



When You're Down to Nothing,  
God Is Up to Something  
Genesis 37:1-28  
August 7, 2005

You know, you could see this family every day on television. Why, this kind of family could end up on Dr. Phil. Just imagine...

Dr. Phil:

Good morning folks. Today I am talking with one of the most dysfunctional families I have ever seen, the family of Jacob of Israel and his twelve sons. Tell me Jacob, when did you first realize your family was such a mess?

Jacob:

Well, the first I knew of anything wrong was when my boys brought back Joseph's bloody robe and said he'd been eaten by wild beasts.

Dr. Phil:

But that wasn't what really happened to Joseph, was it? There was a family secret, wasn't there, brother Judah?

Brother Judah:

Yeah, well, what really happened was we sold him to slave traders. The last we saw they were taking him to Egypt.

Dr. Phil:

You did what? Am I hearing you right? Whose idea was it to sell your little brother into slavery?

Judah: Well it was mine. But I did it to save him. Most of the rest of us wanted to kill him.

Dr Phil:

Now, let me get this straight. You brothers wanted to kill Joseph. Why in the world did they want to kill little Joe?

Judah:

Because he was such a jerk. Because he loved to tell on us. Because he claimed to have dreams in which we bowed down to him. Because he loved to strut around in that fancy robe Daddy gave him and rub it in that he's obviously Daddy's favorite son.

Dr. Phil:

Well, Daddy Jacob? Is that so? Have you been playing favorites between your sons?

Jacob:

Well er, I um...

Dr. Phil:

I think I get the picture, and it's not pretty. You brothers were so jealous you would have killed Joseph if you hadn't sold him first. And Joseph, he really was a jerk. And you Daddy Jacob, you stirred up all this sibling rivalry with your stupid favoritism. You've all got to face the facts.

I wonder what Dr. Phil would have done with that family. Who knows? But we do know what God did with that family. When we heard the scripture account, we left Joseph at verse 28 bouncing on the back of a camel toward Egypt. In just a few hours, that 17 year old boy had gone from the golden son of the tribe of Israel to nothing but raw material for the slave markets. But here is the rest of the story:

Joseph was sold to an Egyptian captain named Potiphar, who put Joseph in charge of his household. Young Joseph did such a good job managing things that he earned Potiphar's complete trust. Unfortunately Potiphar's wife wanted to have an affair with Joseph. When Joseph turned her down, she ran to Potiphar and claimed that Joseph had tried to assault her.

So Joseph ended up in the royal prison, presumably to rot there for the rest of his life. But the guards were impressed by the same qualities in Joseph that had impressed Potiphar, and gave Joseph some responsibility. Also, it became known that Joseph had a knack for interpreting dreams. So when Pharaoh had some disturbing dreams, Joseph was brought before Pharaoh to interpret them. Joseph explained the dreams: seven years of plenty would come upon the land, but they would be followed by seven years of drought and famine. And Joseph recommended a plan: during the first seven years, save up on grain, so that during the seven years of famine, you can sell it to the people. Pharaoh said, "That's brilliant, you're in charge." And so this boy, sold into slavery, became the Prime Minister of Egypt at age 30. A preacher named Jim Twamley says this just goes to show you that "When you're down to nothing, God is up to something."

Funny thing about God here: if you read back through the whole story, God is hardly ever mentioned. But as you follow the story, you get the feeling that this unnamed God is working behind the scenes to bend so many bad breaks back toward good. God takes Daddy Jacob's favoritism, and the brothers' murderous jealousy, and a teenage boy's obnoxiousness, and a housewife's desperation, and uses it all to bring good into Joseph's life. When you're down to nothing, God is indeed up to something.

This ancient story touches you and me right where we live, right in our families, which are so isolated and have so little support and yet have so much pressure. This story

touches us right where we live such flawed personal lives. It tells the bad news about how badly we can mess up, and it tells the good news that God is up to something behind the scenes of our personal messes.

How does God do that? Is God the puppet master who pulls the strings to our hands and feet and mouths – who controls everything we say and do? I don't think so. God didn't make Jacob lavish favoritism on Joseph. God didn't make Joseph behave like a jerk. God didn't make the Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. Each one behaved badly of his own free will. But God took their corporate cussedness and weaved it back into God's will and found a way to use it all to bring good into Joseph's life, to turn a 17 year old jerk into a mature Prime Minister of Egypt. That is the amazing thing about the ways of God, how God is in control, but God is not controlling.

I thank God that I am not a puppet but a human being: free to do good or ill. And when I do ill and make mistakes, God can take my character defects and blunders and fold them back into God's overall plan, and still bring about good in spite of me. And when ill is done to me, God can take even that and turn it back toward good again.

Lance Armstrong says that his cancer was the best thing that ever happened to him. Not everyone who has cancer would say that, but in Lance's case, cancer changed him and helped make him into a champion. I can imagine Joseph, Prime Minister of Egypt saying, "The best thing that ever happened to me was when my brothers sold me into slavery. By the grace of God, I became not bitter, but better."

Now hear me carefully. I am not saying that bad things just look bad on the outside but are really good. No, bad things – cancer, slavery, family strife, tragedy – are truly bad. What I am saying is that God can take what was meant for bad, and overwhelm it, or bypass it, or even transform it, into good.

When Joseph was a middle-aged man, still serving as Prime Minister of Egypt, a group of Hebrew brothers came to his office asking to buy grain to help their people survive the famine. Joseph recognized them, but they of course did not recognize him. Joseph put his brothers through a series of tests, and when he saw that they too had outgrown their own cussedness, Joseph burst out and told them:

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. (Genesis 45:4-5)

Later, when all the family had settled in Egypt, his brothers were still worried that Joseph might hold a grudge against them. So they came to him and asked his forgiveness for what they had done to him nearly twenty-five years before. Listen carefully to what Joseph told them:

Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that my people should be kept alive, as they are today. (Genesis 50:19b-20)

The unseen God, working slowly behind the scenes, had taken a family's treachery and tragedy and used it to save the whole family of God.

That's how it is in your family and mine. And that's how it is in your life and mine. Bad things happen, and a lot of it is our own doing. We are free to make a perfect mess of our lives and families. God lets us be that free. BUT, God does not let us be alone. God is still intimately involved in our lives, in all of it, the good and the bad. And whatever you and I meant for evil, God can take it and transform it and redefine it. Whatever we meant for evil, God meant it for good.

-- Douglas E. Murray

Further note: a helpful word for me came from Walter Brueggemann, who wrote in his Interpretation commentary on Genesis:

...in the contingencies of history, the purposes of God are at work in hidden and unnoticed ways. But the ways of God are nonetheless reliable and will come to fruition. (p. 289)