

Lesson 4: The Rise, Fall and Rise of Joseph (Genesis 35-50)

Division Persists

The family story left off with the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau. This was no small event considering the deep division that existed between the two. The story of Jacob and Esau reminds us of a recurring and important biblical theme: sin leads to broken relationships, but the mercy of God can heal division. Unfortunately, out of envy, Laban, Jacob's uncle whom Jacob had been working for, threatens the new found peace through his dishonest business dealings. In His providence, God uses the circumstances to bring Jacob back from exile.

Chapter thirty-six of Genesis, while seemingly a dense summary of the family tree, lacking any drama, offers an important detail for events that will happen in later generations. Jacob and Esau can no longer live near each other, and so there is still division between the two. While the two are personally reconciled, there is division that separates the two families. Esau is the father of the bloodline of the Edomites, which will become a fierce enemy of Jacob's bloodline, the Israelites. The sin of Jacob so many years earlier will play itself out for centuries. Sin is a powerful fuel for division and strife, not just between individuals but between generations, even nations.

Eventually Jacob settles his family with his twelve sons. It is important to remember that while Jacob has twelve sons in Canaan, the Promised Land, they come from two wives (Leah and Rachel) and their maidservants. Hence, Jacob is living a polygamous and adulterous life. Jacob has the blessing, but this does not guarantee his holiness and fidelity to the covenant. From the twelve sons will come the Twelve Tribes of Israel, but before the establishment of a unified nation, the sin and division will grow worse through the story of Joseph. Joseph is the firstborn son of Jacob and his beloved Rachel. (While Joseph is the firstborn son of Rachel, he is not the firstborn of Jacob. In fact, Joseph has ten older brothers.) Many biblical scholars have considered this story, along with Moses and the Exodus, as the centerpiece of the Old Testament. It serves as a link between the family history of the covenant and what will follow in the departure from Egypt through the great Exodus.

The Betrayal of Joseph

The drama begins when Joseph has two dreams that he naively, or perhaps with pride, shares with his older brothers.⁸¹ The first is that of the sheaves. Joseph is in a field binding sheaves when his brothers' sheaves gather around Joseph's sheaf and bow down before it. The second dream is similar, with the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing down before Joseph. Joseph tells his brothers these dreams, possibly with an air of pride that added insult to injury since Jacob and Rachel already treated Joseph with more favor than the rest of their sons.⁸² Incensed at his conceit and jealous of their fathers' favoritism towards him, the envy this provokes is so intense that Joseph's brothers conspire to kill

⁸¹ Genesis 37:5-11

⁸² We remember in the last chapter how Jacob placed Joseph, Benjamin and Rachel away from harm, all the while putting the ten sons from Leah potentially in harms way as they approached Esau and his large army. (Genesis 33:2)

him. One of the brothers, Reuben, tempers the plan and talks the others into casting Joseph into a dry well, rather than kill him so that he could return later and save his brother and bring him back to Jacob.⁸³

As the events unfold, some passing merchants discover Joseph and sell him to a caravan who take him down to Egypt, far from his homeland, and hand him over as a slave to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh.⁸⁴ Reuben returns and finds Joseph gone and can only assume Joseph is dead. In anguish Reuben rends his clothes.⁸⁵ The guilt that certainly overtook Joseph's brothers must have been intense. To cover their sin, the brothers take Joseph's robe and kill a goat, dipping the robe in blood. They bring the bloodstained robe to their father Jacob and convince him that a wild beast had killed Joseph. This news must have devastated Jacob. His favorite son is killed, and all that is left is a ragged garment soaked in blood. Jacob tears his own garments in anguish, and mourns for many days.⁸⁶ And so we see again that sin leads to division. The family unity that existed is now broken by the sin of the brothers, which in turn could have been motivated by Joseph's pride. Perhaps Joseph was innocent of any pride, but how else could the actions of his brothers be explained?

Joseph in Egypt

In Egypt, Joseph is stripped of the preferential treatment he received from his parents. If there was any pride in Joseph he is now certainly learning humility. This would have been a very humbling experience but one God allows to teach humility and trust. Through it all God has not abandoned Joseph. God is with Joseph in his trials as well as his blessings.

