

The Holocaust

Romans 11:28

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Do you remember the coat of many colors? Most of us learned about it in Sunday School? It was the coat that Jacob gave to his favorite son, Joseph. It was one of the many signs of the special position that Joseph held in Jacob's heart – one of the many things that actually caused his brothers to be jealous of him. You may remember that eventually his brothers sold Joseph into slavery because they were so jealous of the position that he had in his father's heart.

You remember that last week we suggested that that isn't unlike what has happened to the nation of Israel – that just as Jacob thought of Joseph in a special way, so our Creator has always thought of the Israel nation in a special way. Just as Joseph, as a result, was envied by his brothers, so often the special position that the Jewish nation has had in our Creator's eyes has drawn jealousy and envy from everyone else. In fact, we said that God, out of all the nations in the world, has chosen Israel as the group of people to whom he would show himself as a loving Father -- so that they could tell the rest of us and we could trust this loving Father for ourselves, for our needs and for our futures.

You remember we said last Sunday that just as Joseph was given special gifts by his father, so our Creator has given special gifts and abilities to the Israelites. These special gifts and abilities have enabled the Israelites to make striking contributions to the worlds of art and music, and the worlds of culture and commerce. But these gifts also have meant that the Israelites have faced almost unequalled envy and jealousy and hatred because of their position.

You know that that attitude towards the Israelites -- for the special position that they have in the Creator's mind -- has been called anti-semitism. Abba Eban, who is the former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, in his autobiography defines anti-semitism as regarding Jews as evil simply because they are born Jews. That kind of hatred that has come about in our world down through the centuries is to be condemned just as much as we condemn the hatred of Joseph's brothers for him. I think we all have that attitude. We feel that any kind of hatred that comes from envy and jealousy of the unique position that Israel has in God's plan for the world is culpable, inhuman and cruel.

Now, loved ones, that's the human side. That's the side concerned with the culpability of Joseph's enemies or the culpability of the enemies of the Jews. But is that all there is to it?

Could I ask you this: What do you think Joseph did when he was in prison? Did he sit there ranting and raving and blaming the people who had sold him into slavery, and blaming what they had done to an absolutely perfectly blameless man? Did he do that? Moreover, I would ask you, is that what has kept the dear Jewish nation going in the midst of all its exiles and imprisonments, its persecution and its oppressions? Is that what has kept dear Jews going – their resentments against their enemies? Is that what we have seen in the faces of those loved ones in the Holocaust?

You know it isn't -- because both Joseph and the Jewish nation knew that there was another dimension beyond that of what human beings were doing to them. I'd just remind you of that dimension as Joseph himself explains it to his brothers. It's in Genesis 50:20. Joseph said to his brothers who sold him into slavery: "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about

that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

That’s the way Joseph thought of it: "As for you, you meant evil against me. You, my brothers, you meant to destroy me. You had no good wishes in your heart. But God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

In other words, Joseph said, "You men were free and chose to do evil against me. God didn't make you do it. You chose to do it. You meant that for evil against me. But God was weaving your wicked actions into his plan for my life so that my plan and his plan for me would be fulfilled."

Of course that’s what happened. They sold Joseph into slavery into Egypt. He rose up through the ranks and, you remember, became the head of Pharaoh's government. Then he was in turn used by God to make provision for the years of famine so that eventually his father Israel – Jacob --came from Canaan looking for food, and Joseph provided the food that kept the nation of Israel surviving. So what men had meant for evil, God brought about for good.

Loved ones, that’s what has happened with Joseph, and that’s what has happened in the minds of the Israelis down through the centuries. They have been very clear in their minds that it was men that did the oppressing, but they have always been absolutely confident that men could only do what God permitted them to do, and that God was using even the wicked actions of people to further his plan for his own people.

In fact, it’s interesting! The Jewish prophets are so sure of that -- they are so sure that God Jehovah maintains the covenant that he has with the Israeli nation, and will not break it, and will not fail to watch over them -- that the Jewish prophets actually use shorthand in regard to this whole issue of God's providence. That is, they tend not to talk about the secondary cause.

Maybe it’s his brothers that sell Joseph into slavery. But repeatedly the Jewish prophets see so clearly that if God allows a thing, then it’s really God that is dealing with us, that they will say that it’s God that sold them into slavery. They’ll use shorthand. They’ll ignore the secondary cause – even though they know that it’s not God that made Joseph's brothers do it, it’s not God that made the Germans do it, it’s not God that made the Assyrians do it. But whether it’s the Assyrians or the Romans or the Germans, the Jewish prophets always say that God is weaving these wicked actions into his plan for the Israeli nation.

You’ll notice if you read the Old Testament carefully, the dear Jewish Scriptures, that the prophets are always talking as if God did the things, even though it was really his enemies that did it.

An example is in II Chronicles 7:17. It’s a restatement -- of which there are many in the Old Testament -- of the special covenant that God has with his people Israel: I have chosen you so that you will tell all people the kind of Father I am, so that they can trust me, and if you keep this covenant and walk in obedience to me I will protect you. II Chronicles 7:17: "And as for you, if you walk before me, as David your father walked, doing according to all that I have commanded you and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, then I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted with David your father saying, "There shall not fail you a man to rule Israel.”"

