

## **“Don’t Succumb, Overcome”**

### **Genesis 50:15-21**

*Series: DIFFERENT Week 9. Don’t Succumb, Overcome*

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

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He is sick, weak, constantly racked with pain. Too ill to speak, too deaf to hear, has he sit in his wheelchair before the assembled crowd. It’s hard to believe this man who cannot stand once stood as the very personification of racism. He first gained this dreadful reputation for a famous stand. It is called ‘The Stand in the Schoolhouse Door.’ On June 11, 1963, Alabama Governor George Wallace stood in the entrance of Foster Auditorium at the University of Alabama to prevent two African American students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, from registering for class. Believe it or not, Wallace was keeping a campaign promise. In his inauguration as Governor he declared, “I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

On behalf of President Kennedy, the deputy US Attorney General flanked by Federal Marshals, asked the Governor to step aside. When he refused, the President ordered the Alabama National Guard to clear the way. Wallace eventually moved aside. Vivian Malone and James Hood were allowed to enter. Malone became the first African American to graduate from the University. George Wallace went from his stand to a run – the run for President in 1968 on a platform to turn back the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. He won five southern states. He ran again in 1972 until May 15 when Arthur Bremer shot him five times at a campaign stop in Maryland. Though Wallace survived, he was paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life.

Evil. It is everywhere. Whether it’s bolstered by Jim Crow laws and state sponsored segregation or it appears out of the crowd as a lone wolf gunman, whether it’s organized crime, drug and human trafficking, government corruption or religious persecution, cyber hacking, cyber attacking, cyber bullying and just plain bullying on the playground, evil touches every one of our lives. Even the family is not secure and safe from evil which comes as rejection, neglect and abuse.

How do you respond? Attack? Fight back with all the weapons at your disposal? Perhaps. Yet there is the danger of becoming as destructive as your enemy. Ally? Some get on the side of evil and spread it. Adapt? Resign yourself to the reality that evil is a part of life and learn to live with it. That allows evil flourish. Apathy? Just don’t care and do your own thing. These are the ways the world deals with evil. With each one we succumb to evil. Yet Jesus calls His followers to be different.

In the final week of our DIFFERENT series we come to this direction from Romans 12: Don’t Succumb, Overcome. Paul writes

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17-18, 21)

Paul goes on to say judgment is not our job and revenge is not our right. These belong to God. Instead he says, quoting the book of Proverbs,

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” (Romans 12:20, Proverbs 25:21-22)

A head heaped with burning coals doesn't sound very compassionate. It's actually a metaphor. Our acts of kindness over time will sear the conscience of the adversary, causing them to reflect and repent. As Martin Luther King taught,

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

To overcome evil with good is the hardest work of all. And it takes time. A long time.

Just ask Joseph. For decades he received evil and mostly from his own flesh and blood. Talk about a dysfunctional family. There is envy, jealousy, favoritism, resentment, neglect and abuse. And as with many families, the sins of the sons begin with the sins of their father Jacob. For one thing: he clearly favors Joseph over his eleven brothers. He lets him stay home while the others sweat in the fields and herd the sheep. This makes the brothers seethe with resentment.

When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. (Genesis 37:4)

They are furious when Jacob wraps Joseph in a regal, colorful coat, a suit suitable for a prince. They know Jacob is declaring Joseph to be his heir and their master. So they plot to bring down the boy prince. And the last straws are Joseph's dreams.

“Listen to this dream I had: 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.” His brothers said to him, “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. “Listen,” he said, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” (Genesis 37:6-9)

That's it. When they see the teen approach in his fancy coat, they say, ‘Here he comes – the king of dreams! Let's kill him and throw his body in this well. We'll say wild animals tore him apart. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.’ But Reuben, the oldest, knows this is wrong. “We can't shed his blood. He's our kin. Let's just scare him a little. Throw him in the well. That'll teach him who is boss.”

When Joseph finally arrives the wild pack of wolves pick him up, rip off his prince suit, toss him down the hole and roll a stone in place. After a time, the stone is removed. Rough hands reach down and yank him out. Cords are quickly tied around his wrists. The Bedouins who buy him drag him to their caravan. As they lead him away he takes a last backward glance to see his brothers laughing and dividing the few coins they got for selling him into slavery.

Filled with great bitterness and hopelessness Joseph the dreamer goes through one nightmare after another. Just when he thinks he's finally hit bottom it gets worse. After his brothers sell him into slavery, Joseph is falsely accused of rape, unjustly thrown in jail, forgotten and left to rot. Yet there is one more character in this drama: God. He is the One who gives the dreams and His dreams cannot be sold, slain or stopped. Joseph has one mighty fact on his side: "The Lord was with Joseph" (Genesis 39:2). With the help of God, Joseph rises up from the pit to the highest pinnacle of power, second only to Pharaoh. Then, after twenty-two years, comes a rather disturbing reunion. Famine plunges the nations into hunger. So Joseph's brothers show up in Egypt among the mass of starving nomads seeking grain. They bow to the ground before him.

And Joseph remembers! The dreams! All their sheaves bowing to his. All the stars kneeling before him. It's them! The faces are wrinkled but unmistakable. The last time Joseph looked into these eyes they were filled with rage and evil as the caravan dragged him into slavery. What should he do? What would you do? It's a golden opportunity. They don't recognize his shaved head and regal garments. Should he forgive them, humiliate them, or execute them? He decides to test them. Like a psychologist behind a one way mirror, Joseph intends to observe their true reactions under pressure.

First he accuses them of spying, next he throws them all into jail for three days. Finally, he holds his brother Simeon hostage and requires them to bring Benjamin, the youngest son and his full brother, as the ransom for Simeon's freedom. Reuben turns to his brothers with a classic "I told you so."

