

Genesis 37

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Preacher: Al Stewart

[0 : 00] Well, good morning. Good morning. Nice to be with you. And actually, if you've got your Bibles there, if you wanted to open to Genesis chapter 37, and I think it's page 31. I think it is page 31 in the blue Bibles that many of you have.

Well, it's great to see you all here this morning. Everyone's looking very wide awake and well-dressed. And, you know, maybe in Scotland, as we have in Australia, have you ever heard of the car park miracle?

And that is, you get out of the car park and as you walk into church, we put a smile on and we all look happy and so on. And, well, it happens in the land down under. My guess is that many of us have a smile on our face and yet there is heartache in our lives.

Regardless of how old you are, regardless of kind of what stage of life, there's heartache. You might be married and really wish you weren't. You might be single and really wish you were.

Or maybe for your kids, things aren't going the way you'd hope. And you can't stop worrying about them. Or maybe you're worried about your parents.

[1 : 12] In fact, maybe you're kind of middle-aged and one of the joys of midlife is you get to worry about your kids and your parents at the same time. And neither of them will do what they're told. Anyway, that's...

And you just get to a point where you think, this is not how I would have written the script for life. For you young guys, maybe it is that your studies aren't going the way you'd hoped.

And you may not get into the course that you wanted. And so life may not turn you worried about that. Or maybe you get to a certain age and you feel your dreams start to die.

I don't just mean that you kind of, you know, you hit 17 and realise you'll never play football for Scotland. I mean, all those things that you kind of secretly longed for and never really told anyone because they're embarrassing and now you realise they're not going to happen.

Or maybe your job is boring. Or maybe your job is stressful. Or maybe your job is boring and stressful at the same time.

[2 : 17] Maybe even just coming to church is hard work. In Australia, we tell one another, dry your eyes, princess, and move on. But that doesn't help that much.

Especially when you come to really, really big things. Like I have four of my friends at the moment who have cancer. I have four people that I count as friends who have some kind of cancer. And effectively, it's a death sentence.

And for them and their spouses and their families, and how do you cope with that? Or if you're unemployed, how do you face up to that? Or if you've got problems in your family.

You've got family members that just won't get on. How do you? Now here's the thing. If you follow Jesus, and I'm sure many of us do, if you follow Jesus, there'll be people who'll tell you, ah yes, you follow Jesus, you trust him, and you'll be healthy and wealthy and beautiful.

And I think, I just feel middle-aged and tired and bald. Like I, it's... And healthy, wealthy and beautiful can work for some people for a little while, but then hey, reality sets in.

[3 : 25] And you know what? It can sometimes be harder for a follower of Jesus, because of that feeling of, look, if I've got heartache in my life and things aren't going the way they should, why doesn't Jesus fix it? Yes, he could.

As easy as you pull a toddler out of a, you know, struggling in the water, he could fix it, couldn't he? Why doesn't he? Where is God? Is he hidden? Is he powerless?

Why doesn't he fix things in our life when we struggle? Do you know the Bible is very much aware of this problem? Very much. In fact, from cover to cover, kind of the Bible writers deal with this problem.

If God is good and powerful, why doesn't he fix the problems? And one of the key parts of the Bible that answer that is Genesis chapter 37 to 50.

And it's not a philosophical system or whatever. What is it? So often God tells us a story about a family and about how God works in this particular family. It's the story of Joseph.

[4 : 22] It's not a kind of a comprehensive answer to the problem of suffering. It's not really even an answer for the unbeliever. It's not the thing you'd give Richard Dawkins or someone.

It's much more an answer or something to teach the person who wants to trust God and is doing it tough. It's the story of Joseph. Now, I don't know whether you're familiar with the story or not.

My guess is that many of us are and there'll be some of us who aren't. If you're not used to the story, I hope today that I'll motivate you to go home and find a Bible and read Genesis chapter 37 through to 50.

It's my favourite Old Testament story. And when you read it for the first time as an adult, well, it comes alive. I remember a good friend now, Cole, back in Australia, had become a Christian kind of mid-30s and had no Christian background.

