

Genesis 38: Covenant of Scandal

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Date: 02 December 2007

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 38, and you can find this on the Bible provided for you on page 27. Again, that's Genesis chapter 38. Again, you can find this on page 27 of the Bible provided for you.

Hear the reading of God's word. It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hira.

There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shua. He took her and went into her, and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Ur.

She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. Yet again, she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chazab when she bore him.

And Judah took a wife for Ur, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Ur, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death.

[1 : 0 7] Then Judah said to Onan, go into your brother's wife and perform the duty of your brother-in-law to her and raise up offspring for your brother. But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his.

So whenever he went into his brother's wife, he would waste the semen on the ground so as not to give offspring to his brother. And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also.

Then Judah said to Tamar, his daughter-in-law, remain a widow in your father's house till Shelah, my son, grows up. For he feared that he would die like his brothers.

So Tamar went and remained in her father's house. In the course of time, the wife of Judah, Shewa's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went to Timnah to the sheep-shares, he and his friend Hira, the Adullamite.

And when Tamar was told, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to share his sheep, she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up and sat at the entrance to Enam, which is at the road of Timnah.

[2 : 1 5] For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face.

He turned to her at the roadside and said, Come, let me come into you. For he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, What will you give me that you may come into me?

He answered, I will send you a young goat from the flock. And he said, If you give me a pledge until you send it. He said, What pledge shall I give you?

She replied, Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand. So he gave them to her and went into her, and she conceded by him.

Then she arose and went away, and taken off her veil, she put on the garments of her widowhood. When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Dulamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her.

[3 : 18] And he asked the men of the place, Where is the cult prostitute who was at Naim at the roadside? And they said, No cult prostitute has been here. So he returned to Judah and said, I have not found her.

Also the men of the place said, No cult prostitute has been here. And Judah replied, Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at.

You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her. About three months later, Judah was told, Tamar, your daughter-in-law, has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality.

And Judah said, Bring her out and let her be burned. As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant.

And she said, Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff. Then Judah identified them and said, She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son, Shalah.

[4 : 25] And he did not know her again. When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took it and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, This one came out first.

But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out, and she said, What a breach you have made for yourself. Therefore, his name was Perez. Afterward, his brother came out with a scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Sarah.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Well, as Oscar and the St. Albans have already said this morning, this week is the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, which marks the Advent season.

And the word Advent means coming or arrival. From Christmas Day, we celebrate the coming or the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, the eternal Son of God, who in that mystery of mysteries became a human being and was born in a manger.

And the Advent season has two purposes. First, we prepare ourselves for Jesus' second coming, when he returns not as a helpless baby, but in his full glory, when history itself will be consummated.

[5 : 49] And second, we identify ourselves with those faithful people 2,000 years ago, who eagerly awaited the Savior to finally come. So that's what Advent's all about, remembering Jesus' first coming and preparing for his second.

Well, the Bible also had its own way of preparing God's people for Jesus' Advent. We could say that the entire Old Testament is a preparation for the coming of Jesus.

In the Gospel of Matthew, which tells us so much about his life, taps into this Old Testament preparation and the way it begins. Matthew 1.1, which the St. Albans read in our Advent reading, begins like this.

The book of the genealogy of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, the Son of Abraham. A genealogy is a record of someone's family history. So Matthew spends 17 verses, which the St. Albans read all those difficult verses, on Jesus' family history.

This man, the father of that man, who is the father of this man, and on and on from Abraham, the great father of the faith, all the way down, thousands of years later, to Jesus himself.

[6 : 56] And the genealogy is paternal, which is to say it records the fathers and their sons, but not the mothers, with five exceptions. Five women are recorded.

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. So the question is, why? Why would Matthew tell us the names of all of these men, most of whom we've never heard of, but add in these five women?

And that's Matthew's way of saying, go, look at these women, investigate, see how they fit into the big story, which prepares us for Jesus. See how they fit within the lineage of grace.

