

The sovereignty of God and persecution

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- [0 : 0 0] This morning's reading is Genesis chapter 37, starting to read at verse 2. These are the generations of Jacob.
- Joseph, being 17 years old, was pastoring the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives.
- And Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age.
- And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.
- Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, Hear this dream that I have dreamed.
- [1 : 0 0] Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered round it and bowed down to my sheaf.
- His brothers said to him, Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us? So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.
- Then he dreamed another dream, and told it to his brothers, and said, Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.
- But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?
- And his brothers were jealous of him. But his father kept the saying in mind. Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem.
- [2 : 0 7] And Israel said to Joseph, Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them. And he said to him, Here I am.
- So he said to him, Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word. So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. And a man found him wandering in the fields, And the man asked him, What are you seeking?
- I am seeking my brothers, he said. Tell me, please, where are they pasturing the flock? And the man said, They have gone away, for I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan.
- So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, Here comes this dreamer.
- Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.
- [3 : 1 4] But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, Let us not take his life. And Reuben said to them, Shed no blood, cast him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him, that he might rescue him out of their hand, to restore him to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colours that he wore, and they took him and cast him into a pit.

The pit was empty, there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat. And looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels, bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt.

Then Judas said to his brothers, What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hands be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.

And his brothers listened to him. Then Midianite traders passed by, and they drew Joseph up, and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver.

[4 : 31] They took Joseph to Egypt. When Reuben returned to the pit, and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes, and returned to his brothers, and said, The boy is gone, and I?

Where shall I go? Then they took Joseph's robe, and slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. And they sent the robe of many colours, and brought it to their father, and said, This we have found.

Please identify whether it is your son's robe or not. And he identified it, and said, It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him.

Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces. Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son for many days.

All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted, and said, No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son mourning.

[5 : 34] Thus his father wept for him. Meanwhile, the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

Let's just pray before we start. Father God, we ask that you'd be with us now, by your spirit. Would you take these words, your words, your story of your son Joseph, and bring them to life?

Would you bring them home, and help us to understand, to see him, to taste, to witness, to understand, to perceive? And in so doing, would you shed light on our lives, and the way we think, and the way we are, Father?

Amen. Well, this is a series I've entitled Feed the World, because just as Bob Geldof went to Africa, and fed the world, who were in famine, so did Joseph.

He went to Egypt, and fed the world. But before we really get into the nuts and bolts, of the whole story of Joseph, we're looking at this story of him, in his early life. And this account, has a lot to teach us about persecution, and Christian persecution.

[6 : 45] And that's why I've entitled the sermon today, The Sovereignty of God and Persecution. You can follow through, what I'm saying on the back of the service sheets. Do keep your Bibles open there please, in Genesis 37, on page 37.

The Apostle Paul said this, All who desire to live a godly life, in Christ Jesus, will be persecuted. If you're a Christian, if you want to be a Christian, you'll be persecuted.

Last week, some Muslim extremists, killed a lawyer in Pakistan, whose name was Ruby Paul. They killed him, they shot him in his house, and his wife, and their five children.

This is last week. And that's because he wanted to defend a man, another Christian man, who had had his business taken from him, and his home taken from him, by Muslim extremists.

He was a lawyer, just wanted to defend the guy in justice. And his wife and his kids were murdered. On the 17th of July, just a few months ago, in the middle of the night, some Muslim extremists again, attacked a Christian village, in a place called Maza, in the Joss region of Nigeria, which has seen a lot of bloodshed, over the last year or so.

[8 : 09] They turned up in the middle of the night, with machetes, and burned down houses, and attacked whoever they could. Lots of people were killed. The pastor of the church there, the COCIN church, he had his home burned down, and in his home, were his wife, and his two daughters, and his grandson.

What had he done wrong? He was just a Christian. That's all he'd done wrong. Every year, I mean, we don't know, do we, but they estimate somewhere between 150,000 and 170,000 people, are killed, martyred, not for, because they want to blow up other people, on a tube.