And one night he's reading the Bible and his wife was calling him to dinner. Come and sit down. Come and sit. And he's up to Genesis 46 or something and he said, no, no, I can't come. I've just got to know how this finishes. And isn't that great to be able to read it fresh?

[5 : 30] Or maybe kind of the story of Joseph. Yeah, yeah, you've known it for 100 years. I hope you might go home and reread it. Let's have a think about it. Where are we up to in Genesis?

The book of Genesis begins kind of in a mad rush, really quickly. Genesis 1 and 2, you've got creation. Genesis chapter 3, you've got Adam and Eve walk away from God. They sin, the whole world begins to fall apart.

By Genesis chapter 6, God's decided to wipe the slate clean and you've got the flood. 6 to 9 is the flood. Chapter 11 is... You can do it. Like the Tower of Babel, when God divides the land.

So it's right up to 11. And then it just slows down. And God chooses one man out of the whole of humanity, Abraham, who came from Mesopotamia, from the creatively named city of Ur.

And God chooses Abraham out of Ur and makes him these promises. God says to Abraham, if you trust me, I will make you, I will bless you, I will make you into a great nation, I'll give you the land of Canaan, this beautiful, the promised land, and I'll bless the whole world through you.

[6 : 36] And of course, Abraham does trust God. And here's the strange thing. You've got Genesis 1 to 11, kind of the whole of creation. And then the next 38 chapters are about this one little family and just three or four generations, from father to kind of great-grandson.

And God slows it all down. And you've got then the story of Abraham, has Isaac, has Jacob. And Jacob has 12 sons and a daughter from four different women.

And incidentally, the Old Testament never outright condemns polygamy. It just shows you the consequences of having many wives, which is always a world of pain.

But then when you get to chapter 37, by the time you get to chapter 37, you've got Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and then Joseph, his great-grandson. But the question's about how are you going to turn this little family into a great nation?

They're nomads. They pack all the kids and everything and all their belongings into the car, onto the camels, and they move every so often. You can't become a great nation if you've got to keep on moving.

[7 : 45] How do you do that? And how will the whole world be blessed? Well, Genesis 37 to 50 is a story of how God will make these promises about the nation and the blessing and the whole world, how God will make those come true.

And you see chapter 37, verse 2, these are the generations of, that little phrase, the generations of, 11 times so far in Genesis. For each major character, you're telling the story of what happens for that character, of how God keeps his promises to those or what happens to that character.

And you see 37, verse 2, as the next 13 chapters are about Joseph, you'd expect it to say, these are the generations of Joseph. But you notice it doesn't. These are the generations of Jacob.

This is the story of how God will keep his promises to Jacob, whose other name is Israel, and God will do that through his son, Joseph. I want to show you today, just in this chapter that we've read, three things, and I'm leaning on Tim Keller, the American pastor here a little bit.

He's shown me some things in here. Let me show you three things about, in this chapter, we see it's kind of an introduction to the story, about the hiddenness of God, hidden sin, and hidden salvation.

[9 : 01] It's all kind of just below the surface. Let me show you. See, it's as if, the first thing about God being hidden, when you get to Genesis 37, it's as if God kind of steps out of the picture.

There's no miracles in the story of Joseph. God doesn't kind of speak or intervene. And there's all sorts of wrong things that happen, and God doesn't step in to stop it. So Jacob is a hopeless dad, and God doesn't intervene.

Joseph gets, you know, since he's in slavery, and God doesn't stop that. The brothers lie to their father. God doesn't intervene. And kind of, where is God? Here's the thing.

If you read the story, by the time you get to chapter 50, and you get to the end, as you look back, you see God's hand in every detail. God was there. Not only that, it seems like God is hidden.

If you look closely, you see that every character in the story is flawed. You've got Jacob and Joseph and the 11 brothers, and because they're main kind of players in the Bible, they're great people, aren't they?

