

New Generation, Old Problems

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[0 : 01] Today, we're beginning a new series, which is actually the end of the beginning, or rather the beginning of the end of the beginning. Now, some of you were here at the beginning four years ago.

You were either at the Word or the 6 p.m. congregation. And in 2014, when we started working through Genesis, that was the beginning. And Genesis, by the way, means beginning, anyway. And so God willing, as I said in my newsletter, we're going to finish Genesis this year. So we're going to end the beginning. Now, four years is a long time, so let me recap for those of us who can't remember or were not here.

But if you remember, chapter 1 to 11 of Genesis was the big picture, where creation, humanity, and humanity spiraled into sin was described. And so bad was sin that God nearly destroyed humanity. But he rescued Noah in the flood, and he rebooted humanity. From there, the human race began to fill the earth, and God plucked one man, Abraham, from obscurity and promised to bless him and to bless all the nations through him, and in particular, through his offspring, his seed.

[1 : 15] This was even though Sarah, his wife, was barren at the time. God also promised him the land of Canaan as his inheritance. So from about chapter 12 onwards, Abraham and his descendants become the focus of the story.

And one important question runs through the book. And the question is, who is this seed or offspring that God will choose? How will God fulfill his promises to Abraham?

Well, come the next generation after that, we discover that it's Isaac, not Ishmael, that God chooses. Then with Isaac's son, it's the younger Jacob and not the firstborn Esau who will inherit the promises.

And now in chapter 37 to 50, we come to the final installment in Genesis. If you look on the slide, you'll see how Genesis is actually divided into 10 sections called toledots.

That's the beginning of each of the sections. And that word is actually translated as account in the NIV. But the Hebrew meaning of that word is something more like generation or generations.

[2 : 29] And you see on the slide that the toledots actually alternate between story and genealogy. And when you come to the latter half, the genealogy toledots actually relate to the family lines that are not chosen, like Ishmael and Esau.

While the story part of the toledots relate to those which are, because here we see God working to bless Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, according to his promises.

And so it is with the Joseph toledot right at the bottom. Hopefully you can see it. It's a bit small, sorry. That's the final toledot from 37 to 50. And it actually begins in verse 2 of our chapter, you'll be able to see.

And like the others, although it's an account of Jacob's family line, the focus actually is on Jacob's sons and what happens to them. But the important question still stands.

Who is God going to fulfill his promises through? Who is the seed? And in fact, this question doesn't really get answered in this final section until about chapter 49 of Genesis.

[3 : 36] So verse 1, as we've read, is actually the closing verse of the previous toledot. Jacob, God's chosen one, is now in the land of Canaan with his family, just as God promised his father Isaac.

It's in contrast to Esau, which is really the genealogy just before, who even though he was rich and powerful and his descendants numerous, lives outside the promised land.

But then in verse 2, the actual action begins. And so it goes like this. Now immediately one wonders if Joseph is the chosen one.

Is he the one who will inherit the promises? Now that's certainly a possibility in keeping with God's habit of choosing the younger, like Isaac and Jacob. Of all the sons of Jacob, only Benjamin, his full brother, was younger than Joseph.

As well, Joseph was the only one born to Rachel, well, was only born to Rachel after many years of barrenness. Just like it was with Sarah and Isaac and Rebecca and Jacob.

[4 : 53] So there are parallels that would make us think, oh, might this be the chosen one? But we have to leave that question hanging for a few weeks, and then now turn instead to the drama that begins.

Because the very first thing we find is, surprise, surprise, conflict in the family. Where Jacob and Joseph are on one side of this conflict, and they're pitted against their brothers, his brothers, on the other side.

Now, the way the story is told is actually quite clever. Because firstly, it's not clear if Joseph's bad report is really true or not. Neither do we know what the bad report was about.

All we know for sure is that a schism is developing in the family. And now, verse 3, we see the cause of that schism. It's because of Jacob's favoritism of Joseph.

So we read, 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 an ornate road 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.

[6 : 02] Israel, by the way, is simply God's name for Jacob. But immediately, we see old problems repeating themselves in the next generation. If you recall, Isaac and Rebekah played favorites, didn't they?

With their two sons. Well, Jacob is now doing the very same thing. And while the text says that the reason for the favoritism is because Joseph was born in Jacob's old age, the real subtext is because Joseph is Rachel's firstborn.

Rachel is the wife of Jacob, who was loved more than Leah. She was the one who was barren for many years, and so only gave birth to Joseph late in her life and Jacob's life.

And sadly, she was also the one that dies at childbirth, not at her childbirth, but at the birth of her second son, Benjamin. And so Jacob loved Joseph, I think, because he reminded him of Rachel.

