

God's providence - Jesus reigning over us gives us life

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Date: 22 September 2019

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[0 : 00] I want to be able to preface what I'm about to read, if I can, by saying that when you read Scripture, any parts of God's Word, really, imagine it like the seashore. Some parts of God's Word is like dipping your toe in the shallows, and you're able to cope with it.

But then other parts are deep. And so I guess when you're teaching somebody to read the Bible or to learn parts of the Bible, you don't go to the deep end first. Like you would with swimming lessons, you would take them to the shallow end and build them up, and once they can swim, then they can venture out into the depths. That's just a wise reading of Scripture.

You know, what I'm about to read, the two verses that I'm about to focus in on this morning, are sort of in the deeper end, and therefore it requires a bit of knowledge, which I'm sure you all have. The first is in Genesis chapter 50, and the second will be in Acts chapter 2.

But we'll turn to Genesis chapter 50 to begin with. So Genesis chapter 50 is towards the very end of the life of Joseph. This is just before he's passed away. And in verse 15, this is where you have the brothers coming back to meet Joseph.

I'll pick it up in verse 15. I'll read to 21. When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, that's Jacob, they said, it may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for the evil that we did to him. So they sent a message to Joseph saying, your father gave us this command before he died. Say to Joseph, please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you. And now please forgive the transgression of your servants of the God of your father. Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, behold, we are your servants. But Joseph said to them, do not fear, for I am, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today. So do not fear, I will provide for you and for your little ones. Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. If you'd like to turn to Acts chapter 2, or you don't have to, but that's where I'm going to be reading from. And this is just a few words. Again, these hopefully will be familiar to you. So Peter is preaching this sermon on the day of Pentecost. There's many thousands of people there. And he preaches his sermon and he quotes quite a lot from the Old

[3 : 36] Testament about what is to come. And then we pick it up in verse 22 of chapter 2. And so he says, men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst. And you yourselves know, this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. And we'll leave it there. Again, these two readings complement each other in the sense that they're theologically the same, but of course they have their depths. But we'll come back to that after we've sung once more.

As we come to this passage of Scripture this morning, or really both parts of Scripture, by the end, hopefully you'll see how they're theologically the same. The account before us in Genesis is of Joseph and his brothers. And it may be well known by many of us this morning. But I'm also aware that perhaps for some of you it's less familiar. In other words, you may know the story better from the musical than you actually know it from Genesis. And so with that in mind, I'd like us to take a look not so much at the story, but at what we learn from the story. And the one thing that it leaves me with as a pastor is that God is telling me from these words, I'm not hearing anything. He's just telling me as I expound these words, that stop trying to figure things out.

Why do people do this? Why do people do that? Sometimes you don't know. And in the end, everything becomes apparent. But in the moments of them happening, it's less apparent or if not apparent at all. And yet, you know, we like to know the whys, the ins and the outs. And yet this story speaks to us, God is saying to us, just stop it. Just stop it. And it really does put us in a place where we have to sit back and listen to what's being said. Now, the ability to be able to appreciate these lessons all over again comes from knowing the story well. But I want to point out that the environment in which this happens is toxic. You know, we tend to think that, you know, that certain people shouldn't be allowed to say about certain things unless they have a certain standing. And that may be true. You know, you want to be able to listen to a person who can overcome temptation. And more than you want to listen to a person that can overcome temptation. That they're able to, if they're able to pass the test, then you want to find out how they do it. You're not too interested in how the others don't pass the test of temptation. You know, you want to be able to be directed by those who can and those who know. Well, God is the director here. God is the one who's showing us how it is and what we are to learn. But Jacob and his families and Joseph and all of his brothers, it's an environment that no family ought to copy. Okay? You've got, you've got on, from the father to the children, you've clearly got favoritism. And favoritism in scripture of fathers to their children and mothers to their children as well is seen, but it's wrong. Just because it's in the Bible, doesn't make it right. It's in the Bible because it's true, but that truth isn't necessarily right.

