



THE GREAT REVERSAL
Genesis 50:14-21

Today, we come to one of the greatest texts in all of sacred scripture. From **Genesis 50:20** we read: “As for you – you meant it for evil against me – but God meant it for good.” (RSV)

We know that the Joseph story is important because it comprises 14 chapters. One of my preaching mentors – Dr. James Boice – preached 60 sermons from Chapter 37 to Chapter 50. Rest assured I will only be preaching one sermon today.

When I read of all that happens to Joseph, I think of the TV commercial for Nationwide Insurance which says, “**When life comes at you fast.**” Life certainly does come at Joseph fast. He goes from being a favored son – to a pit – to slavery – to a prison cell – and eventually winds up being the Prime Minister of Egypt.

Yes, the story of Joseph is the age-old story of God's sovereignty at work in the midst of human choice and freedom. It is a splendid picture of the prevenient grace of God at work. God at work in our lives and events before we know it - recognize it - or even cooperate with it. It is God at work in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. It makes you sit back and say, “Wow! What an awesome God we serve and are claimed by.”

Some of you have seen the play or watched the movie **JOSEPH AND HIS AMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT**. We think Joseph is the main character. However, it is God who is the beautiful dreamer, the master weaver - the prime actor. It is God who takes the clay and fashions it like a great potter to make something good of it. We discover between all the distorted twists and turns and human scheming stands God keeping watch over his own. It is the first **great reversal** of the Bible. It is a preview of what God would do at the cross.

We see many similarities in the lives of Joseph and Jesus. We see how:

- Both men were loved by their fathers.
- Both men were sent by their fathers to their brothers.
- Both men had a personal robe that was taken from them.
- Both men spent time in Egypt.
- They were both sold for the price of a slave.
- They were both tempted.

- They were both falsely accused.
- They were both placed with two other prisoners, one of whom was saved and the other lost.
- They both began their ministries at the age of thirty.
- Both men were exalted by God after a season of suffering.
- They both forgave those who harmed them.
- Both men were sent by God to save many.
- And finally, they both understood that God turned evil into good.¹

This story resounds with the theme that change can occur - that people can be redeemed - historical events can be redeemed - and God is always faithful. Great reversals take place because there is more grace in God than sin in us. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, "When people tell me that human nature cannot be changed, I am moved to reply that in light of my experience, human nature may well be the only thing that **CAN BE CHANGED!** We cannot change the course of the moon or the sun.

We cannot change the laws of the physical world. We cannot change the movement and flow of the ocean. We cannot change the stars in the skies and the course they move in."

This story of Joseph is so encouraging for people of faith who struggle and question God when they are ridiculed and betrayed - when they are accused of sexual harassment - and are ready to allow rage and bitterness to rule their lives - rather than righteousness and the power of faith. In that spirit I want to share 3 insights for your consideration.

FIRST, GOD IS ABLE TO TRANSFORM DEFEATS INTO VICTORIES IN LIFE EVENTS.

In this great story Joseph is sold into slavery - but winds up the prime minister of Egypt. He is sold into slavery by his brothers - but winds up saving his own brothers. God was able to transform and reverse evil actions and cruel motives into a significant historical event. Our difficulties become an opportunity for God to reverse the platform.

Harper Lee wrote a novel some years ago that eventually became a major motion picture. The movie was called "**TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD,**" starring Gregory Peck. In this novel she depicts life in the South at the time when racism was institutionalized as a seemingly undefeatable evil. The lawyer's name was Atticus Finch. Atticus Finch is defending a black man in a system in which he had no chance at all of winning. But he defends him anyway because he knows that the system is EVIL - the opposite of life - and he knows that he must oppose it. In the end he is defeated. The man is convicted though he is innocent - and later he is murdered.

Finch's daughter, Scout, was sitting in the balcony where the black people were forced to sit because of segregation. The courtroom is packed.

There is no room on the main floor. The verdict is given. The judge leaves. The white people downstairs all leave the courtroom. The black people in the balcony remain. Atticus Finch picks up the papers from his table - puts them in his briefcase, and heads for the door. The people in the balcony stand. The man standing next to Scout says to her, **'Stand up, your father is passing by.'** "But why should we stand? He lost. He was defeated!" Wrong! He was on the side of truth and righteousness and peace. So he won!²

With acts of courage and love represented in this story – the evil system of segregation gives way to a system based on equality. Events can be redeemed! A **great reversal** can take place. God often has a long-term plan to place over our plans to accomplish his most perfect will and plan. God's sovereignty placed over our human efforts always wins in the end. Don't lose heart. Don't weary in well-doing - for God's victory is sure. Man rules – but God overrules when necessary. Look expectantly for the hand of God at work in all of life's events.

