



A FAMILY BORN: EVIL OVERCOME

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Evil is everywhere.

You probably have a lot on your mind today. Maybe you have a lot to do this week and you don't know how you are going to get it all done. Maybe you're out of work and you wish you had a lot to do. Maybe you are hurt by relational conflict. Maybe finances are really tight right now. Maybe you're just lonely.

We all face a lot of problems, but for the most part, they don't seem to qualify as evil. Annoying, yes. Frustrating, yes. Maybe even unfair or biased. But evil? That is serious stuff.

We know evil exists. We read about it. People who walk into movie theaters intent on mass murder. People in positions of authority who sexually abuse those in their care. Military leaders who conscript children into their armies and murder their families. Women enslaved in the sex trade, even in the Bay Area.

But even our little frustrations that don't seem to qualify as evil grow from the same root as the horrific stuff. Self-importance, pride, impatience, hatred, competition, and hostility all start from the same seeds. If we look closely, there is evil even in our experience, though we don't always call it that.

Evil is everywhere.

This morning we are in our third biblical section of our church wide series, EPIC: The astonishing story of God and the world. The first week we saw what God intended life to be and what happened. We saw the problem of a broken world. Last week we saw how God began his solution by choosing a hero. God called Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be part of his plan to save the world. We saw how God's heroes start small and make mistakes. We saw how God's heroes are characterized by faith: they realize that God is the real hero of the story.

Last week we saw part of the method of how God is going to save the world. He chooses a man who becomes a family who becomes a nation that saves the world. The goal is to get back to the original creation, but there is something that stands in his way.

In our first week, we considered the story of Noah. It's a horrific story of God destroying the world because of rampant evil. God's assessment of the people in the world was given in Genesis 6:5, "every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." So God destroyed everything except for one family because of all the evil.

After the flood and the waters died down and Noah and his family started a new life, God promises never to do that again. Here is what he says in Genesis 8:21, "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood."

So God isn't going to destroy the world again, but not because things are different. On the contrary, every inclination of man's heart is still evil. The flood didn't work. It didn't solve the problem. God has a plan, but there is a piece that is missing. Up until this point, we haven't seen how God intends to handle the problem of evil. Until now.

This morning we are looking at the last story in the book of Genesis. It's the story of a man named Joseph. Joseph is the great-grandson of Abraham. His story completes the picture of how God is going to save the world. Last week we saw that God intended to use Abraham and his descendants. This week we'll see how he plans to address the problem of evil.

In fact, this has been one of the most frequently asked questions that I've had in response to the last few weeks. The question comes in different forms. Why would God create people if he knew they were going to sin? Didn't God unfairly test Abraham? Where did the serpent come from? Why even put the forbidden tree in the garden? The underlying question is the same: How can God allow evil to exist?

This question is a theological one, but it's also a personal one. What do we do with the evil that we experience? How do we handle the hardships that we go through? That's why the story this morning is so helpful. We'll be looking at three different scenes from Joseph's life. As we look at these, we're going to build an understanding of how God addresses evil in the world. But at the same time, we'll see that this is how God handles evil in our own lives as well.

Call Out Evil

The story of Joseph starts out with the story of his father Jacob. When God appeared to Abraham, he told him that he would make his descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky. He starts to fulfill that promise through Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. Jacob has twelve sons and is given a new name: Israel. Finally, this great family has begun.

But things aren't perfect in this great family. Jacob has made it clear that Joseph is his favorite son. Joseph has some dreams about his brothers eventually bowing down to him. He tells his brothers about those dreams and they get angry. So eventually, something happens. All the other sons are off grazing the flocks and Jacob sends Joseph to check on them.

Genesis 37:17b-28:

¹⁷So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. ¹⁸But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

¹⁹“Here comes that dreamer!” they said to each other. ²⁰“Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.”

²¹When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. “Let’s not take his life,” he said. ²²“Don’t shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don’t lay a hand on him.” Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

²³So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe-- the richly ornamented robe he was wearing-- ²⁴and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

²⁶Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? ²⁷Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed.

²⁸So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

Joseph's brothers lay in wait for him and plot to murder him. This sounds similar to another story we've recently heard. When we met the first brothers in the Bible, God preferred the offering of one brother over the other. This created competition and jealousy. So the slighted brother set a trap and killed the favored brother. In Joseph's story, they intend to murder him, but one of the brothers manages to talk the other brothers down to simply sell him into slavery.

Joseph is a victim of evil. Selling your brother into slavery is evil. This was supposed to be the family that was going to save the world. But brothers have turned on each other. The problem is not just that there is evil in the world. Even the solution that God has come up is riddled with evil. This problem must be overcome.

