

“The God Who Reverses”

Genesis 41:37-57

Turn in your Bibles this morning to Genesis 41, where in a moment we will read beginning with verse 37. Someone once said that the road to success is paved with failure. It is simply a way of saying that true success doesn't come without the lessons learned from hardships along the way. Thomas Edison, in his attempt at developing the light bulb, when pressed about his repeated failure, famously said, “I have not failed, I've just found 10,000 ways that will not work.” Or consider another example. Before he became our nation's 16th president, Abraham Lincoln had faced his share of numerous personal and political failures in life:

- He lost several elections; in 1832 he lost his first bid for public office when he ran for the Illinois state legislature; in 1843 he lost the nomination for Congress; in 1854 he was defeated in his attempt to win a seat in the Senate
- He suffered deep depression and personal loss; death of his mother when he was 9 years old; death of his sister when he was 19; death of his first love (Ann Rutledge) that plunged him into depression; death of his son Edward at age 4; death of his son William at age 11 who died from Typhoid fever
- He was seen by many as a backwoods lawyer with little chance of national success; he had very little formal education

By the late 1850s, Lincoln was not even considered to be a front-runner for the presidency. At the Republican Convention in 1860, more prominent candidates dominated the spotlight. But as the voting progressed, the momentum slowly began to shift. On the third ballot, the convention suddenly turned in Lincoln's favor. He won his party's nomination, and then went on to win the presidency.

Isn't amazing how things can suddenly change in our lives? Like a reversal of fortunes, or a positive outcome for what has been a painful, prolonged situation. Here in Genesis 41, a similar thing happens in Joseph's life. The road that has brought him to this point has been a rough and bumpy one, filled with detours and delays. Will he ever catch a break? But here we will see that his situation is about to change for the better. (Read)

We've seen from the first half of chapter 41 that God is the God who remembers. Which is to say that He always acts in keeping with His covenant promises. And now in this second part of the chapter, we will see how He is also the God who reverses. He often turns situations upside down in unexpected and redemptive ways. Throughout the Bible we see a recurring pattern—God exalts the lowly, humbles the proud, brings victory out of defeat, and life out of death. These divine reversals display His power, justice, mercy, and grace. The gospel is the saving message of how God has reconciled sinners to Himself through the death and resurrection of His Son. The Son of God became the Son of Man so that the sons of men could become the sons of God. It is a story of divine reversal, one of transformation, the story of how God reverses the effects of the fall and brings redemption.

2 Corinthians 5:21 — “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

That's the greatest reversal of all. The gospel is the news that Jesus Christ became our sin on the cross, so that God the Father treated God the Son as if He had committed my and your sins. And in grace, He treats me now as if I were just as righteous as Christ. He became my sin so that now by His grace I've become His righteousness. There is no greater reversal than the one that takes place through faith when sinners become saints.

How does God bring reversal to our situation? How does He cause all things to work together for our good and His glory? Now, from Joseph's life, we are able to see some ways He does this.

1—He turns humility into HONOR (41:37-45)

“This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. And Pharaoh said to his servants, ‘Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?’ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.’ And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.’ Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, ‘Bow the knee!’ Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.’ And Pharaoh called Joseph’s name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asnath the daughter of Potiphera priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt.”

Joseph tells Pharaoh that God had been showing him what He was about to do. There would be seven years of plenty in which there would be abundant harvest. But those years would be followed by seven years of famine which would be so severe that no one would remember the years of plenty. It was a situation that called for wise stewardship of time and resources. Joseph suggests a plan which he lays out in verses 33-36.

The proposal that Joseph put forth pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. It was a plan that required the leadership of a discerning and wise man. However, not in a million years would Joseph have thought that man would be him, yet this is exactly what happens. In verse 38, Pharaoh says to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?” It is a stunning admission coming from the lips of a pagan king. Here is a man in whom is the Spirit of God! The wisdom that Joseph possessed was unlike anything Pharaoh had ever seen, simply one more evidence of the hand of God on Joseph’s life. He’s still the same man.

Proverbs 18:12—“Humility comes before honor.”

There’s a lot of people who want the honor, but without the necessary humility that comes first. They want glory apart from the daily grind of life. But before the crown comes the cross. Jesus embraced the cross.

Hebrews 5:7-9—“In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered. And being made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.”