And their stories tell us so much about who Jesus is, and about God's mission in sending his son. So that's what we'll be doing in our sermon series this Advent season, looking at these five women.

And today, we're looking at Tamar's story in Genesis 38. And I expect that many of you might have blushed as Oscar read the chapter. It's so bluntly sexual, but not in the way that the Song of Solomon is bluntly sexual.

[8 : 05] Song of Solomon celebrates sex. This, however, is human sexuality at its most selfish and ugly. And not only is it just grotesque, but it also seems out of place.

When you look at the book of Genesis as a whole, with the wide-angle lens, its structure is pretty easy to pick out. So chapters 1 through 11 looks at humanity as a whole in the far distant past, and looks at it in all of its rebellion and sinfulness.

And in chapters 12 through 36, in the middle part of the book, the view narrows down to a focal point that's centered on the lives of the men we call the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the men who were the inaugural members of the people of Israel.

And finally, in chapters 37 to the end of the book, we read about Joseph, one of Jacob's 12 sons. So Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and then Joseph.

So how does chapter 38 fit into the broader Joseph story? Joseph isn't even mentioned here. Instead, it's all about Judah, who was one of Joseph's brothers.

[9 : 16] It's like that little piece of plastic stuffed inside of the turkeys. You know, what's it for? No one knows. Just throw it away. So how in the world does this story fit into the lineage of grace which culminates in Jesus Christ?

Why would Matthew's genealogy point us to this strange, out-of-place, frankly, repulsive story? Silly put, here it is. And I expect you might hear this refrain again this Advent season.

It's that God brings salvation to his people through a covenant of sheer sovereign grace. That's what Tamar's story is all about. Let's unpack it piece by piece.

First, God's plan of salvation is covenantal. And that's a good word for you to impress your family with over the holidays. It is to say that God brings salvation to his people by means of a covenant.

Where do we see this in Genesis 38? Notice how the entire chapter centers around the issue of having babies. The sex and then the babies which are the fruit of the sex.

[10 : 24] It begins and ends with birth records. In verses 1-5, Judah's first sexual conquest with an unnamed woman produces three sons.

Er, Onan, and Shelah. Then, at the very end of the chapter, Judah's second night out on the town bears fruit with the births of twin boys, Perez and Zerah.

So the introduction and the conclusion are genealogical bookends. They're records of births. And the central body of the chapter, in verses 6-26, also centers around having babies.

In this case, the question is, who will get Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, pregnant? She is the wife of Er, but verse 7 tells us, but Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death.

No explanation, just the bare facts. Er was wicked before God, therefore God killed him. Then, verse 8 reads, Then Judah said to Onan, who is the second son, Go into your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her and raise up offspring for your brother.

[11 : 36] Let's take a minute to unravel this odd conversation. Judah commands his second son to have sex with his dead brother's wife, and this is called the duty of a brother-in-law.

There was no intended humor originally, I promise. What's all this about? This was the ancient practice of leveret marriage. During this time, if a married man died, but had not yet fathered a son, who would continue his name, then that man's brother would take his widow as his wife.

And children born in that second marriage would be considered to be the children, not of the first husband, I'm sorry, not of the second husband, but of the original husband, who was dead.

And why did they do this? On the one hand, it meant that the widow didn't have to suffer the terrible shame of dying childless. It also meant, as Deuteronomy 25, 6 says, that the dead brother's name may not be blotted out of Israel.

If your name died with you, it would be as if you never existed. You're just forgotten, pointless. And that was a horrible tragedy in that day. And it's hard for us to understand this practice, since in our culture, sex is everywhere, and yet so shallow that it's practically meaningless.

[12 : 59] But in levered marriage, the sexual act that the dead man's brother performed was not for himself. It was for his brother and his brother's widow. It was his selfless duty. So, it was Onan's duty as the second son to take Tamar as his wife so that heir's name may not be blotted out of Israel.

But he doesn't do it. He repeatedly practices a particular method of birth control. Why? Because in verse 8 he says, but Onan knew that the offspring would not be his.

