

The gospel according to Joseph pt2 - Genesis 37: 12-36

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[0 : 00] Phil Foster is going to come and read to us a couple of passages, first of all from Genesis 37, and then from the book of Philippians. So we'll be first of all returning to the story of Joseph in Genesis 37. We're reading from verses 12 to 36.

Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, as you know, your brothers are grazing their flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them. Very well, he replied. So he said to him, go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me. So then he sent him off from the valley of Hebron.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, what are you looking for? He replied, I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks? They have moved on from here, the man answered. I heard them say, let's go to Dothan. So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. Here comes that dreamer, they said to each other. Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.

When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. Let's not take his life, he said. Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him. Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the richly ornamented robe he was wearing. And they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty. There was no water in it. As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm, and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. Judah said to his brothers, what will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him.

[2 : 46] After all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood. His brothers agreed. So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for 20 shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt. When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, the boy isn't there.

Where can I turn now? Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, we found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe. He recognized it and said, it is my son's robe. Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces. Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. No, he said, in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son. So his father wept for him.

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the Guard. Our next reading is from Philippians 2, which is on page 1179 of the Church Bibles.

We're reading from verse 1 to 11. If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in Spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, Taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Now, can you turn with me in your Bibles back to Genesis 37 on page 41, if you're using the church Bible, and we'll think together about the journey of Joseph, Jesus, and you and me. As we look at this section, journeys sometimes can very much define the stories of our lives. In fact, I guess there are some stories that we tell where the journey is the point. The prince on the quest to storm the castle, slay the dragon, free the princess. Lord of the Rings, a Tolkien story of Frodo and the fellowship of the Ring. Sometimes stories that happen to us can, in large part, define our lives as well. I'm reading a book called Beneath a Scarlet Sky at the moment, which tells the story of a 17-year-old Italian by the name of Pino Leila, who was trained by a Catholic priest to transport Jews who were fleeing the Nazis in World War II across the Italian Alps and into Switzerland, gone from the luxury and ease of a wealthy life in Milan to become someone who would risk everything to help the Jews. What about for you and me? When you think about journeys in your own life, is there a sense in which they shape who we are? Perhaps journeying from one nation or one city to another for university or for work.

[7 : 33] Perhaps there have been significant journeys that you've gone on with friends or you've been on a journey and you've met a spouse perhaps. I still remember coming to faith on the Island of the Sky a good number of years ago. I remember the journey to the church meeting where I was very reluctant to go, dragged by my mum, but I remember the journey back. I remember praying to God with thankfulness in the back of the car for God sending Jesus to save me, that journey defining in large part the story of my life. We sometimes talk about Christianity as the journey of faith. We think about that journey as being both with God, we speak about the God who is with us, who walks beside us, who is our shepherd, but also it's a journey towards God. Our great hope and the goal of the Christian life is that we will be with our God and Savior in a perfect world made new forever. So journeys are really important to the story of the Christian faith. And so we're going to look today at this journey that Joseph takes that begins to define the direction of his life. We're going to see how it becomes important for the story of salvation that the book of Genesis gives to us. I also want us to connect it with the journeys of Jesus and help to see how that connects to our own reality as well. So let's begin in verses 12 to 17, thinking about the journey of Joseph, an obedient son. So last week we looked at the introduction to the story and there in the introduction we discover Joseph is his father's favorite son, which is a sinful thing, and it's led to Joseph being hated by his brothers because of it. In chapter 37 in verse 2 we're told that Joseph and his brothers were all shepherds, but here as our story picks up in verse 12 we discover that the brothers are off shepherding in Shechem, but Joseph is kept home. And we wonder, is he kept home because he is the favorite son? Is he kept home because his father is concerned that these brothers will find themselves in trouble? We don't know. But what we do know, verse 13, as you know your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them.

So Joseph is to be sent to Shechem, which is some 50 miles away. So this will be for him a journey of a few days, either on foot or perhaps on a donkey. He'll be doing it by himself. He will have to face the dangers of wild animals. He will be finding himself in difficult territory. In fact, a few chapters earlier in the Bible we discover that Shechem is a place where two of Joseph's brothers, Levi and Simeon, they have attacked the city and killed many of the menfolk there because their sister was raped by one of the men of the city. And so it's to this place and to this area that Joseph is sent. Joseph, remember, is just a teenage boy at this time. He's only 17 years old. This is a big job for anybody. This is a tough journey for anybody, but especially you think about teenagers, that's a tough sell, 50 miles, hard walking. But how does Joseph respond to his father?

End of verse 13, very well, he replied. Moses records that response of obedience. We could translate it, here I am. Father, I'm ready to go. In the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and now Joseph, eight times, Moses records for us one of those family members saying, here I am, either to God or to their father. Here I am. I'm willing to listen. I'm willing to go.