In His humanity, the Son learned obedience through what He suffered. And He is now exalted at the Father’s right hand. Joseph is an Old Testament picture of this. He is:

Honored with respect

Pharaoh says to Joseph in verse 40, “You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will

I be greater than you.” He is honored with respect and elevated to a place of supreme leadership so that everyone now comes under his authority.

Honored with responsibility

Verse 41 says, “And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.’” He is essentially made to be Egypt’s prime minister. The whole land is now under his jurisdiction. All of it is placed under his charge.

Honored with royalty

Notice verses 42-43 say, “Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, ‘Bow the knee!’ Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt.” To wear the king’s ring was the equivalent of today’s platinum charge card. The idea is that Joseph now bears the authority of the king’s imprint.

Honored with recognition

Verse 44 says, “Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.’ And Pharaoh called Joseph’s name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphra priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt.” He’s given an exalted name and a royal bride.

“Zaphenath-paneah” — *Savior of the world; Word of God that brings life;
Abundance of life*

Just a few hours earlier, Joseph was a forgotten nobody in a lonely prison. Now, he is decked out in royalty, wearing a gold chain around his neck, given the keys

to the company car, receives a bride, and people everywhere are given the command to bow the knee to him.

Psalm 75:6-7—“For promotion comes neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: He puts down one, and sets up another.”

Pharaoh recognizes that Joseph is a discerning and wise man, therefore he could be trusted with promotion. The situation called for a trustworthy person, and not a talking personality. There's a difference. Our culture today loves to worship personalities. Celebrities adorn the covers of our magazines, they fill up our social media feeds with their airbrushed images, and somehow they've duped us into thinking that just because they're famous, they're qualified to lecture us on morality and politics. But these people are famous for being famous. They've done nothing worthy of eternal commendation. Character is more important than charisma, and principle far outweighs popularity.

Promotion can often ruin a person. It will ruin a person when their character takes a back seat to their success. Their gifts have taken them places where their character can't keep them. There are several ways this happens:

- Pride can replace humility

Success can inflate the ego. We would say that it goes to a person's head. People begin to believe they earned their position purely through talent or effort, forgetting the roles of grace, timing, and others' contributions. Proverbs 16:18 says, "Pride goes before destruction."

- Power can reveal weakness

Promotion often gives people more influence and freedom—and that freedom exposes what was already in their hearts. If insecurity or ambition were hidden before, they now come to the surface. Charles Spurgeon said, “The most dangerous trials are not those of persecution, but of prosperity.”

- Position can remove accountability

The higher a person rises, the more difficult it becomes to receive honest feedback. People become flatterers, not truth-tellers. Without accountability, many fall prey to poor decision making, moral compromise, and burnout.

- Prosperity can reduce dependence

Promotion often comes with increased responsibilities, distractions, and expectations. So that a person might stop nurturing their inner life—neglecting prayer, Scripture, and community. Eventually, the external weight of leadership crushes the internal foundation.

- Performance can rule identity

The person’s identity can become performance-based so that they tie their identity to their title. If they derive their worth from being promoted, they will become enslaved to performance, approval, or fear of losing status. It creates anxiety, insecurity, or ruthlessness. King Saul is a classic case. When anointed as king, he started out well. But his insecurity, disobedience, and pride led to his downfall. God gave him the crown, but his character couldn’t carry it. Just this week, if you’ve kept up with the news, you probably saw the story about the CEO who was caught on camera at a concert with a woman who was not his wife. Like the ‘kiss cam’ at a ballpark or something. Right there on the Jumbotron for the world to see is this guy embracing this woman who is not his wife, so that

when they realize they are both on camera, they try to scurry off like a couple of mice when the lights come on. But then it is too late.

It's not that promotion ruins people, but that it reveals and accelerates what's already inside. That is why character formation must always precede promotion. Before honor comes humility, for it is God who turns humility into honor. The second thing that I'll mention about God's reversal of Joseph's situation is this:

2—He turns pain into PURPOSE (41:46-52)

“Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, and he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it. And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured. Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore them to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. ‘For,’ he said, ‘God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.’ The name of the second he called Ephraim, ‘For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.’”

Before honor comes humility, and God reverses humiliation to exaltation. But what about the pain he has experienced? We've seen that Joseph had experienced a lot of pain thus far in his life. There was the pain of being despised and rejected by his brothers. There was the pain of being sold as a slave. There was the pain of being falsely accused and imprisoned. There was

the pain of being ignored and forgotten. It has been said that into every life some rain must fall. If that is true, then Joseph had his monsoons.