That's not that sort of martyr. Just because they're Christians. 150,000, 170,000 a year, just for being a Christian. Haven't done anything wrong.

And that's been the case, throughout the history of the world. I mean, that's always been the way it's been. The Church of England, which we're normally part, we're Anglicans, was founded on the blood of men.

In this nation, in Oxford, in London, in various places, who were burned alive. They were burned alive. For being Christians. Done anything wrong? The Bible itself was written by, the New Testament, by apostles, each of which, most of them, were killed, just for being Christians.

[9 : 34] Matthew, who wrote Matthew's Gospel, was thrust through with a halberd, in Ethiopia, preaching the Gospel to people in Ethiopia. Mark was torn to pieces, by a mob in Alexandria.

Luke was hung on an olive tree, in Greece. John actually died as an old man. He died of old age, but not before they, they boiled him alive in oil, and he survived somehow. And he spent most of his years in prison, or much of his life in prison.

The Apostle Paul, who wrote many letters, was beheaded in Rome. Peter was crucified in Rome. And of course, they were only just following in the footsteps, of their Lord Jesus, who was crucified, as a horrible way to die.

And what had he done wrong? They had no charge against him, that you're the King of the Jews. That's not a charge. That's a travesty of justice. Every one of them, was put to death, for nothing other than, wanting to be associated with Jesus, and Jesus himself.

And Paul says, anyone who wants to be a Christian, anyone who wants to be a Christian, will be persecuted. Why would you want to be a Christian?

[10 : 43] Why would you do that? Well, today we're going to look, very much at the story, of persecution, through one of our forefathers, Joseph, who himself was persecuted, and they haven't done anything wrong.

And I hope, that as we look through this, we're going to see today, that it's normal, to be persecuted. We don't face, the same extremity, that our brothers around the world face, or through history.

But we do face persecution, of one level or another. And that's normal. And I think many Christians, in our country, don't realise that, because we've had it so good, for so long. That it's normal, to face persecution, if you're a Christian.

That's just the deal. But secondly, I want us to understand, hopefully, that this, far from being a kind of, situation that's got out of control, that God has kind of, lost control of it all, that God is sovereign, over Christian persecution.

He always has been. And he still is. It's part of God's plan. And that's a hard thing to understand. But hopefully, we'll be thinking about that, as we go through. Now, we're looking here, in the book of Genesis.

[11 : 47] And let me just preface, this whole series, by saying a few things, about Genesis. Genesis is a story, is ten stories, about ten families, really. And you see in verse two, this is the last of the stories.

These are the generations of Jacob. In other words, this is the story, about the children, the generations of Jacob. So this is about Jacob's family. This is the last of the stories, the generation stories, in Genesis, if you like.

And the three big patriarchs, I guess, the three big guys, in Genesis, apart from God, obviously, are Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. They're the three big stories.

And this is the last, of those three stories. Really, the generations of Jacob, Joseph, is the big guy, in this story. And like I say, some of you might have, seen the play, in the West End.

It's a famous story. It's a story of, of riches to rags, to riches to rags to riches. Classic storyline. Okay. So Joseph starts out, as the beloved son of Jacob, with his multicoloured coat.

[12 : 49] But he's thrown into a pit, and persecuted by his brothers. But then he's raised up to be, the head of Potiphar's house. He's the chief slave. But then he's accused of rape, and he's thrown into prison.

And then God brings him out of prison, and he's put right at, at Pharaoh's right hand, the most important man in the world, really, at that time. And he saved the world from famine. Riches to rags, to riches to rags to riches.

We're going to be seeing that, over the course of these next five weeks. And throughout the whole story, is this one idea, really, that the whole of it, is all orchestrated by God. So on your sheet, I've put a verse, that's a key verse, in this story.