Overcoming evil starts out with identifying it. That's what God did before and after the flood. The narrator of this story wants us to identify this evil act by comparing it to the murder of Abel. Joseph himself identifies this act as evil at the end of the story.

The first step in overcoming evil is to identify it. Name it for what it is. Call out evil.

Sometimes we do this in our own lives. If you have suffered at the hand of someone else (and all of us have to some degree), the first step toward healing is to acknowledge what has happened to you. Call out the unhealthy patterns of relationship; name the wrong you have suffered.

Sometimes we do this for each other. At times, we can't see clearly when someone else is treating us poorly. As a community, there are times when we look at a situation and say "that is not OK." Someone may have lost sight of seeing objectively. Sometimes we call out evil for each other.

Whether we are the victim or someone else is the victim, we can be hesitant to say that we have been the victim of evil. Being a victim implies weakness. Being a victim sounds like an excuse. We don't want to "play the victim" because we are trying to avoid wallowing in whatever has been done to us. There is wisdom in that, but the process toward healing has to start with calling out what has been done. You can't stop there, but you have to start there.

Joseph's story starts out by forcing us to recognize the

evil that has been done to him. His brothers have turned against him. By making that event so central, we are invited to call out the evil we see: whether it is against us or against someone else.

Joseph is the victim of evil. The first step is to say so.

Refuse Evil

What makes Joseph particularly interesting is not just that he is a victim, but that he is an innocent victim. There is some debate about his attitude about his dreams to rule over his brothers. Perhaps he was being prideful. But perhaps he was just sharing them. At any rate, he didn't deserve what he got. Joseph is an innocent victim.

However, as the story progresses, we find out that Joseph is more than simply innocent. He makes some decisions that are extraordinary, especially considering the injustice that he has suffered.

Before reading this part of the story, it's helpful to remember back to a story from Joseph's grandparents. Last week we heard the story of Abraham lying about his wife Sarah when he went down to Gerar. The story we heard was actually the second time he had done this. He had to go to a different country with a powerful king. His wife was beautiful. So he had his wife tell everyone she was his sister so that they wouldn't kill him and steal her. Instead, both times she was taken into the king's harem until God intervened to save her. Abraham did this twice. What's worse is that his son, Isaac, did the same thing years later, with the same king: Abimelech.

So in Joseph's past, we have these three stories of men who have been willing to trade the sexuality of their wives to protect themselves. Their own safety was more important than protecting their wives.

Keeping this in mind, we're ready to get back to Joseph. Since we last left him, he has become a slave in the house of a rich Egyptian named Potiphar. He has worked hard and honorably and has risen to the top. He is in charge of all the other slaves.

Genesis 39:6-20a:

“So he left in Joseph’s care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master’s wife took notice of Joseph and said, “Come to bed with me!”

⁸But he refused. “With me in charge,” he told her, “my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. ⁹No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” ¹⁰And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

¹¹One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. ¹²She caught him by his cloak and said, “Come to bed with me!” But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.

¹³When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, ¹⁴she called her household servants. “Look,” she said to them, “this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. ¹⁵When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.”

¹⁶She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. ¹⁷Then she told him this story: “That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. ¹⁸But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.”

¹⁹When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, “This is how your slave treated me,” he burned with anger. ²⁰Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined.

Joseph is a handsome young slave. The wife of his master keeps trying to seduce him and he keeps turning her down. Eventually, she corners him. He turns her down again and runs away. But she is angry at his refusal, so she claims that he attacked her and he is sent to prison. Once again, Joseph is a victim. Once again, Joseph is an innocent victim.

But this time, he is not just innocent. This time he is righteous. This time, he doesn't just go to jail for something he didn't do. He goes to jail specifically for doing something right. He does the right thing and gets in trouble for it. He chooses to turn down the sexual advances of a woman, knowing that this could threaten his own security. He makes the opposite decision that his grandfather and great-grandfather make. Instead of choosing his own protection, he chooses the right thing at the cost of his own safety. And he gets burned. As if

being a slave in Egypt isn't bad enough, now he is a slave convicted of assault, stuck in prison.

This is what makes Joseph a remarkable character. Think about what normally happens in the world. Often, when you are the victim of evil, you feel justified in returning evil in response. If somebody does something wrong against you, it's easy to feel like it's OK to do something against them in return.

Becoming a victim of evil often leads people to become doers of evil. You see it in children. One child will hit another. You might walk up to that child and correct them: "don't hit." In response, you'll probably hear something like "but he yelled at me" or "she took my toy."

Growing up, my parents would always use this phrase: "Two wrongs don't make a right." Just because someone did something to you doesn't mean it's OK to do something back.