In other words, he knew that everyone would consider the child or the children from that marriage to be heirs, even though, biologically speaking, they were Onan's.

And this action, as verse 10 says, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. So, the first two sons are wicked in God's eyes, and God, who does whatever he pleases for his own glory, takes both of their lives.

Now, according to the custom, it means that Shelah, the third and youngest son, should marry Tamar. But unfortunately, at this point, Shelah is too young for marriage, and so Judah promises Tamar that one day, Shelah will marry her.

[14 : 15] Now it seems like Murphy's law is kicking in. Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong. Judah forgets his promise to Tamar, and so she remains a widow, even after Shelah is of age.

But Tamar remembers. And this is what the central story hinges on. In verses 13 and 14, she goes to a place where she knows Judah will be. It's that time of the year to shear the sheep, and Judah, whose family owns a vast herd of sheep, sets out to Timnah to take care of the family business.

And Tamar gets wind of Judah's location. If Judah sees her, Tamar thinks, then maybe he will remember his promise to her. When Judah does see her, however, he thinks she's a cult prostitute, which is someone who practiced prostitution in conjunction with a pagan religion.

And we shouldn't necessarily think that Tamar tried to seduce Judah. Her intentions were merely to run into him. But Judah saw and took what he wanted.

And guess what? Now Tamar is pregnant, but the baby's father wasn't who it was supposed to be. It was her father-in-law. Which was both extraordinarily taboo in that culture and it is flat out against God's law.

[15 : 35] So, the whole chapter with this introduction, main body, and conclusion is about making babies. So what does this have to do with the covenant? We said that this passage shows us the covenantal nature of salvation.

Well, how? And this is where we have to pay attention to the whole book, the whole context of the book of Genesis. Back in chapter 12, God announced that the way he would bring redemption and healing to a world so marked by rebellion against God would be by a covenant.

And this covenant was all about God making promises. God promised Abraham that from him would come a whole nation, a new people of God who would bless the world.

And within this new redemptive nation, there is a particular redemptive line of descent. And it's the very same lineage of grace that Matthew records in his genealogy.

In other words, the covenant, which you might sometimes hear called the Abrahamic covenant, God promises to Abraham that he will have descendants, he will become the people of God, and within this people, there is a specific line from father to son all the way down to Jesus Christ who would indeed bless the world.

[16 : 50] And so much of the narrative after that initial promise to Abraham shows how God holds true to his promise. Abraham and his wife Sarah give birth to Isaac who becomes the father of Jacob who becomes the father of Judah.

And that's where chapter 38 fits into the big picture with its overriding concern with having babies. It answers the question, who will be the next in line after Judah? Or to put it another way, it answers the question, will God fulfill his promise or will he let the redemptive line die out with Judah and his evil sons?

So God's ultimate plan of salvation is covenantal. And this odd chapter is one piece of that puzzle. And as we've seen, that line does continue.

Even though it seemed like God was going to snuff out all of Judah's sons and just wipe out the line completely, Judah fathers more sons through his own daughter-in-law Tamar, thinking she was a cold prostitute.

And one of their sons, Perez, is the next in line in the lineage of grace. His name is in the genealogy of Matthew. So God fulfilled his promise.

[18 : 00] But why, you ask, would God do it like this? Why would he use such an unsavory character like Judah who commits such reprehensible crimes to continue the line?

Because this covenant, God's covenant, covenant is a covenant of sheer, sovereign grace. It magnificently displays God's sovereignty over everything, his superseding authority over every human action, over every chance event.

We see God's sovereignty in three ways. First, this chapter is one more occasion in which God does what is impossible or unexpected to fulfill his own promises.

And we see a hint of this at the very end of the chapter with the highly unusual way that Perez is unexpectedly born first. Zerah was the first, he appeared to be the first to emerge from the womb, but Perez happened in the end to be the firstborn.

