

47. He came unto his own (2007)

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bible reading this morning. You'll find that in the book of Genesis. And this morning we come to Genesis chapter 37. It's page 31 if you have one of our church visitors Bibles.

If not, whichever Bible you have, it's pretty near the beginning. Last week we were looking at Genesis chapter 36. We've been studying right through the book of Genesis.

At this sitting we've been looking at the later chapters from chapter 25 onwards. Right through the story of Jacob. And last week we saw this parting of the ways between Jacob's sons, Esau and Jacob.

Chapter 36 verse 8 told us that Esau settled in the hill country of Seir. That is away from his brother Jacob.

But as chapter 37 verse 1 tells us, Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. And now here begins the last of the ten books of Genesis that begin with this little phrase, this title phrase.

[1 : 15] These are the generations or this is the account of Jacob's line. Joseph, being 17 years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers.

He had been a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons because he was the son of his old age.

And he made him a robe of, well, whether it was of many colors or, as the footnote says, whether it was of long sleeves. We don't really know.

Andrew Lloyd Webber made his choice. But whatever it was, it was a very special robe. And his brothers hated him because of it. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

Now Joseph had a dream. And when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, hear this dream that I have dreamed. Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field.

[2 : 25] And behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered round it and bowed down to my sheaf. His brothers said to him, are you indeed to reign over us?

Or are you indeed to rule over us? So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. And he dreamed another dream.

And told it to his brothers and said, behold, I've dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon and eleven stars were binding down to me. But when he told it to his father and his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, what is this dream that you've dreamed?

Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you? And his brothers were insanely jealous of him.

It's the force of that. But his father kept the saying in mind. Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem.

[3 : 24] And Israel said to Joseph, are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I'll send you to them. And he said to them, here I am. So he said to him, go now, see if it's well with your brothers and with the flock and bring me word.

So he sent him from the valley of Hebron and he came to Shechem. That's about 50 miles away.

And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, what are you seeking?

I'm seeking my brothers, he said. Tell me, please, where they're pasturing the flock. The man said, oh, they've gone away, for I heard them say, let's go to Dothan. So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

They saw him from afar off. And before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, here comes this dreamer.

Come now, let's kill him and throw him into the pits. Then we'll say that a fierce animal has devoured him and we'll see what becomes of his dreams. But when Reuben heard it, he rescued or he delivered him out of their hands, saying, let us not take his life.

[4 : 38] And Reuben said to them, shed no blood, cast him into this pit here in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him. That he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore, and they took him and cast him into the pit.

The pit was empty, there was no water in it. And they sat down to eat. And looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead with their camels bearing gum, balm and myrrh on their way to carry it down to Egypt.

Then Judah said to his brothers, what profit, what loot is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites. And let not our hand be upon him, for he's our brother, our own flesh.

And his brothers listened to him. The Midianite traders passed by, and they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites for 20 shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes and returned to his brothers and said, the boy is gone and I, where shall I go?

[5 : 54] Then they took Joseph's robe and slotted a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, this we've found.

Please identify whether it's your son's robe or not. And they identified it and said, it is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him.

Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces. Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him.

But he refused to be comforted and said, no, I shall go down to Sheol to my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him. And meanwhile, the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

Amen. May God bless to us this his word. Well, if you would turn with me to the passage we read there in Genesis chapter 37.

[7 : 09] We come to this chapter this morning having already worked through the preceding chapters. And that is, I think, a very great advantage to us because we don't say, ah, yes, the story of Joseph.

And then get fixated on all the wrong things and miss the whole point of what the Lord is teaching us in these verses.

Rather as Andrew Lloyd Webber does. However splendid his tunes may be in the musical. And they are splendid. Now verse 2 is very clear. Just look at it. These are the generations, or this is the account, of Jacob.

That is, of Jacob's line. And how Israel the man becomes Israel the great nation. In this last book of beginnings, in the book of Genesis, it tells us how God's promise to Abraham begins to flourish in a chosen people.

