

Martin Luther on the Life of Joseph

1. God Makes Afflictions Serve Our Best Interest

Note: In the mysterious alchemy of God even the evils and ills of life which pain us must turn to good and help us on our way to perfection. This hallows the memory of past afflictions. So it did for Joseph, Martin Luther points out. In the light of this discovery that man of God found it doubly easy to forgive his brothers (Gen. 45:7).

It is not the nature of sin to produce anything good; this is the effect of divine goodness, which can turn evil into good This doctrine is intended only for Christians, for the children of God. They can submit to whatever evils come their way, hide their grief, and with confidence expect a thousand advantages in place of one disadvantage or loss. For we believe in God, who is the Creator Omnipotent, producing everything out of nothing, the best out of evils, and salvation out of things that are utterly desperate and hopeless.

2. The Paradoxical Ways of Our God

Note: The manner in which God often leads His own does not make faith any easier. Martin Luther calls attention to this (Gen. 37:31-33).

Thus God humbles His own in order to exalt them; He kills them in order to bring them back to life; He puts them to shame in order to glorify them; He casts them down in order to raise them up. But doing this is art and knowledge at their best, a fact which is usually not learned and understood without great labor and then only by very few. Yet it is true and certain, as the example before us testifies; for what is said in Ps. 105:21 is true: God made Joseph lord of Egypt and master and savior of many people. How? By selling him, casting him off, and killing him. These are works of God which cannot be understood until they have been completed and finished. Meanwhile, however, during their performance, they cannot be understood except by faith.

3. God's Purpose: Strengthening Us by His Word

Note: Such being the greatness of God's love for us, He must intend something good when He sends us affliction. Both Joseph and his brothers in the end found how true this is. This is the lesson Martin Luther draws from their story in his lectures on Genesis (45:3).

The ultimate purpose of afflictions is the mortification of the flesh, the expulsion of sins, and the checking of that original evil which is embedded in our nature. And the more you are cleansed, the more will you be blessed in the future life. For without a doubt glory will follow upon the calamities and vexations which we endure in this life. But the prime purpose of all these afflictions is the purification, which is extremely necessary and useful, lest we snore and become torpid and lazy because of the lethargy of our flesh. For when we enjoy peace and rest, we do not pray, we do not meditate on the Word but deal coldly with the Scriptures and everything that pertains to God or finally lapse into a shameful and ruinous security.

4. History Teaches Ultimate Benefits of Affliction

Note: Luther remarks that neither Joseph nor Jacob could see the glorious end God had in store for them when the murderous plots of the brothers brought them affliction after affliction. But we should not fail to profit by their experiences, says he in the beginning of his lectures on the story of Joseph's troubles, so rich in lessons.

As often, then, as we are afflicted and tried, we should look at this example, courageously resist our complaining and indignant flesh, and say: Why God has forsaken me so, I do not know; but I do not doubt that the purpose of my Father is best, is the wisest and the most beneficial, although my flesh does not see it at all but murmurs and struggles against the spirit. Nonetheless, this cross must be borne and overcome with faith and patience; for I see the marvelous, controlling plans of God at work in the lives of the holy fathers

5. Hold On to Patience

Note: At times we may see God's plan even in this life. Joseph did so in Egypt. He teaches us patient endurance, says Luther in his lectures on Gen. 41:40.

From this example [the life of Joseph], which is full of all virtues, let us learn to understand the divine wisdom and goodness and the way in which God guides us; let us learn to wait without end; and let us learn that no time of tribulation and trouble can be so great and so long as to break us or drive the Word of faith from our hearts, that Word which is "the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth" (Rom. 1:16). Therefore we should hold out.

6. "Ye Meant Evil, but God Meant It unto Good"

Note: However painful it may be, cross-bearing, like all affliction, is of great spiritual benefit to a Christian. It is, Luther says in his exposition of John 15:1, like the pruning of a vine. Whatever the designs of those may be who make the believer suffer for his religion, God makes good come of it. We see this in the statement Joseph made to his brothers regarding their deed: "Ye Meant Evil, but God Meant It unto Good"

All the sufferings of the Christians produce this benefit: they only further our Christian life and bring forth fruit in the Christian's fuller understanding and firmer confession of the Word, in his more certain hope, and in a wider spread of the kingdom of Christ. To be sure, the world intends to do us a very bad turn, but it does no more than what the church sings of the martyrs ... They do not know that, without being aware of it, they bring the Christians to eternal joys through martyrdom and death, so that such a martyrdom is nothing but taking a person gently by the arms and leading him to heaven, as one leads a bride to the dance. This is the purpose the suffering serves which the world inflicts on Christians: God converts the wrath into an instrument working for their best, as the pious patriarch Joseph told his brothers: "Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good" (Gen. 50:20). You wanted to kill me that I might not become your master, and you sold me to the Gentiles; but by the very means you used to prevent it you made me a master.

For God is a Master who can cause what would hinder and harm us, to further and profit us; what would kill us, to serve to bring us to life; what would move us to sin and condemn us, to strengthen our faith and hope and to cause our prayer to be all the more effective and all the more richly answered.

7. The Example of Joseph in Egypt:

Note: Luther adduces Joseph as providing an instance of untiring prayer.

For about thirteen years Joseph cried and continued to pray God to help him. But the longer, the worse; the more he prayed, the worse he fared. To this day this is what happens to Christians. When they have called and cried for a long time to God, they feel no improvement, but things grow worse, as they did with Joseph. If God had liberated Joseph, Jacob, his father would no doubt have been glad; but Joseph would have remained a shepherd. However, since the help was delayed so long, he became a lord over all Egypt, so that certainly no greater man can be found in Holy Scripture, no one who rose higher as world ruler than did Joseph.

Thus God still intends to deal with us. After He has denied us our petition for a long while and always said no, but we firmly cling to the yes, it shall finally be yes, and not no, for His Word will not lie: "Whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in My name, He will give it you" (John 15:16). But our reason is highly offended at this delay and would gladly have God answer us promptly. So it is necessary not to be offended. Let our Lord God say no and suspend the answer of our petition for a year, two years, three years, or longer still, and let us only watch that hope and faith in His promise are not torn from our heart. Something will come of our prayer in the end, and God will give us far more than we asked Him to give.

8. The Story of Joseph an Illustration

Note: Luther points out why at times God does not promptly give what is asked, using Joseph as a case in point in his lectures on Gen. 41:40.

It is the nature of God not to give in accordance with our weak petitions. Just so Joseph desired liberation and return from his prison to his father. He pleaded for nothing greater. Then God in heaven lets him burn incense and sweet-smelling things for a while but replies with the words of Paul: You know not what you are asking; I am in the habit of giving above and beyond what you ask and understand; therefore I must detain you somewhat longer; you will have to wait a while; I desire still more of those wisps of ascending incense (your prayers). Later, however, Joseph received what he did not understand, hope for, or ever had dared ask for.

These are certainly great and admirable examples, which we not only should learn for ourselves but also should place before others that we may recognize the divine wisdom, goodness, mercy, and power, which are very definitely on our side.

Prayer by Martin Luther on "Thy will be done":

O Lord God, heavenly Father, I am Thy creature; do Thou with me whatever Thou dost please; it is all the same to me, for I know that I am surely Thine. And if it please Thee that I die this hour or suffer some great misfortune, I would still be very glad to suffer it. Never do I want to consider my life, honor, goods, and whatever I have as higher and greater than Thy will. Thy will shall please me at all times throughout my life.