

Grace In Genesis (x)

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[0 : 00] Of course we all know the standard fairy tale ending. We wish it was always true and they all lived happily ever after. The reality is somewhat different of course.

Sometimes they don't always live happily ever after. Sometimes there is a twist at the end. Sometimes the story ends badly. It's often the way a story ends which stays with you the longest. And especially perhaps the loose ends in a story. So is Deckard from Blade Runner really a replicant after all? Do Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara really ever get together? Whatever happened to John Steinbeck's Joads after their incarceration in California? The name Genesis as you know means origins.

And I guess it's best known for its account of God's creation of the heavens and the earth. It's the first section though in a book which ends in Revelation where God creates a new heavens and a new earth.

[1 : 03] But Genesis itself is a book and its ending in Genesis 50 deserves far more publicity than it receives from the church. The book begins with Adam and ends with Joseph.

It begins in Eden and ends in Egypt. It begins with the beginning, with the breaking of creation's righteousness rather. It ends with the building of new creation's redemption.

The ending of Genesis, if you let it, will stay with you entirely as long as the beginning. There are many themes running through this book, emphasized especially at the beginning and the end. But it's the grace of God which is our chosen theme. The grace which is seen entirely as clearly in Genesis 50 as in Genesis 1. The grace seen entirely as clearly in the death of Jacob as in the life of Adam.

In many ways Genesis 50 is a recapitulation of the theme of God's grace. Tying together as it does various prominent strands throughout the book. Three of which I want to draw your attention to this evening.

[2 : 17] First the grace of sovereign preference. Then the grace of sovereign providence. Then the grace of sovereign promise. Genesis 50 has loose ends which will only be tied up in the book of Revelation.

But as far as the book of Genesis is concerned, it's the ending really which makes the whole book. First of all then we have the grace of sovereign preference.

The grace of sovereign preference. We're introduced to Abraham in the last few verses of Genesis 11. And from there until Genesis 50, the entire story really is focused on Abraham and his descendants.

Large parts of Genesis focus on Abraham's life. Passing on down to his son Isaac. Then on down to his son Jacob. And then on to Joseph and after him.

And as we've seen all the way through, it's the story of God's undeserved favor. For reasons known only to himself, God chooses this man, Abraham, from out of the Chaldees, present day southern Iraq.

[3 : 33] And lovingly commits himself in unbreakable covenant to him and his descendants. God chooses this man, Abraham, and his family over all the other families of the earth.

And sets his blessing upon them. He chooses Isaac to be heir of the promise. And not Ishmael. He chooses Jacob.

And not Esau. For reasons known only to himself, God showers his blessing upon this family. And he makes unbreakable promises to them.

The greatest of all these promises is that through one of their descendants, the whole earth shall be blessed. God's going to raise up from the number of their descendants.

One Messiah. Through whom salvation will be offered. Not merely to Jew, but also to Gentile. To all men and all women. Not on the basis of what they do for God.

[4 : 33] But on the basis of what he has done for them in the cross. I've begun recently charting my family tree through my father's line.

And it's become fascinating to me to discover who my grandparents were and their parents before them. And I can see the direct line of my descent. It passes through William Dow, my father. To William Dow, my grandfather. You can get where this is coming from, right? To William Dow, my great-grandfather. To William Dow, my great-great-grandfather. You get the idea.

If you should chart a family tree for Jesus. The direct descendant of Abraham. You will notice something very interesting indeed.

Something which can only, if you think about it, point to the sovereign preference of God. There are two men in the Old Testament that I would feel safe meeting in a dark alley at night.

[5 : 34] Daniel is one. Joseph is the other. These two men strike me as being honest and faithful, godly and earnest and sincere.

Many of the others, if not most of the others, are just rogues. Jacob himself wasn't a very nice man in his youth and I didn't like him. Moses didn't suffer fools gladly.

And as for King David, well, you decide for yourselves. And so you'd suppose that if you charted a family tree for Jesus, the direct descendant of Abraham, you'd think that given what an honest, godly, faithful and earnest believer Joseph was, that family line would pass through him.

That God would choose the best of the sons of Jacob to be the grandfather of Jesus, many times removed. Well, that's how my mind would tend to work anyway.

I'd want the best specimens of humanity to be the ancestors of the saviour of the world. But then I'm a default legalist who always wants to reward moral effort.

[6 : 48] I'm too much of a stranger to the way in which God's grace works. Because in his sovereign preference, God chose Judah, Joseph's questionable brother, to be the grandfather many times removed of our Lord Jesus and not Joseph.