Who will at last be the means of God's blessing to the whole world. But of course the problem is, as we've seen and as we will continue to see, this chosen people is a people in a mess.

[8 : 26] Here they are as God's chosen people. Back at last in God's chosen place. The land of promise. And yet, what do we find? This people look no different from the pagan peoples that are all around about them.

Remember chapter 34? And the shameful massacre of the Shechemites by Jacob's sons? Turn over to chapter 38 and we'll see next week another sordid tale of sexual debauchery involving Judah, one of the leading sons of Joseph.

And here today, in this chapter we've read, it is full of hatred and envy and attempted murder. And this is the family God has chosen through whom to bless all nations.

Are you kidding me? Is that a joke? This is a family, surely, that needs saving itself. From itself. Well, that is exactly what these last chapters of the book of Genesis are all about.

It is about the saving of God's chosen people. And that people's savior. The God of tenacious grace, whose promise has stuck firm despite everything that has gone before.

[9 : 40] And the God of transforming grace that we have seen at work in Jacob's life over these years. We will see him also to be, in these chapters, the God of triumphant grace in the end.

He will forge a people changed by grace for a glorious future. But it will be through the fires of affliction and on the anvil of testing that this future is going to be forged.

Not without great heartache and pain and very great cost in his people. But above all, for the one God has chosen to be a savior of this people, Joseph, their own flesh and blood.

Who is despised and rejected by them. And yet exalted in his suffering and through his suffering by God.

In order that his brothers might share the fruits of his glory to their own lasting blessing and peace. It's not really a romantic and a sentimental story.

[10 : 47] It is a captivating story. It's wonderfully told. But it pulls no punches. It's brutally real and realistic, isn't it? About the sad tragedies of human life.

And about the bitternesses of the human heart. And yet it is also just as wonderfully real about the extraordinary grace and mercy of God.

Just turn with me over a few pages to Genesis chapter 50 and verse 20. Just before we focus down on our chapter today. Because this verse really sums up the whole of Genesis 37 right to the end of the book.

It sums it up so very well and helps us to get clear just what it's all about. It is a story about the sinful perversity of human beings. Even among God's chosen people, God's church.

Verse 20. As for you, says Joseph, you meant evil against me. There's no pretense. There is no hiding. The brothers are evil in their heart and mind.

[11 : 50] It's a story about sinful perversity. But it's also a story about the sovereign power of God. But God meant it for good. Even man's worst evil is being shaped like clay in the hands of the potter under God's complete control.

And moreover, it is all serving the saving purpose of God. Do you see? God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive.

Or that a numerous people should be kept alive. God meant it. As the NIV translates it there. For the saving of many lives. God's great purpose is that he is calling out for his own name.

A people to bear his name. That's the whole story of Genesis right from the beginning. Indeed, the New Testament tells us that is the story of the whole history of the world from before its foundation. God's whole purpose in creation is that he is building a church. He is building a people who will display his glory to the heavens and the earth to the praise of his glorious grace.

[13 : 05] It's a story, of course, that reaches its fullness and its glorious climax in the seed of Abraham and the Lord Jesus Christ. But here in the book of Genesis is the beginning of that great story unfolding.

And here, just as at every stage of the story, there are numerous echoes of God's saving pattern. There are numerous chimes and foreshadowings that can't but cause our minds and our hearts to wonder at the marvelous way that God has indeed laced the whole of biblical history with the fragrance of his beloved Son.

The shadow of Calvary and the Christ of Calvary is discernible in all the pages of the unfolding story of Scripture. But perhaps never more visibly so than in this story, which begins in our chapter with a father sending out his son to seek his errant and hateful brothers for their good.

But they seize him and they abuse him and they seek to kill him. Joseph, whom God has chosen to be the instrument of salvation for this whole family of faith, he is sold as a slave as good as dead by his own brothers.

