

Joseph and his Brothers

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Preacher: Vijay Henderson

[0 : 00] What effect do you think the virus will have on our church? What effect do you think the virus will have on our church? Here are some effects that I have seen.

A friend who's a minister in Sunbury, he told me that he probably won't get a paycheck for April because they can't physically take a collection anymore. Here's another one.

In every church, there are what we could call flaky Christians. And at least a physical gathering kept them connected to God and his people.

But now, when they can switch off in the privacy of their own homes, perhaps lots of flaky Christians will fall away. Lots of our older congregation don't have the internet.

That means they haven't experienced a church service amongst God's people for nearly two months. What will be the effect for them in six months' time?

[0 : 58] And of course, I've seen lots of people in our church who've been stood down from their work, whose businesses are facing a terrible time. Might they be angry at God?

Where is he in all of this? We have yet to count the psychological and spiritual effect. The virus has done a lot of harm to our church. But the truth is that God is able to use all of that for his good.

In fact, that is the punchline of this whole series at the end of Genesis. It's on your slides or on your screens right now. The very end, Joseph says to his brothers, You see, Genesis is the book of God's promises.

And to Abraham's family, he pledges land and offspring and blessing. It's the job promises. But in this series, lots of harmful things will get in the way.

We'll see terrible things happen to Joseph. He's taken to Egypt, farther away from the promised land. His brothers, they are a rotten and sinful lot. In fact, there is even a global pandemic for them as well.

[2 : 15] And many times we'll wonder about their effect on God's promises. But throughout this series, we'll see that he is sovereignly able to use them for his good.

We didn't plan to do Genesis throughout this virus. But it is the perfect series for a time like ours. We need to see that God is able to take a harmful situation and flip it and turn it and manipulate it for our good.

And for his good. You see, that way we can trust him more. We say trust God almost every single week, don't we? And we want to be careful not to cheapen it, not to be too glib about it.

This series will give us concrete, tangible and meaningful reasons while we can stare the virus in the face and say, I don't know how, but I trust that God is using the situation for good.

To further his promises of blessings for the saving of many souls. And so there's a link above. If you scroll above, you'll find a link to the handout.

[3 : 29] That's the handout there. And as I said, please keep your Genesis passages open. And we're going to begin. I thought that preaching about Joseph and his Technicolor dreamcoat would be easy.

But I'm not sure that Andrew Lloyd Webber has helped even one little bit. Have a look at verse 2. It's on the slide in front of you now. This is the account of Jacob's family line.

You see, this series is not only about Joseph and his dreamcoat, but about all the sons of Jacob. Jacob's name is changed to Israel in chapter 35.

His sons become the 12 tribes. This is a foundational story about all of God's people. And therefore, it's about you and me as well.

And so let's meet Jacob's family line. So firstly, the main character is Joseph. Verse 2 says he's a young man of 17. And I always thought of Joseph as an arrogant little twerp, a sort of upstart who needs God to bring him down a peg or two.

[4 : 33] But the text never casts a shadow over his character. Verse 2 says he brought their father a bad report about his brothers, which sounds like telling tales.

But there's no indication that he's doing anything wrong. Actually, it's the brothers who are the sinners. So Reuben, in chapter 35, he's the eldest. He slept with his father's concubine. In chapter 34, Simeon and Levi, the next elder sons, they almost start a civil war by murdering the neighboring family's children. In verse 2, Joseph brings a bad report about the sons of Bila. That is, Dan and Naphtali. And the sons of Zilpah, Gad and Asher. And it's more likely here that at last there is a son that Jacob can trust.

Someone who'll tell the truth. Who'll act righteously when all his other sons won't. Could this be why Jacob favored his son and gave him the ornate robe?

[5 : 33] Yes, because he's the son of his old age, as the passage suggests. But actually, Benjamin is also a son of his old age. And he never gets a robe.

On the screen now is an artist's impression of the robe. But I think I prefer the next one. This is the Andrew Lloyd Webber version. It's slightly more, as we say, fabulous.

And I think Joseph's ornate robe is like a royal robe for one who'll be prince over his brothers.

If you're not persuaded by that, let's look at the dreams. I think they present Joseph as royalty.

Verse 6. So far in Genesis, God has spoken to this family and their ancestors through dreams.

A second dream seems to be God's way of underlining the point, of making it a certainty. Here's the second dream. Verse 9. Then he had another dream and he told it to his brothers.

[6 : 46] Listen, I had another dream. And this time the sun and moon and 11 stars were bowing down to me. You see, not just God's people, but all of creation as well. Sun, moon and stars bowing down as well.

