

"When God Transforms Evil into Good"

Sept. 13, 2020

Genesis 50: 15-21

¹⁵ Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"¹⁶ So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves."¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹ So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Romans 14: 5-13

⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also, those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. ⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God. ¹³ Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.



This morning we will wrestle with the times and ways in which God transforms evil into good. Our faith in Jesus Christ as the love and light of the world as well as our journeys with God to this point in life have taught us this truth as time and time again as God has worked good for those who love him. Last Sunday we looked at how God calls us to respond when someone does something bad or wrong – either to us or to the larger community. Today we look at how God responds when someone does something bad or evil. Our loving and compassionate God does not cause evil or bad things to happen to us or in the world. Instead, our loving and compassionate God will take terrible and painful events and transform them into good or into growth opportunities. We often come to see these experiences this way through 20/20 hindsight, as we look back at how God has intervened and has worked all things for good for those of us who love him. In the Bible there are tons of examples of God doing just this – working good out of evil. Today we focus in on the story of Joseph found in Genesis 50 as well as Paul's words of wisdom from Romans 14. As we do so, let us pray...

Down through the ages, there are countless stories of ordinary people, who when experiencing the normal struggles and trials of life, rise up and even triumph in spite of all that seems to be stacked against them. We read about them on social media sites. We hear about them on the nightly news. Some of these “hero” stories are made into movies that draw us deeper into the lives of the hero and into their stories. One such story was captured in the movie,

“Hacksaw Ridge”. It is the real-life story of Desmond Doss, a conscientious objector who enlisted in the Army during World War II. His religious beliefs forbade him from carrying a weapon. Entering combat with a fellow



soldier who refused to carry or even fire a weapon did not make Doss a favorite of the other soldiers in his unit. Doss endured endless harassment from his fellow soldiers and survived many attempts by his superior officers who tried to get him discharged from the Army. Doss endured and went on to serve as a combat medic. During one horrific fire fight on Hacksaw Ridge in Okinawa, he saved 75 fellow soldiers. Only then was Doss accepted by his fellow soldiers.

Soon after the initial assault up the 400-foot cliff face, the American soldiers were forced to withdraw to fight another day, leaving scores of injured soldiers behind. As the movie continues, it shows scene after scene of Doss rescuing his fellow soldiers. As he does so, his tag line and prayer become, “Lord, please help me get one more”. As the day dawns, injured soldiers continue to be lowered down from the top of the ridge. Eventually Doss himself is injured and comes down with the last man he rescued. Just six months later, President Truman presented Doss with the Medal of Honor in October of 1945. Desmond Doss was the first conscientious objector to ever win this prestigious award.



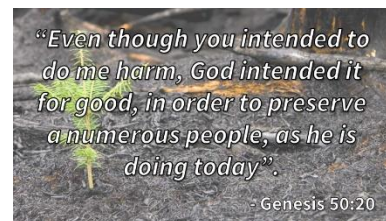
Turning to Genesis 50, we enter the story of Joseph.

Before we delve into this passage this morning, we need a quick review of Joseph's story. As the youngest of eleven brothers Joseph was Daddy's favorite. Jacob had

given him the coat of many colors that he wore with pride. Joseph had dreams that showed him ruling over his brothers, and even over his parents, and was more than willing to share these dreams with his family. He was a tattletale who soon earned the hatred of his brothers. One day he was sent out to check on his brothers as they tended the sheep. In anger they turned on him and sold him to Ishmaelite traders heading to Egypt. During his time as a slave in Egypt, Joseph experiences many highs and lows. Each time that evil rises up in Joseph's life, God intervenes to rescue him – first from the sale block and then from Potiphar's wife and then from his time in prison. Because of his faith in God, Joseph experiences good coming from evil time and time again. God eventually reunites Joseph with his family, and they survive the great famine. At the end of chapter 49 Jacob dies, and the brothers fear that Joseph may still bear a grudge against them from the day they sold him as a slave. As we join the story this morning in Genesis 50, we see that the brothers are still at least partly schemers.