So we see in our story that he came, as it were, unto his own and his own received him not. Let's look briefly then at the events as they unfold in this chapter and then ask ourselves what it is that God wants us to learn from these things.

[14 : 54] First of all, verses 1 to 11 describe for us in Jacob's family a simmering conflict. On the surface, it's a story about a special robe, whether multicolored or whatever it was.

It's about dreams and all that sort of thing. But actually, it's all about the future of a family. It's all about the future of leadership. It's all about the covenant of God.

And this is a family, remember, where birthright and blessings are very, very important indeed. Now, it is very usual for preachers and indeed biblical commentators, when they come to this chapter, to slam into young Joseph.

Here's a man, they say, who's proud, who's arrogant, who's a tale-teller, who's a spoilt brat. But really, surely, Joseph deserved nearly everything he got here. That's a very common view. But remember, that was Joseph's brother's view. That's not necessarily the view of the writer of Genesis, or indeed of God himself. Remember back in chapter 31, where Laban's sons had a very negative and derogatory view of Jacob.

[16:04] But that was not God's view at all. So we need to be a little bit careful whose voices we're listening to in the text here. It's rather like Moses, when you come to Exodus chapter 2.

Moses, who is criticized and rejected by his own kinsmen for saving an Israelite from the Egyptian. But he is not so criticized by God.

Remember the bigger story of Genesis. This has been a story, hasn't it, of conflict right from the very beginning. The seed of the serpent in conflict with the chosen seed, the seed of the woman, the seed of promise.

We saw it magnificently last week in chapter 36. The perpetual enmity of the seed of Esau against Israel. Well, what we're seeing here in chapter 37, in Jacob's own household, is his own sons behaving just like the seed of the serpent.

Just like the pagan enemies of God's promise. Now we have seen already, haven't we, the cut of the jib of these brothers back in chapter 34. And very unpleasant it is.

[17:15] So be careful who you listen to in this chapter. Whose side are you really on? No doubt, Joseph's brothers accused him of dishing up the dirt and dressing up proudly and dreaming up all sorts of fantasies.

But what does the text in front of us actually tell us? What does it actually emphasize? Well, I think if you look at it, it seems to tell us that Joseph is a dutiful young man concerned with his father's business, verse 2.

He's out with his brothers and he brings back a bad report to Jacob. Now you could read that as telling tales or as spreading slander.

The word can certainly mean that. But given what we know of Jacob's sons already, it seems far more likely, doesn't it, that the badness in this report comes from their behavior, not from Joseph's. And Joseph seems to be an obedient son to his father. Quite a contrast, in fact, from Reuben, who you remember a couple of chapters ago as Jacob's firstborn, defied him and slept with one of his wives, manifestly undermining his authority.

[18:26] And here's Joseph, dutifully looking after his father's interests. Indeed, when we come to verse 14, he dutifully goes off on a long journey for his father's sake, to seek his brother's welfare, despite their attitude of hatred to him.

And that seems to me rather a noble attitude, rather than a nasty one. Certainly, Joseph had a lot to cope with in this family. And Jacob's favoritism of him, verse 3, was very foolish.

Of course it was. He put a robe on Joseph that seemed to mark him out, very probably as the leader of the next generation of his family. And that provoked his other sons, verse 4.

They hated it. And yet it was, wasn't it, Jacob's right to do that? And Reuben, his firstborn, had disqualified himself. And Jacob was, in fact, the firstborn of his other wife.

It can't have been easy for Joseph, can it, to be marked out in that way, in such a difficult family. And it wasn't only his father, but in fact, God marked him out too, because God sent these dreams to Joseph.

[19:38] And these dreams bear the full weight of an oracle of God, just exactly, you remember, as an oracle had come to Jacob's mother, about Jacob being the one who would rule over his older brother Esau, back in chapter 25.

Oh, but surely, surely Joseph should have kept quiet about his dreams, people say. Well, should he? Should David have kept quiet when God marked him out as his chosen leader for his people and never told a soul?

