

TURNING EVIL INTO GOOD
Genesis 45:1-8a, 50:19-20

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The year was 1963. I was a graduating senior in high school and as president of our class I wrote in the year book this simple philosophy of life. "All things work together for good." Today, nearly 40 years later, I want to tell you why I still believe that statement is true.

We catch up with our hero, Joseph, in the waning years of his life. His father is dead. His brothers are feeling guilty and afraid. But this young dreamer has lived too long to be revengeful. He has spent enough time in prison to swallow his pride. In a tearful, touching moment with his brothers he makes this statement concerning their acts of evil. "*YOU INTENDED TO HARM ME, BUT GOD INTENDED IT FOR GOOD.*" Will you reflect with me on that statement for a moment?

YOU INTENDED TO HARM ME

When I first believed that "all things worked together for good," I was extremely naïve concerning the nature of evil. While my family of origin was far from perfect, I was safe there, protected from the evil one and seldom acquainted with grief. There were no TV's in those days to disturb our peace. The most sinful thing I thought you could do was to smoke and chew, or run around with girls the whole night through. My, how things have changed.

Evil today is bold and brutal. In the good old U.S. of A., there's an aggravated assault every 34 seconds, a robbery every 1.3 minutes, a rape every 5.8 minutes, and a murder every half hour. In our country, this place we love, one out of three females will suffer some kind of sexual abuse and the abduction of children has been so rampant this summer that parents are now afraid to let their children play outdoors.

Just ten days ago our own daughter-in-law was assaulted when a stranger stormed into their home threatening her life and the life of our grandson. Only her quick thinking defense and the grace of God, along with some caring neighbors who opened their doors to a screaming mother and child, saved them from severe harm.

When Marlon Brando's son killed his sister's boyfriend, Brando said, "For those whom the dark angel has never visited, no explanation is possible. For those whom it has visited, no explanation is necessary."

The pit for Joseph was real. The alienation of Egypt was awful. The prison cell was dark, damp, and difficult. No wonder his brothers were afraid. They should have been afraid. Not even a forgiving Joseph could forget the harsh reality—

You, my brothers, intended to harm me.

If by thinking some way that “things work together for good,” we put these brothers into a partnership with God under the guise that “God has a reason for everything,” we create a God that no reasonable person can possibly embrace. God did not intend harm for Joseph—jealous, angry, impulsive brothers harmed him. Sometimes evil is bold and brutal.

EVIL IS UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Russian author, Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes: “If only there were evil people somewhere committing insidiously evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them; that would be one thing. But the dividing line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Another day is through.
Someone slipped and fell,
Was that someone you?

A number of our staff and lay leaders attended a leadership conference this week sponsored by the Willow Creek Association. One of the speakers was Dan Allender, president of Mars Hill graduate school and author of several books, including Bold Love. For 90 minutes this Ph.D. in psychology talked about the marred nature of human beings. “Only when we name the darkness,” said Allender, “will there be any hope for joy.”

Joseph had his own evil to overcome. He was proud, narcissistic, full of himself. An owner of a small business put out with an egotistical customer said, “I’d like to buy that guy for what he’s worth and sell him for what he thinks he is worth.” That is sort of the situation with Joseph.

If things are going to work together for good, God is going to have to do some reworking on the best of us. We have seen the enemy and sometimes it is up close and personal. You intended to harm me, the tough reality of life, but God intended it for good.

GOD INTENDED IT FOR GOOD

Let me tell you why I still believe in my high school motto. I discovered one day how Romans 8:28, from which that statement comes, is really written. “In all things, God is at work for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.” It is not things that work out; it is God who works things out. Let me say that again. It is not things that work out for good; it is God who is at work in all things seeking for the good.

About 18 months ago, I was licking my wounds over some slander that I had endured. As I lamented the details of the wrong lavished upon me, a friend said to me, “Howard, go home and read Genesis chapter 50 verse 20. “You intended

to harm me, but God intended it for good.”

How is that possible? Let me suggest a couple of ways. God is for us. Paul says in Romans 8:31, “If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ that is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord? Shall trouble or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through the Christ who loves us.”

Once upon a time a man fell in a pit and he couldn't get out. Buddha came and said—Your pit is only a state of mind.

A Hindu showed up and said—Your pit is for purging you and making you more perfect.

Confucius said—If you would have listened to me, you wouldn't have been in the pit in the first place.

A Reporter said—Could I have the exclusive story on your pit?

An IRS agent said—Have you paid your taxes on your pit?

A Realist said—That's a pit.

An Idealist said—The world shouldn't have pits.

An Optimist said—Things could be worse.

A Pessimist said—Things will be worse.

Meanwhile, Jesus came, reached down into the depths of the pit, and lifted him out.

How is it we sing it?

He brought me out of the miry clay,
He set my feet on a rock to stay,
He put a song in my heart today,
A song of joy, Hallelujah.

Joseph discovered that no child of God should ever stay in a pit. The story of Joseph illustrates a person is forever finding the grace of God to get out of the pit, to redeem the moment, and to claim the time. God himself found Joseph there and provided a way of escape.

Lewis Smedes writes in one of his books, “When I flopped into nothingness, I fell into the hands of God. I was held and would not be dropped. I was supported and would not sink. I was held together and would not fall apart. I was accepted and could not be rejected. I was loved and would not be despised. I was in hell and God was there for me.” God is for us. That in itself is redemptive.

God does something else. He finds us where we are and lifts us up to where we ought to be. God has the nerve to take the worst thing that evil people have done to us and begin to weave and shape and fashion it so that even the evil becomes a redemptive act of God. God dares to say, don't ever let a trouble go to waste. Use it, redeem it, shape it, fashion it. While he never causes our troubles, neither is he helpless in the midst of trouble.

Last September 11, Tom Burnett boarded Flight 93 only to find it hijacked. He calls home to his wife on his cell phone and says, "We are all going to die, but there are three of us who are going to do something about it." And they did.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "If only to save myself from bitterness, I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive." To look into the face of hell and find something there to be redeemed, is at the center of the Christian faith.

Nowhere is this principle of redemptive suffering illustrated more effectively than in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On that day when the Son of God was stretched upon a cruel cross, moaning and crying out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" the evil one had to feel victorious. But just as the sinless one absorbs the sins of the world like a sponge, something happens. Evil is suffocated. Death loses its sting. The devil bites the heel of the Divine and is drowned in the blood of the Lamb. For God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.

That same God took a cocky kid by the name of Joseph and redeemed and fashioned him in such a way that he would save several nations from famine. That same God says to you and me, "Don't ever let your troubles go to waste." Let God take the evil choices, the bungling mistakes, the sinister circumstances of our lives and use them in redemptive ways for our sake and for the sake of others."

He never said you'd only see sunshine,
He never said there'd be no rain,
He only promised a heart full of singing,
About the very things in life that cause you pain.

Give them all, give them all, give them all to Jesus,
Shattered dreams, wounded hearts, broken toys,
Give them all, give them all, give them all to Jesus,
And He will turn your darkness into joy.

In all things God is at work for good for those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good. So be it.

Amen.

