

The gospel according to Joseph pt1

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[0 : 00] Let's hear the word of God. Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. This is the account of Jacob. Joseph, a young man of 17, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he had been born to him in his old age, and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said, to them, listen to this dream I had. We were binding sheaves of corn out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered round mine and bind down to it.

His brothers said to him, do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us? And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers, listen, he said, I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me. When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, what is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you? His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

And we will leave it there and return back to that introduction to Joseph's life shortly. And let's think about a new chapter in God's salvation plan. Whenever anybody is writing or documenting history, they're always selective in what they include. So if you've been watching The Crown on Netflix, you'll know that the writers have ten episodes to cover the decade, a decade in the life of the queen, so they have to be selective. Same if you read a political history or you read any national history, there's always a choosing of what to include and what needs to be left out. Same for us, I guess, as we tell our own personal stories, depending who we're talking to, depending on the setting, that will change how we talk about our past, how we talk about our personal feelings and longings.

We're always thinking about how to tell our stories. Moses here is writing the story of salvation history for the newly established people of God, the nation of Israel. And so he is recording for them stories such as Joseph's, so they might see how God has worked in their past to bring salvation to them.

And Moses is led by the Spirit as he is selecting his stories. As he zooms in on particular characters, God is helping him to tell the story of God's saving grace that he wants the church then and the church now to hear. We know this is a new chapter in the story of salvation because we have a chapter break.

[3 : 50] In verse 2, this is the account of Jacob. All through Genesis, when you read that, you've got a new section of the book. So the story of Joseph and his father Jacob is a new page for us in the unfolding work of God's salvation story. So for us, what can we learn from the characters that are focused on, from the themes that are introduced, that will be helpful for us as we think about God's salvation now? So we're going to look at the three characters that are introduced. So we'll think about them briefly. We'll think about one dominant lesson that we can learn from their lives. First of all, let's think about Jacob. And the lesson we can draw from Jacob is that salvation comes by God's covenant grace. Verse 1, Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. This is the account of Jacob. So this is the story of Joseph, but straight away we're discovering his story is tied in with that his father, Jacob. And we also have Jacob's father mentioned. So that brings Isaac in. And by extension, Abraham is part of this story. So Joseph fits in the story of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Now there are some important themes for us to

notice. The first one is the theme of covenant. So we're thinking about Jacob, but if you noticed in verse 3, as we were reading his story, he's then called Israel. And that reminds us that God gave him a covenant name. God changed his name as he reaffirmed the covenant promise that came from Abraham to Isaac, then to Jacob. So covenant is going to be really important and covenant is really important for the whole story of salvation.

So just to fill us in with the story in Genesis that's come before Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In Genesis 1 and 2, you discover God has created everything and he's created everything very good. We discover that people are made in God's image to live in his presence and to enjoy him. But then in Genesis 3, we discover that sin comes. And in between Genesis 3 and 11, you get repeating patterns. You get cycles where people are guilty of sin against God, rebelling against God's word, mistrusting him. You find God brings judgment, but then there's also a message of grace, a sign of grace, hope of grace. So that cycle repeats Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah. And then chapter 11, we come to the story of the Tower of Babel.

In the Tower of Babel story, the people on the earth had been told to scatter and fill the earth with the glory of God have instead decided to gather themselves together and to make a great tower as a way for them to bring glory to themselves. Here is humanity trying to push God to one side entirely. And judgment comes again. The people are scattered. This is where languages come in. People are scattered, but there is grace. Grace at the end of chapter 11 because Abraham's family is introduced to us. And what Moses is saying to us is that Abraham is going to be the means by which God will again make promises to his people, will again work so that God and his people can be together despite our sin and because of God's grace. So in chapter 12, you discover the covenant that is established with Abraham, promising him a great land and a great nation and promising that from him will come blessing to the nations. And Abraham and his family would be carriers of God's promise, this promise of salvation. This hope that God's people will live in God's place under God's rule, enjoying his blessing that comes to Abraham for his family and ultimately for the nations.

[8 : 21] That promise of covenant, that covenant promise involved the promise of a land. You read the story of Israel and you discover their hope tied up with the promised land, which was the land of Canaan. Now, if you turn to verse one, where is Jacob living? Jacob is living in the land of Canaan. So he's in the promised land. Joseph's story begins in what will be the promised land. But they haven't received it yet. At the time of Joseph, as they live in Canaan, all the land that they possess of the promised land is the burial plot given to Abraham that then his family shares. So Moses' first readers, so bear in mind this is written to the nation of Israel by Moses, as they have not yet entered into the promised land. They need to have faith that more will come, that all the land will be given just as God had promised.