And this little scene is meant to remind us of all the unorthodox ways up until this point that the redemptive line has already come about. So Abraham and his wife Sarah give birth to Isaac even though both were way, way past their childbearing years and even though Abraham had already fathered a son through another woman.

[19 : 21] And Isaac's wife Rebecca is also infertile until God opens her womb and then Esau and Jacob are born. And then we would have expected Esau, the firstborn, to continue the line, but it is Jacob, the younger son, who becomes the chosen heir.

Then Jacob is duped into marrying the plain-faced Leah rather than her beautiful sister Rachel, but it is Leah who gives birth to Judah, the next in line.

And then finally, as we see in this chapter, Judah fathers five sons, but the next in line, Perez, is the very last one whom we would have expected it to be.

So over and over again, God fulfills his promises and purposes in the most unexpected and impossible ways. Second, and we'll say more about this later, God is sovereign in the way he even uses sinners and their horrible sins to fulfill these promises.

Now we shouldn't think that Judah is off the hook just because God uses his sin to continue the line of descent. Not at all. Judah is guilty. But God, in his infinite wisdom, even takes sin and uses it for his own ultimate good purposes.

[20 : 41] He is completely sovereign. Third, God's sovereignty is most clearly seen in his grace. Even though God uses sin and sinners to fulfill his purposes, at the same time, it would have seemed much more likely that the redemptive line would have bypassed Judah altogether.

I mean, Judah had 11 other brothers. Surely, one of them would have been the better pick. And that brings us back to the question of how chapter 38 fits into the broader story of Joseph in chapters 37 through 50.

And the story isn't meant to be read in isolation from its surrounding context. Rather, this little weird story about Judah and Tamar is sandwiched between the larger story of Joseph in such a way that we are meant to compare Judah with Joseph.

And let's start back in chapter 37. You don't have to turn there. I'll just try to summarize it. God had revealed to Joseph through dreams that he would one day rule over his brothers.

And when he perhaps unwisely tells his brothers about these dreams, they almost kill him but end up selling him into slavery. And guess whose idea it was to sell him into slavery?

[21 : 59] Judah. So the very first time Judah appears on the scene, apart from the record of his birth, he's heading up the conspiracy against Joseph to sell Joseph into slavery.

Well, how do they, how do Judah and Joseph differ in their characters? We can look at it from two perspectives. First, what about their relations with outsiders? God had promised that the people of God would be a blessing to all the other peoples, but at the same time, he warned them about intermingling and identifying with other peoples lest they adopt their paganism and their immorality.

And the Canaanites in particular are a dangerous people whom the Israelites are supposed to stay away from. Judah is a great example of blessing the nations.

After he's sold into slavery, he ends up in Egypt where he eventually becomes what we might call the prime minister. He's second in command under Pharaoh. And when a famine strikes, his skillful, faithful administration saves Egypt and all the surrounding regions from starvation.

So he is a blessing. Judah, on the other hand, intermingles and identifies with the Canaanites. In both of his sexual conquests, he happens to be with his buddy, Hira, whom, verse one says, is an Adullamite.

[23 : 27] Adullam was a Canaanite city. So in other words, his best pal, the guy he's always getting into trouble with, is a Canaanite. And who is the woman whom he first sleeps with?

Verse two says, she was the daughter of a certain Canaanite. So, Joseph represents the best in how God's people should interact with those outside the covenant. And Judah represents the very worst.

What about their sexual ethics? Well, it's obvious that Judah is not going to get high marks in this category. According to the Bible, both sex within marriage and celibacy outside of marriage are good gifts from God to be celebrated and championed among God's people.

But what Judah does is just ugly. He takes God's good gift and twists it into something hideous. notice even how aggressive he seems in verses two and three.

He saw her, he took her, he went into her. And the girl with whom he had sex is such the passive victim that we never even know her name.

[24 : 41] Everyone else is named but her. Because to Judah, she's not a person. She's just an object for him to satisfy his pleasures. And then the whole scene with Tamar is just as revolting.