[10 : 08] No, they're not. They're basically all hopeless. You pick the story of the father. Jacob, he keeps on playing favourites. So he has a favourite wife, Rachel. And then Rachel's firstborn son, Joseph, is his favourite.

To the point where he gives Joseph the coat of many colours. A little bit hard to translate what it is, this kind of ornamented robe. But what you find later in the Bible is one of King David's children wears a robe described this way.

So Jacob treats his one boy out of 12 as the young prince. And he keeps on doing it. It's a great irony really that Jacob's own dad, Isaac, does the favouritism thing with Esau, his son, and it tears his family apart.

And this favouritism tears Jacob's own family, the 12 boys and the daughter. It tears that family apart as well. And it's like he keeps on making one person or one thing the centre of his life.

If I just have Rachel, if I just have Joseph, if I just have Benjamin. The Bible's word for it is idolatry. But he keeps on doing it. So he's ignoring God and how he lives so much.

[11 : 24] And then Joseph himself, the young man who gets sold into slavery in Australia, what would we call him that you could say in church? A twerp, I think you'd call him.

Do you have that word? A twerp. What I mean is he thinks he's the centre of the world. Now it's unthinkable for someone who's 17 to think they're the centre of the world, but that's what the Bible tells us.

In verse 2, he brings his brothers a bad report. We say he dobbs his brothers in, which makes him unpopular. And then he has these dreams. Do you notice, have a look at chapter 37, verse 6.

He said to his brothers, to his family, he said to them, Hear this dream that I have dreamed. Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field. And behold, my sheaf rose and stood upright.

And behold, your sheaves gathered round it and bowed down to my sheaf. His brother 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.

[12 : 23] It's unthinkable in their world. I mean, not only would it be annoying to us, it's unthinkable in their world. The rule of primogenita, as it's called, means the older is always greater than the younger.

Father is greater than son, older brother than younger brother. He's the youngest, or second youngest. How can he rule over them? And so they're angry with him, they hate him. And then what does he do? He has another dream.

So what does he do? He tells them straight away. He is one annoying kid. Verse 39, Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, Behold, I have dreamed another dream.

Behold, the sun, the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me. And this time even his father is cranky with him. Verse 10, But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, What is this dream that you have dreamed?

Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come and bow ourselves to the ground before you? And his brothers were jealous of him. But his father kept the saying in mind. So Joseph, annoying, proud, really does think he's the young prince.

[13 : 29] And then his brothers, what a mess are they? Verse 2, The four of his brothers are angry with him. By verse 4, All of his brothers are angry with him.

Judah is the ringleader of the whole thing. Did you notice, as Willie read for us, see verses 23 to 25, how callous are they? They get him, they're going to kill him, and the older brother talks them out of it.

So they strip him naked and throw him in a well and while he screams and carries on, we find out later he screams and begs and carries on, they sit down and eat lunch. And why do they sell him?

The silver that they get as a slave, the price of a slave, is actually equivalent of three years of a shepherd's wages. It's just greed, what they do. And then they go and deceive their father and how do they deceive the father?

They deceive their father with a goat and an article of clothing. The coat of many colours and they kill a goat, a goat and an article of clothing. And Jacob is deceived.

[14 : 33] If you've read the story, can you see the irony? Do you remember how Jacob deceived his father Isaac with a goat and an article of clothing? It's all come back to bite them.

And they call Joseph your son, not our brother. Here's the thing, the whole family is dysfunctional. Dysfunctional, yes, to the point of wanting to kill each other.

That's dysfunctional. Even where I come from, that's dysfunctional. Okay, so you've got hidden sin. The whole family is a mess. A hidden God who doesn't seem to be there, the whole family is a mess and then a hidden salvation.

In chapter 37, God seems absent. But as you read on, every part of the story has God's fingerprints there. I don't know if you use the expression about the law and some of the devil is in the detail.

In this story, God is in the detail. Every piece of the puzzle fits together exactly. It's got God's fingerprints all over it. Like the dreams. Joseph has the dreams and the reason the whole dreams come true is because his brothers are angry and try to stop the dreams happening.