His preparation

The affliction that he faced only served to prepare him for the promotion which he now receives. Verse 46 says that he was 30 years old when he enters Pharaoh's service, which means he had been in Egypt now for 13 years. For nearly a decade and a half, God has been preparing him for this moment. God has been preparing him with purpose. None of his experiences are wasted.

God does the same thing in our lives as believers:

Romans 8:18—“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

2 Corinthians 4:16-18—“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.”

God had made Joseph fruitful in the land of his affliction, which is to say that it served a purpose. His was a story of pain upon pain, one affliction after another, but now ends in grace and glory. God allows him to bear fruit out of what had seemed to be a barren patch of ground. His life has been in the winepress of pain. Much like one writer has said it so very eloquently:

*Pressed out of measure and pressed to all length;
Pressed so intensely it seems, beyond strength;
Pressed in the body and pressed in the soul,*

*Pressed in the mind till the dark surges roll.
Pressure by foes, and a pressure from friends.
Pressure on pressure, till life nearly ends.
Pressed into knowing no helper but God;
Pressed into loving the staff and the rod.
Pressed into liberty where nothing clings;
Pressed into faith for impossible things.
Pressed into living a life in the Lord,
Pressed into living a Christ-life outpoured.*

2 Corinthians 4:8-9—“We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed’ we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”

Quote— *“From presses of pain come the soul’s best wine.”*

His position

Divine purpose is further seen in the way that Joseph uses his position. Verse 47 says, “During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, and he gathered up all the food of these seven years and put the food in the cities...And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the saint of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.” He uses his promotion to better serve those around him. That’s the way it must always be with blessings in this life. What if God promotes you, not simply for your sake, but for the sake of those around you? What if God has blessed you so that you can be a blessing to someone else?

His perspective

Verse 50 says that Joseph and his wife have two sons he names Manasseh and Ephraim. The name of his firstborn son ‘Manasseh’ means to forget. The name of the younger son ‘Ephraim’ means to be fruitful, or doubly blessed. The names that Joseph gives his sons provide us a glimpse into his heart—forgetful (Manasseh) and fruitful (Ephraim).

He had forgotten the pain of all he had lived through, and recognized that God had led him through it faithfully.

Warren Wiersbe — *“It’s a wonderful thing when we can come through times of trial with the kind of attitude Joseph had, burying past hurts and rejoicing in present blessings, being ‘forgetful’ and ‘fruitful’ at the same time. What a tragedy when people remember the painful things others have done to them and all their lives carry bitterness that robs them of peace and joy.”*

Over the years, I’ve come across some people who have been obsessed with the disappointments or slights they’ve received at the hands of someone else, so much so that their whole life has become warped. They became bitter and jaded. Instead of opening up their heart to the Holy Spirit, they’ve grown hardened in heart so that they’ve cut themselves off from any hope of healing. Given all that he had experienced at the hands of others, Joseph could have been like that. He could have become hardhearted, cold and indifferent. He could have fixated on the sins of others so much so that it drove him into bitter despair. And yet he doesn’t do that. Instead, he lets the past be the past. He has opened up his heart to the grace of God that heals old wounds. There may be some you here this morning who need to do the same thing. The pain and bitterness of past hurt and disappointment is robbing you of fruitfulness in the present. Forget it and move on. Wallowing around in it will do you no good. The apostle Paul said it this way:

Philippians 3:13-13—“But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

What did Paul mean when he said that he had ‘forgotten’ those things which were behind? What were those things? Obviously, he had not forgotten past mercies. He had not forgotten the grace of God in his life. Nor had he forgotten people, for he mentions many by name. Paul had forgotten those things which he used to hold on to as a source of his identity. He had counted it as loss and rubbish for the sake of knowing Christ. And he had forgotten the things which he had suffered at the hands of others who had opposed his ministry. He refers to these in:

2 Corinthians 6:4-10—“...in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger...We are treated as imposters and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.”

When we put the past behind us, we’re free to focus on the future that God has in mind for us. That’s what Joseph did. And notice that he attributes his healing to the work of God in his life. He says in verse 51 that God had made him to forget all his hardship and his father’s house. That doesn’t mean he no longer thought about his family, but that he did not dwell on the pain of the past. He says in verse 52 that God had made him fruitful in the land of his affliction. The past is history, and what matters now is fruitfulness in the present.