And these two dreams appearing together at the beginning of our series says that Joseph is God's man. He's chosen from among the other children of Israel, a righteous man whose royal rule will cause all others to bow the knee.

In fact, every week when we see Joseph from his highest highs ruling with Pharaoh, it's because God was with him. To his lowest lows, rejected, accused, enslaved, God is with him.

Joseph is God's man. So that's the first son. Let's take a look at the other sons. And they seem to be nothing but sinful. Verse 4. 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.

Verse 8. His brothers said to him, do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us? And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he said.

[8 : 02] You see, if God is speaking through dreams, wasn't Joseph right to tell everyone about it? Shouldn't the brothers have taken the dreams seriously as a word from God?

But instead, verse 11. His brothers were jealous of him. You see, sibling rivalry, jostling for position, trumped listening to God.

And so far, how do you think this family compares with, say, your family? What do you think? My wife, Rachel, she comes from a pretty terrific family.

And surely if God was going to choose one household to work through, it should be the horns of Tasmania and not the Jacobesses or the Israelites of Canaan.

Let's see what happens. In verse 12 to 13. I can't go through every verse for time, but I'll just go through the main ideas. Verse 12 to 13. Jacob sends Joseph to his brothers in the fields.

[9 : 03] Verse 14 says, Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks and bring word back to me. Perhaps Jacob was worried what his sons were getting up to again.

And so he sends trustworthy Joseph to give him a report. Verse 14. When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around the fields and asked him, what are you looking for? Joseph wandering around by himself spells danger. Not just because he's alone, but because he's slowly moving further away from Jacob's protection.

Verse 16 and 17. He finds his brothers farther away in Dothan. Verse 18. But they saw him in the distance. And before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

It's 11 against 1. And there's no one to protect Joseph. Verse 19. Here comes that dreamer. Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him.

[10 : 08] Then we'll see what comes of his dreams. You see, if you don't want God's man to rule over you, you should kill him off. But in verse 21 to 23.

But in verse 21 to 23. Reuben, the oldest son. He puts Joseph in an empty cistern. There's a picture of some cisterns they found from the ancient world on your screen.

They're huge. As you can see, huge water holes that they dug into the ground and into the rock. And they would cover them with a stone. You see, Reuben wants to hide Joseph in a cistern so that verse 22, he can rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

However, over the page in verse 25 to 27. It's brother Judah who takes control. He's calling the shots and he wants to sell Joseph into slavery rather than kill him.

Verse 28. So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph out of the cistern and sold him for 20 shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites who took him off to Egypt.

[11:15] The brothers have done a terrible thing. Joseph is alone. He's enslaved. He's far, far away from his father's protection.

But what they do next is shocking. Look at verse 31. They got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, we have found this.

Examine it to see whether it's your son's robe. You see, I reckon making parents believe that their beloved child is dead when he's really alive is about the cruelest thing they did.

They didn't even pretend that he died peacefully. They thought they let the father believe he was torn to pieces by a wild animal. You see, the sons of Israel thought that with Joseph gone, they will finally win their father's favor.

But their plot backfired. Verse 34 to 35. Jacob missed his beloved Joseph more than ever. It says, I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.

[12:26] And so far, this is verse 2. This is the account of the family line of Jacob. And we said at the start that Israel's family is God's people.

It's a story about you and me. And so it's worth asking which one of the family or who in the family do we identify with? Because given the way we read stories, and thanks to Andrew Lloyd Webber, we're tempted to think that we are the Joseph character.

You see, maybe we are misunderstood like Joseph was. Maybe we have dreams of all our families bowing down to us as well. But the truth is, we could never be Joseph.

He is God's chosen man. A man in royal, ornate clothing with whom God speaks to directly. Who is rejected by those closest to him.

Betrayed for pieces of silver. Who's thought of as dead by those who love him. He was put in an empty cistern, covered with a stone. But whose future involves all of God's people bowing their knees to him.

[13:38] You see, it's clear from the passage that Joseph's life looks more like the Lord Jesus. And actually, if we are anyone in the story, we more closely resemble the brothers.

I like to think of my family as a good one.

My wife's family as a great one. I know your families, they're pretty good as well. But in all of them, and in me too, at least the seeds of what will become these sins.

Even murder. In our New Testament passage, which Grace read to us, Jesus himself says this. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come.

Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside a person, from inside and defile a person.

[14:52] And in this passage, we see almost all of those sins in the brothers. But what is striking is that just the mere presence of God's man exposes these traits in Jacob's family.