Joseph suffers evil, but when he is presented with the opportunity he doesn't respond with evil. He could easily have been a mean, bitter person. He could have taken out his pain on those around him. Instead, he is righteous. Even after suffering evil, he doesn't choose it. He refuses evil. That's our second encouragement. Call out evil, but don't let it be an excuse for evil in return. Refuse evil.

This is really hard for us to do. It goes against our natural tendency. When we are hit, we want to hit back. In fact, we want to hit back harder. We want to take revenge. But one of the most repeated ideas in Scripture is the idea that "vengeance belongs to the Lord." We don't have to take revenge for ourselves.

Jesus summed this up in a powerful way when he said in Matthew 5:39, "I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Even when evil is done against us, we do not have to respond with evil. We don't have to keep the cycle of evil going.

One of the things that enables us to refuse evil is the first step we talked about. When we are hesitant to recognize evil, it actually makes it harder to refuse evil. Our natural tendency is to just react to evil. But the pattern we see in Joseph is different. He recognizes that he is the victim of evil, but he refuses to respond.

Once we realize that we are victims of evil, then we have the freedom to choose how to respond to it. "Ok. I've been the victim of evil. But I have a choice in how I respond to it." This person has wronged me. I got passed over for a

promotion. I was laid off unfairly. My friend talked badly about me behind my back. Life hasn't been fair to me. All of that is true. I have been the victim of evil. But I still have the freedom to choose how I respond to it. I can choose to return evil for evil. Or I can choose to refuse evil.

Let God Redeem Evil

It is inspiring to see Joseph refuse evil even after being the victim of evil himself. But we still haven't solved the problem of evil. It is still out there. What is God going to do about evil?

We pick up Joseph's story in prison. He has gained a reputation as an interpreter of dreams and eventually comes to the attention of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh has been having his own disturbing dreams, so he sends for Joseph to interpret them. Joseph claims that the king's dreams reveal the future. There will be seven years of overflowing harvest followed by seven years of famine. Joseph also points out to Pharaoh that he needs an administrator to collect food during the years of abundance so that it can be redistributed during the years of famine.

Of course, Pharaoh picks Joseph. Joseph goes from being a slave in the dungeon to sitting at the right hand of the king. Pharaoh sets Joseph over all the land of Egypt right as Joseph turns 30 years old. The years of plenty happen and Joseph organizes a huge food storage program. Then the years of famine hit and Egypt alone has enough food for its people, and enough to spare. Everyone comes to Egypt to buy food.

Genesis 41:56-57:

⁵⁶When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. ⁵⁷And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world.

Joseph saved Egypt from a devastating famine. The famine was over the whole country, but they were OK because they had food stored up. But it wasn't just Egypt that Joseph saved. The Hebrew of this verse literally reads, "the famine had spread over the whole earth" and later "the whole earth came to Egypt to buy grain." From the narrator's perspective, the whole world had a famine and Joseph saved everyone.

What can God do with a righteous victim? He can save the world. The whole earth came to Egypt.

Eventually, he saves his family too. Along with everyone else, they come to Egypt to buy food. And after testing them, Joseph reveals himself. He saves his brothers. Finally, he sends for his father who comes to live with him in Egypt along with all his brothers, their wives and their children. Joseph saves his family.

So Joseph saves his family, Egypt, and the world. Does this sound familiar? Isn't this what God promised Abraham? God picked a man to have a family to build a nation to save the world. Now he's done just that. The one difference is that the family itself needed saving. Joseph was sent out from the family. The family was broken by jealousy and Joseph was exiled. But God used him to save the world, to save Egypt, and to save his family.

But it's still not completely clear how he has addressed the problem of evil. Joseph clears it up for us in the last chapter of Genesis. This is the grand theological conclusion of the Joseph story. After Jacob dies, his brothers are worried that Joseph will still be mad at them. His answer to them reveals the most important thing about the whole story of Joseph. This is the main idea.

Genesis 50:19-20:

¹⁹But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

The NIV cleans this up a bit—a more literal translation would be “what you intended for evil, God intended for good.” Think about this statement. What you intended for evil, God intended for good.

This is an incredible statement. We know about things that start out good and become evil. The idealistic politician who resorts to fraud to accomplish his goals. And we know about evil that changes into good. The repentant criminal who truly feels sorry for his wrongs.

But this is different. This is evil that God uses for good. Evil that actually accomplishes the purposes of a good God. This is the great surprise of Joseph's story. We haven't seen anything like it up until this point. So far, God has only tried to end evil by stopping it. He banishes Adam and Eve. He sends Cain away. Noah's son is rebuked. Abraham is corrected and tested. So far, God has only challenged evil directly. But this is a new strategy.

And this is the strategy that ends up being what God uses to save the world. Joseph reveals the purposes of God

in an incredible way. Joseph reveals how God really intends to use one man who has a family who creates a nation that saves the world. God intends to defeat evil by using it for his good purposes. It's an incredible strategy.