Genesis 50, verse 20. This is what Joseph says, to his brothers, at the end of the story. As for you, my brothers, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about, that many people, should be kept alive, as they are today.

All the things, that happen in Joseph's life, Joseph knows, that God is meaning it. God is intending it, for good. Even the bad stuff, even the wicked stuff, is all under God's sovereign control.

[13 : 57] Now what do we mean by sovereignty, God's sovereignty? What we mean by God's sovereignty, is that God is in charge of everything, as Simon said at the beginning. Everything that happens, happens according to God's plan.

The Bible says that, and not even a bird, falls to the ground, without God deciding it. The Bible says that, everyone is born, in a certain place, at a certain time, because God said, yep, you there.

The Bible says that, everything happens, according to the purpose, of God's will. God knows the design, of every snowflake. God knows when every leaf, falls in the middle of autumn.

He knows every leaf, and when it's going to fall, and how it's going to fall. God knows every thought, and intention of our hearts. God knows all of our days, before and after.

You can't hide a thing from God. It's all according to his plan. When you watch the news, and you see the chaos in the world, everything that happens, God has decided it beforehand.

[14 : 58] God plans everything. You cannot thwart God's plan. And yet, we freely choose, what we choose. And that's what we're going to see, as we look through, this story of Genesis, and Joseph.

Now I know the issue of God's sovereignty, can throw up a lot of questions. Now we won't have time, for a question time tonight, because we're going to have Lord's Supper. But, I would encourage you, do ask me questions afterwards.

I've got the church lunch, come and chat to me. Send me an email. If there's any questions you have, about the sovereignty of God, I'd love to tackle them, with you personally, and we'll do them, over the course of this series.

So, questions are good. If you don't ask questions, you don't get answers. So, thick people don't ask questions. It's only, it's only learning people, that ask questions. So please, I'd love to, I'd love to hear your questions. And I can't pretend, I've got all the answers, but I'll do my best.

Well, let's have a look, at this story of Joseph there. And you'll follow the points, through on your sheet. The first point is this, God chose Joseph, to rule, but the brothers hated him. God chose Joseph, to rule, but the brothers, hated him.

[16 : 01] So, verse 2, Joseph is 17 years old. So, he's only just done his GCSEs, okay? And his brothers, they're in their 20s, they're just a few years older than him. So, they're not, I think, I've got in my head this image of, all these young boys, all together, but they're not boys, they're men, they're in their 20s, okay?

They're adults, they have responsibility. Jacob has had two wives and two concubines, which are sort of half-wives, okay? So, he's spread the love a bit, and he's got a lot of children.

He's got 11 children. Now, it doesn't sort of make for, you know, church harmony, family harmony, if you've got four different women, and 11 children, all from different women.

There's bound to be a bit of sibling rivalry, and wife rivalry, I imagine. But, to make things worse, if you like, Joseph is, is his favourite one.

So, verse 3, Joseph, Israel, that's, Israel is Jacob. Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he was the son of his old age, and he made him a robe of many colours.

[17 : 07] I actually think it's not just his, that he's the son of his old age, but his favourite wife was Rachel. He had one favourite wife, and she only had one son, and that was Joseph. So, so Joseph was, was the one that dad really loved.

Daddy's favourite. And he had this coat, and of course his brothers hated him for it, as, as you would. Now, I've heard, um, some sermons on this, and they go into great detail about how it's not a good idea, if you're a parent, to have a favourite child.

And, I think there's probably some wisdom in that. But I also think that's missing the point of this story. Because, yeah, Jacob had the favourite, Joseph. But, but so does God.

And that's actually, if you read Genesis, God's always got a favourite. And God's favourite was Joseph too. Let me show you why. Verse 5, Joseph had a dream.

Do you remember the dream? Brilliantly read. Joseph, his sheave of hay, as they were gathering hay, rises up, and the sheaves of all his brothers, bows down, to his sheave.

