

Joseph in our Old Testament reading for today says something very interesting. He says in verse 20: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." What does that mean, exactly? How can we have something good come out of something evil? We can understand something good coming out of something good. We can also understand something evil coming out of something evil. But for something good to come out of something evil? How exactly does that happen? What exactly does Joseph mean? But this is exactly what God wants to teach us today, to show us what it means for something good to come out of something evil. And he wants to do it by teaching us through the example of Joseph himself.

Because consider Joseph's life up to this point, Christians. At the age of 17, Joseph was sold into slavery by his own brothers. They had tried to kill him before that, but changed their minds at the last second, because there were some traders who were passing by. And so they sold him, and he became a slave in Egypt. And ten years later at the age of 27, Joseph was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, by the wife of his master. She said that he had tried to sleep with her. He had done no such thing, but as a result, he was thrown into prison. An innocent man suffering unjustly all of these things. And it wasn't until three years later, around the age of 30, that Joseph was finally set free, at which point Pharaoh lifted him up and gave him a position of high power. So what this means is that for 13 years, 13 long years Joseph suffered great evil in his life. Things he didn't deserve. Things that he should not have gone through. But this was what he had to endure.

So you would understand, then, his brothers are scared. They know all the things that he has gone through. They know all of the things that he has suffered. And now they know that they were the ones that caused him to suffer them. So in other words, what they're afraid of is that now that Jacob is dead, now that daddy is gone, so to speak, Joseph might come and take revenge to get back at them for all of those years of suffering that they made him to go through. And so they say to him, "Please forgive us. Please set us free. Don't take revenge on us. We're sorry for what we did."

But Joseph says to his brothers, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me." And they certainly did. They did some pretty terrible things to their brother, all because they were jealous of him. "But God meant it for good." All of these things which have happened to me, God meant it for great good. What exactly was that good? Joseph says, "To bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Through Joseph's suffering, through all of those things that he went through, all those 13 long years, God lifted him up and put him into a place to do great good for the land of Egypt, so that by his wisdom, so by his leadership, all the land of Egypt and the land surrounding would be kept alive during the great famine which took away all of their food. God had used the evil in Joseph's life as a means of bringing about that great good, because, as Paul tells us in Romans chapter 8 verse 28, "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." All things work together for good for those who love God.

Now, what does Paul mean by that, exactly? What does it mean that all things work together for good for those who love God? What it means, Christians, is that our suffering as Christians, the things which we endure in this life as believers in God is not pointless. It's not empty. These things are doing something for us. They're bringing about great good for us. So that through our

suffering as Christians, God is lifting us up and making us more and more like himself. Now, listen closely to what I'm saying here. What I am not saying is that there is always good coming out of every evil. I'm not saying that there is a silver lining in every cloud. I'm not saying that all of these things are going to work out in the end. Or whatever else the world may come up with to try to deal with a bad situation. No, what I'm talking about, Christians, is that we as Christians, we as believers are built up through these things, because God works all things for good for those who love him. For those who don't love him, these things will not work out the same way. They will feel God afflicting them, and they will despair. They're not going to get anything out of it. But for us who trust in the Lord, we will be lifted up, because God takes care of us through good and through bad.

Let me use some analogies, so that maybe you understand what I'm getting at here. We understand that medicine, for example, is often very bitter. A spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down. All of that sort of thing. And we also understand that medicine is something which is deadly when we take it in excess. If you take too much of it, it's going to hurt you rather than help you. And you might even understand something like surgery. It seems destructive. It seems like it's just hurting us more than it would be helping us. But we also understand that in all of these things medicine is meant to help. Even if it's bitter, even if we don't like it, it ultimately helps us to be better than what we were. In the same way, Christians, God is our great physician. He is our doctor. So that no matter how bitter the pill may be that he gives to us, it is ultimately meant for our good.

Or another analogy. We understand that fire is destructive. You throw something into the fire. It's very likely to just be burned up. But it is also through fire that gold is refined. And it is in the fire of that furnace that gold is melted so that all of its impurities can be taken away. And in the same way, God may put us into the fires of his affliction, not to destroy us, but to purify us, to make us better than what we were.

Or one more analogy. If you have a bent rod, for example, something that is completely bent and you need to straighten it out. The only way you often can straighten it is by heat and by hammering. That seems abusive, doesn't it? It seems like you're just hurting it more than anything. And you might even have to bend it further past being straight so that it will come straight in the end. But it is through that hammering and through that heat that the rod is made straight. And so in that way, even if God is hammering on us, so to speak, with his afflictions, he means it to straighten us, to make us into something better than what we were. Because in all of these things, Christians, God afflicts us for good, so that we would be more than what we were.

And so when we see all of our life's afflictions, all the things that we have to deal with, it helps us to understand why. Maybe we are poor. We don't have nearly as much money as we might like. We can't seem to make ends meet. And we're wondering, can't we just have a little bit more? But maybe God has not given us these things because he knows our hearts. Because he knows that if we did have that little extra, that we would be led astray, that we would be led to trust in the world more than in him. And so he sends these things to us as a way of keeping us on the straight and narrow, of keeping us closer to himself. Perhaps we have fallen ill, and we're laid out in our beds, and we're wondering, "Why did this happen to me?" But perhaps God has sent this into our lives, Christians, as a way of teaching us to come back to him, to learn to pray.

Because it's very often when we are laid out on our backs, not being able to do anything else, that we come face-to-face with God. Perhaps we have lost a loved one in our lives, and we're wondering, why were they taken from us? Why did this have to happen? But perhaps God has done this for us so that we come back to him, so that we are led to trust him more and more. Or in many cases to start going to church more than we used to. We've seen it happen time and time again. Or perhaps the drought that we are dealing with. And we are wondering, how we're going to make ends meet? How are we going to finally make it all work out in the end? But perhaps God has sent this, Christians, as a way of teaching us to trust him, to know that he is the one who provides, that he is the one who will take care of us, no matter how bad things seem to be. In all of these things, God shows us that he loves us. And even through these evils, even through these afflictions, God is making us better than what we were.

And we know that especially, Christians, in our Lord Jesus Christ. Because Jesus suffered the greatest evil of all to bring about the greatest good of all. Jesus suffered the great evil of the cross--being beaten, suffering, dying on our behalf--so that he would bring about the greatest good of all: our salvation in him. And when we see how he suffered the evil which he had to endure, we can understand what it means for us to suffer as well. Because all of these things work together for good for those who love God. And we even know if we were to lose everything, if everything was to be taken away, Jesus shows us that we would still have him. And because we have him, if we lose the world, we haven't lost a thing, because we belong to God forever.

So what should we learn from all of this? What is God ultimately trying to teach us? He wants to teach us patience, Christians. Patience in the midst of suffering, patience in the midst of evil. We don't have to be impatient. We don't have to grumble. We don't have to worry. Because God is your loving Father. And everything that he does, as bitter as it may seem at the time, is meant for your good. God is refining us. God is purifying us. He's cleansing us. He's making us into something better than what we were. And so no matter what we endure as Christians, we can do so with patience. We can even do so with joy, because God is with us in all things.

So don't be impatient. Don't grumble. Don't wonder, even becoming angry with God. God is your loving Father, and he will take care of you in the midst of everything. It's going to hurt. We may have to drink a pretty bitter cup, but it is not poison. It is meant for our good. Trust him, Christians, because he is your loving Father forever.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us the greatest good through your Son, Jesus Christ. We pray that you would strengthen us always to trust you, so that we would not be impatient, but know that you are the one will bring about good in all things. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.