God chose in many ways the worst of the twelve brothers, not the best. I don't want to go into it this evening, there's no prophet in it. But all you have to do is to read the sordid account of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 to realise what a questionable man Judah really was.

God chose the worst of the bunch, not the best of the bunch. And he chose to shower the grace of his divine blessing upon him.

Why does God do that? Why was Jesus called the friend of sinners, passing by as he did the rich and the dignified and the handsome, and choosing the outcast and the leper to be the recipients of his grace?

Why did God choose Saul of Tarsus, the chief of sinners, to receive the grace of his gospel? Why did God choose Judah and not Joseph, to be the ancestor of our Lord?

[8 : 14] Of course we could say, yes, it is a matter entirely of sovereign preference, and it is. But could it also be that God delights to choose the foolish things of this world to confound the wise?

The weak things of this world to shame the strong? The point is this. God's choice of Judah and not Joseph is a great historical demonstration of his grace at work in that he chooses not according to works, but according to his sovereign love.

Why did God choose Abraham and not Pharaoh? Why did God choose us to be his sons and daughters? It's all of grace.

It is nothing of works, and therefore, whatever else we may do, every day is a fresh opportunity to praise and worship God for the grace of his sovereign preferment.

That out of all the better specimens of humanity out there than we are, he chose us to be his children. The grace of sovereign preferment.

[9 : 33] The grace, secondly, of sovereign providence. The grace of sovereign providence. Talking about stories tonight, Ridley Scott's Blade Runner, Margaret Mitchell's Gone With The Wind, John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath.

They all have this one thing in common. They're all stories dreamt up in the mind of gifted and talented writers. But I don't care how talented and gifted the writer is, he or she could never have dreamed up the story of what happened to bring Israel down to Egypt in the first place.

As an American friend say, Peter said awesome this morning. They also say crazy. There's famines. And there's families. And there's betrayals.

And there's dreams. Did I say no one could dream this up? Well, only one person did, God himself. Well, you can see from the text that after Jacob died, Joseph's brothers, in verse 15 onwards, Joseph's brothers were terrified that he would wreak a fearful revenge upon them.

After all, they had betrayed him. They'd thrown him into a pit. And they had sold him into slavery in Egypt. Now Joseph is one of the most powerful men in the world.

[10:54] And with a click of his fingers, he could have them all executed. And why wouldn't he? You can imagine the terror of the brothers. And how they imagined Joseph saying to himself, the moment my father dies, I'm going to put them up against a wall.

Furthermore, by killing his brothers, Joseph could inherit their property, their livestock, their wives, the promised blessings of God, as it were. So as far as Joseph's brothers could see, the death of Jacob was something to be greatly feared because now Joseph can pursue retribution.

They had intended to harm Joseph and would have killed him had it not been for Reuben, the oldest son's intervention. But even then, they sold him into slavery in Egypt, in many ways, a fate worse than death.

So from a purely human point of view, here we are at a cliffhanger. And we're fully intending Genesis 50 to run with the blood of these 11 brothers.

You can almost hear the proclaimers in the background, Reuben no more, Issachar no more, Judah no more, and so on. But over the years of his experience, Joseph had learned a very important lesson.

[12:16] The one he declares in verse 20, one of the most important verses in the Bible, which if you memorize scripture, which is a good practice, this is a verse you should memorize. You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Joseph realizes that underneath the pit into which his brothers cast him, and behind Potiphar's house into which the Ishmaelite traders sold him, that behind the prison into which he had been cast, having been falsely accused, behind his promotion by faith on account of his interpretation of dreams, is the greatest force in the universe, the sovereign will of God.

The brothers intended their actions toward Joseph for evil, but God intended them for good. God's good sovereignty at work, God's good sovereignty was at work even through their evil intentions. God had a higher purpose than even Joseph and his brothers knew. And you know, Joseph didn't read this in a book. He didn't learn this in college. A lifetime of experience with God had taught him this.

That God is sovereign and that he's working even when we don't see his hand. It took a pit and Potiphar's house. It took a prison and promotion at the hands of Pharaoh for him to learn it, but learn it he did and now he says to his brothers, you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.

[14:02] Here we have God's grace at work in his sovereign providence. That in all things, as the Apostle Paul will later say, God works for the good of those who love him.