[18 : 09] And of course, the brothers know exactly what that means. That means, you think you're going to be the boss. Do you think you're the boss, Joseph? But then he has another dream. And in the second dream, have a look down, at verse 9.

I've dreamed another dream. The sun, and the moon, and the eleven stars, were bowing down to me. Now, if you've read Genesis 1, in Genesis 1, the sun, and the moon, and the stars, rule over the heavens.

The sun, and the moon, and the stars, symbolically, and you see through the prophets, often represent rulers. And here, the sun, and the moon, and the stars, represent Israel, and his wife, and the eleven sons of Israel.

They're the rulers of Israel, if you like, that will become the patriarchs of Israel. And Jacob and his brothers know exactly what this is all about.

Look at the end of verse 10. When Jacob rebukes him, he says, Shall I and your mother, and your brothers, indeed, come to bow ourselves down on the ground before you. They know exactly what this means. Two dreams, in both the dreams, Joseph rules over his family, and his brothers hate him.

[19 : 18] How dare you say that? But interestingly, Jacob, at the end of verse 11, kept the saying in mind. Now, what's that all about? Now, the two major patriarchs before Joseph, that was Abraham and Jacob, they both had dreams.

At key points in their lives. Do you remember Jacob's dream with the ladder, going up to heaven? Do you remember that dream? Yeah? Jacob knows full well that God speaks through dreams. In fact, I'm sure the brothers know this as well.

And when you get two dreams like this, later on, when a pharaoh has his dreams, and Joseph interprets his dreams, he has two dreams as well.

And he explicitly says later on in Genesis, that Joseph says, well, because you've had two dreams, the double dream, that means that it's fixed by God. The double dream means it's going to happen.

This is definitely going to happen. And here's the double dream, it's definitely going to happen. This isn't just a young lad with fanciful dreams. My wife has fanciful dreams all the time, about random things.

[20 : 21] I talk to her every day about them. This is not fanciful dreams. This is God, saying, I have chosen Joseph to be my ruler over the world, and you will bow down to him.

Now, when you think about it in those terms, when you couch it in those terms, you understand why the brothers might be jealous of their father's love, the robe of many colours going to Joseph.

But when you see it's God choosing, their hatred, their jealousy, which leads to murderous intent, is a bit more sinister. It's not just, we don't like you being daddy's favourite.

This is, we don't like what God's got to say. We don't like that God has chosen this one to be the ruler over the world. It's just petty jealousy.

It's hatred of God's word. It's more than sibling rivalry. And just as we look at this point, I thought it might be worthwhile just spending a minute or two now, just thinking about how, how jealousy is not just something for people out there, but it's a bit more close to home.

[21 : 26] And how jealousy can creep into the church. Because these were brothers. This is the infant church. This is Israel. These are the sons of Israel. And jealousy, just in there, in those days, well it's here in this room as well, isn't it, sometimes?

Just have a think about what jealousy is for a moment. I was thinking about this this week. Jealousy is the outward expression of a covetous heart. If in my heart, I'm not thankful for all the things that God has given me and content in what I've got, and there's something that I don't have that I want, well jealousy is just, it's just that someone else has got that thing and I, and therefore I'll hate them.

See? Jealousy is just, it proceeds from a covetous heart. That someone has got something that I want that I don't have. It comes from discontentment. What is it that you are dissatisfied with in your life?

What is it that you, you lack, that you, you grasp after, you cling for? What is it that you have in your life that you don't have in your life, that other people in this room have in their life?

Maybe it's, they're about looking at you. Maybe it's they're better educated. Maybe it's their house. They've got a much bigger house than you have.

[22 : 54] Maybe it's they've got a better husband or wife than you have. Or maybe they have a husband or wife and you don't. Maybe they've got better children than you have.

You know, they behave better or they're more successful than your children. Maybe they've got children and you haven't. Maybe their career is going really well and they're doing really well and yours has floundered.