Didn't I tell you not to sin against (Joseph)? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood" (Genesis 42:22).

Father Jacob, however, will not part with Benjamin. Having lost Joseph, he cannot bear to have Rachel's last son taken. But soon the grain is depleted and a decision must be made or they will all die.

When all the brothers return with Benjamin, Joseph sets the final test. He places a precious silver cup in Benjamin's sack of grain. When it is discovered, the Egyptians arrest Benjamin. Finally Judah speaks. "God has uncovered our guilt. We are now your slaves." "No," replies the Prime Minister, "only the one who stole the cup shall be my slave. The rest are free to go to your father." Now is the moment of truth. Will they take this chance and run? Will they cast aside another son of Rachel to save their own necks? Will they deceive and grieve their father again? Summoning all his courage, Judah says

Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come on my father. (Genesis 44:33-34)

This is Judah: the one who plotted to kill Joseph. Judah: the one who suggested they sell the boy into slavery. Now this same Judah lays down his life. At this brave sacrifice, the Prime Minister shouts to his staff, "Everyone leave us!" When the room is cleared, the lord over all Egypt turns to these rag-tag shepherds and says in Hebrew, "I am Joseph!"

"Oh!" and "Oh-no!" Stunned and silent, the full weight of this revelation sweeps over the brothers. And they are terrified. They thought he was dead. At most they figured he'd be a lowly slave working on a pyramid. Never in their wildest dreams did they picture him at the top of the pyramid. Dreams! Those wild dreams of sheaves and stars once drove them almost to murder. In trying to kill the dreams, they actually caused them to come true. Here they are, bowing down to their kid brother, the ruler over all Egypt. Now they are at his mercy. And given the way they treated him, they expect no mercy. "Come close to me," Joseph commands. They inch forward. "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!" Oh no, he hasn't forgotten. Here it comes.

Then Joseph does a most extraordinary thing: he breaks down and cries. Then he raises up his brothers and embraces them. Regaining his composure Joseph says,

And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But 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 45:6-8)

Years later Joseph reassured his brothers.

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Genesis 50:20)

Do you feel the power of that truth? Three times Joseph drives home three words, "God sent me." Did God throw Joseph in the pit? Did He sell the boy into slavery? Did He arrange for him to be falsely accused and locked in prison? No! But in all these dark moments, God was working silently to accomplish His will. Sometimes He worked through the actors in this drama, sometimes alongside them, and sometimes against them. But always, the Lord's will was to bring good out of evil. Paul writes,

We know that God works in all things for the good of those who love Him. If God is for us, who can be against us? In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that nothing in all creation will be

able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (selected verses from Romans 8:28-39).

Are all situations in life good? No. Many are not good and some are even evil. But do you know that in all things God is working for your good? Do you feel like more than a conqueror through Him who loves you?

- In the pit of depression
- In the fires of temptation
- In the face of injustice
- In the heat of family conflict
- In the grip of addiction
- In the shadow of disease and death

Are you convinced down to the marrow of your bones that nothing can separate you from His love in Christ Jesus? Joseph was convinced. His brothers meant to do him evil. But God brought good out of their evil and, by it, saved even their lives. He did it for us as well. The Cross is the greatest evil humanity ever attempted – the concentration of all our sin and the execution of our God. Yet on the Cross, God brought the greatest good out of all the dark evil we do. And by it, He saved our lives. No matter what your situation, I invite you, like Joseph, to do four things:

Trust that God is working  
 Seek where God is working  
 Work where God is working  
 Give thanks that God is working.

That’s exactly what Vivian did. When Governor George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door to block Vivian Malone, James Hood and all African-American students from the University of Alabama, she did not respond with hate. Instead she prayed. James Hood was at her side, but he was scared and needed encouragement. Vivian helped him by passing him a simple little note, a prayer: "Whatever may be our adversary this day, our Father, help us to face it with courage, for it can be conquered when thou art with us. In faith we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen."

Yet Vivian didn’t just want to gain admission to college or earn a degree. With God’s help, she hoped to win over the hearts and minds of her adversary, of all the racists who stood in the way. And God worked to make that happen through the one who most personified racism in our country: George Wallace.

In the late ‘70s, Wallace became a born-again Christian and his heart changed. He began to seek forgiveness from those he once opposed. In 1979 he appeared unpublicized and unannounced and was pushed in his wheelchair down the aisle of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama where Martin Luther King Jr. once preached. He told the surprised and stunned congregation:

I have learned what suffering means in a way that was impossible before the shooting. I know I contributed to that pain, and I can only ask your forgiveness.

The governor also regretted how he treated Vivian Malone. When they met, she told him she forgave him years earlier. Why? She replied,

This may sound weird. I'm a Christian, and I grew up in the church. And I was taught that—just as I was taught that no other person was better than I—that we were all equal in the eyes of God. I was also taught that you forgive people, no matter what. And that was why I had to do it. I didn't feel as if I had a choice.<sup>1</sup>

George Wallace funded an award for courage and made Vivian its first recipient.

On March 10, 1995 George Wallace sat in his wheelchair to welcome 200 marking the 30th anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march which he once vigorously opposed. He declared, "May your message be heard. May your lessons never be forgotten." Joseph Lowery, a leader in the original march thanked the former segregationist "for coming out of your sickness to meet us. You are a different George Wallace today. We both serve a God who can make the desert bloom. We ask God's blessing on you." And then the crowd joined hands and sang "We shall overcome."

Don't Succumb. With God's Power let's overcome.

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<sup>1</sup> "Transition—Vivian Malone Jones," Newsweek (10-24-05), p.10