

“God’s Assessment”

Genesis 37:23-30, Romans 8:22-28;  
Matthew 13:31-33; Psalm 50

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It’s a familiar story. Any of us who have grown up with scripture at all have probably heard the scripture about Joseph. Even if you haven’t grown up with scripture, you may have gone to a musical that had something to do with Joseph. At its heart, it seems so familiar, not just because it’s a story I’ve heard, it seems like a story that I know, almost from experience. Not that I had brothers that threw me in a pit or that I was a brother who threw someone else in a pit, but that sense of jealousy is familiar.

Take those brothers who were around Joseph when their father gave him this wonderful coat. They felt their father must think Joseph was special. I can just hear the whispering that goes, ‘What makes him so special? Why should he get it?’ And then he has this dream. We didn’t read it but he has this dream. Maybe he would have been wiser not to share it. Maybe he was just excited about what it was and wondering about it. Maybe he was even trying to get his brothers’ goat a little bit. He has this dream about this sheaf of wheat that all the rest of them bowed down to. And again, you might hear the whispering going on, ‘Why is he is so special? What makes him think so? We’ll show him.’ We don’t know the exact way they made the decision but their jealousy came out. They pushed him into a pit. The indication is that maybe they were just going to leave him there to die. They decide killing him is probably not the best thing to do so they sell him into slavery. ‘We’ll show him. We’ll get rid of him.’ Those feelings, maybe not quite so drastic, those feelings of ‘I’ll show him’ or ‘I’ll show them’— I hope they’re not familiar but they seem all too human to me, too easy to have.

So we come from this story where there’s this group of brothers acting on their rivalry, their jealousy, their envy. It asks us, how do we respond? How do we respond? It seems that this is what the psalm is about, I think. Of course, the psalm starts out reminding us of who we are talking about. You know, in the last couple of psalms (Psalm 13 & 79) the first one had us complaining about God, almost suggesting that God doesn’t know how to do it right. The second psalm almost sounded like we were taunting God: God, we’ve been shamed and, actually, it’s really you who’s been shamed. It talks about our jealousies, our desires that we want God to solve.

Today’s psalm reminds us who it is that we are talking to. It starts out talking about the wonder of who God is. I was lying outside last night, looking up and seeing the Milky Way, and just that alone made me wonder at how huge the universe is, how incredible a place it is. God created it, and we’re going to contend with God? God has a right, I think, to come to us and that’s what he is doing in this psalm. God is coming and saying, ‘Why are you not living out the covenant that I have made with you, he way I have directed you, the guidance I have given you?’

*What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?  
For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you.*

How many of you like the word discipline? It's not one that feels like it's easy to accept. Discipline means that I might have to do something that I don't want to do. Discipline means making a decision that might not be pleasant, even if it's just doing my exercises or letting something pleasurable go, like not eating all the food that's before me. Perhaps it's listening when I simply want to talk or noticing when I'd rather complain. God's discipline to us is inviting us to hear God's word to us. It is incredible to think of the one who comes and speaks through the psalm to us.

The psalm seems to be asking something. You see, it's so easy to simply want to look in the mirror, to pay attention to myself. I think the psalm is suggesting that's what God is a little upset about. I spend too much time in front of the mirror, thinking about myself. And God asks what right I have to recite the statutes? What about God's covenant? It's interesting to me to then go on and see how God knows that God's people have left behind the covenant. Here's what the psalm says:

*You make friends with a thief when you see one,  
and you keep company with adulterers.  
You give your mouth free rein for evil,  
and your tongue frames deceit.*

It goes on to talk about how we don't even give our family a good name; we slander our kin. Each one of those is interesting to me because it's all about how we live out our relationships with one another. We may not think of ourselves as thieves. We aren't going to take somebody's car. But, it's a little easier to take something like someone's idea and not give them credit. It's a little easier to twist things a little bit to make myself look better. It's a little easier to put someone else down so that I might be raised up. And as we've read these last psalms, it's felt like it's very easy then to go to God and simply say, 'You're like us. We want you to be on our side. Take care of those other folks whether it's an individual like is Psalm 13 or as a group in Psalm 79. Take care of those other folks.' There is an interesting line in the psalm:

*These things you have done and I have been silent.  
You thought I was one just like yourselves.*

How easy it is to make God in our own image, to make God the one we want to take care of things the way we would take care of things, and not listen. It's amazing to me that our relationship with this incredible God, this God that created everything, comes down to it being in part about how we treat one another. When God sees the covenant going south, it's because God's people are not treating each other well.

It's interesting to me that the wonderful thing about this incredible God is that God works in our daily lives, how we live each day. We can complain. We can begin to think, God where are you in all of this, because in many way, we want God to do this huge thing and make it all better. It's easy to miss a mustard seed. There is no way you can see this seed I'm holding from where you are sitting. Sometimes there is no way we can see the way that God is at work. And yet, what comes out of God's work creates life and creates that place for us to be and live. It is then through our trusting

that God's leaven is at work, that God's seeds are planted and that we live according to God's ways. We become part of that leaven. We help create the place of shelter.

Paul, at the end of Corinthians, says that all things work together for good for those who love God and who are called according to his purpose. It may be hard at times to see the seed. It may be hard at times to see the leaven but we're called to trust.

There is a little bit of warning at the end of this psalm. I'd like to retranslate the second to the last line where it talks about God saying, 'I'll tear you apart,' because the language underneath it is more like this: Understand this, you who forget the Lord, lest I lose you among the lions with no one to deliver you. I think that's a great image of what it means to lose our way. God is inviting us to turn again and again to him, and to know that when we go the right way, God does show us God's salvation for us.

So, in some ways, you might say that this whole psalm is about whether we want to simply look after our own gratification or if we can look to God in gratitude and listen.

*Will you pray with me? Gracious God, we recognize how stuck we get in the stuff of our own lives, how easy it is to become jealous, to wonder why that other one seems so special. How easy it is to act in ways that we regret. Lord, help us continually turn to you, remember that you are at work among us, that your leaven is at work, your grace is powerful. And, in turning to you, help us walk in your way, turning away from the ways we might twist things to our advantage, and instead, looking at how we can care for another and serve you. Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.*