Maybe they've got a career and you didn't get one. Maybe they've got authority in the church and you'd like it. Maybe they've got spiritual gifts that means that they serve in a church in a way that you'd love to but you just can't because God hasn't given you that kind of gift.

The sons of Jacob, the brothers of Joseph, had lots to be thankful for, didn't they? I mean, because of their dad and their upbringing, they had great wealth, they had a great inheritance coming to them.

They all came to have wives and children. They had enough food and shelter. They all had jobs. But just like Adam in the Garden of Eden, God had given him absolutely everything.

[24 : 05] Just don't eat from that one tree. It's just one tree. But he had to have it. I've got to have that as well. And so it was with the brothers of Joseph and so it is with us.

Because they didn't have what they wanted, they became jealous. And that jealousy led to a murderous intent in their hearts. So let me appeal to you, just as we're thinking about this, and I'm applying this to myself as well.

Am I thankful? Are we thankful for what we have from God? Do we focus on what we haven't got and completely ignore all the things that we have got? And actually, all the things that we have got are the things that we really wanted at one stage and prayed for and longed for and then God gave them to us and then we've kind of forgotten about that quite quickly and we fixate on something else that we haven't got.

Are we easily forgetful of all the things that we have? Are we thankful people? Are we striving to be content in all that we have?

Because I tell you what, look at yourselves, look at us, right? You've got loads. How good has God been to us? I mean, really? There are so many people in so many parts of this postal district that have got far less than we have.

[25 : 23] God has been really good to us and it's wrong, isn't it? And I'm saying this to myself, it's wrong when we are covetous, isn't it? And therefore jealous. It's just rubbish. I remember being a single man for many years, going to weddings and sitting there thinking, part of me was, it's a battle in your heart, isn't it?

Part of me was thinking, you know, well, there's another one. Another one's got married. Yeah, well done. It's not me. But do you know what I should be thinking? And I was always battling this in my heart.

I should have been thinking, you know, God has been really good to you guys. Praise the Lord that you're married. And you can apply that to any other thing that you're jealous of or you're discontaining.

Well, let's move on. Let's move on to the second point. The second point is this. The brothers plotted to kill Joseph, but Joseph, sorry, but God planned his exaltation. The brothers plotted to kill Joseph, but God planned his exaltation.

So two different plans, both came to pass, but two very different intentions, God and the brothers. Now, from verse 12 down to verse 17, there's a very weird bit in the middle of this story and I've no idea what it's about.

[26 : 44] So Jacob sends Joseph to Shechem, okay? Now, Shechem is not the sort of place you want to go because just in a few chapters before this, when they actually lived in Shechem at one point, the man Shechem who lived in Shechem raped Dina, who was one of the, was the daughter of Jacob, Joseph's sister.

And in anger, Simeon and Levi, two of the brothers, went into Shechem and killed all the males. So, if you, if you're from Shechem, you're not very popular in the Shechem region if you're one of Jacob's brothers, okay?

It's just not, they're not the sort of place you'd want to go. But that's exactly where Jacob sends Joseph to find the brothers. And on his way, he gets there and he gets there and he can't find them.

They're not there. And there's this strange man, verse 15, who finds him wandering in the fields. What are you seeking? I'm seeking my brothers. Tell me please where they're pasturing the flock.

And the man said, they've gone away. I heard them say they've gone to Dotham. So Joseph went to Dotham. Who's this funny bloke? Now, I don't know the answer to this, but it is striking that again in the life of Abraham and in the life of Jacob, they both came in touch with a man.

[28 : 00] And in both those cases, that man explicitly turned out to be the angel of the Lord. Both those patriarchs, at key times, the angel of the Lord directed them.

Now, it doesn't say this is the angel of the Lord, but I wonder, I wonder, if this little funny paragraph, I mean, the Bible writers don't waste, there's no pointless bits in the Bible.

