisdom to take matters in hand.

When Joseph served in this capacity, people came to him from all parts and asked for rations. One day several men appeared, speaking a strange language. Joseph listened, remembered it as the tongue of his boyhood days, and recognized the men as his brothers. At first he did not disclose his identity, but on a later visit for further supplies of food, he said, "I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him for they were troubled at his presence." They thought Joseph would have vengeance on them for selling him when he was a lad. They realized that their brother had such power in Egypt that he could do what he wished.

When Joseph had no strength they were bullies, but after he had become mighty they feared what he might do. When they came to him whining for kindly treatment Joseph said, "Now be not grieved nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life." He was too conscious of God's over-ruling in his trials to be bitter with those who had injured him. The thing he was interested in was the fact that God had transformed their evil deed, and changed the course of his life. It takes a great man to forgive and forget personal injuries, but it takes an even greater one to confess to those who have wronged him that the injury has turned out to his advantage, yet Joseph did just that.

Joseph looked back at his trials and saw that the very things he thought at the time were evils had turned out to be blessings. He had been led over a very strange road -- sold by his brethren, imprisoned for adherence to principle and neglected by those whom he had assisted. But, as Joseph looked back, he could see that his troubles had been stepping stones to a higher and richer life. For him calamity had been the gateway to success. How God often uses hurtful things, and makes them contribute to His purposes, is illustrated by the way in which men make the venom of snakes into a healing agency. Many sufferers from rheumatism have been helped by the stings of bees.

When Joseph and his brothers returned to Egypt after they had taken their father's body back to Canaan for burial, the brothers became frightened at the thought of their sin against Joseph and possible revenge at his hands and sent a messenger to him to plead for pardon. They feared that he might try to get even with them for their sin against him in other years. This was an entirely unwarranted feeling. He had forgiven them long ago; had provided for them many years; and now they tried to open up the old grievance. You see, their request was a reflection of their unforgiving hearts. They assumed Joseph was like themselves. How this hurt him! We are told that he wept. Those tears were caused by the fact that they did not fully believe him and trust him. Joseph assured them that while they meant what they did against him for evil, God meant it for good. He might have taken the wrong attitude toward the trying experiences through which he had passed and charged it to the meanness of his brothers but he would have missed the best part of the truth. Such an attitude would have hurt him and would not have done his brothers any good. He might have emphasized the malice of his brothers and the wrong they had done to him, but he had a better and the right attitude toward his trial. He saw in it not the meanness of men but the purpose and providence of God.

If vengeance was to be taken, God, to whom vengeance belongeth, would look after that. What the brothers of Joseph had done was cruel and wicked; yet it had resulted in good; in good for Joseph, for his brothers and for the whole nation. "Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good." Just how what was happening to him was going to turn out for good, Joseph may not have been able to see when he was lying in the dungeon. But later he learned that it was the purpose and plan of God to bring good out of evil and make the wrath of man to praise Him. The purpose of God is that by which He orders or permits whatever comes to pass. The plan of God is the method by which He brings things to pass. We need not cease to believe in the goodness of God because we cannot see at any given time how what is happening to us is going to be for our ultimate good. This is where Christian faith and trust must play their part.

"He writes in characters too grand
For our short sight to understand.
We catch but broken strokes, and try
To fathom all the mystery
Of withered hopes, of deaths, of life,
The endless war, the useless strife;
But there with larger, clearer sight
We shall see this -- His way was right."

All things come to pass under God's authority, but He never makes a mistake. The purpose, the end and the means are in keeping with an all-wise, all-powerful and all-benevolent God. He does all things well.

It may take time to grasp the divine purpose. It does not always appear on the surface or at once. Joseph had to wait for years before God's meaning was ultimately made clear. The weary months passed by, affording plenty of opportunity to wonder, but at length the meaning became clear -- "God meant it for good."

Joseph was a great soul. Prosperity is the best test of a really great soul. Prosperity does not make a man, but it reveals him. As someone has said, "It takes a steady hand to carry a full cup." The real thing about life is not where you live, but how you live. Joseph could have lived a low life in a high place had he desired, but he refused to do so. He saw God in every part of life, and he believed that God was at the back of things, and that this universe was ruled by Him. Truly God is always master of the situation.

Out of this scripture comes this lesson, When you cannot grasp God's meaning, trust Him. We can trust Him when we cannot understand. Knowing that on the morrow His crucifixion would plunge His followers into darkness, confusion and dilemma, our Lord said, "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me." If God is good, and He is, and He means good, and He does, then you and I can trust Him even when the way is dark. Undoubtedly there will be times when we shall not be able to understand the peculiar situations which arise in our lives. In those hours let us trust God and rely upon Him. We can always be assured of the fact that God is good and whatever happens He always means good.

"Until I learned to trust
I never learned to pray;
And I did not learn to fully trust
'Till sorrows came my way.

Until I felt my weakness
His strength I never knew;
Nor dreamed 'til I was stricken
That He could see me through.

Who deepest drinks of sorrow
Drinks deepest, too, of grace;
He sends the storm so He Himself
Can be our hiding place.

His heart, that seeks our highest GOOD
Knows well when things annoy;
We would not long for heaven
If earth held only joy."