Should Jesus have kept quiet and never risked hatred by claiming that he was chosen by God and call people to follow him as the only way to God? Should he? The whole story requires, doesn't it, that the brothers were told about God's plan for Joseph.

And yet it was the telling of that that got Joseph into such trouble. Maybe the best that we can say is, as William still comments, is all very difficult. So it is.

It's hard to fathom it out, isn't it? Maybe Joseph was indiscreet in what he told and how he told it. Maybe he was. Although God gave the dream to him again, a second time, as if to absolutely confirm that this is true.

[20 : 52] And they weren't really dreams in need of any great interpretation, were they? Maybe he was. Somewhat immature and naive at 17.

Who isn't? And yet, when you turn the page to chapter 39, a very short time afterwards, we seem to see somebody extraordinarily mature for his years, don't we? I'm not even sure that that is how we're to see Joseph here.

But whatever we think, the text says nothing, nothing about Joseph parading this coat proudly or arrogantly.

All it tells us is that his father made it for him. For all we know, Joseph might have hated wearing that coat and just did it to please his father. But the text is totally silent on all of these things.

It's just speculation. What we are told and what shouts aloud at us off this page in front of us is there in verse 4 and verse 5 and verse 8 and verse 11 that Joseph's brothers hated him.

[21 : 57] They hated him for his dream, the oracle that came from God. And they hated him even more for testifying to this oracle of God. They were violently jealous of him.

That's the force of that word in verse 11. It's even stronger than hatred. It's a passion that is looking for an opportunity to take vengeance. And that's what overshadows everything else in this text, isn't it?

We can't miss it. Whatever incitement there might have been by Joseph's favoritism or even by Joseph's attitude, if he did have a foolish attitude, this visceral hatred of Joseph, it's the spirit of Cain, isn't it?

Who murdered his brother Abel. It's the spirit of Esau, who hated Jacob because behind it all is hatred of God himself.

Hatred of God's election and God's purpose and plan. It's not just Joseph that they hate, it's his dream. It's God's sovereign choice.

[23 : 03] It's God being God, doing things his way through the person that he chooses. People hate that. People always hate the challenge of a sovereign God because it's a challenge to their personal autonomy, their own self-rule.

It's not new to have that hatred of God. It's right here back in Genesis. And the brothers reject the oracle of God because they hate the idea of having to submit to God's rule his way.

And they despise the messenger who tells them of that. So here is the family that God has chosen to bless and through whom to bless the world. But they are raging at God's own chosen way of salvation.

They're hardly a family of saviors, are they? They need a saviour themselves. They need to be saved themselves and transformed before ever they can do anything for the world.

And yet when God provides one from among their own brothers, they want to kill him. And that pattern, that pattern of simmering conflict against God and his covenant promise is a perpetual pattern throughout history.

[24 : 18] God's people have always rejected the saviors that he sends them. If you doubt my reading of this chapter, then when you get home, read Acts chapter 7 and you can read the apostles' inspired commentary, the authentic commentary of the whole Old Testament story in his speech.

Here's what he says in Acts 7 verse 9. The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt, but God was with him. Likewise, he says they rejected Moses.

Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? They said. But this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer. And he sums up, speaking to Israelites, the very family of faith, he sums up and says, You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.

As your fathers did, so did you. They hated Joseph. They were jealous of him violently.

And they wanted to kill him. And verses 12 to 30 tell us how they got their chance. These verses tell of a shocking crime. Seems strange, doesn't it, that the family would want to go anywhere near Shechem again, given the history and their reputation there.

[25 : 38] Maybe that's what explains Jacob's concern in verse 14. Perhaps he fears for them. He wants news of them. It also seems strange to us, doesn't it, that Joseph would be sent by Jacob all that way on his own, especially into the midst of his brothers.

Does Jacob not sense the depth of their hatred for him? Perhaps Jacob just can't believe or imagine that his children could ever stoop to something so low as to harm Joseph.