They don't sort of randomly put pointless bits in. I wonder if this is a hint of, and we'll see this as we go through, God's directing Joseph. God wants Joseph to find the brothers who will then plot to kill him so that he can be raised up and become the saviour and Lord of the world.

Verse 18, the brothers see him from afar, they're at the Dothan region, and they conspire to kill him. Here comes this dreamer, let's kill him and throw him into one of these pits.

Reuben tries to step in and says, oh, let's not kill him, let's just throw him into the pit alive. But Reuben's leadership is weak and he'll get usurped by Judah later on. But what they do is they strip him of his coat of many colours.

[29 : 11] Now that coat, what is that coat about? The coat idea is really important in the whole story of Joseph. Later on, Pharaoh will put a coat on him.

And when Pharaoh puts that coat on him, that is both the coat signifying his favour and his authority. Joseph is now king when he puts on the coat. And I wonder when Jacob gave him the coat, he's showing him he's his favour, but maybe he's showing him also that he's the one who's my chosen, he's my firstborn.

Actually, that's exactly what will happen in the coming days. And when this coat is stripped from him, just as it will be in Potiphar's house next week, that coat being stripped from him shows that his favour has been taken from him.

It shows that his authority has been taken from him. And he's cast into a pit like a dead man into a grave. It's the lowest of the low, or so he thought at this stage in his life.

The beloved son of Israel, specially loved by his father, despised by his Jewish brothers, stripped of his robe of power, and thrown into a grave.

[30 : 26] Who does that remind you of? It's striking to me that there is a shadow in this, if you like, of a greater son of Jacob.

Jesus Christ. The one whom God, you know, all of Israel were the sons of God. They were my son, my chosen son. But Jesus was the special, chosen one.

And he was sent to his brothers. In fact, it was the shepherds of Israel who rejected him. They hated him. They were jealous of him. And they threw him into a pit, if you like, symbolically, in death.

But God raised him up just as he would do Jesus Christ. Jesus said this, if they persecute me, they'll also persecute you.

Just as they treated Joseph, just as they treated Jesus, Jesus says, so they'll treat us. So people will treat us. And so that's why this story of Joseph is really important for us because Jesus is the story of Jesus.

[31 : 34] It's the story of us. This will happen to us as well. Now, of course, in many nations, as I said at the beginning, being a Christian means proper hardcore persecution. There are lots of countries where you lose your, you have unfair taxes, you don't have the right to vote, you're a second class citizen, you might lose your job or your home.

In some countries, when there's anarchy, in saying, there has been in the Sudan recently or in parts of Pakistan, the Christians are the ones that get it first every time.

They're the ones whose daughters are raped and whose sons are sold into slavery. This is real. This happens all the time. In some countries, being an evangelist is a capital offence.

And converting to Christianity, that means the death penalty. And so it has been throughout the history of humanity. Now, in our country, God has been really good to us.

By God's grace, we have the flickering embers of a Christian heritage. But it is a flickering ember and it could easily go out.

[32 : 41] Just in the last 10 years, there's been a number of bills in Parliament that have tried to kind of criminalise things that Christians do or Christians believe.

Do you know that even right now, there is an EU equal treatment directive that's being debated. And they won't publicly say what it is, actually.

It's all been done in secret. And they, it turns out that this directive is, it looks like they're going to try to ban any kind of harassment. What is harassment?

I mean, it's such a vague term. But it could be that the EU will make it that if anyone harasses, i.e. says that homosexuality is a sin, maybe that would be harassment.

Or that Allah is not a god, that he's an idol. Maybe that would be harassment. Now, these things are becoming more and more common. A couple of bills have failed. But it's just a matter of time now before these things become legal.

[33 : 42] It may well easily, I mean, many of you in your jobs, if you're a teacher or if you're a doctor, you're already in a situation where you're not allowed to say anything about Jesus. 20 years ago, that would have been ridiculous.

