

JOSEPH: THE GOOD JOURNEY

Genesis 50:15-21

God intends every evil to come out good.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
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Where I grew up in LA—Lower Arkansas—there are very few sidewalks, except in the downtown areas. Most of the roads don't even have shoulders to protect the inattentive driver. What there are, are ditches on either side of the road to drain the rainwater. Sometimes these ditches were deep enough to stand in and be eye-level with the road. Back when I was a child, the ditches would also catch the occasional glass coke bottle, which could be redeemed at the local grocery store for a nickel, which could then be spent on candy or bubble gum. I spent more time in the ditch than I did on the road, looking for those glass treasures. Those are the kinds of roads I learned to drive on, and I learned to pay attention, because veering off into the ditch could spell disaster.

It occurs to me that the road to life is like those childhood roads in south Arkansas. You have to pay attention, or you will become intimately acquainted with the ditch, and that could be destructive of your car and your health. Apparently, the roads were in similar shape in the time of Jesus, because he said in the Sermon on the Mount, "*Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*"¹

In fact nobody in the Bible had an easy way through life. Every significant Biblical character faced challenges, hardships, and suffering. Think about it. It's not too different from life as we experience it. So for the next few weeks we are going to look at some of the heroes of the Bible—Joseph, Job, Jeremiah, Jesus, and James—and discover how they dealt with the challenges of their lives. We're going to see what they can teach us about keeping it between the ditches.

Do you remember the story of Joseph? It takes up the last 14 chapters of Genesis, the longest narrative in the book, and it's one of the most interesting as well. Joseph was the 11th son of Jacob and the firstborn of Jacob's favored wife, Rachel. Therefore he enjoyed a very special and privileged relationship with his father. Dressed in his coat of many colors, not having to work like the other sons, and sporting an attitude of arrogance, Joseph was not well-liked. It was no surprise that his brothers plotted to get rid of him. They took

him and sold him as a slave to a wandering band of traders and told Jacob he had been killed by wild beasts, producing the blood-stained coat of Joseph as evidence.

Meanwhile Joseph ended up a slave in Egypt. He did pretty well there, becoming the chief steward in the house of Potiphar, an Egyptian official. But Potiphar's wife, jealous for Joseph's affection, accused him of sexual assault, and Joseph was thrown into prison. But even there, Joseph won the trust of the prison guards and helped out some fellow inmates by interpreting their dreams.

When Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had a disturbing dream, they sent for Joseph to interpret it. Joseph told Pharaoh that the dream—seven thin cows eating seven fat cows, and seven bad ears of corn eating seven good ears of corn—meant that a severe famine was coming, and they ought to prepare for it. So Joseph was put in charge of the food warehousing program, and when the famine did hit as predicted, Egypt became the breadbasket of the ancient world, feeding their own people and sending food to other nations as well.

Eventually Joseph's father Jacob sent Joseph's brothers to Egypt to get food, too, and Joseph was reunited with them. The story of the intrigue surrounding that reconciliation is fascinating, but I won't go into it here. Eventually the whole family moved to Egypt, and Joseph provided a place for them to live. Jacob died in Egypt, and they took him home to Canaan to bury him. When Joseph and his brothers returned to Egypt, the brothers were sure that Joseph had just been biding his time until his father was gone, waiting to exact a terrible revenge on them for selling him into slavery all those years before. They came crawling to Joseph, saying that Jacob had said something about Joseph forgiving them and offering their lives in service to their younger brother.

Finally, Joseph gave the punch line to his whole life story, right at the end of the book of Genesis. He said, "*Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 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.*"² This was part of the plan all along. God knew what God was doing. In the midst of evil, God was working for good the whole time. That is the great truth that I want you to believe and celebrate today. In the midst of evil, God works for good.

The New Testament expression of Joseph's truth is Paul's great statement in Romans 8:28: "*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love God and have been called according to his purpose.*" That's good news!

That's the difference between optimism and hope. Optimism believes everything will eventually turn out all right. But true hope says that even if things don't turn out all right, God will be with us to make things right for his people who are faithful. As disciples of Jesus, we are not merely optimistic; we have a hope that does not disappoint us because we believe in a God who works in the midst of evil to turn things good.

How did Joseph keep his hope alive, even when he was confronted with betrayal and prison and hardship? How did he stay between the ditches of life? Let's look at three qualities of Joseph and apply them to our journey, which God also intends to be good.

Joseph was a man of trust. Even when he was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery, even when he was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and thrown into prison, he never lost his faith. He trusted in God. In prison, the Scripture says, "*The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love.*"³ When Joseph was given the power to interpret

dreams, he did not take credit for himself, but he gave credit to God. Joseph trusted that God had a purpose and was directing his life.

This week I was out for my early morning walk with Zoe, our little dog, and I was listening to my prayer devotional. I must confess that my mind was not in the right place. There were some things that were bothering me, both physical and mental, and I wasn't paying close attention. I was listening to the Easter morning devotional, because I had been busy on Easter. Reflecting on the fear of the women at the tomb, the reader asked, "What things are frightening me today? Where are the sources of my anxiety? I clench these fears in my fists and feel their tension in my body." I thought, are you talking to me? Then the voice said, "And now, slowly I relax my fists and open my palms to God, repeating these words, 'I trust you.'"⁴ I thought, Oh yeah, I trust God. I opened my hands and repeated several times, "I trust you." A wave of peace came over me, and I literally felt a source of pain leave my body.