That is, their wickedness is exposed or provoked by Joseph's presence. Verse 4, it says, Verse 5 says, Verse 8, Verse 19, Verse 19, Here comes that dreamer.

Come now, let us kill him. Then we'll see what becomes of his dream. Just the mere presence of God's man exposes the sins in the sons of Israel.

And actually, it's a pattern we see throughout the Bible. Whether it's the prophets rejected as they speak God's word. Whether it's the Hebrews opposing Moses.

Will you reign over us? They said. Whether it's David, opposed by Saul as the rightful king of Israel. And especially in the Lord Jesus, whose mere presence is the light which exposes our darkness.

[16:32] But we will not have him. The presence of God's man exposes the sin in God's people. Just like Joseph's brothers, we will not have it.

Joseph's brothers, they will not bow the knee. Their sin is provoked to full expression as God's man takes center stage.

And this is, all of this is the introduction to our series. It's not a promising start. We're scratching our heads when we see such rotten, raw materials. It's going to be hard to believe our key verse.

That God works all things for good. But I think the end of verse 11 gives us some help. After Joseph's dreams, his father kept that matter in mind.

You see, when Jacob sees the evidence of his son's death, the torn and the bloodied robe, he found it hard to believe that God was still in control.

[17 : 35] Where is God in all this? How is he going to use this harm for good? But he was supposed to, verse 11, keep in mind that God's man will rule.

But instead, verse 34, 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, I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave. So his father wept for him. You see, how can Joseph be dead if God made it clear that he will rule?

If Jacob had kept this matter in mind, it would have carried him through what appeared to be a harmful and hopeless situation.

And I think verse 11 is the author's purpose for us as well. That even though the virus is harmful and seems like a hopeless situation, that it's harmful for our economy, on households and people's minds, where to keep in mind that God is still sovereign.

[18 : 46] This week, when you turn on the news and again see nothing but hopeless situations, keep in mind that none of God's promises have failed. That nothing out there will upset his plans to bless and save many souls.

And especially for us Christians. Because at this stage, our church seems to be like Joseph's robes, you know, torn and a bit bloodied.

I mean, just look at how we are meeting these days. But we're to keep in mind that God's man still rules. That is, we are free to keep building the church, to keep carrying on with ministry.

Why? Because Jesus is still Lord, even over this situation. And that means God will use the virus, or this family full of sinners, or this family full of sinners.

He will even use Jesus' own death for his good, for the saving of many souls. We began our sermon today talking about the negative effects of the virus.

[20 : 03] And to be honest, I'm a little bit sick of talking about all that negativity. Do you understand what I mean when I say that? I'm kind of fed up with talking about all these bad effects. And so this week, I asked some of you to show me evidence that God is using this harmful situation for good.

And here is what some of you said. Some people said, Because people at work are talking less about trivial things, there's an open invitation to check how people are going.

And as such, I'm having meaningful conversations with clients about the foundation for my hope. Isn't that great? Some people said, Having extra family time is building bonds between us.

Another family said, My family wasn't able to make it every Sunday, and now all of us are sitting down together and tuning in each week. Someone said this, Michelle said this from our children's ministry.

Some children are memorizing their online lessons and going around the house and reciting their memory verses. She said, One child has begun evangelizing their non-Christian father. Isn't that fantastic?

[21 : 10] One person said, Our fortnightly Bible study is now a weekly one, just because we can. And another said that their small groups are full again, because people can easily attend.

Here is a big one. People are sharing the link to this online service with others whose churches perhaps don't have the resources that we're blessed with.

And that means people all around the world, from America and India, Malaysia, Singapore, all around Melbourne, Sydney, Tasmania, and WA, Christians are still being fed with God's word, still growing and maturing.

The church is still being built. These are the things we need to keep in mind that God is able to use this harmful situation even for good, for the saving of many souls.

And so this week for homework, I put it on the handout. How many ways have you seen God use the harmful virus for his good? And when you count those ways, use them as a way to trust him more.

[22 : 21] For now, I'm going to pray. So join with me and close your eyes. Father God, we praise you that you are sovereign enough to use harmful situations for good.

Thank you, Father, that even though we see a terrible thing happening to Joseph, a terrible thing happening in our city, that your man still rules, that Jesus is still Lord.

Please help us to trust in you. Please help us to count our blessings. Please, Father, show us ways that you have been kind, that you have been using things for good. And please, would we use all of these as evidence?

Would we keep them in mind so that we trust in you more? We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.