I fully expect that in my lifetime as a Christian minister, sermons like this that will get recorded on the internet could result in me going to prison. I wouldn't be surprised if that happened.

Now, how does that make you feel? Do you begin to feel the terror that many people around the world already feel? How Joseph felt?

Not having done anything wrong, just believing what we believe. And I'm sure you already feel a certain amount of that fear now. I mean, you can't just sort of talk about Jesus to people without feeling intimidated or slightly fearful.

I mean, it's there now, isn't it? To some regard. The striking thing, the striking thing about this story here is that God was behind the persecution.

[34 : 49] God led Jesus, sorry, Joseph and Jesus to his brothers to be persecuted. God gave him the dreams which brought him the hatred.

The man in Shechem led him there. And did you notice, just as the brothers sit down to eat in verse 25, guess what happens? What a coincidence. Some Ishmaelites just happened to turn up with a caravan.

Oh, we don't, maybe we don't have to kill him, Judah says. We could sell him into slavery. What a coincidence that was. And look at the very last verse of the story at the end, in verse 36.

Jacob's mourning the loss of his son. And you get this brilliant, it's a great narrator's quote. Meanwhile, the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of the Pharaoh, captain of the guard.

You see, as all this stuff is going on, as this evil, this jealousy, this hatred, this almost murder happens, over the whole thing, God knows exactly what's happening.

[35 : 52] As I read earlier, as for you, you meant evil against me, Joseph says. They meant it. But God meant it for good. How can a loving God allow his own children to be persecuted?

How many of you, as parents, would give your children to be persecuted? This is a very difficult subject, and I haven't got a lot of time to really go into this in depth.

But persecution hardship is God's boot camp to train us. It's God's training school to train us to become mature Christians.

Training schools are hard places, but that hardness is what toughens us, is what trains us, is what makes us men and women.

Some people here, some people I know, have given up the faith, and some people here, may give up the faith because of persecution. Maybe your family, maybe your husband or wife, maybe your children, maybe your boss at work, maybe your friends, maybe your social circle, maybe your friends at school.

[37 : 12] Some of you will give up the faith because of persecution, but the rest will endure that pressure, will take that hardship on, will not give up the faith.

You'll accept the insults, will accept being patronised and laughed at and looked down upon and overlooked. We'll accept the detriment it is to our careers and to our possessions.

Do you know why? Because all these things, ultimately, there will be, it doesn't matter because one day we'll be in heaven with the Lord Jesus in the new creation and we'll look back and think, do you know what?

My career really mattered to me but actually now I realise it wasn't that bad a thing. Do you know, back then, my marriage really mattered to me but now I realise it's okay. However hard it is, whoever makes it hard for us, if we keep believing in Jesus and keep going, then it makes us stronger, not weaker.

Persecution is God's training school, it's his boot camp to make new Christians into mature Christians, to train babies into being adults.

[38 : 26] Now I don't pretend to like that but I can see, looking back at minor times of relative persecution in my life, how God has done it for my good and he'll do it for your good.

Let's pray. Father God, we pray for our brothers and sisters around the world who are being persecuted for nothing other than being Christians. We thank you for their boldness and their strength for standing up to be counted as sons of the living God, as believers in Jesus and we ask you to strengthen them and help them to keep going.

We pray for us here as well that you'd help us to be people who are bold, who aren't afraid, who will be counted for the name of Jesus.

We pray that all of those who do wrong against us, even though we haven't done anything wrong ourselves, other than being Christians, we pray for them. We pray that you'd show them through our example, the love and example of the Lord Jesus.

and most of all, Father God, we praise you that just as you raised Jesus Christ from the dead, even though he suffered and persecuted, just as you raised Joseph after he suffered and was persecuted, so you will raise us and we pray in that hope that you'd keep us going to that great day when you raise us from the dead.

[39 : 48] We praise you, our good and gracious Father. Amen. Amen. Amen.