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## A MINDSET FOR ENDURING TRIALS

Genesis 50:20

By

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Genesis Lesson 85

## A Mindset for Enduring Trials Genesis 50:20

Two boys were walking along a street when they encountered a large dog blocking the sidewalk. "Don't be afraid," one of the boys told his more timid companion. "Look at his tail, how it wags. When a dog wags his tail he won't bite you."

"That may be," admitted the other, "but look at that wild gleam in his eye. He looks like he wants to eat us alive. ... Which end are we going to believe?"

You may have felt like those two boys when you've had to face trials in your life. The Bible exhorts us to "count it all joy" when we encounter various trials (James 1:2). We are assured that God is working all things together for good to those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). But sometimes we aren't quite convinced whether to believe the wagging tail of God's promises or that wild gleam in the eye of the big trial confronting us. What if we count it all joy and the trial bites us?

Joseph was a man who had developed a godly mindset that carried him through the many trials in his life. He had been badly mistreated by his own family, as well as by others whom he had not wronged. He spent the better part of his twenties in an Egyptian dungeon, separated from his father, not knowing if he would ever see him again. Yet in spite of all these trials, he could say to his brothers, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). He knew that even though his brothers hated him at the time and were trying to get rid of him, behind them it was God who was at work, sending Joseph to Egypt for God's sovereign purposes (Gen. 45:5, 7, 8). Joseph's trust in the sovereign goodness of God carried him through these terrible trials with a joyful spirit, free from bitterness and complaining. That same mindset will help us bear up under trials:

To bear up under trials, we must trust in the sovereign goodness of God in every situation.

A mistaken idea, widely promoted in Christian circles, is that all trials are from the devil and that a good God would never send trials to His children. Thus when we are hit by a trial, whether sickness or a difficult person or a financial setback, we are supposed to rebuke the devil and claim our victory by faith. If we don't experience fairly rapid deliverance, then our faith may be defective. I believe that this is a faulty paradigm for facing trials. We need to see that . . .

1. God is sovereign over all, even over the evil things people do.

In this fallen world, there are many evil people who will seek to harm you. Often, as with Joseph, these evil people are close family members. It may be a parent who abused you emotionally, physically, or even sexually when you were a child. In Joseph's case, his half brothers hated him and would have killed him had not the slave traders providentially come by at just the right moment.

What is even more galling, often the family members who mistreated you seem to be doing quite well in life. Genesis 38 shows how Judah, who had suggested selling Joseph into slavery, was doing quite well even though he was so far from God that he didn't hesitate to go in to what he thought was a harlot for a moment's pleasure. He had his pagan friends and seemed to be enjoying life, all the while that Joseph was grinding out an existence as a slave in a foreign country.

You have to keep in mind as you work through Joseph's story that at the time he was suffering, Joseph didn't know how the story would turn out. He didn't know yet that if he just held on for a few years, God would raise him up as second to Pharaoh. But it is clear that he knew one thing for certain, that God is sovereign, even over the evil things people do (45:5, 7, 8; 50:20). Joseph's trust in the sovereign God carried him through many bleak days in the dungeon.

Let me clarify that trusting in God's sovereignty does not mean that you must passively endure the situation. If you are a child being abused, you need to report it to proper authorities. If you are being badly mistreated at work or at school, you may need to take some action to deal with it. What I'm saying is that there is great comfort for the believer in knowing that, however difficult your situation, the

sovereign God is still in control. The devil is not in control; evil people are not in control; God *is* in control.

Many Scriptures teach us that God is sovereign even over evil men, and yet He is completely unstained by their sin. In the story of Job, the Chaldeans raided and stole Job's camels, killing his servants who kept them (Job 1:17). These wicked men were not acting simply on their own accord, but were impelled by Satan. And yet God was over Satan, giving him permission to go so far and no farther. Satan could not do anything unless God willed it.