Joseph's brothers come to him to tell him that his beloved father Jacob has died. They come with a story too – Jacob told us to tell you to forgive us for all that we did to you long ago. But Joseph sees far beyond that grievance that occurred years ago. He long ago forgave his brothers because he saw the bigger picture that God was working out. Yes, it was evil to sell your little brother into slavery.

But a more mature and faithful Joseph had looked back over the evils that had befallen him and saw God's hand at work time and time again, bringing good from the evil. In verse twenty Joseph reveals his faith and trust in God's plan, saying to his brothers: *"Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today"*. Yes, what the brothers did was evil. But God used that to do good, to save his people many years later from a severe famine and to provide a place that the remnant of his people could survive. God used the evil in the brothers' hearts and transformed it into good. Within this story is also the story of grace and forgiveness. Because Joseph's faith grew through and because of his trials, he was able to forgive his brothers and to offer them reconciliation. In the movie "Hacksaw Ridge", young Doss was able to turn the harassment and evil done to him into a deeper trust and faith in God. In the end it is Desmond's faith that carried him through that fateful day upon the bloody ridge. The good that God worked out of the evil led to a reconciliation with his fellow soldiers because Desmond did not harbor ill will towards them. He loved them as Christ loved him, allowing grace and forgiveness to be extended to those who had done him evil. Just as God also worked at transforming the hearts of Joseph's brothers, God worked at and transformed the hearts of Doss' fellow soldiers.



The good news for you and me is that the creative and healing power that God used to transform the evil done against Joseph is the same creative and healing power that God can and will use to transform the evil done against us into good. In faith, we believe that God is always at work and that he will bring about good in our lives. In the midst of the trial, though, this is not always easy to do.

When Joseph was in the bottom of that pit, expecting to be hauled out and murdered by his brothers, we are probably safe to wager that he did not look to God and trust that good was to come. When Joseph was staring at the prison floor that first night after being falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, he did not have that 20/20 hindsight. But as he trusted in God and in God's plan for his life, he came to learn that God really can and will work good from the evil that others exact upon us. That is the faith that we are called to as well. Yes, in the trial and suffering, God is at work. Through God's grace and love, we too will be able offer those who do us evil and who harm us both forgiveness and reconciliation.



Turn with me to our second passage for this morning, to Romans 14. In this passage we also receive words of grace and forgiveness, words of wisdom and

understanding. Again, we need a little background as we prepare to delve into this passage. Paul is writing to the church in Rome. It is a church made up of new and old believers. The new believers are mostly Gentiles who are relatively new to the faith. Accordingly, they do not have a lot of traditions and other long-standing practices. In contrast stand the Jewish Christians. They grew up steeped in the Law and in all of the traditions and practices of the Jewish faith. They see themselves as the "mature" or more devout Christians, as the ones who see and do things correctly because they have been at the game much longer than those newer to the faith. It was quite the mixture of the old and the new, represented by this picture on the screens. Once in a while churches today experience this same phenomenon as old and new try to meld together. Sometimes there is conflict in today's churches too. It happens every time someone says, "We do not do it that way here" and another asks, "Why not?"

For example, in the church in Rome that Paul is writing to, the Jewish Christians thought that all believers should eat only vegetables. They feared that the meat might not have been slaughtered according to Jewish customs. Eating it, therefore, would make them unclean. Their solution was to avoid eating meat. They looked down on those who ate meat. The Gentile converts, from their perspective, looked at the Jew's fear of eating unclean meat and saw that as a weak faith – a faith that could not see that all that God had made was good and, therefore, was okay to eat. A similar controversy arose around the day to worship. The traditional Jewish Sabbath was what we now call Saturday. As the early church formed, for many, Sunday became the preferred day for worship. Sunday was the day of the resurrection and soon became known as "the Lord's day". Again, old and new clashed. The old looked down upon the new and the new began to look down and chafe at the old, traditional ways.



