

HOW GOD TURNS EVIL INTO GOOD

Joseph: Man Of Faith...Image Of Christ

by Ron Ritchie

I have experienced the most wonderful three weeks; weeks in which I have heard about or been part of watching God turning evil into good. A young Christian man told me that his beloved father whom he and his mother had been praying for had become a Christian in one of our recent morning services. Then last Wednesday morning a mother of three children, encouraged by the recent salvation of her husband, invited Jesus to become her Lord and Savior. That same evening, I met a young mother with two children who worked with the son who's father recently came to the Lord; she also invited Jesus to take over her life, forgive her sins and give her the wholesomeness, joy and peace that He promised by the power of the Holy Spirit. As I walked out of the office that evening, a fellowworker told me that the father of a mutual friend had accepted the Lord at my seminar held at our annual men's retreat a week earlier. As I reviewed all this new life in Christ, all I could think of was, "Satan, you work among us for evil but God takes that evil and its horrible effects on our lives and brings good out of it; good in the form of *the saving of many lives* [Proverbs 6:9,19:21]."

All of these new believers have been transferred out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, but all of us are painfully aware that we are still living in an evil world filled with pain and suffering. But in the midst of all of this evil, we have the promise of God from the word of the Apostle Paul to a suffering community in his day, "...we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). This truth can be so clearly seen in the blessings Jacob had bestowed on his grandsons and his own sons as we turn to Genesis chapters 49 and 50. This can be clearly seen in the blessings Jacob bestowed on his grandsons and then his sons. At 147 years of age he knew he was dying, so it was time to bless them. He first called for Joseph, his eleventh son born of his beloved Rachel, and Joseph's two sons Manasseh and Ephraim. He adopted these grandsons so that they would come under the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. Then instead of giving the birthright blessing to his first-born son Reuben, he went into the next generation and gave it to the second-born son of Joseph, Ephraim (see Genesis 48:5; 1 Chronicles 5:1-2; Hebrews 11:21). Jacob completed this meeting by encouraging his beloved son Joseph that God's plans and hope for his people lay in Canaan and not Egypt; he gave Joseph a piece of land in Shechem, Canaan to symbolize that spiritual truth.

Shortly after that meeting he called for his twelve sons and began to bless them (see Genesis 49). In those blessings, Jacob in the power of the Spirit of God laid out the future of the nation of Israel and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant by the hand of the coming "Prince of Peace" in a restored Garden of Eden. The experiences Jacob and Joseph had of God's blessings were but a foretaste of the glory to come, just as believers in Jesus Christ have been given the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of a greater inheritance (see Ephesians 1:13-14).

The two most interesting of these prophecies of Jacob's, for purposes of our study, were given to Judah and Joseph. Judah was the fourth son of Leah and Jacob. As you recall, it was Judah who had suggested to his brothers that they sell Joseph to the slave traders. Judah had also failed to keep his promise to his Canaanite daughter-in-law Tamar to provide her a husband after her first husband died; then he went to a prostitute after his wife's death only to discover it was Tamar, who gave birth to twins Perez and Zerah. But later Judah had been willing to lay down his life before Joseph for the life of Benjamin (see Genesis 44:33-34). It may be because of that change of heart and character that Jacob prophesied the following by the Spirit of God (see Genesis 49:8-12):

"Judah, your brothers will praise you;
your hand will be on the neck of your enemies;

your father's sons will bow down to you [just as they were bowing down to Joseph then].

You are a lion's cub, O Judah;
you return from the prey, my son.
Like a lion he crouches and lies down,
like a lioness---who dares to rouse him?

The scepter will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he come to whom it belongs
and the obedience of the nations is his."
Psalm 78:65-72 gives us a commentary on this:

"...[The Lord] rejected the tents of Joseph,
he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim;
but he chose the tribe of Judah,
Mount Zion, which he loved.

He built his sanctuary like the heights,
like the earth that he established forever.
He chose David his servant...
to be the shepherd of his people Jacob,
of Israel his inheritance."

Out of the seed of Judah and Tamar would come King David and then Messiah Jesus---the "Lion of Judah"
(see Matthew 1:1-16). And the nation of Israel as well as the nations of the world would fall at Jesus' feet. The
apostle John wrote in Revelation 5:5, 9, "See the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has
triumphed...And they sang a new song:

'You are worthy...
...with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation."
(See also Isaiah 63:1-6; Revelation 19:11, 13.)

Then Jacob blessed his beloved Joseph, the son born of Rachel in his old age, and said (see 49:22-26),

"Joseph is a fruitful vine,
a fruitful vine near a spring,
whose branches climb over a wall.
With bitterness archers attacked him;
they shot at him with hostility.