And to show him his love, Jacob bestows him with an ornate robe. Or if you've ever watched Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, *The Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

[7 : 10] Yes, sounds much nicer. But anyway, ornate robe it is. This was Jacob's most visible sign of favoritism. I'm sure that he would have showed favoritism in other ways, but this was the one that was most visible.

And some scholars even suggest that by wearing it, Joseph had no need to work like the other sons. And so the reaction of the brothers is not surprising, is it?

If you've ever had brothers or sisters, you know that nothing quite gets up your nose more than favoritism. If someone gets more pocket money than you did, if someone had...

Is that true? I hear... That's more pocket money. If someone doesn't have to do the housework, and you do, always washing the dishes, always putting up the laundry, that really gets to you, doesn't it?

Except, of course, if you're that favorite sibling. In which case, you're oblivious, aren't you? To all the resentment that's going on around you. And I think that's what Joseph, you know, is probably thinking.

[8 : 14] Because in verse 5, when Joseph has a dream or two, he doesn't hesitate, does he, to go and say, Brothers, look, I've had a dream. Which makes them hate him even more.

And so he says to them, Listen to this dream I had. We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheave stood up while your sheaves gathered around me and bowed down to it.

And his brothers obviously 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. And if that's not enough, he had another dream, and he told that to them again.

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, even 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. So three times we read of

the brothers' hate for him.

[9 : 21] Can't be more obvious than that, can it? First, due to Jacob's favoritism, and then secondly, due to the way Joseph is callous in the way he speaks to them, rubbing these dreams into their faces.

Now, of course, at this stage as well, because God doesn't appear in these dreams like he did with Abrams and Jacobs, we don't know at first if these are merely dreams that are false or true.

We're left to wonder and suspect that perhaps it is so. A bit like how Jacob is pondering the matter in his mind. And it's actually not until chapter 41 where we discover, this is what Joseph says in chapter 41, that when dreams come in two forms, then it's an indication they're from God.

Now, I have to add here that this is not meant to apply to us as a universal truth. If you went home tonight and over the next two nights had the same dream in a row, the Bible is not saying that it's from God, okay?

This is only meant to apply here to Joseph and the narrative. Now, all this happens, of course, to set up what comes next because this favoritism that Jacob shows sets off a chain of events which we'll now read from verse 12 onwards.

[10 : 45] Now, we didn't get to read it earlier, so I'm just going to get Renee to come up now and she's going to read the rest of the chapter for us. So that's page 39. Now, as Renee reads, I want you to just see if you can recognize any recurring patterns in what's being described here with what has already happened in earlier parts of Genesis, particularly between Isaac and Jacob and Esau.

We're reading from verses 12 to 36. Joseph sold by his brothers. Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flock near Sechem, and Israel said to Joseph, As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Sechem.

Come, I'm going to send you to them. Very well, he replied. So he said to him, Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks and bring word back to me.

Then he sent him off from the valley of Hebron. When Joseph arrived at Sechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, What are you looking for?

He replied, I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks? They have moved on from here. The man answered, I heard them say, Let's go to Dothan.

[12 : 04] So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. Here comes the dreamer, they said to each other.

Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams. When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands.

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

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the ornate robe he was wearing, and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty.

There was no water in it. As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Juliet. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

[13 : 17] Judah said to his brothers, What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him.

After all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood. His brothers agreed. So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for 20 shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, The boy isn't there. Where can I turn now?

Then they got Joseph's robe, slotted a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, We found this.

Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe. He recognized it and said, It is my son's robe. Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.

[14 : 21] Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted.

No, he said, I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave. So his father wept for him. Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potipha, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

Quite clever storytelling, I think, by the writer. And I think we're meant to come into this second section at the end, realizing that whatever, you know, the anger that's caused by the favoritism, there's no excuse to do what the brothers did to Joseph.

But let's sort of wind back and go back to the start of that story. And I think the way it's told brings out the extent of the hate of Joseph's brother. Did you see there was a lot of tearing going on? Tearing of clothes right down the whole story. But the first thing to notice is how the story progresses, that how as the story progresses, we find Joseph being led further and further away from the protection of Jacob.

[15:31] So on the map here, we see that he starts from the Hebron Valley, which is down south where Jacob was. And then he goes to Shechem, which is up north. And then finally, because they were not there and the man points him, he goes up to Dothan, which is right up the north.

And between there and there, that's Hebron and Dothan. That's about 67 miles. Probably between here and Geelong, it's about 67 miles, I think. And then finally, of course, he goes down again to Egypt, which is hundreds of miles away.

There's also an irony in the way the story is told, because in verse 14, Jacob instructs Joseph to go see if all's well with the brothers. Literally, it's go see if all is at peace.

And the Hebrew word there is, as many of you know, shalom. But of course, we know that there's actually no peace, because back in verse 4, we already read or heard that the brothers couldn't speak a kind word to Joseph.