To top it all off, once Tamar begins to show her pregnancy, Judah demands that she be killed. So he self-righteously applies a different standard for her than for what he held for himself.

And this is where the contrast with Joseph is so striking. In chapter 39, right after this scene, we see Joseph sold into the house of Potiphar.

By God's grace, Joseph is very successful and greatly blesses Potiphar's household. Then when everything is going so well, Potiphar's wife tries to initiate sex with Joseph.

But Joseph refuses and even says in verse nine, how then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God? And later, the woman catches Joseph off guard again demanding sex.

[25 : 44] He runs away this time, but the woman grabs a piece of his clothing and with this evidence accuses him of attempted rape. And he spends the next several years in prison for a crime he didn't commit.

So Joseph was sexually innocent even when having an affair with his master's wife would have cut him out of prison. So how different he is than Judah. And how amazing and bewildering it is that God would choose Judah and not Joseph to continue the redemptive line.

Why? It doesn't seem fair. Back when I was on a prolonged spell of unemployment or underemployment, I applied to a number of jobs which we generically call entry-level jobs.

and if I got an interview, I would inevitably be asked that inane question, what separates you from the other candidates? To which I would want to respond, nothing.

Anybody with half a brain who tries can do this job. There is no top candidate. I didn't get those jobs. But that's not the case here.

[26 : 55] Between Judah and Joseph, there really is a more qualified candidate. But this is the point of the narrative. Even though to our standards nothing is fair about the story, in the end, it is the best news for us because it means that even the very worst of sinners like Judah can enter into the covenant.

That's why it's grace. Because Judah doesn't deserve it. It is a covenant of sheer sovereign grace. In Dostoevsky's famous book *Crime and Punishment*, the main character Raskonikov plans to murder a pawnbroker, a truly evil predatory woman.

He doesn't believe in God and thus doesn't have to fear any type of divine punishment. All he has to do is not get caught. And not only will this murder not have any negative consequences for himself, but it will be a positively good act.

Humanity will benefit from the death of this parasite. It's as good a justification for murder as there ever was. So he commits the crime. Unfortunately, he also has to kill the woman's innocent half-sister who was at the wrong place at the wrong time.

And for much of the rest of the novel, even though he has a good chance of remaining undetected by the police, he finds that internally he has such an overwhelming sense of guilt that he nearly goes insane.

[28 : 33] And his perfect murder isn't so perfect after all. Eventually, he goes to the police and confesses his crimes. And at the end of the novel, he is serving his sentence in a Siberian prison.

And the point of tension throughout the novel is how a murderer like Raskolnikov can find redemption. And he finds it in the most unlikely of places, in the love of a girl driven into prostitution by her family's desperate poverty and her father's addiction to alcohol.

And this unfortunate girl teaches him the story of Lazarus, the dead man whom Jesus called back to life in John 11. And that is what redemption means for murderers like Raskolnikov, and for sexual tyrants like Judah.

And for the very worst sinner in this room, redemption is to be dead in sin, but called to life by Jesus Christ. And this is all by grace. And we can also think of a real life man like John Newton, a British slave ship captain back in the 18th century, a man who made his living transporting human beings from Africa to America as if they were cattle.

But God saved him and changed his heart. He eventually joined forces with William Wilberforce and crusaded against the slave trade.

[29 : 58] He's also the man who wrote the hymn Amazing Grace. And this is how he described himself. I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I want to be.

I am not what I hope to be in another world. But still, I am not what I once used to be. And by the grace of God, I am what I am. What a beautiful description of what the gospel does to a person's heart.

And some of you might say, I'm like Judah. I'm like the murderer in the book or the slave trader. I am the very worst of sinners and there is no reason that God would have anything to do with me.

And you might come here every week hoping to somehow undo what you've done. Be done with it. The same grace shown to Judah is extended to you as well.