But his bow remained steady,
his strong arms stayed limber ,
because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob,
because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,
because of your father's God [El Shaddai], who helps you,
because of the Almighty, who blesses you
with blessings of the heavens above [rain],
blessings of the deep that lies below [springs],
blessings of the breast [flocks and herds of animals] and womb [children].
Your father's blessings are greater
than the blessings of the ancient mountains,
than the bounty of the age-old hills.

Let all these rest on the head of Joseph,
on the brow of the prince among his brothers."

(See also Moses' blessings on Joseph's tribe in Deuteronomy 33:13-17.)

After blessing his twelve sons, Jacob gave instructions that he be buried in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which his grandfather Abraham had bought for himself and Sarah (see Genesis 23). They were eventually laid to rest there, followed by Isaac and Rebekah and then Jacob's first wife Leah. Then Jacob took his last breath and was "gathered to his people" at the age of 147.

The death of the father

Genesis 50:1-14

Joseph threw himself upon his father and wept over him and kissed him. Then Joseph directed the physicians in his service to embalm his father Israel. So the physicians embalmed him, taking a full forty days, for that was the time required for embalming. And the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days.

When the days of mourning had passed, Joseph said to Pharaoh's court, "If I have found favor in your eyes, speak to Pharaoh for me. Tell him, 'My father made me swear an oath and said, "I am about to die; bury me in the tomb I dug for myself in the land of Canaan." Now let me go up and bury my father; then I will return.'"

Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear to do."

So Joseph went up to bury his father. All Pharaoh's officials accompanied him---the dignitaries of his court and all the dignitaries of Egypt---besides all the members of Joseph's household and his brothers and those belonging to his father's household. Only their children and their flocks and herds were left in Goshen. Chariots and horsemen also went up with him. It was a very large company.

When they reached the threshing floor of Atad, near the Jordan, they lamented loudly and bitterly; and there Joseph observed a seven-day period of mourning for his father. When the Canaanites who lived there saw the mourning at the threshing floor of Atad, they said, "The Egyptians are holding a solemn ceremony of mourning." That is why that place near the Jordan is called Abel Mizraim.

So Jacob's sons did as he had commanded them: They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre, which Abraham had bought as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite, along with the field. After burying his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, together with his brothers and all the others who had gone with him to bury his father.

Joseph, out of all the sons, threw himself on the body of his beloved father and wept over him and kissed him. More Egyptian than Jew at this time in his life, he had in his power the resources to embalm his father Jacob, and he took full advantage of this privilege. He did it not because of the Egyptian theology but to honor his father. This forty-day embalming process was followed by seventy days of national mourning to honor Joseph.

After the seventy days of national mourning, Joseph asked Pharaoh if he could take his father home to the cave in Hebron and bury him with his fathers, for Jacob had made him swear an oath that he would do that. Pharaoh was very willing to encourage Joseph to go to Hebron, and once the plans were made, Joseph left Egypt with not only all of Pharaoh's court dignitaries, but also the dignitaries from across Egypt. Joseph and his wife and household were also accompanied by his eleven brothers and their wives as well as chariots and horsemen. Only the small children and their flocks and herds were left in Goshen. It was quite a procession

that began the hundred-mile trip north out of Cairo to the small village of Hebron in Canaan.

They may have taken the same route that Moses would take out of Egypt and then Joshua would take in the conquest of Canaan, which would have put them on the east side of the Jordan River with Jericho on the west side. Once in Canaan they rested at the threshing floor of Atad and mourned for another seven days. When the Canaanites saw this Egyptian ceremony they called the place Abel Mizraim ("The Egyptian Mourning Place" or "Meadow of Mourning"). It appears that the Egyptians stayed there and the sons went up to Hebron. There Jacob was laid to rest with his fathers, and then the cave was sealed and Joseph and his large company returned home to Egypt.

As God fulfilled his promise to Jacob in his death, so he will fulfill his promise to his people Israel that one day they will have a peaceful land, and in returning to the land they will be accompanied by many from among the nations. Isaiah wrote (2:3),

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob."

(See also Zechariah 8:23.) Thus the story of Jacob's burial in the land foreshadows the time when God "...will...bring Jacob back from captivity and will have compassion on all the people of Israel..." (Ezekiel 39:25). The Jews are now coming back into the land by the thousands, but most are still held captive by the world, the flesh, and the devil. But one day all of Israel will be saved and our risen Lord Jesus will rule in righteousness out of Jerusalem.

While the Jews have always looked for the promises of God in the land, Christians look for the spiritual promises of God now and in eternity. When Jesus was facing the evil of the cross of Calvary, he said to his disciples and all who love him, "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14:1-3.)

After the death of his father, Joseph was confronted with...