And so Moses is saying to us that, okay, this family is messed up, mixed up. We see lots of sin, but they are a family of faith and obedience. So Joseph begins this journey and he arrives at Shechem.

We see his dedication to the task in verses 15 and 16, don't we? He's very dedicated. He's wandering around. He's doing a diligent search. A man asks him who he's looking for. He's told his brothers have gone to Dothan and he moves on again. Another 15 miles he adds to his journey so that he might complete the task that his father gave to him. So by the end of verse 17, we find Joseph going after his brothers and finding them near Dothan. So again, Moses is very deliberate about how he is telling his story. He is zooming in here on the character of Joseph and he is presenting us with Joseph who is an obedient and a trustworthy son. And we're going to see in a few moments how that contrasts quite strikingly with his older brothers. But let's at this point take some lessons from this stage of the journey. Well, at a very basic level, it is good for us as people to be obedient and trustworthy, is it not? In our workplace, to be people of integrity who work hard, who work well, who are good employers or good employees. In our family, it is good to be obedient and trustworthy, whether we are children, whether we are parents, brothers or sisters. We bless others. We are good for the people around us when we have this kind of character. And that's part of what Christian faith looks like as well, that we are obedient and trustworthy. But I think more significant for us to recognize from the story of Joseph is that the path of obedience, for us, a path of obedience to God does not equal ease or comfort. And again, this comes through in many places in the book of Genesis and then Exodus. We can think about Abraham, who's told to leave behind his place and his people to go at the age of 80 to the land that God was showing him. And so he left everything that was familiar, to go in obedience. When you think about Moses, who writes the book of Genesis,

[14:04] Moses is called in obedience to enter into conflict with Pharaoh, the most powerful man on the planet at that time. And Moses, in obedience to God, has to deal with, as the leader of Israel, with their unbelief, with their repeated attempts to revolt against God's plan and God's will for them and to go back to slavery. Pattern after pattern, story after story of the characters in the Bible is that obedience to God does not equal ease and comfort. And we need to recognize that. And we do people a disservice if we don't tell people there is a cost to discipleship. Jesus was honest about it. He said to his disciples, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

We're called to self-denial for the sake of Jesus, and not just occasionally, but daily. Jesus said to his disciples before going to the cross, in this world you will have trouble.

He said, the world hated me, therefore by extension expect also to be hated. The path of obedience to God does not mean our life will be easy. It doesn't lead to health and wealth and prosperity like some false teachers would claim. Perhaps as we read the story of Joseph, you find yourself in a situation in your own life where saying, here I am to God is bringing you into a dark place, a difficult spell in your journey of faith. Well, the Word of God would say, continue to trust and continue to obey and to remember the God who is with you. When you face, as John Newton said, the dangers and the toils and the snares, we need to keep hold of the reality that the Good Shepherd is with us. He is the God who has promised to hold us, to never abandon or forsake us, rather that he will guide and protect us. And he will enable us to walk with obedience even as we go through hardship. Maybe as we're saying, here I am to God, we find ourselves, as it were, at crossroads on our journey and we're asking, what next? What does the future hold for me?

Where am I to go? What should I do? And again, we are to ask God for wisdom and we are to wait on him and to trust that he will provide and that he will lead and guide. And as we think about Joseph here, going on this journey as an obedient son, we need to remember the wider story of salvation. We need to think about Jesus. Jesus too went on his journey as an obedient son. We read it in Philippians, Jesus sent by the Father, Jesus who willingly comes into the world, knowing that that will be for him a place of suffering, that he will be the man of sorrows and familiar with grief. But he will live a life of suffering, but also a life marked by perfect, sinless obedience at every point. Even as his journey would take him to the cross where he would die in the place of sinners to bring forgiveness and give the gift of eternal life, he would be obedient to that path laid out for him. In our story, Jacob was wondering as the father, if always well with Joseph's brothers. Jesus came on his journey knowing full well, all was not well with his brothers and sisters. Because of sin, we are disobedient. Because of sin, we are in grave danger left to ourselves. And so Jesus is that brother who loves us and he leaves home in order to save us. Jesus knew what it would mean for him to say, here I am to his father. And yet in love, he was willing to come.

Perhaps there's somebody here who's thinking, that sounds good, but the Christian message sounds hard. It sounds hard to know that trials will come.

[18 : 41] It sounds hard to know that obedience will not equal comfort and suffering. Why should I go on that journey? Why should I want to obey God if that's the case? Well, the best answer I can give, the best answer I think the Bible gives is to consider the love of God. To consider the love of God and the forgiveness and the new life that Jesus offers. To think about the love of God and his promise to be present with you, to exercise power for you every day of your life. Consider his love in that welcome he offers to you. That invitation into the eternal love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that we receive when we trust in Jesus. Life is hard whether we're Christian or not, but the wonderful thing that a Christian has is we have the love of God. We know God with us and God with us always.