One of my favorite trust Scriptures is Proverbs 3:5-6: "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*" In other words, God will keep you between the ditches.

Joseph responded to God by trusting. He believed that God was weaving his life together in some grand design. There are ditches on either side of the road, but the good news is, God owns the road! God is ultimately in control, and God can take the events of your life, painful as they might be, and weave them into something beautiful.

Joseph was also a patient man. Things didn't happen for him quickly. He paid his dues—in slavery and in prison—before he was lifted up to a position of success. When he saw his brothers again after all those years, he was patient to wait until the right time to reveal himself to them.

We don't like to operate that way, do we? We live in a culture of instant gratification. We want our goals realized now. We want to taste the success of all our endeavors today. But life seldom works that way. Change happens slowly. It takes a long time to see the fruit of our labors. We can get frustrated or depressed, or we can be patient, and let God work it out.

Tony Dungy is one of the most recognizable names in professional football. He was the first Black football coach to take his team, the Indianapolis Colts, to a victory in the Super Bowl. He is also known as a man of great personal integrity and Christian character. Now retired from coaching, he spends a lot of his time speaking to Christian groups about his faith.

The Super Bowl victory didn't happen overnight. It was the culmination of a long journey. That journey included Tony Dungy getting fired from one team as head coach, resigning from another, and grieving the suicide of his son James. Through the trials, he said, "it was hard to remember God's promise from Romans 8:28, that all things work together for good to those who love him. But I also tried to remember the promise in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9—that despite all of our troubles, God will never abandon us. What we often see as defeat is frequently the stage being set for a comeback."

Tony Dungy's comeback was completed on February 4, 2007, when the Indianapolis Colts became the world champions of professional football. Reflecting on his son's death and then the Super Bowl victory just a year later, Dungy said, "Both of these events have given me the opportunity to grow in my faith. I have been touched by so many people who have reached out to me to express their own experiences, their triumphs as well as their

tragedies. And because of my experiences, I have been able to help them. I can tell them in no uncertain terms that despite these ups and downs, God is with us. God is for us. He won't ever abandon us.”⁵

When we endure the hardships of life, when we don't see our dreams and desires come to fruition, when trials and trouble run us into the ditch, we have to live with patience.

Finally, Joseph was a forgiving man. He was betrayed by his brothers. He was imprisoned falsely. When he got power and position, he could have had his revenge on those who had hurt him. But he didn't. He reconciled with his brothers. Still, they came to him after their father's death, fearful that Joseph would finally exact his revenge. Again, Joseph responded with a great statement of faith and forgiveness: “*Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.*”⁶

If you're going to stay out of the ditches, you are going to have to forgive those who have hurt you. I know it's hard, and sometimes the pain inflicted by our families is the worst of all, as it was for Joseph. But the journey will not turn out for good if you carry the baggage of resentment, hatred, and hostility along with you. When Jesus taught the disciples his prayer, he said, “*If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*”⁷ Could it be any more clear?

Dr. Yvonne Pointer of Cleveland, Ohio, has had a journey that would rival Joseph's. Raised in a Christian home by loving parents, she rebelled as a teenager and by the time she was 16 was a pregnant drug addict. There was one friend of her parents that kept telling her to change her ways and turn back to God, and finally she did. In 1975, Yvonne recommitted her life to Christ and crawled out of the ditch.

Nine years later, Yvonne's fourteen-year-old daughter Gloria was murdered. The loss of a child is the greatest pain there is, and Yvonne spent hours alone in her church trying to understand it. She had come through drugs and street life, now to experience this? But she turned to God because she knew God.

And God provided her help; her church and her friends wrapped the arms of love around her and helped her through the crisis. Then Yvonne became aware of others who were hurting because they had lost children. She formed a support organization for parents of murdered children. Later she expanded it to include women who were going through any kind of difficulty. Then she went to work for the city of Cleveland in community relations and became an advocate for the safety of children. She always shares from the perspective of her faith in God's sustaining love.

They never found Gloria's killer, but he has been forgiven. Yvonne Pointer says, “I found hatred too heavy a load to carry. Would I want the person who murdered Gloria over for Sunday dinner? No. But if I didn't forgive him, unforgiveness would kill me, too. Forgiveness releases you to live.”

She adds, “This is the message we need to take to the world, that God loves us. I am not a perfect person. God doesn't need a perfect person—he needs a willing person.”⁸

Are you willing to believe today that God works in all things for the good of those who love him? Are you willing to believe that God intends for your journey to come out good? Are you willing to trust God? Are you willing to be patient for the outcome? Are you willing to forgive those who have hurt you?

Maybe you're in the ditch today. Maybe like Joseph you have been betrayed or falsely accused. Maybe you are in a prison not of your own making. Or maybe you're sitting in

a self-made cell of bitterness and despair, bound in the chains of your own mistakes and addictions.

I have good news. God intends your journey for good. You can trust in him. You can be patient, because God is working it out. Forgive others, and receive the forgiveness of his grace. Crawl out of your ditch, and find the path to life!

¹ Matthew 7:13-14.

² Genesis 50:19-20.

³ Genesis 39:21.

⁴ Pete Grieg, *Lectio 365*, March 31, 2024.

⁵ Michael W. Michelsen Jr., "Gentle Warrior," *Today's Christian* (September/October 2007).

⁶ Genesis 50:19-20.

⁷ Matthew 6:14-15.

⁸ Audrey T. Hingley, "Gloria's Legacy," *Today's Christian* (May/June 2006), 31-33.
<https://www.yvonnepointer.com/>.