

JOSEPH: TRUSTING IN THE HIDDEN PURPOSES OF GOD

As for you, you meant it for evil against me; but God meant it for good. Genesis 50:20

This past month, Brendan Case a director of a think tank at Harvard, began an article entitled “The Toll of Unbelief” with these chilling words:

On a single weekend in June 2021, seven people died of drug overdoses in Rochester, New York. On that Saturday morning, three adults were found dead on a front porch on a quiet, residential street. Inside the house were six orphaned children. Lab tests showed that the lethal agent was heroin laced with xylazine, a powerful horse tranquilizer.

As we look forward to emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, America remains in the grip of an epidemic of deaths from drug overdose, suicide, and alcohol poisoning. The epidemic began in the mid-1990s and is still escalating: The CDC estimates that 2020 saw ninety-three thousand drug overdose deaths, a 30 percent increase from 2019 and the highest total ever recorded. This epidemic was nearly two decades old before it was given a name—“deaths of despair”—and a face—principally white Americans without college degrees—in an influential 2015 paper by Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton, and in their 2020 book. Recent trends are severe: Deaths of despair caused drops in overall life expectancy in the United States for three consecutive years (from 2015 to 2017), the longest period of decline since World War I.

The article then goes on to explore various possible reasons for the growth of “deaths of despair.” Case explores the truth of the loss of meaningful jobs at lower skill levels. Globalization led to the loss of many good paying manufacturing jobs that provided for a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. He also writes about the steep drop in marriage rates for those with a high school diploma or less. There is a large increase of men and women in their thirties who have never been married. Case also points to the large decrease in Church attendance. He tells us:

In short, less-educated Americans on average have less purchasing power, marry and have sex less often, have fewer friends, invest less in their neighborhoods and towns, and worship less than their parents and grandparents did.

I believe behind the despair is a lack of meaning. We human beings have a built in need to find meaning in our lives. We want to know that what happens to us has purpose.

The idea that our lives have meaning and purpose, is often hard for us to fully accept. I am sure there have been times when you have heard people talking about the meaning of life. The discussion is held in detached abstract terms. Even the phrase “the meaning of life” seems to be dry and lifeless. It all sounds too abstract to impinge on our lives or engage our emotions.

The truth is that the question of meaning is never truly faced in the abstract. We do not really care about the meaning of life in general. What we want to know is does my life have meaning. We want to know if our individual life has any purpose at all.

We face this question in a variety of ways throughout our lives.

When we are young we ask questions about what we should do in our lives.

What vocation should I follow?

Should I have a family?

These are questions of meaning.

When we reach our late thirties and forties, we have struggled for a number of years at our work and may have achieved some measure of success and security, but we find that it does not bring us complete happiness. We begin to wonder is this all there is to life. We sometimes question if we want to just endure twenty or thirty years more of reruns of the last decade. This is a question of meaning.

We sometimes face some tragedy in our family. We suffer from a difficult illness or face an accident or maybe the death of a loved one and we wonder what we should make of it all. We begin to question God's care for us. This is another form of the question of meaning.

Then, God willing, we live a long life, we retire and later begin to face the limitations of age and ponder what has all this meant. Has my life been worthwhile? What purpose have I served? This is a final question of significance.

These are all various forms of our individual search for meaning in our lives. We all want to know if the jumble of events that make up our lives have any perceived coherence. We want to know if God is at work in our lives. We want to know if we matter.

Our core narrative from the Bible for today comes from the end of the story of Joseph. Joseph is one character in the Bible who must have wondered time and again what possible purpose could his life have served.

Joseph was born the favored son of Jacob. He grew up as a spoiled little brat who thought he was better than his brothers. They became angry with him and sold him into slavery. The slave traders took him to Egypt and sold him as a household servant to Potiphar. Joseph worked hard and was trustworthy and after some time became the headman on the estate. Things were looking up for Joseph.

Then, as you may recall, Joseph was the victim of sexual harassment. Potiphars' wife made unwelcome advances and when he rejected her, she turned on him and he ended up in prison. While in prison he interpreted the dream of one of his fellow inmates. The Pharaoh's chief butler was given a positive interpretation of a dream and he was thankful. When the butler was released from prison he was restored to Pharaoh's court. Joseph had reason to believe that he would put in a good word and soon he would follow him out of prison. But the Chief Butler forgot him and Joseph languished in prison for two more years.

Then Pharaoh had a dream that no one could interpret for him. The Butler remembered that Joseph could interpret dreams and he is brought from prison to Pharaoh. Joseph's ability to interpret dreams saves Egypt from famine. The grateful Pharaoh makes Joseph his prime minister.