“But if you turn aside and forsake my statutes and my commandments which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will pluck you up from the land which I have given you;” (even though it isn’t God that plucks them up. It’s another people that come and exile them or

imprison them or conquer them.) "I will pluck you up from the land which I have given you; and this house, which I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight, and will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And at this house, which is exalted, every one passing by will be astonished, and say, "Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house?"' (Even though it was oppressors that did it, and enemies.) "Then they will say, "Because they forsook the Lord the God of their fathers who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and laid hold on other gods, and worshiped them and served them; therefore he has brought all this evil upon them.'"

Loved ones, there are dear Jews who have died in loneliness that you and I do not know, in concentration camps and in gas chambers, and as they have held their babies to their breasts they've been able to say, "But the Lord is in charge." They've known that there was meaning in this and that the dear Father who chose them was working in it even though they couldn't see it. Loved ones, that gives a courage that no one, however much they hate the Bible, has the right to take from either the Jewish nation or ourselves.

Now that's two sides, loved ones: the human side -- the culpability of the oppressors of the Jews and even ourselves, because we're to learn lessons from these things. It's also God's side -- the truth of God's providence, his ability to overrule and to use the wicked actions of men to further his plan. But there is another side. That side came out a little in those verses that we read in Chronicles. I could bring it before you by asking you one simple question. Was Joseph blameless?

Well, obviously he wasn't -- if you read the dreams that he shared with his brothers. Look at the second of those dreams. It's in Genesis 37:9-11: "Then he dreamed another dream, and told it to his brothers, and said, 'Behold, I have dreamed another dream; and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' But when he told it to his father and to his brothers," (who obviously were the sun and the moon and the eleven stars) "his father rebuked him, and said to him, 'What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?' And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind."

In other words, Joseph did contribute a little to the jealousy. He did by his own kind of subconscious attitude of superiority stir up some of the jealousy in the hearts of his relatives.

That is a constant theme -- not of Ernest O'Neill, not of Christian preachers. That is a constant theme of the Jewish prophets. It's a constant theme of the Jewish prophets that there is sin that needs to be dealt with in the Israel nation. It comes up again and again. One obvious place is that verse in Ezekiel that we looked at once before -- Ezekiel 39:23: "'And the nations shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity'" (Why?) "'for their iniquity, because they dealt so treacherously with me that I hid my face from them and gave them into the hand of their adversaries, and they all fell by the sword.'"

That's Ezekiel, in about the 8th century B.C., a Jewish prophet. "And the nations shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity, because they dealt so treacherously with me that I hid my face from them and gave them into the hand of their adversaries, and they all fell by the sword."

Now notice, loved ones, that's not saying that the Holocaust or the exiles, or the tragedies that befall even you and me -- because we are now experiencing these things ourselves -- it's not to say that the things that befall us all are punishments for our sins -- nor even that they are

appropriate retribution for our sins.

Of course, that's the dreadful mistake that loved ones who are almost theologically illiterate seem to say. They take the tragedies and say, "Oh, that's a punishment for sin." NO! But it's true that in the things that came upon the nation of Israel, and the things that come upon us, God prompts us to re-examine our covenant with him, to re-examine our position with him, and to step into a higher place of faith and obedience. Even though these events are not appropriate retribution or even punishment for the actual sins we commit, God uses them to say to us, "There's something rotten in the state of Denmark."

In other words, this is what we mean when we talk about theodicy -- how God's will operates together with man's will to bring his people into a deeper place with himself. It's the principle that is outlined in Job, one of the earliest books in the Old Testament. It's because of the failure often of liberal theologians to understand this that they have trouble with evil and cancer and everything else.

Job 1:8: "And the Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nought? Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face.' And the Lord said to Satan, 'Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand.' So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord."

God would not touch Job himself. God does not send cancer upon us. He does not send a Holocaust upon us. But God allows the powers of evil that are enshrined in Satan to do certain things to us in order to bring us into a closer place of union with himself. At the same time, with the trial, he is providing a way of deliverance through his grace. Loved ones, that's the way the Jewish prophets from the early times of Job regarded the tragedies that men brought upon them.

Now the question is: can you regard the Holocaust in the same way? Only if God is still dealing with his people, the Jewish nation, under the old covenant. Only if God still has a covenant with the Israeli nation. Only if God is still dealing with them as he dealt with them in the Old Testament. Only then can you see the Holocaust in the same light as you see the exiles and the tragedies and the imprisonments of the past 4000 years of Jewish history.

Now can you see it that way? I don't think we should say what we think. I think we need to say, what do Jewish theologians think? How do they regard the Holocaust?

If you read Newsweek, the March 10 edition, you know that there is an article called "Debate over the Holocaust." There are several quotations of Jewish theologians in regard to the way the Jewish nation thinks of the Holocaust. What does it say is the normal attitude of Jewish theology to events like this?