Parents can be very foolish and naive, can't they? I always laugh when I hear somebody saying, Oh, my little Johnny would never do that. Oh, my little Jenny would never use language like that. I do hope as Christian parents we're not so foolish. If we are, we're going to have egg on our faces, aren't we? We think that sort of thing about children. But off Joseph goes, and surely we must be struck by his obedience to his father and the care that he has for these brothers of his who hate him so grievously.

Fifty miles and more he travels to Shechem. And then further on, verse 15, you get the feeling he's terribly vulnerable, don't you? Wandering about in the fields, in hostile territory.

[26 : 55] But it's not the strangers who are dangerous. It's his own flesh and blood. Verse 18 tells us, They see him from afar and they conspire, they plot to murder him.

Same word, by the way, as Cain's murder of his brother Abel. And the same glaring repetition also of the word brother that's repeated all the time in Genesis chapter 4.

Here in this chapter, 21 times, did you notice as we read, the word brother appears. So Joseph, verse 17, found his brethren and they conspired to murder him.

Their own brother, their own flesh, as Judah puts it with grim irony in verse 27. They wanted to get rid of Joseph, but notice verse 20, they wanted also to get rid of his dreams, to silence him and to silence the intrusion of God's unwelcome revelation into their lives.

Or rather unexpectedly, verse 21, Reuben intervenes, probably more out of self-interest, I think, than pity. He's out of his father's favor and perhaps he wants to get back into his favor by rescuing Joseph to him.

[28 : 08] So they don't kill him immediately, they strip him of his robe, this special royal robe, and they throw him into a pit. And then verse 25, they just sit down to eat, have their picnic lunches if nothing had happened.

Utterly callous, isn't it? Cold-hearted. You can't help but think, can you, of another man stripped of his robe while other coarse-armed men sat around glibly playing poker.

Reuben, though, seems to have wandered off and Judah takes charge. It seems that Judah is a rival for leadership in the tribe. Let's make some loot out of this for ourselves, he says.

We'll sell him as a slave to these Ishmaelites, these Midianite traders, these complete pagans.

There's no mercy in his speech, by the way. Kidnapping and people trafficking was a capital crime in the Mosaic law just because it was considered just like murder.

And very clearly, the brothers never thought they were going to see this man again. Slaves didn't tend to live very long at all, did they? That's for sure. So they're delivering him over to certain death.

[29 : 20] But they just avoid the nasty business of having blood on their own hands. Not our own hand on our own flesh, says Judah, verse 27. So they solve their consciences very easily, it seems.

And they get their pieces of silver. But it is blood money. Another little chime. So Reuben comes back.

And we have this pathetic outburst in verse 30. Oh, where shall I go? What can I do? Well, what he could easily have done is gathered all the brothers and insisted that they go after the traders to restore Joseph.

After all, these are the brothers who slaughtered every man and a whole city to rescue their sister just a few chapters ago. But no, Reuben just acquiesces in the shocking crime.

Verses 31 to 36 tells us that he just joins in what is then a shameful cover-up. What a sorry tale this is.

[30 : 26] But it's replete, isn't it, with irony. Jacob, who deceived his old father with stolen clothes and a goat, is now himself deceived, what by?

His son's clothes and the blood of a goat. Well, the Bible does teach us, doesn't it, that you tend to reap what you sow. If you live your life by deception, don't be surprised if it comes back to bite you. Great irony. And cowardice, it seems, verse 32, they sent the robe, very probably by the hands of servants. They knew the shock and the grief would be terrible, so they wanted to hide from it.

But they do come to Jacob and the cruelty of maintaining the deception is absolutely stark, isn't it? They let Jacob mouth in his own words, the very words, back in verse 20, they had concocted to say, a fierce animal has devoured him.