Take another story: God willed that the wicked King Ahab be killed in battle. How did God do it? A demon presented himself before God with the plan that he go and be a deceiving spirit in the mouths of Ahab's prophets. God granted permission; the wicked prophets prophesied falsely; Ahab believed them, so that he was killed. God's righteous judgment was carried out by a demon using deception, and yet God is not tainted by the evil. The prophets were responsible for following demonic counsel.

Samson wanted to marry a Philistine woman, which was clearly a sinful thing. His parents tried in vain to dissuade him from doing such a thing. Yet, we read, "his father and mother did not know that it was of the Lord, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines" (Judges 14:4). Samson was sinning, yet God sovereignly used that sin to achieve His righteous judgment!

Many more examples abound in Scripture. David's son Absalom sinfully committed incest with his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel, yet God declares the work to be His own: "You did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel" (2 Sam. 12:12). Rehoboam foolishly rejected the counsel of his elders, resulting in the division of the kingdom, but "it was a turn of events from the Lord, that He might establish His word" through his prophet (1 Kings 12:15). Nebuchadnezzar selfishly and brutally wiped out Jerusalem, yet he was doing God's work and is called God's servant (Jer. 1:15; 25:9; 27:6; 50:25). Cyrus, another pagan king, who like all pagan kings sought to build his own empire for his own glory, is called God's anointed, whom God was using for His purpose (Isa. 45:1). Wicked men falsely accused and crucified the Son of God, and yet they only did what God's hand and purpose predestined to occur (Acts 4:28).

After citing such examples, of which there are many more, John Calvin concludes, “Yet from these it is more than evident that they babble and talk absurdly who, in place of God’s providence, substitute bare permission—as if God sat in a watchtower awaiting chance events, and his judgments thus depended upon human will” (*Institutes*, 1.18.1).

Joseph not only knew that God was sovereign over the evil his brothers had done; he realized that God is sovereign over even insignificant things that we would tend to shrug off as chance. You’ll recall the story of when his father sent him to check on his brothers, and he didn’t find them at the place where they were supposed to be. A man found Joseph wandering in a field and told him that his brothers had moved the flocks to Dothan. So Joseph went to Dothan and found them. They threw him into the pit, planning to kill him after lunch. But it was precisely at that moment that the trading caravan “happened” by, and they sold him into slavery (37:14-36).

As that caravan made its way south, Joseph had plenty of time to think, “What rotten luck! Why did I happen to run into that man in the field who happened to know where my brothers were? Why did that caravan have to come along just then, when Reuben had indicated that he was going to try to get me out of the pit and back to my dad? Where was God in all this?” But Joseph didn’t believe in luck or happenstance. He believed in a sovereign God who sent him down to Egypt for reasons that, at the time, Joseph did not know (45:5, 7, 8).

Thus it is important to affirm God’s sovereignty not only over the major things that happen, but also over the little daily mundane details of life. Car problems, traffic jams, interruptions, clogged drains, sick kids, and a million other frustrations in life, as well as the bad things that evil people do to you, are under God’s sovereignty. Nothing and no one can thwart God’s sovereign, loving purpose toward you in Christ. He will work *all things* together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. We need that mindset to endure trials.

But, also, we must understand and affirm that . . .

2. God is good in everything He does.

“God meant it for *good*” (50:20). He “works all things together for *good*” (Rom. 8:28). As God said through Jeremiah to the exiles who had been carried off to Babylon, “‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope’” (Jer. 29:11). Although God’s people may suffer terribly, they must affirm by faith with the psalmist, that even though God afflicts us with trials, He is good and does good in all His ways (Ps. 119:67-68; 75).

Most of us are quick to see God’s goodness in the blessings of life, but not so quick to discern His goodness in the trials. Jacob was like that. When his sons returned from their first trip down to Egypt to buy grain, and the unknown lord of the land (Joseph) had taken Simeon captive and was demanding that Benjamin accompany them on the return visit, Jacob wailed, “You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and you would take Benjamin; all these things are against me” (42:36). But, in fact, all these things were not against him. The truth was, *God was for him*. Even the trial of the famine was being used to reunite him with his beloved Joseph and to provide for all his needs for the rest of his life.