But as we're going to read Joseph's story, we'll see that it begins in the promised land, but then he goes from the age of 17, I guess, to Egypt. And there he will stay, except that his bones will return when the people enter into the land. And the same is true for Jacob. So there is a now and a not yet about this promise.

They're in the promised land, but they haven't yet taken possession of it. That promise given to Abraham also connects very much to seed and to family. And what we see in the story of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob is that God chooses, God elects a son, a brother, to be the line through whom the blessing will flow. So with Abraham's sons, the blessing will be through Isaac and not through Ishmael. When it comes to Isaac's two boys, it will be through Jacob, the younger twin, not Esau, the older, through whom the promise will come. And now think about how Joseph is being presented in verse 2. Read with me verse 2 and see how Moses is setting Joseph apart from his brothers. Joseph, a young man of 17, was tending the flock with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. See there, we've got the sons of these other wives and then you've got Joseph. You've got Joseph who is bringing a bad report about their evil activity. By extension, Joseph is not guilty of that evil. Joseph, at this stage in the story, is God's chosen one to protect, the promise to protect this family so that salvation will come. As we get further on in the story, we'll see how Judah becomes important, but for now we're going to see how God sets apart Joseph. Now even just thinking about that very brief sort of reminder of God's covenant promise and dealings with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. What does this teach? What would this teach Israel as they were awaiting to get into the promised land?

[11 : 45] What does it teach us today as a church? Well, it reminds us very clearly that all of us then and now we are saved by God's covenant love. We are saved because of God's commitment, God's initiative to call and rescue a people for himself. There is a people of God because of God's desire to restore that relationship that people had broken because of sin and disobedience.

And we say that really clearly. We say that really clearly when Jesus comes because Jesus has come to establish a new covenant between God and his people. He says that as he shares the Last Supper with his disciples before going to the cross, that his broken body and his shed blood are the means of covenant being established. That through his death for sinners, forgiveness and reconciliation, a new life with God is now possible. And the Bible tells us that Jesus is the Lamb of God who was slain before the foundation of the world. There is an eternal commitment from God to save people, to bring people to himself through the finished work of Jesus. So the hope for Israel was the same as our hope.

It becomes clear as we look at these stories too that we are saved by God's grace. It's always striking how honest the Bible is about the characters that are portrayed. Even the great people of faith are seen as men and women who sin, who disobey, who rebel against God. And when you look at the portrait of this family, we recognize there is sin here, reminding us that we are never ever saved and accepted by God on the basis of our merit or moral goodness. It's always on the basis of God's loving kindness to us, which we don't deserve.

It's grace. Jesus comes as God's gift of grace to the world. Jesus is God's undeserved kindness expressed to sinners like us. Jesus is the one just person who dies for the unjust to bring us to God. Jesus is the one who, by his death, takes us, if our faith is in him, from a position of being spiritually dead to enjoying abundant life, new life in him. It is through faith in Jesus and what Jesus has done for us that we, as prodigals, in all of our sin and shame and disgrace, can be welcomed by our Father in heaven.

[14 : 52] Amen. Same message then is the same message now. We're always saved by grace. Moses is writing salvation history so that you and I will give glory to God.

So we'd see God's glory in the saving of sinners. That we'd recognize that Israel, as God's chosen nation, that the church throughout history only exists by God's covenant grace. And it's all because of Jesus dying on the cross for us. So that Jacob's hope and Joseph's salvation is your hope and my hope and salvation today.

And because it's by grace and not our goodness, not based on who we are, it means for us that there is no room for pride. Rather, we are called to be humble. Just as Jesus humbled himself for us, leaving the glory of heaven to become one of us, to then die on the cross for our sins. So as Christians, we are called to be humble, to recognize every day with gratitude that God saved us despite ourselves.

But just as there is no room for pride, so too there is no cause for despair. If you're here today and you're not a Christian, nobody can say, I am too bad for God.

Nobody can say because of their past, I am begone, God's help. I am a nobody and God would want nothing to do with me that this is not for me. Rather, God's grace is wide and it's rich and it's for anyone who will put their trust in Jesus.

[16 : 33] God offers you and me today saving grace, sustaining grace. What we need to do is trust him, trust Jesus and enjoy life from him.