[15 : 42] So they said to one another, here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits and we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him. Then we'll see what's become of his dreams.

It's like the dreams, trying to stop them, mean that they come true. Every piece of the puzzle fits together. The fact that his father sends him to check on his brothers.

The fact he just happens to meet the man who says, oh, they've gone to Dothan and Dothan is this remote place where no one will see what happens. Reuben, his older brother, is there to stop him being killed but not there to stop him being sold into slavery.

And every piece of the puzzle had to fit together or they would all die. I don't know if you've read the story. If all of those things hadn't happened, if Joseph wasn't sold into slavery, if he didn't end up in Egypt, the famine was coming, they would have all died.

No family, no nation, God's promises to the world all hang by a thread. Now they're all hard things though, aren't they?

[16 : 45] You think about it. Jacob thought that his son was dead for 22 years. Joseph spends years and years in slavery, betrayed and so on. Why so much pain?

Here's one of the sad things of life really. Just telling someone something usually doesn't work. So how do you stop a teenager? With all respect guys, okay?

I'm sure it's no one's problem here. How do you stop a teenager wanting to sleep in until lunchtime, play PlayStation and not work for etc, etc? And will you just tell them once? Would you mind getting out of bed early?

Would you mind not playing PlayStation? Would you mind working? That's it, that's all it takes, isn't it? No, it's not usually. It's reality has got to...

We've got a son who we love dearly at the moment who's just finished study. He needs to go and get a job. Why? He needs to have to turn up somewhere every morning and do stuff that he really doesn't want to do to receive money.

[17 : 52] It's called a job. But you don't really understand that until you actually do it, okay? Yeah. See, reality... It's reality that teaches us.

And often it's hard things. You know, isn't that the way... I'm certainly no expert about parenting. But the essence of parenting is to let your kids gently, gradually feel the consequences of what they do.

If there's no reality in someone's life, they end up a total mess. It's that... And God uses reality here. God uses events to change people.

To change people. And you can see that. If you read on in the story, and I hope I'll motivate you to, you see Joseph. At the age of 17, he thinks, hey, the world revolves around me and aren't I wonderful and I'm the young prince.

And you imagine those dreams, what they mean is that one day he will have incredible power. And you imagine if God had given him that power while he's still a twerp, okay?

[18 : 54] And it would have been a mess. But by the time God gives him that, God has rolled the heavy roller over him. Now, that's a cricket illustration. Do you guys get it up here?

Anyway, God's rolled the heavy roller over him or held his head underwater, if you like, a few times, okay? And taught him some humility. And those hard things in life have taught him humility and he's worked out that actually power is about being able to serve and look after people.

But it was the hard... It was 13 years of slavery that taught him humility. Or Jacob. Jacob keeps focusing on one particular thing and making it his little small G God.

If I just have Rachel, if I just have... And you know what? God just keeps taking those things away from him. And God will do it to us too. You have a small, a little God.

If I just have this, I'll be happy. God may well take it away from you. And it hurts. But why does he do it? You read the story. Jacob, he takes away Rachel. He takes away Joseph.

[19 : 53] He takes away Benjamin. And Jacob at the end, what's he got? Well, he's only got God to rely on. Hard lesson. And Judah, if you read chapter...

By the way, you've got to be over 18 to read chapter 38. Okay? So just... Anyway. But if you read chapter 38, you'll see what a louse. Louse?

Mongrel? Just somebody nod that you understand. Okay? Right. Judah, terrible man. That's what it's saying. And yet God uses the circumstances and actually in the story of Joseph, I think Judah is the high point.

If you don't know why, read the story. Judah's the high point. God changes them. And so you've got all these hard things, like 20 odd years of real pain, and God changes those guys to actually rely on God.

He rescues them as a family. By the end of the story, they're actually repentant and sorry. They're not wanting to kill each other. And salvation as a nation... Here's the question.

