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God Has a Dream

Desmond Tutu

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About the Book

Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu has long been admired throughout the world for the heroism and grace he displayed while encouraging South Africans in their struggle for human rights. In this, his most soul-searching book to date, he shares the spiritual message that guided him through those troubled times.

Drawing upon personal and historical examples, the Archbishop reaches out to readers of all backgrounds, showing how individual and global suffering can be transformed into joy and redemption. Born from his own experience, this is a very personal and life-changing message.

About the Author

Desmond Tutu, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, is Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa. In 1995, President Nelson Mandela named him as Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the organisation charged with bringing to light the atrocities of apartheid in South Africa and achieving reconciliation with the former oppressors. Today Tutu is active as a lecturer throughout the world, as well as serving as a member of the Board of Directors to the Victims Trust Fund of the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Also available from Rider by Desmond Tutu
No Future Without Forgiveness

God Has a Dream

A Vision of Hope for Our Time

Desmond Tutu

With Douglas Abrams



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INTRODUCTION

DEAR CHILD OF God, I write these words because we all experience sadness, we all come at times to despair, and we all lose hope that the suffering in our lives and in our world will ever end. I want to share with you my faith and my understanding that this suffering can be transformed and redeemed. There is no such thing as a totally hopeless case. Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now—in our personal lives and in our lives as nations, globally. The most unlikely person, the most improbable situation—these are all “transfigurable”—they can be turned into their glorious opposites. Indeed, God is transforming the world now—through us—because God loves us.

This is not wishful thinking or groundless belief. It is my deep conviction, based on my reading of the Bible and of history. It is borne out not only by my experience in South Africa but also by many other visits to countries suffering oppression or in conflict. Our world is in the grips of a transformation that continues forward and backward in ways that lead to despair at times but ultimately redemption. While I write as a Christian, this transformation can be recognized and experienced by anyone, regardless of your faith and religion, and even if you practice no religion at all.

Some will say that this view is “optimistic,” but I am not an optimist. Optimism relies on appearances and very quickly turns into pessimism when the appearances change.

I see myself as a realist, and the vision of hope I want to offer you in this book is based on reality—the reality I have seen and lived. It is a reality that may not always seem obvious because many of the things God does are strange, or at least they seem strange to us, with our limited perspectives and our limited understanding. Yes, there is considerable evil in the world, and we mustn't be starry-eyed and pretend that isn't so. But that isn't the last word; that isn't even the most important part of the picture in God's world.

This book is a cumulative expression of my life's work, and many of the ideas and beliefs presented here have been developed and delivered in earlier sermons, speeches, and writings. For those who have followed my work, there will be much that is familiar. This is inevitable since, while my thinking has evolved, my core beliefs have remained the same over the years. With the help of my friend and collaborator Doug Abrams, I have tried to offer my understanding of what I have learned from the marvelous life with which I have been gifted and the extraordinary people I have met along the way. It is their faith and their courage that give me so much hope in the nobility of the human spirit.

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GOD BELIEVES IN US

DEAR CHILD OF God, it is often difficult for us to recognize the presence of God in our lives and in our world. In the clamor of the tragedy that fills the headlines we forget about the majesty that is present all around us. We feel vulnerable and often helpless. It is true that all of us *are* vulnerable, for vulnerability is the essence of creaturehood. But we are not helpless and with God's love we are ultimately invincible. Our God does not forget those who are suffering and oppressed.

During the darkest days of apartheid I used to say to P. W. Botha, the president of South Africa, that we had already won, and I invited him and other white South Africans to join the winning side. All the "objective" facts were against us—the pass laws, the imprisonments, the teargassing, the massacres, the murder of political activists—but my confidence was not in the present circumstances but in the laws of God's universe. This is a *moral* universe, which means that, despite all the evidence that seems to be to the contrary, there is no way that evil and injustice and oppression and lies can have the last word. God is a God who cares about right and wrong. God cares about justice and injustice. God is in charge. That is what had upheld the morale of our people, to know that in the end good will prevail. It was these higher laws that convinced me that our

peaceful struggle would topple the immoral laws of apartheid.

Of course, there were times when you had to whistle in the dark to keep your morale up, and you wanted to whisper in God's ear: "God, we know You are in charge, but can't You make it a little more obvious?" God did make it more obvious to me once, during what we call the Feast of the Transfiguration. Apartheid was in full swing as I and other church leaders were preparing for a meeting with the prime minister to discuss one of the many controversies that erupted in those days. We met at a theological college that had closed down because of the government's racist policies. During our discussions I went into the priory garden for some quiet. There was a huge Calvary—a large wooden cross without corpus, but with protruding nails and a crown of thorns. It was a stark symbol of the Christian faith. It was winter: the grass was pale and dry and nobody would have believed that in a few weeks' time it would be lush and green and beautiful again. It would be transfigured.

As I sat quietly in the garden I realized the power of transfiguration—of God's transformation—in our world. The principle of transfiguration is at work when something so unlikely as the brown grass that covers our veld in winter becomes bright green again. Or when the tree with gnarled leafless branches bursts forth with the sap flowing so that the birds sit chirping in the leafy branches. Or when the once dry streams gurgle with swift-flowing water. When winter gives way to spring and nature seems to experience its own resurrection.