The all things, including the darker circumstances of our lives, the pits and the prisons, the grief, the betrayals, and the loneliness. This is no more and no less than the Bible's presentation of the sovereignty of the grace of God.

A presentation of which some take offense because they consider it to be the fatalism of Calvinism. But in which we rejoice, not only because it's the plain teaching of the Bible, but because it gives us hope that whatever we are having to endure in our lives right now, whatever, in the sovereign grace of God, he intends it not to harm us.

But to do us good. To help us. To depend upon him more and experience his grace. And that's an amazing truth.

One which we need to experience some of what Joseph did in order to understand. You'll know it if you read it in a book, but you'll only understand it if you experience it for yourself.

[15:26] That life's not an accident or a series of chaotic events. The things which happen to us happen to us for a reason. The lives of God's children are filled with purpose.

And everything that happens to us happens according to God's plan. Namely, that God might show it upon us the blessings of his grace. In our darker moments, sometimes we might ask ourselves, why is this happening to me?

Perhaps there's someone at home or at work or in school or in uni who is being nasty to you. They mean what they do to you for harm.

But the ultimate answer to the why question, why is this happening to me, is right here in black and white in Genesis 50 verse 20, God intends it for your good.

He intends it for your good. But there's more here. Notice how Joseph defines the good God intends it for as the saving of many lives.

[16 : 36] That's what's good about what happened to Joseph. That if Joseph's brothers hadn't thrown him into a pit, if they hadn't sold him to the Ishmaelites, and if the Ishmaelites hadn't sold him to Potiphar, and if Potiphar's wife hadn't trumped up false charges against him and thrown him into a prison, and if in that prison there shouldn't have happened to be a baker and a butler, and if Pharaoh hadn't had strange dreams, and if Joseph hadn't been promoted to second in charge of Egypt, and if his brothers hadn't come looking down to Egypt for food, if, if, if, if these things had not happened, then by the time of Genesis 50, Jacob and all the brothers of Joseph would have died of starvation because of the famine in the Middle East.

The very fact that God was at work, it was with this purpose in mind that his people might be saved from death.

You see, in the storyline of the Bible, this is an incredibly important episode. Remember how God had made a promise that a son of Eve, not Eve Macasson, but Eve, would crush the head of the serpent, and that a son of Eve would be the savior?

Remember how God promised that through one of his descendants, singular, all the people of the earth would be blessed? These promises would have failed had Joseph not gone down into Egypt the way he did, and God not worked in his sovereign grace.

Okay, so big deal, we say, after all these events happened 4,000 years ago, of what relevance are they to us today? Simply this, if Judah, Joseph's brother, had died in the famine in Canaan, his greatest descendant, Jesus, would never have been born.

[18 : 45] And if Jesus had never been born, he would never have died on the cross. There would be no forgiveness of sins, no resurrection from the dead, no eternal life, and no hope.

You see, no Goshen, no glory, no Egypt, no cross, no starvation, no salvation. Now, can we begin to see the bigger significance of Genesis 50?

Because there's a direct line between this chapter and the latter portions of the gospel where Jesus is dying on the cross.

Let's remember again, these wonderful words in Acts 2.23 where the apostle Peter is preaching on the day of Pentecost and he says to the Jews about Jesus, he says to them, this man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge and you, with the help of wicked men, killed him by nailing him to a cross.

They too, the Jewish religious authorities, meant the death of Jesus for harm, but in the sovereign providence of God he intended it for good that the death of the Lamb of God should result in the forgiveness of the sins of his people.

[20 : 09] So as you see, Genesis 50 does make an excellent end to the book of Genesis because it points a line straight to the cross and the glory of the gospel where our eternal salvation is held up for everyone to see.

This is the grace of sovereign providence. Then thirdly and lastly, we have the grace of sovereign promise, the grace of sovereign promise.

The book of Genesis as you know begins in Eden, it ends in Egypt and yet isn't this strange because is it not true that one of the central covenants of this book, the covenant God made with Abraham, is that God would possess the land not of Egypt but of Canaan, that it would be the land of Canaan, not Goshen in Egypt which would be the inheritance of Abraham's family.

That after all is one of the central pivots of the covenant promises God made to Abraham. But the book ends not in Canaan, it ends in Egypt.

What of this promise now? As we've seen already, the promise of God regarding a Messiah holds good since through God's wonderful orderings of events, Jesus' ancestral line through Judah has been saved.

[21 : 37] But what of the promise of the land? Well, there are two deaths in this chapter you will notice, Jacob and Joseph. Jacob dies in Egypt.

