

A small group of us, mostly from SJK, are reading the bible together online. Our phone bible app has now brought us to the end of Genesis, where we find the old man Jacob (aka Israel) has just died. This leaves the 12 brothers together, in Egypt, where Joseph is 2<sup>nd</sup> in charge of the whole country. The other brothers are wondering how Joseph will now respond to them, in view of their earlier treachery towards him.

### THE PATHETIC AND THE GLORIOUS

*When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." (Genesis 50.15)*

*But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, 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 many people should be kept alive, as they are today. (Genesis 50.19-20)*

Dr. Don Carson comments:

Everything that is sad and flawed in this family [the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob] resurfaces when Jacob dies. Joseph's brothers fear that their illustrious sibling may have suppressed vengeful resentment only until the death of the old man. Why did they think like this? Was it because they were still lashed with guilt feelings? Were they merely projecting onto Joseph what they would have done had they been in his place?

Their strategy involves them in fresh sin: they lie about what their father said, in the hope that an appeal from Jacob would at least tug at Joseph's heartstrings. In this light, their abject submission ('*we are your servants*' 50.18) sounds less like loyal homage than desperate manipulation.

By contrast, Joseph weeps (50.17). He cannot help but see that these grovelling lies betray how little he is loved or trusted, even after seventeen years of nominal reconciliation (the time they had been in Egypt, 47.27). His verbal response displays not only his pastoral gentleness – '*he comforted them and spoke kindly to them*' promising to provide for them and their families (50.21) – it also reflects a man who has thought deeply about the mysteries of providence, about God's sovereignty and human responsibility. '*Do not fear,*' he tells them. '*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 many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*'

This profound reasoning comes into focus as we reflect on what Joseph does *not* say. He does not say that during a momentary lapse on God's part, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, but that God, being a superb chess player, turned the game around and in due course made Joseph prime minister of Egypt. Still less does he say that God's intention had been to send Joseph down to Egypt in a well-appointed chariot, but unfortunately Joseph's brothers mucked up the divine plan, forcing God to respond with clever counter-moves to bring about his own good purposes. Rather – *in the one event* – the selling of Joseph into slavery – there were two parties and two quite different intentions. On the one hand, Joseph's brothers acted, and their intentions were evil; on the other, God acted, and his intentions were good. Both acted to bring about this event, but while the evil in it must be traced back to the brothers and no further, the good in it must be traced back to God.

This is a common stance in scripture. It generates many complex philosophical discussions. But the basic notion is simple. God is sovereign, and invariably good; we are morally responsible, and frequently evil.