

TRANSFORMING REVERSALS

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Today is Palm Sunday. It is so called, because Jesus' ride into the city of Jerusalem was strewn with palm branches that were used as flags of joy and esteem by the crowd that welcomed Him.

This event was so significant that all four Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—recorded it in some detail. Here is Matthew's report:

Matthew 21:1 As Jesus and the disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the town of Bethphage on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. ² "Go into the village over there," he said. "As soon as you enter it, you will see a donkey tied there, with its colt beside it. Untie them and bring them to Me. ³ If anyone asks what you are doing, just say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will immediately let you take them."

⁴ This took place to fulfill the prophecy that said,

*⁵ "Tell the people of Jerusalem, 'Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey—
riding on a donkey's colt.' "*

⁶ The two disciples did as Jesus commanded. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt to Him and threw their garments over the colt, and He sat on it.

*⁸ Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road ahead of Him, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ Jesus was in the center of the procession, and the people all around Him were shouting,
"Praise God for the Son of David! Blessings on the One who comes in the name of the Lord!
Praise God in highest heaven!"*

¹⁰ The entire city of Jerusalem was in an uproar as He entered. "Who is this?" they asked.

¹¹ And the crowds replied, "It's Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

But, I must say, Luke offered a noteworthy addition to the record. As Jesus and His disciples reached the crest of the Mount of Olives, where the cityscape of Jerusalem loomed before them, they paused.

Luke 19:41 But as He came closer to Jerusalem and saw the city ahead, He began to weep. ⁴² "How I wish today that you, of all people, would understand the way to peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ Before long your enemies will build ramparts against your walls and encircle you and close in on you from every side. ⁴⁴ They will crush you into the ground, and your children with you. Your enemies will not leave a single stone in place, because you did not recognize it when God visited you."

His heart was broken by their stubbornness. So close to peace and freedom, and yet so far away!

Had a Bad Day?

On that Sunday, Jesus was ushered into Jerusalem by a giddy crowd, amid shouts of praise and adulation that sent the whole city into an uproar.

Two days later, He was arrested and tried, and on the third day, the people of that same city cried out relentlessly for Him to be crucified.

That could be the definition of a bad day.

I don't know how you might define a "bad day," but my guess is they are all First World definitions, that are shallow compared to what most people around the globe may experience. And they pale completely in comparison to what Jesus experienced on our behalf at the end of His life.

What we do have in common is the experience of unanticipated reversals of circumstance—whether the death of someone close, a marital divorce, the loss of a job, or a host of other, lesser, but similarly frustrating setbacks.

David, too, experienced a turnabout of circumstances. Samuel, the prophet of Israel, picked David, the youngest of seven brothers, from a lineup of his older and apparently well-suited siblings, and anointed him to become the second king of Israel. God gave him a position and favor within the palace of the present king of Israel, Saul. But Saul soon turned against David and sought to kill him, hunting him for years, throughout the country.

God gave Joseph, the youngest boy in his household, a dream—in fact, two dreams—that suggested that he would one day receive honor and power over his family and over his descendants. He could not have imagined that the way to that throne would pass through treachery, mistreatment, malignment, imprisonment, and betrayal.

Abraham was promised a child, a son in his old age, a miracle-child who would carry his legacy of promise to generations to come. He waited 25 years for that promised son to be born. Then, just thirteen years later, the same God who promised Abraham an unending inheritance through that boy, asked him to put the boy to death in a ritual of worship. What?!?

Job was a righteous man. How righteous? Besides his obvious religious faith, God Himself declared that there was no other man on the earth as righteous as Job. That's a good recommen-

dation. That would look good on anyone's resume. But Job lost all of his children in a freak accident, and he lost all of his flocks and herds to marauding bandits, and his health was broken by a serious and painful skin disease.

These were mind-bending circumstances, orchestrated by God, in loving response to the spiritual conditions and needs of individuals He had chosen to work through. What happened defied reason! Those situations could not be explained by karma or just-deserts.

When things like this happen to you, your hopes are dashed, you reach the very end of your rope, all natural resources seem depleted, and your self-reliance and self-assurance are broken. Conditions like these make many people want to just give up and die.

And conditions like these cause some people to write songs that say, "What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger." And that's true, if only you won't give up, if only you won't quit.

But the only way to not quit is to find another resource, outside yourself, on which to rely.

Who's In Control?

When life is out of your control, it still is not beyond God's helping control. In fact, He generally leads us down a path that dismantles our self-reliance, for the simple reason that until that happens we will not fully trust in Him. As long as we retain a shred of self-sufficiency, we will continue to make God our last resort instead of our first choice.

The United States of America are a bastion of hope—social freedom and economic opportunity—for so many around the world. But our American economy, as we have seen, is not impervious to a crash. Our freedoms are under growing threat every week—in the name of security, if nothing else. Our moral framework is tattered and in danger of collapse. Our system of law threatens to buckle under the sheer weight of spurious codes and frivolous litigations. Superstitions and prejudices still govern the thoughts and emotions of many.

Unity Is Hard To Do!

We, the Church, have the Holy Spirit, yet we are fractured to the point that people on the outside mock in disbelief. And on the inside, we pretend to be family, keeping up appearances, while distancing and isolating ourselves with endless activities and distractions. We profess to be doing the will of God, as long as it is convenient to our overbooked schedules. We have no more time to be still and contemplate the greatness of God, or the mercies of Christ, or the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit. We wander like lost people on the decks of a ship called "Found."