Joseph's story becomes a little preview of how God intends to save the world. If you've been listening closely, you may have already noticed some of the connections between Joseph and another hero, born almost 2000 years later.

As a child, Joseph goes to Egypt to avoid being killed. Jesus did the same.

Joseph is sold for the price of a slave. Jesus was too.

Joseph is wrongly accused and declared guilty for it. Jesus faced the same unjust accusations.

Joseph began his service to Pharaoh when he was thirty years old. Jesus began preaching at that age.

In Joseph's darkest moment, he is surrounded by two criminals, one with a good future, one not so good. Jesus died between two criminals, one of whom would join him in paradise.

Joseph goes from being a criminal to sitting at the right hand of the King. Jesus is executed as a criminal, only to rise to the right hand of the Father.

At first, Joseph's brothers don't recognize him. Jesus' disciples don't recognize him after the resurrection either.

At the end of story, Joseph is reunited with his father. Jesus leaves the earth by ascending to his Father in heaven.

But most of all, Joseph was an innocent, righteous victim. He suffered evil that he didn't deserve to suffer. But God used that evil for the highest good: to save the world. Jesus suffered the evil of humiliation and execution that he didn't deserve. But God will use that evil to save the world and defeat evil for good.

This is the brilliant strategy that God will use to defeat evil. He will take it and turn it into good. He himself will be a victim of evil. He will refuse to return evil for evil. And through that, he will turn evil into good. Defeat becomes victory. What is intended for evil becomes used for good.

I heard an audio interview where someone described it this way: “The cross cannot be defeated because the cross is itself defeat.”

Here we are introduced to God's secret weapon. God takes evil and turns it into good. That's redemption. This is how God will conquer evil. Our final point is to allow God to do that. Call out evil. Refuse evil. But finally, let God redeem evil. Let God redeem evil.

This is the answer to how God plans to address the problem of evil in the world. But it also gives us an answer to why God created the world at all. Why would God create a world that he knew would descend into evil? If you read the whole story, you realize that the end is described as better than the beginning. The tree of life in the New Jerusalem of Revelation is an improvement over the tree of life in the garden of Eden.

Redemption is better than innocence. Evil redeemed is better than evil unknown. One of the reasons that God created an earth that had the potential to descend into evil is that redemption is better than innocence. It is more powerful to have seen evil and see God turn it into good than to have never known evil at all.

This often plays out in personal experience. It is frequently the people who have suffered the most who have the most courage and compassion and maturity. Facing evil and coming out the other side is a beautiful thing. This biblical story suggests that it is more beautiful than never having seen evil at all.

God's solution to the problem of evil in the world is also the answer to how we face evil in our lives. We start off by calling evil out. We must recognize that we have been victims. But we refuse to respond with evil. All of this is made possible because of what we know about our God. He redeems bad things. He can take evil and turn it into good. Sometimes the evil we face is so great that this seems completely impossible. But our God does the impossible.

I don't know exactly what evil you've suffered. I know what I've suffered: not as much as most, but enough that I can complain about it for a while if you're willing to listen. But Joseph's story tells me about a God who is going to defeat evil by taking that evil and making good from it. God is doing that in the world and God can do that in your life. Let God redeem evil. Ask him for it. Trust him for it. Wait on him for it.

God has a plan to overcome evil.

Conclusion

In these first few chapters of the EPIC story that we are following, we've seen in a lot of the story that God created the world with good intentions. Those good intentions fell apart. God started working to bring his creation back to what he intended it to be.

First, he calls a series of heroes. He picks a man to start a family that becomes a nation to save the world. He starts with Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob. Finally, we find out the method that God is going to use to solve this problem. God will defeat evil by turning evil on its head. By accepting defeat that turns into victory.

One of the amazing things about watching children grow up is what happens in that first year. When people are born, they are completely helpless. If you leave them alone, they will die. But a lot happens that first year or so. They learn how to function in this world. They learn to walk. They learn to talk. They can put food in their mouths. And by the first year or shortly after, they are walking, talking, and eating. When my kids were at that stage, I remember being amazed at that. It's like you learn everything you ever really learn in the first year of life. Then you just get better. You control your body better, you communicate more clearly, you provide for yourself more independently.

That's what we've seen as we complete the book of Genesis. Everything about the story has already been revealed or hinted at. The rest of the story just fills it out in new and richer ways. The nation gets built and gives birth to a hero who ends up saving the world and starting a family of his own: that's us—the church.

So we've seen where it started. We've seen what happened. We've seen who will save us. And now we've seen how it's going to work. Next week we'll start a new era and we'll see the family of Abraham become a nation.