I have often profited spiritually from the incident in the life of David where he hit bottom. He had gotten himself into a mess because he had doubted the sovereign goodness of God in his life. God had promised David that he would sit on the throne of Israel, but for years he had been chased by the mad King Saul. In a moment of despair, David said, “Now I will perish one day by the hand of Saul” (1 Sam. 27:1). So he went and allied himself with the pagan Achish, King of Gath.

For a while David was able to play the dangerous game of convincing this pagan king that he was on his side. At first, things seemed to go much better for David and his men. Saul stopped pursuing them. Achish gave David a city, Ziklag, where he and his men could live with their families, instead of having to hide in caves.

But then a ticklish situation came up, where Achish and the Philistine warlords were going into battle against Saul. David went up with them, pretending to be one of them. But it was awkward for him to be going into battle against the Lord’s people, including his dear friend, Jonathan. At the last minute, God rescued him by making the Philis-

tine warlords insist that he not accompany them into battle. So David and his men returned to Ziklag.

That's when the bottom dropped out. Raiders had burned Ziklag with fire and had taken all their wives and children captive. David's men were so upset that they were talking about stoning him.

But then comes a great verse: "But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God" (1 Sam. 30:6). I can't say for certain what all that entailed. But, based on his many Psalms, I believe that David probably confessed his sin of doubting God's sovereign goodness when he had gone over to Achish. He also probably reaffirmed God's gracious covenant promises. He definitely humbled himself under God's sovereign hand, because he inquired of God as to whether he should go after the raiders and recover their wives and children. That was not an easy thing to do! What if God had said, "No"? But David now was bowing before God's sovereign lordship.

But the great thing about the story is that even though David had brought about many of his troubles by his own lack of faith, God was graciously working things out to give him the kingdom. In the battle against the Philistines, Saul and Jonathan were killed, opening the way for David's taking the throne. God graciously allowed David and his men to recover their wives and children, along with much spoil. So even though it seemed to David in his low point that God was not good, he could look back and see how God's sovereign goodness was directing all the events of those difficult years.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out how when difficult things happen to us, and we are quick to grumble and wonder why God would allow this to happen, and even to doubt His love, it should awaken us to our own sinfulness. We should realize in a new and deeper way how prone we are to harbor unworthy thoughts of the God who has loved us with an everlasting love, and we should be humbled. But, he points out, such humility is good for us, and anything that so humbles us is working together for our good. It also shows us our desperate need of God's forgiveness, help, and strength. "It is only in this way," he concludes, "that we really get to know the love and grace of God, His kindness, His compassion, His tenderness, His patience, His longsuffering. How little we know of them!" He sums it up by saying "that our greatest trouble is our ignorance of God. We know things about

God, but our real trouble is our ignorance of God Himself—what He really is, and what He is to His people.” (*Romans, The Final Perseverance of the Saints* [Zondervan], pp. 166-168).

This affirmation of God’s goodness, even in our trials, has been the refrain of the saints down through history. John Calvin cites many Scriptures that show how God tenderly cares for and protects His children. He sums it up: “Indeed, the principal purpose of Biblical history is to teach that the Lord watches over the ways of the saints with such great diligence that they do not even stumble over a stone [Ps. 91:12]” (*Institutes*, 1.17.6).

In 1895, the beloved pastor and writer, Andrew Murray, was in England suffering from a terribly painful back, the result of an injury he had incurred years before. One morning while he was eating breakfast in his room, his hostess told him of a woman downstairs who was in great trouble and wanted to know if he had any advice for her. Murray handed her a paper he had been writing on and said, “Just give her this advice I’m writing down for myself. It may be that she’ll find it helpful.” This is what he had written:

“In time of trouble, say, ‘First, He brought me here. It is by His will I am in this strait place; in that I will rest.’ Next, ‘He will keep me here in His love, and give me grace in this trial to behave as His child.’ Then say, ‘He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me lessons He intends me to learn, and working in me the grace He means to bestow.’ And last, say, ‘In His good time He can bring me out again. How and when, He knows.’ Therefore, say ‘I am here (1) by God’s appointment, (2) in His keeping, (3) under His training, (4) for His time.’”