And then added to the cruelty, there's the hypocrisy of their feigned comfort. How did they manage it? You wonder that, don't you, sometimes when you've seen on television bereaved parents pleading for the murder of their child to come forward or to be handed in and then just a few days later you discover that they have been arrested and they are the ones who have killed their own child.

[31 : 46] And you wonder, how could they do it? How could they do this to Jacob, their father?

Surely we say no one can do something like that. But we're wrong, aren't we, whenever we say that. We're so wrong about the human heart. And Jacob, we're told, will not be comforted.

His grief is terrible and deep and it seems interminable. I shall go down to the grave mourning Joseph, he says. It seems as though he's grieving now as someone with no hope.

It's different from the grief in chapter 35 when he buried his wife Rachel. Maybe he does think now that God has deserted him utterly. Maybe Jacob thought that Joseph, the firstborn of Rachel, his beloved wife, maybe he thought that Joseph was the seed of promise.

And now that he's dead, he assumes that God's covenant must be void and must be broken. We don't know. But we can't miss the darkness of soul that verse 35 portrays.

[32 : 59] There's mourning, there's weeping, there's utter darkness. And to Jacob in the midst of this story, it did really seem, didn't it, that this was the end of Joseph and the end of hope.

Wouldn't you have thought the same? But let's just look again at this narrative, knowing what we know. And even here, let's see the hints that this is not so because the whole chapter has also been witness, hasn't it, to a sovereign control.

A sovereign control superintending absolutely everything that unfolds in this story. Now it's true, of course, God is not mentioned in this chapter.

He doesn't appear. He doesn't speak directly, although he is clearly the unspoken sender of the dream. But at first, it seems as though God's hand is utterly absent.

But as Ralph Davis reminded us when he spoke at our minister's conference here a few years ago, his fingerprints are everywhere. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

[34 : 12] And in verses 1 to 11, for example, amidst the simmering conflict, the dreams do remind us, don't they, of God's bigger story, of God's promise to Abraham and to Jacob that rulers would come from their flesh to whom many would bow down.

we're also reminded of the pattern that God has already revealed of the younger one being the ruler over the older brothers. There's a familiar pattern at work.

God's fingerprints are there and we recognize them. And in verses 12 to 30, despite the shocking crime, there are so many apparent coincidences that we can't help but remember God's promise to Jacob to be present and to protect him and his seed wherever they go.

Joseph is not alone. He's protected all the way through that long journey all on his own. And he just happens to meet a man in the field. Remember all those just happened to meet people at wells in the past.

And it just so happens that the relocation of Joseph's brothers to Dothan meant that a caravan of traders just so happened to be passing it at just the right moment. And Reuben, for whatever reason, just does the right thing.

[35 : 30] And the incestuous adulterer becomes the rescuer, verse 21. The word used there, rescuer, he delivered Joseph. It's the same word used of God delivering his people in the Exodus.

A word that any reader of this under Moses would be all too familiar with. And then verse 24 tells us that the pit just happened to have no water in it.

unlike what you would expect in any normal system. So it's not a death pit, but a saving pit. And even Judah's mercenary mind seems to save Joseph from his fate.

They meant it all for evil, there's no doubt about that. But God meant it for good and his fingerprints are evident. And that's underlined, of course, in verse 36, the very last verse.

There's great grief and there's weeping, but meanwhile, we're told, Joseph is not dead, but instead, he is sold not into a galley, but to a high-ranking officer in the palace of Pharaoh.

[36 : 37] Just like another deliverer of God's people would be taken mysteriously and miraculously to live in a palace of Pharaoh, to be looked after there and nurtured and made ready for his great

role as a deliverer of God's people.

There's a divine hand at work. Right through all this conflict and this cruelty and this crime, there is a sovereign control. God meant it for good.

And not only for Joseph's good, but for the good of his whole people. The people that God is gathering to bear his name forever. And not only even the immediate family of Israel, but through their seed of promise, a people of blessing for all the families of the earth, the entire church of Jesus Christ.

