

Genesis 44:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And when they were gone out of the city, and not yet far off, Joseph said unto his steward, Up, follow after the men; and when thou dost overtake them, say unto them, Wherefore have ye rewarded evil for good?

Analysis

And when they were gone out of the city, and not yet far off, Joseph said unto his steward, Up, foll... This passage is part of the Joseph narrative, a masterfully crafted account demonstrating God's sovereign providence working through human choices and circumstances to accomplish His redemptive purposes. The Joseph cycle shows how God transforms evil intentions into instruments of salvation.

Central themes include divine providence orchestrating events toward redemptive ends, the testing and refinement of character through suffering and success, forgiveness overcoming betrayal and injustice, and the preservation of God's covenant people through famine. Joseph's rise from slavery to second-in-command of Egypt illustrates how God exalts the humble and uses seeming disasters for ultimate good.

Theologically, these chapters reveal:

1. God's meticulous sovereignty over all events, even evil human actions
2. suffering as preparation for future service rather than punishment
3. forgiveness as reflecting divine character and enabling reconciliation
4. God's covenant faithfulness across generations ensuring the survival and blessing of His people

5. how present suffering gains meaning when viewed from the perspective of God's larger purposes.

Joseph's words "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (50:20) epitomize biblical theodicy and providence.

Historical Context

The patriarchal narratives (Genesis 12-50) reflect the cultural, social, and legal customs of the ancient Near East during the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1500 BCE). Archaeological discoveries including the Mari tablets, Nuzi tablets, and Egyptian records confirm many details: nomadic pastoralism, covenant-making ceremonies, marriage customs, property laws, and international travel patterns described in Genesis.

The cultural practices reflected include: treaty/covenant forms (Genesis 15), bride-price customs (Genesis 24, 29), inheritance laws favoring firstborn sons (Genesis 25, 27), adoption practices (Genesis 15, 30), levirate-type arrangements (Genesis 38), and Egyptian administrative systems (Genesis 41, 47). These parallels confirm Genesis's historical reliability while showing how God worked within ancient cultural frameworks to accomplish His purposes.

For later Israelites, these narratives established their identity as Abraham's descendants, explained their claim to Canaan, justified their possession of Joseph's bones (Exodus 13:19), and provided models of faith despite imperfection. The patriarchs' failures and God's faithfulness encouraged Israel that covenant relationship depended on God's grace rather than human merit. The movement from Mesopotamia to Canaan to Egypt set the stage for the Exodus and conquest narratives.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. What does this passage reveal about God's sovereignty and human responsibility?
2. What obstacles prevent us from living out the truths presented in this verse?
3. How does this passage point forward to Christ and the gospel of redemption?

Interlinear Text

וְ	יִצְאָ	אֶת	בָּעֵיר	לְ	הַרְחִיקָה
H1992	And when they were gone out	H853	of the city	H3808	and not yet far off
	H3318		H5892		H7368
אַחֲרֵ	רַדְפֵּ	קָרְבָּן	אַחֲרֵ	רַדְפֵּ	אַחֲרֵ
Joseph	said	H834	H5921	unto his steward	Up
H3130	H559			H1004	H6965
בָּאָנָשָׁ	וְהַשְׁגַּתְתָּם	לְ	אֶלָּהָם	לְ	טֹבָה:
H376	and when thou dost overtake	H5381	said	H413	H4100
			H559		
שְׁלָמָתְךָ	פְּנֵי הַ	בְּעֵבֶד	פְּנֵי הַ	בְּעֵבֶד	טֹבָה:
unto them Wherefore have ye rewarded	evil	H8478	for good	H2896	
H7999	H7451				

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 35:12 (Evil): They rewarded me evil for good to the spoiling of my soul.

John 10:32 (Good): Jesus answered them, Many good works have I shewed you from my Father; for which of those works do ye stone me?