

“An Eye for an Eye”

As I sit at my desk to write this article the news media is reporting that some crudely built pipe bombs were sent through the mail to various government officials including, two former Presidents of the United States and their wives. Thankfully the bombs were intercepted before any physical harm was done. Sadly, where once we engaged in conversations with respectful tones, now many are speaking, and acting, with open hostility toward those with whom there is disagreement. With the lack of civility that seems pervasive in our nation at the present time, are Americans increasingly tempted to retaliate against anyone whom we believe has wronged us? I want to begin a short series of articles from a passage of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that addresses the topic of retaliation toward the wrong done against us—whether real or perceived. Our passage is from Matthew 5:38-42 which includes the well-known phrase, “An eye for an eye.....” One question that we’ll seek to answer in this series is, “How has this oft-quoted phrase been woefully misunderstood by many, sometimes with tragic results?”

As we think about whether retaliation is ever an appropriate response to personal injustice, I want to take us back to the Old Testament book of Genesis and look at a portion of the life of Joseph. This narrative can potentially bring out any number of emotions in us including anger, bitterness, sadness and even joy. The story begins with Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt when he was 17 years old by his jealous brothers. Later, he is imprisoned after the wife of one of Pharaoh’s officers wrongly accuses Joseph of attempting to have an illicit relationship with her. When Joseph is finally released from his imprisonment after several years of hardship, we’re happy to learn that he will now be the second in command in all of Egypt. This has happened because God has given Joseph the ability to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams—dreams which reveal God’s plan to bring seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. We would be hard pressed to believe that Joseph’s life was a series of random events.

When the famine comes to the lands in and around Egypt, only Egypt is prepared to meet the inevitable food shortage. Joseph’s brothers are eventually forced to travel from Canaan to Egypt to buy grain. After all that’s happened we may find ourselves wondering how Joseph will respond after having been ill-treated by them many years earlier. It’s been approximately 22 years since Joseph was separated from his family and sold into bondage in Egypt. He has experienced much pain and sorrow. Will he use his current exalted status in Egypt to punish his brothers? If we, the readers, are expecting him to deal harshly with them, we soon find just the opposite to be true. He addresses them truthfully, not denying what they have done, and yet he treats them with compassion. “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.....do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me here to preserve life.”

What an amazing display of genuine love and compassion! How could Joseph not want to punish his brothers? Simply stated, Joseph didn’t need to retaliate because he learned

something that all God's people need to learn. God has a bigger purpose in the events that make up our lives than we can completely understand. The story of Joseph teaches us many things about God's faithfulness to his Old Testament covenant people including their preservation at a time in their history when they would have surely perished had God not providentially superintended the events of Joseph's life.

What can we learn from this important Old Testament text? At minimum we can say that Christians are children of this same God who sustained Joseph and he's at work in our lives for our good and his glory (Romans 8:28). If we truly understand our God, we don't ever need to retaliate when we're personally treated in a negative way. Our attitude must be that God is in control and his purposes—although we rarely understand why things happen as they do—are always right and good. Like Joseph, the truth that God is in control does not marginalize or ignore sin—either our sin or the sin of others. But it does mean that vengeance belongs to God and not to us. This attitude of compassion for others who may have wronged us will only be ours as we're seeking, by grace, to live lives that glorify God while taking our primary focus off of ourselves.

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