So Jacob, he reminds us that salvation is by God's covenant grace. And then we're introduced to Joseph. And Joseph and his story reminds us that God saves through a chosen redeemer.

So we're reading the history of Israel. We're reading salvation history. But you'll see when you read any, I imagine any national history, thinking about our own history, you read a Scottish history textbook, undoubtedly you will come across the figure of William Wallace.

You will find others who fought for independence, fought to retain our status as a nation. Or if you read the history of the United Kingdom in the 20th century, you will undoubtedly find prominence given to Winston Churchill for his place in saving the nation during war.

And when it comes to the story of salvation history, as you read the Old Testament and then you come to Jesus in the New Testament, you see that attention is focused on God's chosen deliverers and rescuers.

[18 : 00] Those who he appoints to either rescue or to protect, both God's people and God's promise. And they stand for us as signposts to the coming of Jesus and to his rescue mission.

So we're back in verse 2, and we already noted how Moses draws a contrast between Joseph and his brothers. So Joseph, all throughout this story of his life, is presented as righteous and good. And that's there from the beginning. He is a young man, a man of faith. And then we find in verse 3 that he is favoured by his father.

Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons. And that's where the coat of many colours comes from. And here we see the providence of God.

So that's a sinful action, isn't it? In a family, you never want to have favourites. That creates tension. It creates dysfunction. It is not good.

[19 : 15] But God in his providence is able to use that sinful action. That begins a chain reaction of more evil actions, where Joseph will find himself in slavery and then in prison.

But ultimately, he'll find himself in a position in Egypt, where he's able to save the nation of Egypt, but more important for our purposes, able to save his family and therefore able to save the promise so that salvation might come, that blessing might come through the people of God and then through Jesus, God's ultimate and great saviour.

Then we come to Joseph's dreams. And Joseph's dreams, they remind us from the beginning that Joseph has been chosen by God.

God used dreams to speak, to prophesy about things still to come. So Joseph is here being presented to us as the one God has chosen to raise up in the fullness of time.

So we see, what do we see in the details? There are the sheaves of corn representing Joseph and his brothers, and all the brothers' sheaves of corn bow down to Joseph. And then the sun, moon, and stars, his whole family are seen to bow down to Joseph.

[20 : 31] Now, we don't know at this stage when that will happen, but ultimately, God is saying that Joseph will be given a position of honour and prominence, and it will serve the purpose of preserving the covenant family and the covenant promise.

Joseph is God's chosen redeemer. So again, as we think about Moses writing history, carefully selecting this story, these facts, why?

What will Israel learn about salvation? What do we learn about salvation from thinking about Joseph? Well, this family and Joseph's place in the family helps us remember that we stand in need of a redeemer.

Again, the Bible is very honest. It presents Jacob as a man of faith and as a sinner. We see it here in his favouritism, which is so wrong and so destructive.

We will see his brothers, full of hatred, anger, jealousy, which will get worse. This family, chosen by God, needs the mercy of God, because everybody needs God's redemption for each one of us.

[21 : 50] If we were to imagine God's spotlight shining on our hearts and on our lives, it would expose much darkness and shame.

If the story of our thoughts and minds and desires was to be displayed on these big screens, we would run from this place and probably never return, most likely.

Just like in this story, we are those who love some and love them well, but we neglect others. We are those, too, who show jealousy, who are quick to get angry, who find it hard to speak kind words of others.

We see ourselves in this family when we take an honest look at ourselves, because sin affects us all. With the result that by nature and without Christ, we are separate from God, separate from his love and his life and his joy.

Rather, we are deserving of judgment. We are far from God, deserving of his judgment. And so the Bible is constantly wanting us to see that we need God's rescue.

[23 : 11] Ultimately, that we would see Jesus is our only hope, because he is God's chosen redeemer. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

He is the one who can say to us, Go in peace, your sins are forgiven. He is the only one who can bring us peace with God. He is the only one who can deal with the guilt and shame that lurks within. And so again, we are invited to go to him, to look to him, to turn to him, and to be saved. So we've seen Jacob, and we've been reminded about God's saving by covenant love and grace.

And we've seen Joseph, who reminds us that God saves through a chosen redeemer. And then the other main characters that we find in this section of the book, and they will run through the whole story, are his brothers.