The protecting and the saving of God's Savior here is for the protection and the saving of all God's seed, of all God's people of promise. This isn't just Joseph's story, just as the Exodus isn't just Moses' story, just as the Gospels aren't even just Jesus' story.

All of these are part of the great story that explains every story. And that's the purpose of God from before all eternity to bring into being a family who bears his name to display his glory to the whole world.

[38 : 05] It's the letter of the Ephesians, isn't it, in the New Testament that lays that eternal purpose of God out so, so clearly. The purpose set forth before time itself, we're told, a plan reaching its climax in Christ and the fullness of time, so that through him and through his saving work, Paul says, in the church, the manifold wisdom of God might be made known even to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places, not just on earth.

And that, says Paul, is the eternal purpose of God realized, coming to pass at last, in our Lord Jesus Christ. God's eternal purpose, the reason of this world and everything in it and everyone in it, is that through the promised Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, God will have a people displaying his marvelous glory and grace throughout the universe.

That's what Paul says in Ephesians chapter 3. And immediately he goes on then and says something very striking. Listen, this is God's great purpose, he says, for all his people.

So, I ask you not to lose heart of what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. Paul, the servant of Christ, says, I am suffering for that glorious purpose, so don't lose heart.

Isn't that striking? It sounds strange to us, doesn't it? But Paul is always saying things like that when you read his letters. I am sharing, he says, in the sufferings of Christ and so must you, he tells Timothy and all other servants of the gospel.

[39 : 52] Because that is how glory is being forged for all God's people according to his eternal purpose. You see, if we see that pattern, which is the pattern of Calvary, we see it foreshadowed in the lives of all who serve this great glorious covenant purpose of God, leading up to the coming of Christ in the flesh as our Savior.

And if we see that pattern echoed in the servants of Christ who serve that same purpose as we await the return of the Lord Jesus Christ as our King, if we see that, then I think we'll begin to understand both mysteries and the experience of the Bible saints of old like Joseph, but also the mysteries that we experience in our lives as the saints of God today.

Because if we're believers in Christ, we also are part of this same great story. It's the story of God gathering himself a people for his name. And it's the story of him keeping them alive forever, to be freed at last from the curse of sin and from death itself, and to share at last in the promise of his glory forever and ever.

That's what we're involved in as Christians today, just as Joseph was involved in way back then. So as we close, let's just look back over this story in the light of what Paul says there in Ephesians, about the great story of God's marvelous mercy, of which this story is just one part.

Let's just let it sink in, what it means for us to be part of that story, the people chosen to share God's glory. First, surely we can't escape marveling, can we, at the sheer magnitude of God's mercy.

[41 : 46] That this family, dysfunctional and destructive and full of envy and hatred and enemies, enemies of God's grace, that they were the objects of God's saving mercy.

mercy. The whole story in these chapters is about the rescue of these brothers, to bring them to a place of blessing and of prosperity, to rescue them not only from the hunger that will come on their homeland, but to rescue them from the hatred in their own hearts that would have destroyed them. It's easy for us to read this story, isn't it, and look down on Jacob's brothers, until we realize that in fact, in looking at them, we're simply looking in a mirror. We're looking at our own hearts.

Never mind what we once were, but even what we know we still are as believing people, isn't that right? Resenting others, resenting very often those that God has called and chosen for a role that

we ourselves covet but don't have, hating in our hearts and jealous of those that have things that we haven't been given.

It's not just pagans who have a chip on their shoulder, is it? Not just pagans who nurse grudges and bitterness in their hearts. And without God's mercy in Christ, friends, think how much worse our hearts would be.

[43 : 18] Paul says to Titus, we ourselves were foolish, disobedient, slaves to various passions, full of envy and malice and hating one another. Is that untrue?

But, says Paul, the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared and he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy. We are not Joseph's brothers, as Bob File would say if we were standing here. But we do resemble far too closely their flesh and their hearts.