Joseph proves himself to be a good worker, and Potiphar recognizes Joseph's value and rewards his righteousness by entrusting his entire household to Joseph as chief steward. Trouble, as we might guess, is not far behind. Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph and is so consumed by her lust for him that she grabs him and refusing to let go rips off his clothing. At this point Joseph can either succumb to her pressure or flee. As a righteous and prudent man he flees. This is an interesting example of courage, as attested to in the writings of many saints who say that, in the face of temptation, it is actually more courageous to flee than to remain in the occasion of sin and possibly fall. In order to cover her illicit advances towards a slave, Potiphar's wife frames Joseph, claiming that he tried to seduce her. Joseph holds out against the temptation to have a sexual relationship with her because keeping the law is more important to him than his own life, and in this he is a strong model of the virtue of chastity.⁸⁷

⁸³ Genesis 37:12-24

⁸⁴ Genesis 37:25-28

⁸⁵ Genesis 37:29

⁸⁶ Genesis 37:29-35

⁸⁷ In today's age of the Internet and Internet pornography, Joseph is a great model. Rather than entertaining the temptation, the best thing to do is to run from it and not allow our weaknesses to be exploited. Saint Ambrose said: Learn from Abraham firm obedience of faith; from Isaac the genuineness of a sincere heart; from Jacob perseverance in the midst of trials...and so the saintly Joseph has been set as an example of chastity (*De Joseph*, 1, 1). Saint Caesarius of Arles said: Joseph flees in order to escape from that shameless woman. Learn, therefore, to flee if you want to win out against the attack made by lust. Do not

Joseph is unjustly convicted and thrown into prison. God strips Joseph of everything in order to display His overriding love and providence in times of trial and suffering. In fact, through all of this the Scripture says, “The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love.”⁸⁸ Joseph recognizes his poverty that he cannot rely on his former position. He is stripped of everything so that God might show forth His power. God is transforming Joseph from a man of pride to a man of humility and virtue through his trials. Even in prison Joseph gains the trust of those around him and is entrusted with the care of the other prisoners. Whatever calamity falls upon Joseph, the Lord made it prosper. We, too, must learn that we are poor and must rely completely on God. It is only when we are humble that we enter into an intimate participation with God of His plan of redemption.

During Joseph’s time in prison the chief butler and baker of Pharaoh are thrown into prison. Once in prison, they each begin having dreams of their own. Joseph interprets the dreams, explaining that the power to interpret the meaning of their dreams is a gift given to him by God. For the butler, his dream indicates that he will be restored to his place in Pharaoh’s household. For the baker, it means that Pharaoh will take his life. Joseph asks the Butler to remember him once he gains his freedom. Sadly, the butler forgets Joseph. For two more years Joseph is in prison without any hope of freedom.

Finally, after two more years in prison (thirteen years since Joseph was first taken into slavery), Pharaoh begins having disturbing dreams of his own. However, he cannot find anyone to interpret them. The butler eventually mentions Joseph (probably because the butler thinks he can take some credit if Joseph interprets the dreams) and his ability to interpret dreams. Joseph retells the details of Pharaoh’s dreams and correctly interprets them. There will be seven years of strong agricultural production, followed by seven years of famine and drought. Joseph then recommends a plan for Pharaoh in order to avoid starvation for his people and as a way to have an economic advantage over neighboring nations. Pharaoh is so impressed with Joseph that he makes him head of all Egypt, “only with regards to the throne will I be greater than you.”⁸⁹ Joseph even marries into the highest ranks of Egyptian society, and is given so much political authority that he often exercises more power than the king himself. Joseph’s wife is a daughter of the Priest of On, which is where Re, the greatest God in Egypt, is worshipped. Joseph’s marriage into this family is another sign that he is possibly the most powerful man in all of Egypt. In fact, when Joseph dies he is embalmed and put into a coffin, which was typically reserved only for Pharaoh. Joseph basically becomes king of Egypt.

How fitting it is in the context of salvation history to have Joseph sold into slavery and then raised to the heights of political and social power. Just as Adam and Eve sinned and were exiled, Joseph was exiled from his homeland and his family. With Christ, however, humanity is raised above its original dignity, just as Joseph was elevated to the seat of

be ashamed to flee if you want to attain the palm of chastity...among all the fights a Christian has to engage in, the most difficult are those of chastity; here the struggle is a daily one, and victory is difficult. In this a Christian cannot but have daily acts of martyrdom (*Sermones*, 41, 1-3).

⁸⁸ Genesis 39:21

⁸⁹ Genesis 41:40

power within Egypt. The sin of Joseph and his brothers led to Joseph's exile, which in turn was used for a greater good for all; so too with the sin of Adam and Eve. Their sin led to the redemptive grace of Christ, which is a greater good for all mankind. As the Easter vigil liturgy says, "Felix culpa!" (Oh, happy fault!).