And they remind us that we need to have a right response to God's deliverer. It's really striking in this story, isn't it, how you can see Joseph at one and the same time be so loved by his father, but yet so hated by his brothers.

[24 : 37] The same subject with very different responses. I read this week of a flower with the wonderful name of the corpse flower, which grows in Indonesia.

This is a massive flower that grows to some 15 feet. And when it blooms, it is utterly repellent to human beings because it stinks of rotting flesh.

But at the same time, it is loved by the bugs and the insects. So for the purposes of pollination, that stench is great for the corpse flower. That same object loved and hated.

We can think of lots of examples in our own experience. And we see it in the story of Joseph.

Moses, from the very beginning, as he's painting a portrait of the brothers, is going to show us that they need the mercy of God.

In verse two, their brother brings a bad report about them. And sometimes, you know, as people tell the story, they say, well, here's Joseph, and he's just sort of full of himself, and he thinks he's better than his brothers.

[25 : 55] Moses is not saying he was wrong to bring the bad report. And in fact, when we look at the lives of the brothers, it seems to be expected that this is representing their spiritual condition at this time.

Verse four, when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

Because of the sin of their father, they are starved of a father's love. But what do they do as they see just how much their father puts Joseph on a pedestal and makes him the favorite?

They take it out on Joseph. They hate him. They're jealous of him. They cannot speak a kind word to him. Just before we move on, how do you and I deal with that experience when we see someone else being favored over us?

When we see it in a workplace, someone getting a promotion or getting credit that you feel you deserve. Perhaps in a classroom setting, you are overlooked and other people get the attention and the praise.

[27 : 12] Or perhaps that's our experience in a family that we feel like we are less valued and treated less well than some of our siblings perhaps.

How do we deal with that? The letter of James in chapter two, it would say to Jacob, do not show favoritism, but it would also say to Joseph's brothers and to us, you must obey the royal law, whoever the other person is, the royal law to love your neighbor as yourself.

So even as we see other people being elevated ahead of us, rather than bitterness, hatred, envy, jealousy, gossip, trying to bring them down, instead the Bible would have us continue to love them, to think and speak well of them.

But we find the brothers unable to do that at this stage. And then Joseph compounds the problem by sharing his dreams with them. And we see just how that causes the hate and the jealousy to grow.

We can see it in verse five, Joseph had a dream. And when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. Again, in verse eight, they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.

[28 : 35] And then verse 11, as he tells the second dream, his brothers were jealous of him. But here's the point. Dreams are where God chooses to speak sometimes.

This dream, these dreams are showing that God has chosen Joseph to be their family deliverer, deliverer, but rather than honor him, rather than love him, rather than accept him, they cannot. They cannot speak well of him at all. Their response to the Redeemer is wrong. How does this help us think about salvation?

Fast forward to the story of Jesus, and we discover what was true of Joseph will also be true of him. Jesus, the son of God, enters into the world, comes as savior, but he faces rejection and hatred from his brothers.

The father in heaven speaks well of Jesus. This is my beloved son. I am well pleased with him. Listen to him. The father says, I will glorify you, my son, but his brothers, they don't heed that message so many.

[29 : 56] John's gospel says, Jesus came to his own, but his own did not receive him. Jesus came for his own, and his own cried out, crucify him. We have no king but Caesar.

Jesus, too, divides opinion. Where do we stand when it comes to Jesus today?

Do we receive his love and his grace, or do we reject it? Will we be those who would worship Jesus as Lord and Savior, or would we wash our hands of him and say, he's not for me, he's not for now.

Moses, led by the Spirit, has begun to introduce us to Joseph's story. It's a story of God's faithfulness. It will be a story of God's deliverance.

It's a story of God's grace to sinners. And it prepares us for the greater than Joseph's story. It prepares us for the coming of Jesus.

[31 : 08] Jesus, who is the beloved son of the Father. Jesus, who in the fullness of God's timing will be raised up. raised up in the first place on the cross to die in the place of sinners to complete God's plan of salvation, and then raised up as at his resurrection, and all to be our hope of salvation.

This Jesus, he could deliver a bad report of us. When we're honest, we know the sin in our own hearts, but by God's grace, Jesus was raised up to bear our sin, to wash us clean of sin, to give us a new report.

Reckoned to be righteous in Christ. So that we, by faith in him, can be brought into this great salvation story ourselves.

Trusting Jesus is the way to enter that story of salvation, salvation to receive God's love and all God's promises. And our response must be to turn from sin and to follow him.