So our story begins with Joseph, the obedient son. He arrives at Dothan, but then his journey is halted because there is this plot from the disobedient sons. So verses 18 to 35, the focus shifts to Joseph's brothers. Moses, our writer of this salvation history, is drawing a sharp contrast. End of verse 17 into verse 18, Joseph in obedience went after his brothers and found them near Dothan, but they saw him in the distance and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. Remember, it's always important to remember this is true history. Remember too, these are Israel's spiritual fathers. So they're hearing this story of their ancestors for the first time and they're discovering they are also people who sinned like us. They were also people who needed mercy like us. They're not perfect and different from us. And it's good news for all of us that the Bible is an honest book. It's honest about human sin. It's honest about human need. And it's also honest in giving the answer of God's mercy and grace. So we see the brothers, verse 20, we see their plan to kill Joseph. They intend to kill him, to dispose of the body by throwing him into a cistern, to cover it up by claiming a wild animal devoured him. Again, this family that received the promises of God, this family is a messed up and broken family. There is sin, there is the need of mercy.

Now, why do they plot against Joseph? What wrong has he done? What do they focus on? Verse 19, it's his dreams, isn't it? Here comes that dreamer. Verse 20, end of verse 20, then we'll see what comes of his dreams. So God had given Joseph dreams that at some unidentified time in the future, Joseph would be raised up to prominence and his brothers and his family would bow down before him.

And as much as they hate Joseph because he's the family favourite of his father, they hate him more because of those dreams. Those dreams come from God, showing that Joseph will be a deliverer for his family. But his brothers, in their hate, in their jealousy, refuse to listen. And so we see them refusing to honour their father because they won't show any love to Joseph. We see them refusing to honour Joseph because they want to kill him. And in so doing, they refuse to honour God, who calls all of us to love our neighbour as ourselves. And they reject God's chosen deliverer at this stage. Well, Reuben is introduced to the story. Verse 21, Reuben is the firstborn.

He intervenes. He comes up with a different solution. Let's not take his life, he said. Don't shed any blood. Instead, throw him into the cistern, but don't lay a hand on him. He's basically, he says he wants to, in verse 22, he wants to come back and rescue Joseph. But the only way he can persuade his brothers not to have Joseph killed instantly is to say, well, let's throw him down a well, leave him there, let nature take his course. So the brothers are happy, basically, so long as the end result is Joseph dies. But Reuben is hoping to rescue him. When Joseph arrives in verse 23, notice the first thing they do. They strip him of his robe, this symbol of the special love he has from his father that causes them to hate him. They take it off. They throw him in the well.

[23 : 35] Their brother, who's been sent by their father to see if all is well, and they want him dead. So they're sitting down for lunch, verse 25. And then we're introduced to another character who will become crucial to the story of Jacob's family, another one of Joseph's brothers. This time it's Judah, verse 26. Let's listen to Judah. Let's see what we make of his character at this point.

Judah said to his brothers, what will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Well, so far so good, we might say. Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him.

After all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood. Not very brotherly. Well, we won't kill him, but let's profit from his destruction. Let's sell him as a slave. After all, he's our brother. So we see again, there is real coldness. There is real hate from Judah. He wants to profit from this situation. And all the brothers are very quick to agree.

And so the brother Joseph is sold to the Ishmaelites. Poor Reuben returns later, comes to carry out his plan, and he discovers that Joseph isn't there.

But then instantly know what happens. Not let's go on a rescue mission. He doesn't try and change the brothers' minds to win him back. Rather, it's let's devise a different cover-up. So they take, verse 31, they take Joseph's robe, they dip it in blood, and they want to deceive their father, Jacob, who instantly presumes that Joseph has been killed by wild animals.

- [25 : 26] Jacob, who's now devastated by the loss of his son. The brothers have, as they see it, removed a rival in getting rid of Joseph. But they haven't claimed the father's love. Verse 35, all his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. No, he said in mourning, will I go down to the grave for my son. A tragic episode in the life of one family. A tragic episode in the life of a family that had been chosen to receive the promises of God. A couple of things for us to think about. First of all, beware of sin, because sin blinds us to its destructive power. One of the things that's striking about this family is how history repeats. So Jacob is the father, and he is guilty of favoritism, which causes so much trouble. But Jacob, as a son, also lived in a household where there was favoritism, where his father favored his older brother, where the mother favored Jacob, and that caused all kinds of problems. God had said that it would be through Jacob that the promise would continue to flow. But Isaac, his father, so favored Esau, his brother, that he was going to give the blessing to him. And so Jacob responds in sin by deceiving his father. Deception is there.

Favoritism is there in order to claim the blessing. And then he has to run from his life from a brother who wants to murder him. So all of those realities in Jacob's life, he then passes on down the generation.