So in times of trial, we can and must know that God is sovereign, even over the evil things people may do to us. But also we must know that God is good and that He will work every situation together for good for His children. Finally, knowing this, . . .

3. We must trust the sovereign goodness of God in the midst of our trials.

The reason we must trust God is that it may be years, or perhaps only in eternity, before we figure out specifically how God is using our trials for good. Joseph had to keep trusting for years as he sat in that Egyptian dungeon. Every morning when he awoke in that foul place,

he had to direct his thoughts to God and say, "Lord, I trust that You have some good and loving purpose in this situation. I submit to Your sovereign purpose, even though I do not understand." He may have had to do that a hundred times a day. But I contend that he did it. If he had not, we would not hear him say, "God sent me here"; "God meant it for good."

Trusting God is a mindset; it occurs in your thought life. It is a mindset that puts God at the center, where He rightfully should be. If we are focused on our happiness as the center, we will not be able to trust or glorify God in the midst of our trials. But, as we have seen, Joseph lived a God-centered life. As Scripture makes clear, God's glory is the supreme thing in all of life. If we daily, moment-by-moment, put our thoughts on glorifying God, showing by our trusting attitude that He is both sovereign and good, then He will bless us in many ways as a by-product. But if we are focused on our own happiness, we will find it hard to trust God and we will be miserable people.

In the *Institutes* (1.17.11), John Calvin develops at length the blessings that come to the believer when he learns to live under the loving providence of God. He cites a number of assuring verses from the Psalms: "The Lord is my helper" [Ps. 118:6]; "I will not fear what flesh can do against me" [Ps. 56:4]; "The Lord is my protector; what shall I fear?" [Ps. 27:1]; "If armies should stand together against me" [Ps. 27:3], "if I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death [Ps. 23:4], "I will not cease to have good hope" [Ps. 56:5; 71:14]. Then he comments, "Whence, I pray you, do they have this never-failing assurance but from knowing that, when the world appears to be aimlessly tumbled about, the Lord is everywhere at work, and from trusting that his work will be for their welfare?" In other words, they trust in the sovereign goodness of God.

### Conclusion

A believer confided with his Christian friend, "I find it terribly hard to trust God, and to sense His presence in the dark passages of life." "Well," said his friend, "if you cannot trust a man out of your sight, he isn't worth much. But you can surely trust God even when He is hidden in the shadows, for you have His promise that He will never leave you or forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

Another man who loved the Lord was going through deep and discouraging trials, and his trust in God was near the breaking point. One day he went for a walk in an orchard with his young son. The boy wanted to climb an old apple tree, so the father patiently stood below watching. Many of the limbs were dead, and some of them began to break under the boy's weight. Seeing his son's plight, the man held up his arms and called, "Jump, Buddy, I'll catch you." The boy still hung on, and then as another branch snapped he said, "Shall I let go of everything, Daddy?" "Yes," came the reassuring reply. Without hesitation, the boy jumped and the father safely caught him.

Later the man said, "That incident was God's message directly to me! I understood what the Lord was trying to teach me. At that moment I did trust Him completely, and it wasn't long until He wonderfully supplied my need." ("Our Daily Bread," July, 1982).

That's the mindset we need to endure trials—to trust in the sovereign goodness of God in every situation. Whatever you're going through, you can know that though others may mean it for evil, God means it for good. He wants you to trust Him so that He will be glorified in your life.

### Discussion Questions

1. We are often told today to let God know how angry we are at Him. Is it sin to be angry at God? Should we be encouraged to express it?
2. A skeptic sneers, "How can God be good and allow innocent children to be abused?" Your answer?
3. How can God be sovereign over everything and yet not be responsible for evil?
4. If God is sovereign, how can we know when to submit passively to some wrong and when to take action against it?

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