Through all of this Joseph has learned to abandon all into the hands of divine providence. He trusts that God has allowed the evil of his brothers to bring about a greater good. Joseph himself says, "God has made me forget all my hardship...for God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."⁹⁰ It takes a person of great faith and humility to say this. Joseph is a changed man through his suffering and separation from his family, and will become the vessel by which his family is blessed.

Joseph's Brothers Travel to Egypt

The famine comes just as Joseph interpreted in the dreams. It stretches to Canaan where Jacob and his sons suffer to the point of near starvation. The drama of the story is better than any plot written in Hollywood. His brothers, who sold him into slavery, are about to re-encounter their long, lost brother; only they will not recognize him, believing him to be dead.

As we reach chapter forty-two and the famine is taking its toll, we approach the climax of Joseph's story. Jacob hears that there is grain for sale in Egypt. The biblical description of his sons is almost funny, "Why do you look at one another?"⁹¹ It is as if Joseph's brothers have completely lost their capacity to act in unity now (perhaps division from the last time they acted together...when they put Joseph in the well), and that by looking at each other they are now forced to confront one another and their past sin. The prospect of going to Egypt must have shaken Jacob's sons unto realization that they had not escaped from their past. Jacob sends his sons (minus his new favorite, Benjamin) down to Egypt to buy grain for the family from the governor of Egypt. This is a collision course between Joseph and his brothers. The plot is now thick with anticipation.

Twenty-two years have passed since Joseph last saw his brothers. They come to him and bow before him, just like he said they would in his dream.⁹² In this face-to-face confrontation with their guilty past, God wants to reveal to them their sin, and call them into repentance and reconciliation. Joseph recognizes them immediately, and begins questioning them about their family, under the pretext that he wants to determine whether or not they are spies. He then plays a reversal on the brothers, a sort of repetition of what they did to him. His brothers had once cast him into a pit, where his fate was uncertain. Now he throws all ten of them into prison for three days. Then, as they did before, he isolates one brother from the others. It is at this moment that Joseph's brothers recognize the divine significance of this. They are being treated as they once treated Joseph. Believing that they are finally being punished for their unjust treatment of their young brother twenty-two years earlier, they begin to confess to each other the recognition of their own guilt. Perhaps for the first time, the brothers come face to face with their sin

⁹⁰ Genesis 41:51-52

⁹¹ Genesis 42:1

⁹² Genesis 37:7

and express true remorse.⁹³ This is all done in the presence of Joseph but in their own language, Hebrew, which the brothers do not know that Joseph speaks. Joseph is able to see directly the remorse of his brothers. Joseph is so moved by this moment of grace that he turns his head from them and weeps. This is an emotional scene and a testament to Joseph's love for his family even after all the hardships he has endured because of them.

Joseph Reveals His Identity

Joseph releases nine of the ten brothers and sends them back to retrieve Benjamin. This is all done under the pretense that Joseph suspects that they are spies and demands that they prove that they are who they say they are, and not spies. This episode of the brothers fearing for their well-being and Joseph secretly knowing their identity is filled with tension. The whole story in its many details is the height of drama. Few, if any stories in literature match the dramatic intensity of this narrative. It is worth reading in total:

Joseph saw his brothers, and knew them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." Thus Joseph knew his brothers, but they did not know him. And Joseph remembered the dreams which he had dreamed of them; and he said to them, "You are spies, you have come to see the weakness of the land." They said to him, "No, my lord, but to buy food have your servants come. We are all sons of one man, we are honest men, your servants are not spies." He said to them, "No, it is the weakness of the land that you have come to see." And they said, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is no more." But Joseph said to them, "It is as I said to you, you are spies. By this you shall be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of you, and let him bring your brother, while you remain in prison, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you; or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies." And he put them all together in prison for three days.

On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined in your prison, and let the rest go and carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me; so your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they did so. Then they said to one another, "In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us and we would not listen; therefore is this distress come upon us." And Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to sin against the lad? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood." They did not know that Joseph understood them, for there was an interpreter between them. Then he turned away from them and wept; and he returned to them and spoke to them. And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. And Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, and to replace every man's money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. This was done for them. Then they loaded their asses with their grain, and departed.

⁹³ Genesis 42:24

And as one of them opened his sack to give his ass provender at the lodging place, he saw his money in the mouth of his sack; and he said to his brothers, "My money has been put back; here it is in the mouth of my sack!" At this their hearts failed them, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, "What is this that God has done to us?" When they came to Jacob their father in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had befallen them, saying, "The man, the lord of the land, spoke roughly to us, and took us to be spies of the land. But we said to him, 'We are honest men, we are not spies; we are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no more, and the youngest is this day with our father in the land of Canaan.' Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, 'By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, and take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. Bring your youngest brother to me; then I shall know that you are not spies but honest men, and I will deliver to you your brother, and you shall trade in the land.'" As they emptied their sacks, behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack; and when they and their father saw their bundles of money they were dismayed. And Jacob their father said to them, "You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin; all this has come upon me." Then Reuben said to his father, "Slay my two sons if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you." But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he only is left. If harm should befall him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol."