While serving as prime minister his brothers came from Palestine seeking food because of famine. Later his Father Jacob and all of the Hebrews were able to move into Egypt in order to escape starvation.

We can only imagine Joseph's feelings and reactions during his topsy-turvy life. At times God seems to be punishing him when he is sold into slavery or put into prison. At other times God seems to favor him as when he becomes the steward of Potiphar's household. At almost every important time in his life, Joseph must have thought his whole life made almost no sense at all.

It was only at the end of the story that he could look back and begin to understand what it all meant. His brothers and Potiphar's wife attempted to do him evil, yet God used those evil acts for good. Joseph was able to say to his brothers **As for you, you meant it for evil against me; but God meant it for good.** It was clear to Joseph long after these events that God had used them to enable Joseph to save the life of his father and brothers.

Joseph learned the truth that the Danish Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard put so well when he said. **"Life can only be understood backward; but it must be lived forward."** You and I cannot really understand the meaning of events while we are living them. It is only sometimes in retrospect that we can begin to catch glimpses of their significance. While we are living our lives the meaning is largely hidden from us. I would like to illustrate this in two ways.

The first is taken from literature.

George Herbert wrote a poem, which is printed on the bulletin cover. Please take a look at it now. It reads:

**My words and thoughts do both express this notion,
That *Life* hath with the sun a double motion.
The first *Is* straight and our diurnal friend.
The other is *Hid*, and doth obliquely bend.
One life is wrapt *In* flesh, and tends to earth.
The other winds towards *Him*, whose happy birth
Taught me to live here so, *That* still one eye
Should aim and shoot at that which *Is* on high
Quitting with daily labor all *My* pleasure
to gain at harvest an eternal *Treasure.***

There are two ways of reading this poem. One is the conventional reading from left to right line by line. These represent the everyday events of our lives that come one after another. We live our lives from day to day. We sometimes can see patterns between events as they happen. We live our lives from birth to death. There is a natural order and progression. Yet meaning and purpose of the kind we crave is not found in these patterns.

In Herbert's poem there is another message hidden in the text. When we read the diagonal from the top left hand corner down to the right bottom corner we find the words **"My life is hid in Him who is my treasure."** God uses the everyday human events of life to shape those who love him. He is secretly at work molding us and shaping us for his kingdom.

A second example is taken from my own experience.

In retrospect the most important event in my life was being elected to the nominating committee in my home church. My home Church had the practice of having a teenager on the nominating committee each year. In 1972 I was chosen to serve. Following a meeting in October of that year I walked out of the meeting with Lloyd Cox who was also on the committee. He asked

me what colleges I was planning to apply for acceptance. He wondered if I had considered St. Lawrence. I told him that I did not know anything about that school. He spent the next half an hour sharing all the good things about his Alma Mater.

That short little meeting which seemed without much significance at the time changed the course of my life. Needless to say, I ended up going to St. Lawrence. I went with the intention of going to into law and possibly politics. Once at school I took a course in the religious studies department. The course both fed my mind and soul. I took one course after another and finally felt led to go to seminary.

While at St. Lawrence I took advantage of one of the semester abroad programs. I spent the second semester junior year in Vienna. There was another student on that program whom I had not met before. Her name was Kathleen Dann. You can probably guess the rest of the story.

At the time the short little meeting in the parking lot of church seemed to be a little blip in my life, yet it became instrumental in setting the whole direction of my life. My spouse and my vocation are a direct result of that small isolated meeting. If I had not been elected to that committee, I would be a different person today.

All of this is true not only for Joseph but for you and me. In the midst of our lives God is at work even though you and I cannot perceive it. We cannot always make sense of the individual events of our lives. When tragedy strikes and we want to ask why has this happened, the true Christian answer is that we just do not know why. When good things happen to us we can question why do we experience good fortune again the Christian answer is we do not know why. The ultimate meaning of events in our lives is hidden from us.

This does not rob each event of our lives of purpose. It does not mean the events we live through are not important. It is our daily acts; it is our day in and day out faithfulness that God uses as the raw material in shaping the meaning in our lives.

We know that much of what happens to us seems senseless and without purpose. There are all kinds of questions that we have from day to day. Yet the Scriptures teach us that God is using all of what happens to us to shape and mold us.

All though at times it seems hard to believe,
All people do matter to God.
Your life matters
And my life matters.
You matter so much
That God was willing to give his son just for you.

The meaning of our life is mostly hidden from our minds, yet we can live in faith, trusting that God is using the events of our lives to bring about his purposes.

We do not give into despair,
because we trust that the meaning of our lives is securely hid with Christ in God.

As for you, you meant it for evil against me; but God meant it for good.