And the word there is actually shalom as well. They couldn't speak a peaceable word to him. And so there's a play here on peace. And actually, it's only until we get to chapter 45, there's peace, peace.

[16:40] There's a lot of talk of peace up to chapter 45. And then when the brothers actually reconcile, the word peace no longer is used. And so almost as if they're making a point out of every time they talk about peace, there's actually no peace between the brothers.

Third, we also learn that the brothers can recognize Joseph from afar in verse 18. And why is that? Well, we only find that out in verse 23 when we discover, aha, he was actually wearing the ornate robe that was visible from afar.

And so the robe was like a red rag to a bull, reminding the brothers of the father's favoritism and of his dreams. And that's why they say in verse 19, here comes the dreamer.

And so callous are they in their hate for him that we read in verse 25, they actually sit down to eat. It's such a casual sort of thing that they do right after they'd seized him and stripped him and thrown him into the cistern.

This was their brother. They'd done all that and then they just sit down to eat. It's as though it was all in a day's work kind of thing for them. The other thing to notice about the story is that Joseph himself remains silent and passive from the moment that he seized.

[17:58] We're not told how he's reacting. All the reactions are of the brother, firstly, and then later on of Jacob. And so it's their actions and their intentions that were meant to focus on, not Joseph's.

And it's only really later again, chapter 42, when we finally discovered how Joseph actually reacted, that he actually did cry out from the cistern for help. And finally, as the story closes with the focus on Jacob and his loss, the irony is, as we see him mourning, we actually know that all this pain is for nothing because Joseph isn't really dead.

His brothers knew this and yet they pretended to comfort him. Did you notice? That's just how cold-blooded they were. Not even the pain of their father's needless mourning would move them to tell the truth.

And so there are many parallels here with the story of Isaac with Jacob and Esau. Like Isaac, it's Jacob's favoritism that sets off this drama.

The brothers' plotting is like Rebecca's plotting, trying to negate this favoritism. And in both cases, the items used were actually, the items of deception used were actually of goats.

[19:16] So it was goats that Rebecca cooked for Jacob to serve Isaac. It was goat skins that she used to disguise Jacob and make him look hairy or feel hairy.

And here, it's the goats' blood that the brothers used to deceive Jacob. And at the end, what happens is Joseph, like Jacob, spends years apart from his family, living in exile, suffering great affliction and missing his home in Canaan, just like Jacob.

And so, it may now be the next generation, but do you see that the same old problems are still rearing their heads in this? It's a messy old business, isn't it?

this thing called family? If you don't think so, just ask Meghan Markle. The whole saga about, is dad coming? Is he going to walk me up the aisle or not?

And then you get running commentary from, you know, the half-sister and half-brother. Now, thankfully, our own family affairs are not played out across the world like hers. But I'm pretty sure that there are things, aren't there?

[20 : 24] If we look at our own families, we would rather not others know about them. conflicts, grudges, petty jealousies and hurts, or worse, major schisms, you know, that carry on from one generation to another.

Things you need to watch out for when the family comes over for Christmas or Chinese New Year. And if you've ever been caught up in all of this, even to a small extent, you sort of, you realize just how depressing and despairing it is, isn't it?

You know, there just doesn't seem to be a way out. You try and do this to make things better and it just, you know, flares up again. You think the wound has been healed and someone says something and it brings it all up again.

It's, yeah, it's rather sad, isn't it? Even for us that come from Christian homes. But I guess the really encouraging thing for tonight's passage is that it shows that God is able to do, no, actually, this is what He does.

is that He's able to graciously help us in spite of ourselves. One of the striking things here in this passage, I don't know whether you realize, is that the words God and Lord is never mentioned.

[21 : 43] Do you notice that? In fact, it's unlike the rest of Genesis where God appears to Abraham and Isaac. None of that happens in this. and actually throughout the entire Joseph narrative, God doesn't appear at all, not once, and He doesn't actually speak directly.

The narrator himself would mention God twice in two places, and we would only ever hear the work of God on the lips of the characters. Genesis. And yet, we're meant to take from this, not that God isn't active, but that actually He is still working.

He's still in control of history. He hasn't stepped out and stopped being involved in the lives of His people. This is the same God that has been there throughout all of Genesis, who uses the very failings of human beings, and without them even realizing it, brings His plans to pass, fulfills His promises to His people.

And so, if we go back over the story again, in verse 21, Reuben is moved somehow to stop the brothers from murdering Joseph with the intention of rescuing him later. But that wasn't part of God's plan, was it, for Joseph to be returned to Jacob?

And so, along comes a caravan in verse 25, where God has just so happened placed them in Dothan, which is along the trade route between Mesopotamia and Egypt. And then Judah is somehow moved in verse 26 to suggest that they sell Joseph to them, so as not to have blood on their hands.