[20 : 56] How do you take a bunch of nomads, a little family, and turn them into a great nation? What's got to happen? Well, you've got to put them somewhere where they can stay put, where they can become farmers. You've got to put them for several hundred years in beautiful farmland like the Nile Delta.

And that's what God does. He puts them there and they turn from a family into a nation. And then when God's ready, God puts them into slavery and they're ready to leave. And in the book of Exodus, he takes them out.

Salvation for our world. And how does God save our world? Chapter 38 is all about God's promises for a Messiah being fulfilled in spite of Judah.

And, you know, God works in similar patterns through the Scriptures or through our world, really. But there's... You see here, you've got a young man who needs to suffer for his brothers.

And, you know, you read the Bible, there's another young man. And this young man hadn't done anything wrong. And he's betrayed by his brothers. Betrayed by people who should have loved him for silver.

[22 : 02] And he cries out to God that he might be rescued and he isn't. And he dies so that those who don't deserve it can be rescued.

And if you'd been there and seen it happening in the middle of the story, you wouldn't have understood. You wouldn't have understood what was going on. Do you remember Matthew tells us in Matthew chapter 27, And there were also many women there looking on from the distance who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Who is Mary, the mother of James and Joseph? It's Jesus' mum. And as she stood there and watched partway through that story, she didn't understand.

I'm sure her heart was breaking. She didn't understand. Let me ask about your story so far. One of the things is when you're actually doing it tough and when you're really hurting, in the last few years I've had some real heartache with some people I love.

When you're doing it tough, it's hard to think. It is. It's hard to think clearly. That great philosopher Mike Tyson, he's recorded as saying, everyone's got a plan until they get hit.

[23 : 27] And when you're doing it tough, you feel like you've been hit, right? So it's hard to think. And halfway through your story, you can't always see what's going on.

Now let me show you, I know not all of us here will follow Jesus, but let me show you the difference in understanding and trusting God following the Lord Jesus makes. You might want to turn to page 944, or you can just listen, whichever you prefer.

I want to read you something. It's really important. When the Apostle Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, you listen to what he says in Romans 8, verse 28. We're all hurt.

In the middle of our story, we're all trying to work out what's going on. We feel like we've been hit. Here's the promise that the Apostle Paul makes. He says, from Romans 8, verse 28, he says, And what's that all mean?

See what he says in verse 28? All things work together to make life easy and wonderful for those who follow Jesus. So, you know, you were going to buy a house and it didn't kind of come through.

[24 : 44] And then guess what? The next house was even better and even cheaper and it was wonderful. And if you just have enough faith, you'll be healthy and wealthy and beautiful. And that's not what it says, is it? It's not what it says.

Because you see, if you follow Jesus, it may well be that one day you'll go to the doctor and you'll be told you have cancer.

Or maybe even worse, someone you really love has it. And like I said, I've got three or four friends who are in that situation. I've got another couple where she was only in her 30s and she's diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

Or another friend who I really care for has motor neurone disease. And six months into it, no, about a year into it now, she can't talk. So we get frustrated, hand signals and a writing pad that she writes on and she's a wonderful Christian woman.

Or some people lose their jobs. Or I've got another mate who's kind of late 30s, brilliant young guy, solid Christian, and his wife has just walked out on him for another man.

[25 : 58] And so these things happen. And you think, well, wait a minute, how's that all things work together to make you happy and no? See what it says? It says, all things work together for good, verse 28, for those who are called according to his purpose.

But what's good? Answer verse 29, for those whom he foreknew, he also predestined, God chose in advance, knew us beforehand, chose us in advance, to what? To be conformed to the image of his son.

See what's good? To be made like Jesus. That's what's good for us, to be made like Jesus. Now, do you want to be made like Jesus? Oh yes, please, absolutely, stop, just a minute.

Do you want to be made like Jesus? Because it's very easy to be glib about that. Oh yeah, of course. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was made perfect, not that he did anything wrong beforehand, but made exactly right as saviour through suffering.