The fear of the brothers

Genesis 50:15-18

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

The brothers got together and began to think over the past suffering they had caused their younger brother, and now because their father was dead they began to fear for their lives once again. What if all this love and gifting from Joseph had been to encourage the heart of their father Jacob, but now that he was dead Joseph planned to bring personal revenge against them for all the pain and suffering they had caused him? What if Joseph finally looked at their sins and wanted to settle the account with them? What if...? There was no one left on earth to guard them against this threat.

So out of guilt and fear they sent this note to their brother, the second in command of Egypt, using their dead father as a mediator to indirectly ask Joseph to forgive their sins. Joseph had wanted to be reconciled to his

brothers, but this is the first time it is recorded that they wanted to be reconciled to him. They had never asked him for forgiveness, so their feelings of guilt and shame had continued to haunt them. Now they began to look for mercy. The brothers were living like most of the world---very clear about their sin, knowing that a day of accounting was coming, and not sure they had anyone in their corner to guard them against God in the day of judgment. Their hearts were full of fear. They had everything materially, and yet their souls and spirits were struggling with Joseph's love for them because it seemed as if they had committed a sin that could not be forgiven. But they were hoping Joseph would hear their dead father Jacob's words on their behalf.

The brothers acknowledged that they had sinned against Joseph and twice asked for forgiveness of their sins. They then acknowledged their relationship as servants of the God of Israel who was also the God of their father. Joseph wept because his older brothers finally admitted their sin for what it really was---horrible; clearly harmful; deserving of death or, even worse, slavery.

The brothers then arrived at the palace, walked into Joseph's presence, and fulfilled the dream he had told them and his father so many years before: "We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it." (Genesis 37:7.) At that time the brothers had become jealous and had hated him. Now they came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

As the brothers threw themselves down before Joseph hoping to obtain the forgiveness of their sins, so we must all fall down before Jesus Christ to obtain the forgiveness of our sins. And we have the hope that one day all of Israel will fall down before our risen Lord Jesus and ask him to forgive them for their rejection of him as their Messiah and Savior. For as Paul recorded for us, one day "...all Israel will be saved...

'The Deliverer [the Redeemer] will come from Zion;
He will remove ungodliness from Jacob [the people of Israel].'

'And this is My [new] covenant with them,
When I take away their sins.'
(Romans 11:26-36; see also Isaiah 59:21; Jeremiah 31:31-34.)

Joseph's response to the brothers reflected...

The grace of God

Genesis 50:19-21

But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Joseph was saying, "I have no revenge in my heart against you. Yes it was horrible, difficult, deadly, lonely, and unjust---but looking back now on all those years of pain and suffering and then on the years of the blessings of God through Pharaoh, my wife and children, and my rank and position, I can see that God was behind every event in my life and I am right where God has always planned for me to be! Remember, I told you when I first revealed myself to you not to become distressed because you sold me into Egypt, for '...God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.' [Genesis 45:7-8]. I take no credit, I was and I remain clay in the hands of the Master Potter. My life has never been my own. I have sought by faith to serve *Yahweh* in the land of many gods, and now as I look back I see that he has had his hand on me every step of the way. I could never have dreamed of a better place to be than the place of God for me in the great plan of redemption he has designed to come through our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and now through me, and in the years to come, through Messiah."

Jesus also understood the place of God for his life. For in the beginning of his life a righteous Jew named Simeon came to the temple to bless Jesus when he was just eight days old: "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel..." (Luke 2:34). John the Baptist said to his disciples upon seeing Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29.) He understood that his cousin was in the place of God. Jesus understood the place of God for him just before his triumphal entry to Jerusalem: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). And then in the garden while speaking with his Father the night before his death, he said he understood the place of God: "Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me, yet not My will, but Thine be done" (Luke 22:42). When Jesus was on the cross he understood the place of God for him, praying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And then he said, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:34, 46; see also Psalm 31:5)---finally, the perfect place of God.

Behind all the events and human plans recounted in the story of Joseph lay the unchanging plan of God. It was a good plan from the beginning for Joseph, and it was as well for Jesus. For after he had risen, he reviewed the plan of God for his life to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations...." (Luke 24:46-47).

Joseph spoke kindly to them: "So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children," reflecting the character of God who is the God of all comfort (see 2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Now we come finally to...

The death of the son

Genesis 50:22-26

Joseph stayed in Egypt, along with all his father's family. He lived a hundred and ten years and saw the third generation of Ephraim's children. Also the children of Makir son of Manasseh were placed at birth on Joseph's knees.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place."

So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.