[23 : 26] And even the brothers' deceit is actually critical, isn't it? Because had they confessed to what they did to Reuben or to Jacob later, then Reuben would have gone after Joseph to try and get him back.

But they didn't. And therefore, what that allowed was for Joseph to actually go on ahead to Egypt, where this was where exactly God wanted him to be.

And so it's only right at the end in verse 36 that we finally get a sense of what God is up to, because Joseph finds himself in Potiphar's house, who is the captain of Pharaoh's guard.

And that's where God wants him, because God is preparing Joseph to be a savior of the world.

Imagine this, God uses this petty family conflict to save not only Joseph's own family later on, but to save all of Egypt and Canaan.

The very evil that the brothers did turns out to be for their salvation. How ironic is that? How undeserving are they?

[24 : 45] And yet, how gracious is God? And that's the theme that we will keep coming back to over this series, because the big idea of this narrative is actually found right at the end, in Genesis chapter 50 and verse 20, where Joseph says to his brother, you intended to harm me, but God

intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

And friends, this is true not just for Genesis, but for all of history. God uses our very sins and human failures to bring about his plans and purpose.

And the supreme example of this, as many of you will know, is none other than the life of Jesus himself. Because just like Joseph, Jesus was sent by evil men to his death.

The elders and chief priests had only the intention to harm him and crucify him, they did. But God used this very evil deed to bring salvation to the world.

Peter says exactly that in Acts chapter 4 and verse 10 to 12. That would have been our New Testament reading, in case you're wondering why we didn't have one, and I'm going to give it to you now.

[26 : 00] So Acts chapter 4 verse 10 to 12, Then know this, you and all the people of Israel, it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

Jesus is the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone. salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind, by which we must be saved.

Friends, this is the depth of God's love for us, that even though as individuals, as families, as the entire human race, we have done our very best to stuff things up in this world, even when we've thumbed our noses against God and think we don't need him, we've tried to prove that we're good enough without him, God has mercifully not left us to our sin, but rather he's turned the very things that we've done wrong to accomplish the good in his hands.

And so our response then isn't to then keep saying, okay, well, God has used my wrongs to do good, well, what's the problem?

Let's keep doing wrong. That would be the wrong response. Instead, our response then must be to repent, as Peter says, to put our trust in the only name under heaven by which we must be saved, the name of Jesus.

[27 : 31] And his death is the ultimate good that God has already done for us. So if today you know that you've been living against God's will, then now is the time to fess up and turn back to him.

turning back means repenting and rejecting the way you've lived up to now. Turning away from your disobedience to him.

Realizing that there is no way out of this mess except to repent and turn to God. That you may try and fix it, things may improve even, but the reality is that you'll be stuck in your mess until you turn yourself back to God.

That's what true repentance means, changing your ways and not just turning up at church but turning back to God. But the good news is that once we've done that, once we've put our faith in Jesus, then no matter where we find ourselves, however badly we've stuffed up, then God is able to unravel all that in our lives.

He's already unraveled it on the cross, but now He will begin to apply it to your lives. Now, I'm not saying that just because you do that, then suddenly you snap your fingers and everything will come right.

[28 : 53] I'm not saying that God will just rewind your life and bring things back as if nothing wrong had ever happened. No. In fact, some of these things will have long-lasting effects that might continue until we get to heaven.

But what I'm saying is that just as God did for Joseph and his brothers, God will use from now on everything in our lives to bring about His good purpose for us.

So even though we might be stuck in what we think is a mess, if we trust in God, then God will use those very things to help us to turn our lives back to Him, to live for Him, to live with purpose.

So the famous verse that Paul gives in Romans 8 28 is this, And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

And Paul, when he wrote the letter of the Romans, he was talking in the context of suffering and persecution. So when he says all things, he means all things including the things that we've stuffed up, the mess that we've created for ourselves.

[30 : 04] But this great promise is for those who are in Christ, who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. So friends, let's be repentant of our failings if we haven't done that.

Let's turn away from our wicked ways. But then let's not despair. Let's not feel like we're stuck. No matter what situation.

Let's not think, I wish I was born in another family. I wish I didn't do this. I wish I didn't. Let's not think that. But let's rejoice that God has now going to use these very things to achieve His good purpose for us.

Even though we may not understand exactly how He'll do it or how things will turn up. Let's pray.

Father, please console and comfort those of us whose life is a bit of a mess at the moment.

Father, forgive us of the part that we've played in it. help us to look to Jesus. Save us by the blood of Jesus.

[31 : 11] Help us to know that in Him, even if not all our problems will disappear in this life, yet you will be able to turn it for your good and for your glory.

Teach us to trust you even when we cannot see your plans, and help us to submit your will for us in our lives. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus, who died for us.

Amen.