Isn't that so? And surely we can't read these verses without being humbled again by the magnitude of God's mercy to us, God's mercy to me in Christ.

But second, this story also makes us marvel afresh at the means of God's mercy. It comes through the appearance, says Paul, of a Savior who suffered for us in our place that we might inherit his glory.

[44 : 33] There's an inspired commentary again on the whole story of Joseph in Psalm 105 in just a few short verses, a psalm that tells of the great redemption of God's people. And it speaks of God sending a famine to judge the land.

But for Israel, we're told, he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, sold as a slave. His feet were hurt with fetters, his neck put into iron.

And so through his suffering, Israel were made fruitful and stronger than their foes. You see, here in chapter 37 of Genesis, we can't see how any good can come from this dreadful evil.

Just as the disciples around the cross and the women at the tomb could not see anything but darkness and death and despair in the death of their beloved master. But as John Calvin says, God brings forth the salvation of his church not from magnificent splendor, but from death and the grave. There's a familiar pattern, isn't there here? God's way of dealing with evil is by means of suffering servants, by means of the brother who suffers and bears the enmity from the very ones that he himself came to save.

[45 : 53] And Joseph is just one of the many deliverers of God's people. But each one faced the same rejection, the same hatred, the same scars. It's always, always a pattern of deeply pained experience for God's saviors just because of the persistent perversity and sin and evil in the human heart of those who need that mercy.

And that's why, friends, Joseph's story of triumph and fruitfulness comes only through humiliation and suffering. And that's why that story so chimes with the experience of the Lord Jesus himself because always it has been so for Joseph, for Moses, for all the prophets that Stephen speaks about and for all Christ's apostles like Paul.

They're all sharing in the great saving suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ himself through which his marvelous mercy is being poured out on his people that they will at last forever be glorified as he has purposed them to be.

And when we understand that, when we understand the means of God's mercy, the way he brings his glorious purpose to pass, that is what will help us also when we face the mysteries of his mercy. When we as Christian people find ourselves amid the perplexities and even in the pit of despair that Joseph must have felt that he was in here in Genesis 37, in the very real pit that was a prison here and in the prison that he was later in in Egypt.

[47 : 41] Because in a real way, you see, every single follower of the Lord Jesus Christ is also called to be a means of God's mercy for the sake of Christ and of his church, for the sake of people's eternal blessing.

And yes, it's true, we are not Joseph. But the spirit of the God who led Joseph through all of this is the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ and he indwells our heart.

And he leads us, says Paul, in the privilege not only of believing in him, but also of suffering for his sake.

so that we too, says Paul in Philippians 1.29, so that we too are engaged in this same conflict.

Because we too are called to share in the marvelous story of God gathering a people for himself.

But he brings forth the salvation of his church not from magnificent splendor, but from death and the grave. Or as Jesus put it, whoever would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

[49 : 01] Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit. If anyone serves me like this, says Jesus, my Father will honor him.

It won't look like honor to the world, and it won't feel like honor to you when that service puts you in a pit or in a prison of darkness. Or in the midst of great marked darkness when every fiber of your being is crying out, my God, why have you forsaken me in this?

It won't feel any less painful when men do intend evil against you because of whose you are. God's grace and love you.

But amid the perplexity and the mystery, if you remember the means of God's great mercy and the magnitude of his saving purpose, which we also, like Joseph, are called to play a part in, then we too will be able to say with Paul, I rejoice in my sufferings for the sake of Christ's body, the church. And we'll be able to say with Joseph, God, God meant it for good, for the saving of many lives.

[50 : 31] Amen. Let's pray together. Beloved, be not surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you.

But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you also may rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed because the spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Therefore, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good. Lord, we thank you for the magnitude of your mercy that called even such as we to play a part in this, your marvelous and glorious, eternal purpose of grace.

May we be granted the privilege of also sharing and being the means of that mercy. And so, looking to you, even amidst the mystery of it all, and praising your glorious name.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.