As you recall, Joseph arrived in Egypt in 1893 BC as a seventeen-year-old slave. Either Amenemes 1-IV or Senwosret 1-III was ruling in the Twelfth Dynasty (1990-1775 BC), which was called the Strong Middle Kingdom of Egypt. And by the time Joseph was thirty years old, the Lord had placed him in the position of second in command of all of Egypt, below only Pharaoh. God blessed Joseph in many ways, but the way that is dearest to the heart of a man or woman is the joy of children and then grandchildren, and for some even great-grandchildren. Joseph and his wife had the privilege of producing some famous sons in the history of Israel: Joshua, Gideon, and Samuel to mention a few.

At the age of one hundred and ten years, having served Pharaoh for eighty years, Joseph realized that his life on earth was drawing to a close. So he gathered his family around him as his father before him had and informed them of his impending death. He then sought to comfort them with the promises of God and the reality that they would all be taken back to "the promised land." He asked his family to bury him with his fathers in Canaan as a further symbol of his faith in God that all the promises of the Abrahamic covenant would be fulfilled to his fathers and to him and his children. Then Joseph died (1910-1800 BC), and as was their custom they embalmed him and put him in a coffin in Egypt. Four hundred years later Moses would take his bones out of Egypt [see Exodus 13:19], and then after forty years in the wilderness, Joshua would fulfill Joseph's request by taking Joseph's bones into Canaan and burying him in "the promised land" at Shechem

(see Joshua 24:32).

We first saw Joseph's faith in God when he shared his dreams with his family (see Genesis 37:5-10). We then saw his faith in God expressed when Potiphar's wife sought to seduce him and he cried out, "How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9). The next time his faith was expressed was when he trusted in God to give him an interpretation of the dreams of the Pharaoh's chief baker and chief cupbearer (see Genesis 40:8). He expressed this same faith in the presence of Pharaoh when he was brought out of prison to interpret Pharaoh's two dreams (see Genesis 41:16). His faith was again expressed in the naming of his children: Manasseh, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household"; and Ephraim, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering" (see Genesis 41:51-52).

Joseph confessed his relationship with the only living God before his brothers at their first meeting in Egypt (see Genesis 42:18). When he made himself known to them after their second journey to Egypt, he said, "...It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you...God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance...[God] made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt" (Genesis 45:5-8). He confessed to his father Jacob when Jacob was on his deathbed that his sons were gifts from God (see Genesis 48:9). And then as we have just seen, he told his brothers after their father's death that they had nothing to fear; "Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

Finally on his own deathbed Joseph entrusted his brothers and their families into the hands of God to take them all up into "the promised land." The writer to the Hebrews said (11:22), "By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones."

In Joseph the families of all the earth found blessing, and the whole world can place their hope in Jesus to completely fulfill the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. Over and over again we have seen the life of Joseph foreshadow the life of the Messiah to come, Jesus the son of God.

We saw how both men were loved by their father (see Genesis 37:3; Matthew 3:17).

- They were both shepherds of their father's sheep (see Genesis 37:2; John 10:11-16).
- Both men were sent by their fathers to their brothers, but Joseph's brothers hated him and sought to kill him and Jesus' blood brothers rejected him and his spiritual brothers sought to kill him (see Genesis 37:13ff; John 7:3; Luke 20:47).
- Both men had a personal robe that was taken from them (Genesis 37:23-24; John 19:24).
- Both men spent time in Egypt (see Genesis 37:25-28; Matthew 2:14-15).
- They were both sold for the price of a slave (see Genesis 37:28; Matthew 26:15).
- They were both bound in chains (see Psalm 105:18; Genesis 39:20; Matthew 27:2).
- They were both tempted (see Genesis 39:7-10; Matthew 4:1-11).
- They were both falsely accused (see Genesis 39:16-17; Matthew 26:59).
- They were both placed with two other prisoners, one of whom was saved and the other lost (see Genesis 40:2-22; Luke 23:32-43).
- They both began their ministries at the age of thirty (see Genesis 41:46; Luke 3:23).
- Both men were exalted by God after a season of suffering (see Genesis 41:41-43; Philippians 2:9-11).
- They both forgave those who harmed them (see Genesis 45:1-15; Luke 23:34).

- Both men were sent by God to save many (Genesis 45:7; Matthew 1:21; Mark 10:45).
- And finally, they both understood that God turned evil into good (see Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28).

(Some of this listing was suggested by the New International Version *Life Application Bible* .)

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were all called by God to become clay in the hands of the Master Potter. He molded them and then placed them into the fire of suffering and evil to become vessels that would carry his message of love and salvation to the lives of their families and the surrounding nations in their generations and the ones to come. As these men were called out in their generations, so we are called out in our generation to place our faith in Jesus Christ and understand that he can take what has been evil in our lives and turn it into good to the saving of many lives.

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