Here is the way it puts it: "Jews by tradition have always interpreted great catastrophes, such as the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70, as God's punishment for their failure to keep his law." That's the normal way that Jewish theologians have regarded catastrophes. They've interpreted special catastrophes, such as the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70, as God's punishment for their failure to keep his law. Why? Because they always felt God is

dealing with them in a special way. Moreover, the interesting thing is -- they see clearly that if you throw away that interpretation, you throw away the covenant. You throw away the special position that the Jews have in God's plan for the world.

What does an orthodox Jewish theologian think? Well, here is what Arnold Wolf, Jewish chaplain at Yale University, says: "Suffering of the kind that Auschwitz symbolizes is not an accusation against God. It is a warning about human sin." Auschwitz "is not an accusation against God. It is a warning about human sin."

What about liberal theologians? It's interesting! They see that if you believe in a special covenant between God and the Jewish nation, you have to interpret the Holocaust as part of the ways that God has used the evil actions of men to bring his people nearer to him. Here is what one of the most liberal, Rubenstein in Florida, says: "You can't say you believe in the covenant with God, and then say in the face of the Holocaust that God had nothing to do with it."

It's interesting! Now actually, he throws it all out. He throws the covenant out as well. He throws everything out, as do all liberal theologians, Jew or Gentile, who don't really believe the Bible is God's Word. They throw the whole lot out. They take away from the dear Israeli nation, God's chosen people -- they take away their chosenness. They take away their special position. This man says, "You can't say you believe in the covenant with God, and then say in the face of the Holocaust that God had nothing to do with it." Of course, men like him often will say that God sent the Holocaust, whereas obviously in Job and in all the prophets down through the years, it's clearly taught that though men meant it for evil, God meant it for good. Though God did not send it, God is using it.

Loved ones, it is true that Jewish theologians see clearly -- that if the Israeli nation has a special relationship with God, then that's what makes sense of all the tragedies and the persecutions that have come upon the Israeli nation. And if you take away from them their special covenant relationship with God -- you take away from them the one great source of courage that they have had in the midst of all their Holocausts -- and of course the one great source of courage that all of us have had, because it's something that we have learned from them.

We have learned that God works together for good in all things -- that all things work together for good, and whatever men may do to us, God is in there all the time, weaving it into his plan. It's one of the beautiful things that we have learned from the Jewish nation and one of the reasons why we treasure them.

Because we need to go on to that. Christians who believe the Bible respect the special relationship that the Jewish nation has with God. They do. We want to protect that relationship because it's written into this dear Word {pointing to a Bible}.

We also believe that Jesus is the Messiah. We also believe on the basis of John 1:11 that he came onto his own and his own received him not. So we actually go a step further than the loved ones who are Jewish theologians. They will interpret the events that come upon the Israeli nation as part of God's dealing and bringing the Jews into his own will. We will, of course, go the further step and say that Jesus came unto his own people and his own people received him not. So we will say that the Jewish nation was disobedient in not receiving Jesus as the Messiah.

But loved ones, does that mean that we hate Jews? Does that mean that we reject the Israelis? NO! Because of God's Word.

I'll show you that in Romans 11:28: "As regards the gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake" (that is, they don't accept it); "but as regards election" (as regards their being chosen by God to show himself to the nations) "they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers." That's why no one who believes God's Word, no one who believes this dear Bible, can think of showing anything but love to the Jewish nation – because they are beloved for their Father's sake. Because they are beloved in our Father's eyes -- we can give them only love. That's why it's possible to live in peaceful co-existence. Even though some people do not receive Jesus as Messiah, yet we are obligated to love them because they are God's chosen people, and they are our dear brothers and sisters in the human family.

Of course there's another reason why we can't dream of taking the position that many theologians think you have to take if you believe that the Jewish nation has disobeyed God. Many theologians think, "If you believe that, then you should become God's executioner! That's what Hitler did! He became the executioner of God's justice, against the disobedient people." Loved ones, we cannot do that. Not only because of the love Jesus has put in our hearts, but because of this dear Word. It's written throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, but particularly there in Psalm 105:15: "Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!" We disobey our God if we dare to lay a hand upon God's own people.

This dear book {pointing to a Bible} gives us all a place to stand. We need not fear this dear book. It provides an umbrella for all of us. It provides an explanation why we can respect and love each other and yet differ from each other. It provides the best protection that not only the dear Israelis but we ourselves could ever have. It's the reason why this book has been the guardian of liberty and freedom in this dear nation.

It's the reason why at the coronation of the kings and queens of England, the Archbishop holds this book out to the queen – the monarch that's being crowned -- and says: "To keep your Majesty ever mindful of the law and the gospel of God as the rule for the whole life and government of Christian princes, we present you with this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom. This is the royal law. These are the lively oracles of God." Thank God. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you that your Word, rightly interpreted and respected and trusted and obeyed, gives us all a place to stand. A place in the sun. Thank you Lord. Thank you Father, that your dear Word, as we would expect, protects your dear people, and gives every one of us who believes it, a reason for respecting, and loving, and protecting the nation that you have called your own. Lord, thank you that this Word also enables us to believe with our whole hearts the truth, and to follow it, and to pursue it, and to spread it, in love and respect for all men. Thank you Lord. Amen.