SECONDLY, WE BELIEVE THAT EVEN MATERIAL ITEMS CAN BE REDEEMED AND USED FOR THE GLORY OF GOD.

Mary and I have been privileged to spend a day at Wesley Chapel in the city of London, England. One of the items of great interest to me is his desk. It would surprise many Methodists to realize that it once belonged to a bookie! It was originally used for taking bets - but its purpose was redeemed because John Wesley wrote his greatest sermons and cared for the details of the Methodist movement at that desk. It was a **great reversal**.

Bishop Will Willimon tells of a small College Chapel in North Carolina that has one of the most unusual baptismal fonts in the world. It is made from a huge stone which has been hollowed out for a font. On that very stone, a little over a hundred years ago, black slaves stood to be sold to the highest bidder.

Today, the stone serves Belmont Abbey as its baptismal font. An inscription on the plaque tells all who enter those cleansing waters: "On this stone men were sold into slavery. From this stone men are now baptized into freedom."³ It was a **great reversal** from its original meaning.

About 2 years ago I told you the story of how the Hyde Park United Methodist Church in Tampa, Florida, purchased the Magnolia Tavern Sports Bar. They purchased the tavern to provide a gathering place for their growing youth and adult ministries as well as community AA meetings. The sports bar now has a different purpose. Here people can connect with God and the real living water of life. They took down the name of the bar and covered it with a new banner that reads, **"Under New Ownership – Where God Knows Everybody's Name."** A great reversal took place.

The mighty Roman army built roads to extend their empire - and have control over those who occupied the territory. God took those same roads and used them to take the

gospel to the world - and to extend his kingdom. The Romans meant it for oppression - but God meant it for the liberation of the human spirit. It was a **great reversal**.

THIRDLY, PEOPLE CAN BE REDEEMED.

Those in the congregation who are close to me in age probably remember the name of the rock star Alice Cooper. If you think Alice Cooper is a "she" - you give your real age away. Alice Cooper was the first "shock -rock" act. He used to parade on stage with makeup and live snakes and simulate his own decapitation - a pretty raunchy act. A few years ago his career received quite a boost when he appeared in the movie **WAYNE'S WORLD**. The scene everyone remembers is where Wayne and Garth have a chance meeting with Mr. Cooper. They fall to their knees in worship, saying, "**We're not worthy, we're not worthy.**" Alice Cooper's long and successful career is the epitome of everything that critics hate about rock-n-roll. He has glorified rebellion, immorality, idolatry, and excess like practically no other rock artist. Considering this, many people were surprised when it was announced that Alice Cooper had converted to Christianity. He gave his life to Christ, and is now involved in a Bible church in Phoenix, Arizona. He even sings in the choir and helps at church dinners.

It gave me a whole new understanding of **Alice's Restaurant**. It seems you can get most everything now at Alice's Restaurant. It was a **great reversal**.

The question I want to ask you now is, Do you really believe anything I have shared with you today? Can our God really take events, materials, and people and, by his prevenient grace and sovereignty, create great reversals?

Let me take it even deeper today. Do you believe that God can take the evil our world has done - and redeem it? This story teaches us that God is at work even now. It is a great comfort to me to know that this God is at this very moment working in the life of our world - and working out great reversals at this very moment. It is the hope of our lives. Our world thinks it is in charge. This story teaches us that God is in control. One of the great hymns of our faith teaches us, "Although the wrong seems off so strong, God is the Ruler yet."

The good news in this text today is that God wants to change us - He wants to reclaim us - He wants to reshape us. He wants to redeem us and participate in the great reversals he is presently designing in our world today.

I close with this word from Dr. Boice: "The important thing for every believer is to be living in the light of God's presence – knowing that his or her life is being guided by God's hand. You may look at your life and see dark threads and wonder how God can possibly use those threads to produce a thing of beauty. But you should look to the life of Joseph and remember that God uses even the wrath of men to praise him. It was Joseph's steadfast trust in God and persistence in the right that eventually leads to his triumph of faith."⁴ Never allow circumstances to disrupt your relationship to God.

May God give us wisdom and courage to do the same.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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ENDNOTES

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1. As suggested by the New International Version Life Application Bible via Ron Ritchie.
 2. Thanks to Mark Trotter for this illustration.
 3. William H. Willimon, **Remember Who You Are**, Upper Room, 1980, page 61.
 - ⁴ James M. Boice, **GENESIS: Volume 3, An Expository Commentary**, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, page 863.