Will there be revival? Will God breathe upon the embers that remain once more? Or will the church, as so many predict, fade into irrelevance and be absorbed by the world's darkness?

What you want, or what I want, doesn't make a bit of difference, unless we line up with what God wants! I cannot cheerlead the church to revival. If the Holy Spirit can't do it, what hope have I? And if we will not give Him the time and attention to do it, what can even He do?

But if you're willing to face your Goliath in the name of the God of Heaven, like David did, He will give you victory.

If you're willing to endure hardships for the honor of God, like Joseph, He will exalt you in due time.

If you're willing to hold on to the promise of God, like Abraham—even if He has to raise the dead, He will do it.

If you're willing to relinquish your own sense of self-righteousness, like Job, in order to uphold and honor the righteousness of God, He will see you through and reward you generously.

Return to Jerusalem

Yes, everything seemed to be going so well on the road from the Mount of Olives to the gate of Jerusalem—buoyed by an infectious crescendo of exuberant praise!

Yet, everything ended so badly: Jesus was scourged until His back was a bloody pulp, then forced to carry His own crosspiece two miles to the place of execution, and nailed—hands and feet—to the cross and hoisted to the sky to die in agony that lasted for hours.

But Jesus chose this path. He had options, but He chose the way the Father had chosen for Him. He wrestled with that choice in the Garden of Gethsemane—with strong tears and earnest struggle—but His conclusion was clear, again: *“Nevertheless, not what I want, but what You want, be done.”* (Matthew 26:39).

He knew the price of our forgiveness and freedom, and He was willing to pay it. He knew that His death, even the horrific death of the cross, was His temporal destiny, and He didn't seek to evade it. Why? Because He also held His ETERNAL destiny in sight. He knew there was life on the other side of death. The glory of the Father, the glory of His Kingdom, and the glory of the Church were before Him, lighting His way.

His death was not the end of His work, nor the end of His life. He said, *“I am the resurrection and the life.”* And He also said, *“Anyone who believes in Me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in Me and believes in Me will never ever die”* (John 11:25-26). That is the everlasting

destiny of every follower of Christ. Is it yours? Do you believe this? Do you live like you believe this?

The Way to Peace

Jesus looked over the city of Jerusalem with a deep longing. *“How I wish today that you, of all people, would understand the way to peace.”* But they did not. It cost them much grief, and it cost Jesus His life. How about you? Today, do you understand the “way to peace”?

I’ve heard a lot of descriptions and definitions of the “way to peace,” but none resonate with such clarity and weight as the one Jesus gave that day. He said that Israel did not find the “way to peace” because they *“did not recognize it when God visited”* them. And He declared this BEFORE what we call His “triumphal entry.” The recognition He received that day could not reverse the deeper rejection that existed and would surface just days later.

The will of God is not always what pleases us; it is always what pleases Him.

“We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps” (Proverbs 16:9).

You may think you know what tomorrow will bring, and say to yourself, “I will do this and that.” What you should say is, “God willing, I hope to do this and that.”

How quickly life can turn! Without warning, without a sign; we are not guaranteed preparatory notice.

But we have been promised the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, our Helper, who will “show you things to come.” We are children of the light. We will not stumble in darkness (unless we have closed our eyes).

Nevertheless, when it appears that the day will bring sunshine, it could bring rain. When it appears that all will be calm, a storm could rise. Are you ready for the unexpected?

Your readiness is in the presence of God. God is with you; He remains with you. He will never leave you, nor abandon you. This is your readiness. This is your preparation. This is your promise of a way out. This is your strength.

God visits His people through Holy Spirit encounters and through human representatives. Yet, it’s possible to miss Him! To fail to recognize Him. To call it a “coincidence.” To imagine we know better.

Christ had visited the nation for nearly four years, preaching to the crowds, teaching in their synagogues, healing the sick, cleansing lepers, raising the dead, giving hope to the hopeless,

and admonishing the self-righteous. But they did not—would not—recognize that God had sent Him. Their fate was sealed by their stubborn refusal to actually follow Him.

All our shouting and dancing on any Sunday cannot compensate for a pragmatic rejection of Christ's lordship in our everyday behavior. If Jesus is not Lord of all of you, then He is not Lord at all to you.

I'm going to invite everyone to an altar of prayer today—a place of waiting and talking with God.

Don't miss God's visit! When He comes, we must respond. Wake up! Pay attention! Listen to His words. Confess your sins. Live by your convictions.

Why do what mere people expect of you, when you can do what Almighty God asks of you?

There is nothing too hard for Him. Therefore, there is nothing too hard for you, if He asks you to do it, and you lean on Him for guidance and strength.

Don't be a wimpy Christian. Be a courageous Christian! Courageous Christians seek God in prayer. So, get ready to come this morning and build an altar of prayer to God.

Before you throw in the towel and give up, listen to the voice of Jesus—He's beckoning you to come to Him, to follow Him. Relinquish your self-righteousness, your self-reliance, and your self-control to Christ. Let Him take control, rely on Him, and receive His righteousness.

He will turn your bad day into a fruitful one. For *"God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them"* (Romans 8:28).