The principle of transfiguration says nothing, no one and no situation, is "untransfigurable," that the whole of creation, nature, waits expectantly for its transfiguration, when it will be released from its bondage and share in the glorious liberty of the children of God, when it will not be just dry inert matter but will be translucent with divine glory.

Christian history is filled with examples of transfiguration. An erstwhile persecutor like St. Paul could become the greatest missionary of the church he once persecuted. One who denied his Master not once but three times like St. Peter could become the prince of apostles, proclaiming boldly faith in Jesus Christ when only a short while before he was cowering in abject fear behind locked doors.

I doubt, however, that we could produce a more spectacular example of this principle of transfiguration than the Cross itself. Most people would have been filled with revulsion had someone gone and set up an electric chair or a gallows or the guillotine as an object of reverence. Well, look at the Cross. It was a ghastly instrument of death, of an excruciatingly awful death reserved for the most notorious malefactors. It was an object of dread and shame, and yet what a turnaround has happened. This instrument of a horrendous death has been spectacularly transfigured. Once a means of death, it is now perceived by Christians to be the source of life eternal. Far from being an object of vilification and shame, it is an object of veneration.

As I sat in the priory garden I thought of our desperate political situation in the light of this principle of transfiguration, and from that moment on, it has helped me to see with new eyes. I have witnessed time and again the improbable redemptions that are possible in our world. Let me give you just one example from our struggle in South Africa, which I know best, but such transfigurations are not limited to one country or one people. This story took place almost twenty-five years after that first experience in the priory.

It was just before April 1994 and we were on the verge of disaster, literally on the brink of civil war and threatened with being overwhelmed by a bloodbath. We had witnessed the stunning release of Nelson Mandela and other leaders in 1990 and the miraculous move toward universal elections, but between 1990 and 1994 we had been on a roller-coaster

ride, exhilarated at one moment, in the depths of despair the next. Thousands of people had died in massacres during the transition, such as one at Boipatong, near Johannesburg, in which about forty-five people were killed in one night. The province of KwaZulu-Natal was a running sore as a result of rivalry between the Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress. Some of us said that a sinister Third Force, including elements of the government's security forces, was behind a spate of indiscriminate killings on trains, at taxi ranks and bus stops. We were usually pooh-pooed by the authorities. Just before the election, there was an insurrection in one of the so-called independent homelands, which was run by black leaders who were prepared to work within the apartheid policy. A neo-Nazi Afrikaner group who wanted to sabotage the transition intervened in the rebellion. Inkatha, a major party in KwaZulu, was boycotting the election. Attempts were made to destabilize and intimidate the black community and to scare them away from voting. Our impending election looked like a disaster waiting to happen. We were all gritting our teeth, expecting the worst. But in the weeks leading up to the election, the insurrection failed and the neo-Nazi group was ignominiously routed. At the proverbial eleventh hour, we heaved a sigh of relief as Inkatha was persuaded to join the election.

Elections are usually just secular political events in most parts of the world. Our elections turned out to be a spiritual, even a religious, experience. We won't so quickly forget the images of those long queues snaking their way slowly into the polling booths. People waited a very long time. John Allen, my media secretary, said there was a new status symbol at the time in South Africa. Someone would say, "I stood for two hours before I could vote!" And someone else would say, "Oh, that's nothing—I waited four hours. . . ." There was chaos in many places, not enough ballot papers or ink or whatever. It was a catastrophe about to take place.

It never did. After I had cast my vote, having waited all of sixty-two years to do so for the first time, I toured some of the voting stations. The people had come out in droves and they looked so utterly vulnerable. It would have taken just two or three people with AK-47s to sow the most awful mayhem. It did not happen. What took place can only be described as a miracle. People stood in those long lines, people of all races in South Africa that had known separation and apartheid for so long—black and white, colored and Indian, farmer, laborer, educated, unschooled, poor, rich—they stood in those lines and the scales fell from their eyes. South Africans made an earth-shattering discovery—hey, we are all fellow South Africans. We are compatriots. People shared newspapers, picnic lunches, stories—and they discovered (what a profound discovery!) that they were human together and that they actually seemed to want much the same things—a nice house in a secure and safe neighborhood, a steady job, good schools for the children, and, yes, skin color and race were indeed thoroughly irrelevant.

People entered the booth one person and emerged on the other side a totally different person. The black person went in burdened with all the anguish of having had his or her dignity trampled underfoot and being treated as a nonperson—and then voted. And said, “Hey, I’m free—my dignity has been restored, my humanity has been acknowledged. I’m free!” She emerged a changed person, a transformed, a transfigured person.

The white person entered the booth one person, burdened by the weight of guilt for having enjoyed many privileges unjustly, voted, and emerged on the other side a new person. “Hey, I’m free. The burden has been lifted. I’m free!” She emerged a new, a different, a transformed, a transfigured person. Many white people confessed that they too were voting for the first time—for the first time as really free people. Now they realized what we had been trying to