Same too for the brothers, as they are blinded by hate and by jealousy. It's remarkable, really, that they can in one moment plan the murder of their brother, and then in the next moment it seems sit down to enjoy their lunch together, seemingly without a thought for Joseph. They can sell their brother into slavery and can break their father's heart rather than try to bring him back.

sin is ripping this family apart. This family that received God's promises stands in great need of God's mercy and restoration and reconciliation. And it will come, but it will be a long road to get there.

sin is devastating like a wildfire is devastating. Sin destroys lives. Sin leaves us in desperate need of a rescue only God can provide. A rescue he has provided through his son.

- [28 : 43] Let's think for a moment as families. It's important for us when we read stories like this to recognize that sin doesn't just impact individuals.

your sin and my sin has an impact on those around us, especially can have a grave impact on our families.

What legacy do we want for our children? What is it that we pray for and long for? No doubt we want them to be healthy and to be happy, but do we want them to be following Christ?

Do we want them to be choosing the path of obedience, to be persevering even through trials? And how will we show them that? Are we teaching, are we showing our children what the grace of God looks like?

Are we showing them what repentance and confession of sin looks like by taking the lead in that when we sin against them or sin against others as parents?

- [29 : 56] Are we quick to say, I'm sorry to our kids and to others? Are we reminding ourselves and our family of God's grace in the face of the destructive power of sin?

Beware too that sin blinds us to our greatest need. Again, those dreams that Joseph received, they came from God and those dreams from God were saying, Joseph had been chosen as the family deliverer.

How do the brothers respond? Let's kill him, let's cover it up and let's go eat lunch. They reject the Savior who came to them. They showed hatred and anger towards him.

And again, doesn't this remind us of what happened when Jesus came? Jesus, the great rescuer. The religious leaders hated Jesus. They were jealous of his popularity.

They hated the challenge that he brought to them. And so they lived with that settled conviction that what we need to do is to get rid of him.

[31 : 09] As Peter would say in his sermon in Acts 2, you killed the author of life. Their creator had entered creation in order to rescue them, rescue him. But in their rebellion, in their blindness because of sin, they turned their back on Jesus.

They shouted, crucify Jesus. They said, give us Barabbas, a murderer. We don't want Jesus. What's your greatest needs and mine as human beings?

It's to be right with our creator. There is nothing more important than that. To know that we can stand before our maker on the judgment day and to know we can enjoy his acceptance.

We need to know the way back to God. We need to know where peace with God comes from. How can we be reconciled to this God? And the answer is Jesus. Jesus is the only way back to God.

He has made a way back by his death on the cross. He has dealt with sin, so the barrier is gone. So we can now be welcomed into the presence of God through faith in Jesus.

[32 : 15] Through turning from sin and trusting in Jesus. The Savior comes near to you and to me today. In his word, in the gospel, as we meet here together, how do we respond to him?

Let me encourage all of us to welcome him and to enjoy him. Don't turn your back or reject the one who is the answer to your greatest need.

Finally, verse 36, we see the end of the journey for Joseph at this stage. The journey to slavery in Egypt.

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. This story, as we leave it, we leave it on a cliffhanger.

Here is Moses, the storyteller. So at one and the same time, we have Jacob, who's mourning, imagining his son is dead. But we're told Joseph is alive, but where is he?

[33 : 23] He's a slave in Egypt, that symbol of oppression. That nation that's known for being anti-God. And so we're left with tension. How can the promises of God come true when Joseph, the chosen one, is a slave in Egypt?

How can the people of God take possession of the land that he's promised when the chosen one is now away from the land and he's in the place of slavery? How will these dreams come true?

How will the story of salvation work out for the people of God? We don't get an answer just yet. We need to read on to find out. But one last lesson, really a reminder to remind us again of Jesus, that God's chosen rescuer walks a hard road to save others.

Joseph didn't choose this path. He didn't set out on his journey with the end goal, his great desire to be a slave in Egypt. But God would use it so that one day he might deliver that nation.

But more importantly, for our story, he might deliver his own family from death. Joseph has a high price to pay for his place in the salvation story.

[34 : 40] And that very much prepares us for the coming of Jesus, who came to be a savior for his brothers and paid the ultimate price. Jesus, like Joseph, would be hated and rejected and sold.

Jacob, Jesus, like Joseph, will journey from his father's side. A journey that will take him to the cross where we hear him cry, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

The path of Jesus' earthly life is one of suffering first with glory to follow. And that's the pattern for the lives of his followers. But our great hope is that because of his journey, because of that journey that he took to save us, by trusting in him, yes, the path is hard, but we can enjoy life with God now.

And that's good news. We have the promised certain hope of eternity in the presence of God. That's our goal, the end of our journey that keeps us going.

And we know his goodness and his mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. So our road, our journey may be hard, but the destination is always worth the effort.