Picking up the text in verse ten, Paul asks, "*Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?*" Here Paul is framing

his argument. He is asking both sides to come to a place of mutual respect and then on to reconciliation. He goes on to remind them that they will all "*stand before the judgment seat of God*". This is the idea we touched on last week as we looked at the implications of our salvation being nearer today than when we first believed. After reminding them that one day every knee will bow before God, Paul re-emphasizes the fact that "*each of us will be accountable to God*". In these words and warnings, Paul is reminding both the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians, as well as all of us gathered here today, that God alone has the right to judge. Being imperfect beings, we all have faults. All of us.

In the early church, both groups were finding fault with the other and then turning to being judgmental as a means to make themselves feel superior, better, more than. While there are core beliefs and understandings that our faith is founded upon, there are also many minor things that can cause dissention and fraction in a church body. Eating meat or not, worshipping on Saturday or Sunday, are two such minor issues. The passing of judgment upon one another was creating "*stumbling blocks*" and "*hinderances*" in the early church and in the lives of the believers. Both sides were causing spiritual harm to the other. The evils of pride and comparison, of self-righteousness and position were rearing their ugly heads. Paul is emphatically saying, "STOP IT"!! Through his guidance and words of wisdom the early church will see the error of its ways and God will work good from this evil.

As God did in and through the evils that Joseph faced and overcame in Genesis 50 and as God did in and through the struggles of the early church in Romans 14, God continues to be at work in the church and in the world and in our lives bringing good from evil and growth from times of trial and suffering. Because God is above all else a God of love, God is always at work to bring good and to pour out blessings upon his beloved children.

I close this morning with an illustration. As the old parable about end times judgment begins, all the people who have ever lived are brought before God. Not submitting to God, several groups come with a complaint to lodge. The first group made the claim that they suffered persecution. They had died in gas chambers and concentration camps. They wanted to know how God could judge

them. What would he know about their suffering? The second group had been slaves and suffered terribly. They had no homes and no place to lie down to sleep. They had been poor and just had made enough to pay for their needs. There were others who had been sick most of their lives. How could God judge them? God lived in heaven where there is only goodness and light, no tears, no worries, no fears, no hungers, no mistreatments. Together, these groups appointed a committee to draw up a case to bring before God. The case stated that before God could judge them, he must first endure what they went through.

They said he would have to live on earth and be subject to all they had gone through. They cried out, *"Let him be born a Jew! Let Him be poor! Let him be rejected by his people! Let him have friends who betray him! Let him have false charges brought on him! Tried before a jury! Convicted by a judge! Abandoned by his friend! Let him be lonely! Let him be tortured! Let him die at the hands of enemies!"* The crowd stood back and gave approval to each sentence. Then there was hush that grew to be heard all over the room as they each then realized that God already had served that sentence. For Jesus, in His coming as a man, identified with us, in his sufferings, in struggles and temptations, in his pain of body, mind and spirit. He felt it all completely, totally, and personally - just as we have.

So, we must ask WHY? Why did Jesus do this? It was so we could know the depth of God's love for us. It was so we could know how far God was willing to go to prove he loved us. It was so that in all that we go through, we can turn to God and see one who has proven his love for us in his Son Jesus Christ.

In 1st John 4, verses nine and ten, we read, *"God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins"*. We experience God's love as he works in our lives, sometimes bringing good from evil. This week, may we each love others in the same way, seeking to bring healing and wholeness to the brokenness of their lives, allowing them to also experience the wonderful and healing power of God's love. Let us pray...

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you have matured in the faith, how has your sensitivity to and awareness of other Christian's consciences changed? How has this led to further growth and a deepening of relationship with people of other faiths?
- 2) *Pray*. Are you more like those with "strong" faith or "weak" faith in Romans 14? Pray for God to guide your understanding of self and of the other.
- 3) *Study*. Re-read Genesis 50: 19-21. What "low lights" and "highlights" come to mind when you apply these verses to your life? When have you recently been tempted to replace God in judging others? In judging yourself?