Thank God for the twin gifts of forgetfulness and fruitfulness!

3—He turns suffering into SALVATION (41:53-57)

“The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, ‘Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do.’ So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.”

As the God who reverses our situation, God turns humility into honor, and pain into purpose. He also turns suffering into salvation. Joseph’s story is one of redemption.

Facing famine

Verse 53 says that the seven years of plenty came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, and verse 57 says it was severe over all the earth. Famine in the Bible is often a symbol of man’s empty spiritual condition. It is often used as a sign of God’s judgment on sin or the consequences of disobedience. Leanness of soul. The psalmist writes about this in Psalm 106 and recalls God’s faithfulness to His people Israel despite their unfaithful actions. He says they forgot His works, didn’t wait for His counsel, and tested God in the wilderness through their fleshly appetites:

Psalm 106:15—“And He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul.”

God gave them what they wanted, but it wasn't what they needed. Are you facing famine in your soul today? The things you crave are not necessarily the things that you need, nor will they satisfy you if you had them.

Finding bread

Verse 55 says, "When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. He said to all the Egyptians, 'Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do.'" Are you hungry? Go to Joseph. Are you in need of bread? Go to Joseph. Go to Joseph. Go to Joseph! And this won't be true of just the Egyptians, but verse 57 says, "All the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth." The world was hungry, but could find bread at the feet of Joseph. And this will include his own brothers who, in the very next chapter, we will find coming to bow before him. The last verse of chapter 41 is setting the tone for what is about to happen.

I read a fascinating example about the Chinese Bamboo Tree and the way it grows. After the seed is planted, nothing visible happens for up to 5 years. During this time, it must be watered and fertilized regularly, even though no growth appears above ground. Then, in the fifth year, the tree will suddenly sprout and can grow up to 90 feet in just 5–6 weeks. While it looks like nothing is happening, the bamboo tree is actually developing a strong root system underground to support its eventual rapid growth. That's Joseph. During those long, painful years underground, God was developing his root system. That's why sudden promotion doesn't phase him. He was ready for it, and it came in God's own timing. He's the God who reverses! While promotion doesn't always come in this life, you and I as believers live in the confident expectation that God will one day wipe away the tears from our eyes when He takes us home to be with Himself. So that in that sense, future glory is just up ahead!

Joseph had been betrayed, accused, and condemned—though he was a righteous man who had done nothing wrong. He is made to suffer because of the sins of others that had been against him, but then he is suddenly exalted to a position where everyone must bow the knee to him. Like the Servant of Isaiah 53, “Behold, My Servant shall act wisely, He shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.”

Psalm 30:5—“Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning.”

Psalm 30:11—“You have turned for me my mourning into dancing.”

What a portrait his life is of One much greater than himself, so that through his humiliation and exaltation, Joseph points us to the Lord Jesus Christ.

God’s own Son was betrayed, accused and condemned to die, even though He was the only person who ever lived that was without sin. He was despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Surely He has born our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned, every one, to his own way, and the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all. As He was nailed to a cross and treated like a common criminal, He prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” The Giver and Creator of life was cast into a prison of death to save others. He tasted death and bore the full weight of the judgment of God on sin in His own body on the cross.

Philippians 2:8-9—“He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name.”

Talk about a reversal! The last glimpse the world had of Him, Jesus was crucified like a common criminal. But the next time this world sees Him, there will be no mistaking who He is. On the isle of Patmos, John catches a glimpse of Him in all His glory and describes Him as being clothed in a dazzling display of white, with eyes as a flame of fire, and His voice like the roar of many waters. John writes:

Revelation 1:7—“Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him.”

God the Father now says to the world, “Bow the knee to Jesus!” I have this idea that there are some hungry men and women here this morning. You’re longing for some bread that will satisfy the desires of your heart. The storehouses you thought would save you have proven to be hopeless saviors. Jesus said:

John 6:35—“I am the Bread of Life; whoever comes to Me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in Me shall never thirst.”

To be saved from spiritual famine and death, you must turn from your sin and place your faith and trust in Jesus, believing in His death and resurrection. And the one who comes to Jesus will experience a miraculous ‘reversal’—He takes away your sin and makes you righteous! He clothes you in the white robe of His own righteousness, puts a ring of sonship on your finger, and makes you a joint heir with Himself and will one day raise you to future glory in His kingdom. This gospel hope is offered to every person. So come to Jesus, my friend, and live!