Now the famine was severe in the land. And when they had eaten the grain which they had bought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go again, buy us a little food." But Judah said to him, "The man solemnly warned us, saying, 'You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.' If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food; but if you will not send him, we will not go down, for the man said to us, 'You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.'" Israel said, "Why did you treat me so ill as to tell the man that you had another brother?" They replied, "The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our kindred, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?' What we told him was in answer to these questions; could we in any way know that he would say, 'Bring your brother down?'" And Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I will be surety for him; of my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame for ever; for if we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice."

Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry down to the man a present, a little balm and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds. Take double the money with you; carry back with you the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks; perhaps it was an oversight. Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man; may God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, that he may send back your other brother and Benjamin. If I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."

So the men took the present, and they took double the money with them, and Benjamin; and they arose and went down to Egypt, and stood before Joseph. When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, "Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon." The man did as Joseph bade him, and brought the men to Joseph's house. And the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph's house, and they said, "It is because of the money, which was replaced in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may seek occasion against us and fall upon us, to make slaves of us and seize our asses."

So they went up to the steward of Joseph's house, and spoke with him at the door of the house, and said, "Oh, my lord, we came down the first time to buy food; and when we came to the lodging place we opened our sacks, and there was every man's money in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight; so we have brought it again with us, and we have brought other money down in our hand to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks." He replied, "Rest assured, do not be afraid; your God and the God of your father must have put treasure in your sacks for you; I received your money." Then he brought Simeon out to them. And when the man had brought the men into Joseph's house, and given them water, and they had washed their feet, and when he had given their asses provender, they made ready the present for Joseph's coming at noon, for they heard that they should eat bread there.

When Joseph came home, they brought into the house to him the present which they had with them, and bowed down to him to the ground. And he inquired about their welfare, and said, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" They said, "Your servant our father is well, he is still alive." And they bowed their heads and made obeisance. And he lifted up his eyes, and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!" Then Joseph made haste, for his heart yearned for his brother, and he sought a place to weep. And he entered his chamber and wept there.

Then he washed his face and came out; and controlling himself he said, "Let food be served." They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians. And they sat before him, the first-born according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth; and the men looked at one another in amazement. Portions were taken to them from Joseph's table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him.

Then he commanded the steward of his house, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his sack, and put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain." And he did as Joseph told him. As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their asses.

When they had gone but a short distance from the city, Joseph said to his steward, "Up, follow after the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you returned

evil for good? Why have you stolen my silver cup? Is it not from this that my lord drinks, and by this that he divines? You have done wrong in so doing.” When he overtook them, he spoke to them these words. They said to him, “Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants that they should do such a thing! Behold, the money which we found in the mouth of our sacks, we brought back to you from the land of Canaan; how then should we steal silver or gold from your lord’s house? With whomever of your servants it be found, let him die, and we also will be my lord’s slaves.” He said, “Let it be as you say: he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and the rest of you shall be blameless.”

Then every man quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and every man opened his sack. And he searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest; and the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. Then they rent their clothes, and every man loaded his ass, and they returned to the city. When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph’s house, he was still there; and they fell before him to the ground. Joseph said to them, “What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that such a man as I can indeed divine?” And Judah said, “What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord’s slaves, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found.” But he said, “Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father.”

Then Judah went up to him and said, “O my lord, let your servant, I pray you, speak a word in my lord’s ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant; for you are like Pharaoh himself. My lord asked his servants, saying, ‘Have you a father, or a brother?’ And we said to my lord, ‘We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age; and his brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother’s children; and his father loves him.’ Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes upon him.’ We said to my lord, ‘The lad cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.’ Then you said to your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall see my face no more.’ When we went back to your servant my father we told him the words of my lord. And when our father said, ‘Go again, buy us a little food,’ we said, ‘We cannot go down. If our youngest brother goes with us, then we will go down; for we cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.’ Then your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons; one left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces; and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm befalls him, you will bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to Sheol.’ Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father, and the lad is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the lad’s life, when he sees that the lad is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life.’ Now therefore, let your servant, I pray you, remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord; and let the lad go back with his

brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the lad is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would come upon my father.”⁹⁴

So we see, in the end Judah admits the guilt of the brothers and offers his life for Benjamin’s in reparation for trying to take away Joseph’s life years earlier. It is impossible not to see Judah as a sort of anticipation of Jesus.