His body is embalmed and is taken back by Joseph and his brothers to Canaan and buried in the cave which Abraham bought. So, in this cave is now buried Abraham and Sarah and Jacob and Rebecca, Isaac and Rebecca rather, and Jacob is buried there too.

So, Jacob ends his days not in Egypt, he ends them back in Canaan. But then at the end of the chapter, Joseph himself dies, 110 years old.

Once again, he dies in Egypt and his body is embalmed in the Egyptian way, we don't know how that worked, you know, think of all the mummies. and it's laid in a coffin and then it lies in this coffin for 400 years.

In a coffin in Egypt. It's not immediately taken back to Canaan. So, is this the end then for God's promises regarding Canaan? Does it all terminate in an Egyptian sarcophagus in the land of Goshen and the remains of Joseph?

[22 : 56] Not at all, for in verse 24 you can read these words. A dying Joseph says to the growing population of Israelites in Egypt, I'm about to die, God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Joseph knew, you see, that God's promise was going to hold good even though it would take 400 years to accomplish. And that God would take his people back to Canaan from Egypt.

Perhaps Joseph didn't know all the wonderful ways in which God would do that. Maybe he didn't have eyes to see the division of the Red Sea. But just like his fathers, he believed God's promise.

And he believed it to the extent that he ordered that his body be embalmed and when the Israelites should return to Canaan, they should take him with them. And so 400 years pass and Jacob lies in his coffin in sarcophagus in regal state.

And the people of Israel multiply until there are millions of them in Goshen. That's one aspect, of course, of the promise of God given to Abraham that's being fulfilled, that his descendants shall be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

[24 : 15] And yet that land promise remains unfulfilled until the Exodus. When a Pharaoh arises who's got no memory of Joseph and begins to enslave the Israelites.

And that's another story, of course, and we know how that ends as well with the Israelites being miraculously rescued. And finally, after 40 years of wandering in the desert, Israel enters Canaan.

But what about Joseph and his bones in this golden sarcophagus? We learn in Exodus 13, verse 19, that when the children of Israel left, Exodus 13, 19, rather, that when the children of Israel left Egypt, they took with them the bones of Joseph.

But even in death, after 400 years, Joseph didn't remain in Egypt. And then in Joshua, chapter 24, verse 32, after the people of Israel have settled back in Canaan again, we learn about Joseph's final resting place.

We read there, and Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried in Shechem, in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver.

[25 : 34] This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants. Yes, even Joseph ended up back in the land of Canaan. Joshua nicely sums up the message of the grace of sovereign promise in Joshua 23, verse 14, where he says these words, You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God has given you has failed.

every one has been fulfilled. Not one has failed. I don't really care whether Deckard was a replicant or not.

It makes no difference to me. It doesn't concern me if Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara ever got together. It doesn't keep me awake at night.

We will never know what happened to John Steinbeck's Joads. It doesn't really affect my circadian rhythm. But this does.

That we each are beneficiaries of the grace of sovereign promise. A grace which might begin away back then in Genesis but is ultimately fulfilled on the cross of Jesus where Abraham's greatest son through Judah died to take away our sin.

[27 : 03] Endings really do make a story you know but beginnings also. I wonder sometimes whether Genesis really should be called the book of origins or if it should be called the book of promises or perhaps even the book of grace.

The grace of sovereign preference. The grace of sovereign providence. The grace of sovereign promise. The three great pillars of Genesis 50. And now all that's left is to challenge us to live in the truth of the grace of God which dominates Genesis to allow that grace to also dominate us.

But as we believe and live out the gospel great things things entirely significant as those which the patriarchs experienced for themselves can happen in our lives also.

Our story begins with Jesus and the cross. But it's the end that will really make our stories.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father we thank you for your goodness to us. We thank you for the grace of sovereign preferment that you chose Judah not Joseph.

[28 : 20] You choose the foolish things of the world not the wise. We thank you for the grace of sovereign providence that though these brothers intended to harm Joseph yet you intended it for Joseph's good that many lives would be saved.

We thank you for the grace of sovereign promise that though it took 400 years for that promise to be fulfilled yet Joseph's bones returned to Canaan. We thank you that all these threads line up to one great fundamental truth.

That Jesus Christ, the Jesus who died on the cross, the descendant of Abraham, that Jesus is Lord and King and that through him there is forgiveness of sin for all who will believe.

Help us then to have our lives dominated by grace. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.