So what is the proper response to God's grace? Again, let's look at Judah. When Judah's sin has been exposed, he says in verse 26, she, Tamar, is more righteous than I since I did not give her to my son, Shelah.

[31 : 05] He owns up to his sin, even admitting his guilt against Tamar herself. Then that last comment in the verse, and he did not know her again, which is to say he didn't have sex with her again.

This is the biblical picture of repentance, confessing sin and turning away from it. And if we follow Judah along in the rest of Genesis, we see a remarkable picture of transformation.

We see him again as the leader of his brothers, but now instead of convincing them to sell Joseph into slavery, he's advocating for the wisest course of action to deal with the famine.

And then in chapters 43 and 44, as the whole family prepares to move into Egypt, where Joseph has become prime minister, he even offers his own life as a pledge to his father to make sure the transition goes as planned.

And the word pledge is the same as the word in verses 17 and 18 of chapter 38, when he gave his signet and his cord and his staff as a pledge after his dalliance with Tamar.

[32 : 11] So he once gave pledges to cover up his sins, now he's offering his own life as a pledge for the benefit of his family. The worst of sinners is transformed by God's grace.

And the offer is the same for you as well. God's grace in his son Jesus Christ makes you new. It wipes away even your worst sins and increasingly reconstructs you to take on his holy character.

So repent, confess your sins, turn away from them and turn to the God who forgives the very worst of sinners. And so far we've seen from this chapter that God brings salvation to his people.

Through a covenant. And that's where this preoccupation with having babies fits in. It's a working out of God's promise to Abraham that he would have countless descendants, including the Lord Jesus himself.

We've seen that this covenant is a display of God's utter sovereignty in the way he fulfills his promise. He does it in the most unexpected way, it's always doing the impossible, even using sin to accomplish his own good purposes.

[33 : 22] And we've seen that this covenant is fundamentally a display of God's magnificent grace to sinners. One last point. The covenant is gracious to the faithful as well.

Some of you might be saying, you know, all this is well and good, but I'm really not like Judah. I'm still a sinner, but I know that Jesus paid for my sins. I am confident in his grace, so what does this passage have to say to me in particular?

And this person, rather than identifying with Judah, might more easily identify with Tamar or Joseph. Let's look once more at Tamar.

She is more righteous than Judah, as Judah himself says, but other than that, we don't have too much insight into her heart. We're not told if she's a Canaanite or someone who worships the true God.

And after this passage, she's only mentioned in the genealogies. All we really know about her is that she tried to do what was right, but was victimized by her powerful, sexually immoral father-in-law.

[34 : 30] She is an example of a good person, a righteous woman who suffers unjustly. But God, who takes sin and uses it for his own glory, gives her the enduring honor of being a descendant of Jesus Christ himself.

And it's similar with Joseph, the man so starkly contrasted with Judah. He's faithful and obedient to God at every point, and yet is sold into slavery by his own brothers.

He's falsely accused of attempted rape, and then wastes away in an Egyptian prison. He's a righteous man who suffers unjustly. But God is gracious to him too.

He blesses him, rescuing him from prison. Putting him into a position of great authority to do such good work for other people. Near the very end of Genesis, Joseph looks back over his life and says to his brothers, with Judah standing right there, he says, as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.

And this is really the grand theme of chapters 37 to 50. Judah, meaning it for evil when he impregnated Tamar, but God meant it for good.

[35 : 48] And it should be a perpetual encouragement to all of us. And as we enter this Advent season, you might look back on this past year and say, why God? Why have all these things happened?

It might be unemployment, or failed relationships, hardships, or even the death of someone whom you would give anything to have back. God is utterly sovereign.

Nothing is beyond his control. And he is wise and good. Even when we can't see how things can possibly work out for good, like when Joseph was in prison, or when Tamar was on the road with Judah, God is working for your good.

Romans 8.28 says, And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

The end of our suffering is our good. In the meantime, trust him. Hang on to his promises, because God saves and sustains his people through a covenant of sheer sovereign grace.

[37 : 01] Let's pray.