After proving their truthfulness and loyalty Joseph cannot contain his identity any longer and reveals himself to his brothers. At this remarkable self-disclosure, Joseph and his brothers embrace in a reunion that not only signals reconciliation, but also forgiveness and filial unity. It also reveals Joseph’s astonishing faith. He recognized God’s plan and blessing for his family despite his unjust treatment and immense suffering. He understood that the details of his difficulties were bound up with and took their meaning from the ultimate end of his misfortune – the health and welfare of his family, and the fulfillment of the covenant. He says to his brothers, “Now don’t be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”⁹⁵ In this act of forgiveness and faith, Joseph proves himself to be one of the great figures of the Old Testament. Rather than harboring anger and thoughts of vengeance, Joseph directs his life to restoring unity within the family, leading his brothers gradually to repent of their sin. Joseph is a model for how we should treat one another. Forgiveness should be a defining characteristic of our relationships with each other.⁹⁶ John Paul II said, “Forgiveness demonstrates the presence in the world of the love which is more powerful than sin. Forgiveness is also the fundamental condition for reconciliation, not only in the relationship of God with man, but also in relationships between people.”⁹⁷

There are two main points to gain from the story of Joseph. First, God wants our fidelity above everything else. Success apart from faithfulness reaps bitter fruit. Abraham and Jacob took matters into their own hands when they doubted God’s word, and reaped bitter fruit. Joseph reveals the true fruit of the Spirit that can only come from abandonment to Divine Providence. Second, sin brings evil consequences but God can work everything to our favor and good. Thus, we must not curse Him or assume that He is neglecting us when bad things happen. Rather, we must abandon ourselves to Him in complete trust, knowing that He is God and can bring good out of any situation. “As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”⁹⁸ This is the heart of the message: God will accomplish His will through all things. The Catechism says:

In time we can discover that God in his almighty providence can bring a good from the consequences of an evil, even a moral evil, caused by his creatures: ‘It was not you,’ said Joseph to his brothers, ‘who sent me here,

⁹⁴ Genesis 42:8-44:34

⁹⁵ Genesis 45:5

⁹⁶ The CCC says, “Thus the home is the first school of Christian life and ‘a school for human enrichment.’ above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one’s life.” (#1657)

⁹⁷ *Dives in misericordia*, #14

⁹⁸ Genesis 50:20

but God.... You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive.’ From the greatest moral evil ever committed – the rejection and murder of God’s only Son, caused by the sins of all men – God, by his grace that ‘abounded all the more,’ brought the greatest of goods: the glorification of Christ and our redemption. But for all that, evil never becomes good.⁹⁹

Saint Thomas More

Saint Thomas More, the great saint from England who suffered martyrdom at the hands of King Henry VIII because he would not renounce the authority of the Catholic Church, is a model of trust during suffering. Thomas More was a high-ranking official in the English government with prestige of office and social standing when the king broke from the Catholic faith and established a national church (the Anglican Church) in order to divorce and remarry. Thomas More was asked to renounce his Catholic faith in loyalty to the king. While everyone around him, including many priests and bishops, renounced their Catholic faith, Thomas More refused to do so. Consequently, the king classified Thomas as an enemy to England and sentenced him to death. To preserve his life and save his family from the anguish of his execution Thomas More could have easily relented and offered his total allegiance to the king and the new Church of England. Instead, he held his ground and suffered imprisonment, and eventually a tortuous death.

In the Tower of London, St. Thomas More reflected upon the plight of Joseph as he awaited his execution: “The brothers of Joseph could never have done him so much good with their love and favor as they did him with their malice and hatred. Nothing can come except what God wills. And it makes me very sure that whatsoever that be, even if nothing has ever appeared so bad, it shall indeed be the best.”¹⁰⁰ And so Saint Thomas More died at the hands of an unjust government but in his willful submission to his execution in fidelity to his faith, he has become a model for nearly five hundred years of Catholics who have looked to his life and death as an inspiration to persevere through their own struggles.¹⁰¹ As St. Paul says, “all things work for good for those who love God.”¹⁰² This is how Joseph lived, and this is how we are all called to live by faith in the mysterious goodness of God the Father.

⁹⁹ CCC, #312

¹⁰⁰ CCC, #313

¹⁰¹ For a good profile of Saint Thomas More, read *A Portrait of Courage* by Gerard Wegemer, or see the classic film *A Man for All Seasons*.

¹⁰² Romans 8:28