Jesus suffered and had his character and his ability to empathise with us, moulded. Hebrews 12 says, God disciplines us as sons or heirs.

[27 : 11] God disciplines us. Why? To change us. And so becoming like Jesus will hurt. It will.

God doesn't send bad things into your life if you belong to him, but he sends hard things. And it depends what you've got to learn. If God needs to teach you to serve, I reckon he might surround you with people who need to be looked after.

If you need to learn to be patient, he'll make you wait for things. I've prayed for patience often, but he doesn't answer me in a hurry. I don't know. I just... Or maybe you need to learn to rely on God.

Well, maybe then that'll be... He'll make your life slightly out of control. Or he might give you some real financial pain. Or maybe your kids just won't do what you want them to do.

And you might think, do you mean God will deliberately send pain into my life? Yes, that's right. That's what I'm saying. You belong to Jesus, he'll deliberately send pain into it. Really? Why? Because he wants to change you.

[28 : 18] Good friends of ours have a daughter who's a great kid. Smart and clever. Just a great kid. And her teeth are really crooked. She smiles.

It's just not quite right. The teeth all... And they are about to spend absolute fortune. They're about to put some dentist's kids through college. And it'll mean pain for her, for the girl.

She's going to have a mouthful of steel for however, you know, two or three years or something and those rubber band things, however they work. And lots of trips to the dentist, etc, etc. Now, pain and cost.

Why? Because at the end, she'll have a smile that lights up the room. Is it worth it? At the time it hurts. In the end, it'll be worth it. And that is, God wants to give you Jesus' smile.

But it's going to hurt. And I don't say this is a cliché. Do you know that those people who have had hard things in their life and still walk with Jesus have a depth to their faith that healthy, wealthy and beautiful just never understand.

[29 : 25] And often, we will only see the hand of God in hindsight. See what God was doing. See, also, it's not just about us.

God has got a whole lot of things that he's doing. And you can't, maybe you won't see them in this life. Yesterday, a very kind man, a very kind new friend took us to the Isle of Skye and we had to find out about Janet McSwan.

She was 36 years old. She got on a boat in 1850 from the Isle of Skye with her husband, Roderick, and seven kids. And her husband, aged 38, died on the boat of Typhus.

So there you've got mum, aged 36, a widow and seven children. And as far as we know, she was a Christian. As far as we know, she was a believer in Jesus.

And I'll bet that she sat there on that boat and she was wondering what is God doing? And I wish maybe I could have told her, kind of, you know, somehow tell her, well, as you look down, that six-year-old, kid number five, Donald, he's going to go to Australia, he's going to go to the north coast, he's going to have a son in 1890, also called Donald, and there's going to be, I don't know, 50 followers of Jesus in a few years' time and by the way, here I am, you know, I'm one of them.

[30 : 50] And she might have had a look at me and thought, it's not worth it. But we still won't know what God, but she would have asked what he's got, well, I can see what God was doing, but I'll bet she couldn't.

And you see, God's agenda to change you if you belong to him, to be like Jesus. Jesus promises that he will build his kingdom and that's what God is on about, but in the middle of your story, you probably will not be able to see it.

You will just feel like you've been hit and you will just squeal and hurt the way that Jacob and Joseph and the brothers do. And if you're a follower of Jesus, what's the promise?

God says, everything will work together for your good to make you like Jesus. And if you're not a follower yet, you can have that promise, you've just got to trust him and ask for forgiveness.

Will you pray with me? Our Father, we thank you for your love shown in Jesus. For that young man who had done nothing wrong, betrayed by brothers and who called out to you and yet you could not answer him and save us.

[32 : 07] Thank you for his willingness forgiveness. To pay the cost of our forgiveness. We ask please that we may all come to trust him and find that forgiveness that he won at such great cost.

Thank you for your promise that all things work for good for those who love you. Thank you for taking the initiative to grab us and bring us to that position. And pray please that we may learn from this great story of Joseph how you keep your promises and how even in the middle of things where we cannot see the end we may be able to hold on to your promises and trust you.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.