And so Joseph grew up an environment with his brothers where he was the favorite. And of course, that's a toxic environment. That, that, if you want to turn a family against itself, love one more than the others. Pay attention to one more than the others. If you want to, you want to tear your family apart, then that's how you do it. Just, just, just focus in on one more than another person. But then, of course, this leads to jealousy. This, of course, leads to anger. The short-sightedness is clearly a big issue. The lies that are being told amongst the family, the division, and how everything begins to break down from, you know, the combination of these toxic situations. But here's, here's the strange thing, or not necessarily the strange thing, that, that, the truth in all of this, that even in all of that, God is providentially caring for his people. And it's a bit like Esther. When you read the book of

Esther, God is not mentioned once, but you can see God on every page, in every action. God is providentially caring for his people. And in the same way, when you get to the Lord Jesus Christ, and you see that people, you know, are angry at Jesus, they hate Jesus, they even crucify Jesus, that even through all of that, God is providentially caring for the very people who are rejecting and angry and liars and thieves and gluttons and everything that comes with that. The particular care there is salvation. And so these two accounts go together in a wonderful way. One, in fact, leads to the other. And so we pick up the story in Genesis 50, long after Joseph is displayed to be the father's favorite. A long time after Joseph has the dreams at 17, this is like 20-odd years later, and he's had these dreams. He then tells his brothers about these dreams. It's after that.

[10:07] It's also then after the fact that his brothers threw him into a pit and then sort of, you know, sort of looked down upon him and thought, well, we can make some money here. He's worth more to them alive than he is dead. Let's take him out, sell him, and off he goes to Egypt. But then when Joseph is in Egypt, it begins, hey, he seems to be doing all right. But sure enough, lies are put against him, and he's thrown again into another pit, which is a prison. While he's in prison, the baker and the cupbearer is sort of sent down into prison with him because of the things that they did. And they have dreams, and God uses this as a means of getting Joseph out of prison. He's able to interpret the dreams. Both are true, but only one is favorable to one of them. And out they come. Sorry, out Joseph comes. When he is out of prison, he is eventually restored to a place, or he gets a higher place of prominence in becoming, you could almost say, the prime minister of Egypt. He was in charge of the economical affairs, the affairs of the land. And the reason this is because Pharaoh had a dream, but he could not figure it out. And it was whispered to him, we know a guy in prison who can do this.

And so out comes Joseph. He tells Pharaoh what his dream meant, that there's going to be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. And that was it. And then Pharaoh said, well, what must be done?

And so Joseph then says, this is what must be done. So he has this place of prominence, because he has this gift given to him by God, to be able to understand what God is going to do in the near future. Now, during this time of famine, not the seven years of plenty, but the seven years of famine, guess who turns up in Egypt? Almost everyone. Okay? Because that's the place where there is food.

And Joseph's brothers out there, not in Egypt, come to Egypt for food. And the last person, they came to look for food. And what they found was their brother that they sold into, that they just sold, they got rid of. They told his father that he had been killed by a wild animal. So his father, Joseph, Jacob, sorry, thought that Joseph was dead. But no, Joseph is alive and well in Egypt, but he did not want to be there. Joseph, you must remember, never chose to be in Egypt ever. He wasn't following the Lord's leading. The Lord was leading him, okay, and not telling him where he was going to go. Hey, this is not like Jonah. You remember in Jonah, Jonah is told to go to Nineveh and to go and speak to them the words that God has given them. And Jonah goes in the opposite way to Tarshish. Now, if you remember, when he's down in the belly of the fish and sort of he, it seems as if he repents, right? Because he says, fine, I'll go. But what he's, what Jonah actually comes to the conclusion about is not that, fine, I have to go to Nineveh, but that I can't escape God. Because when he gets to Nineveh, we know that he's upset that God's changed his mind and he sits down by a tree, right? He's still not happy about being in Nineveh. What he, but what he realizes in the belly of the fish is you cannot get away from the direction that God is leading you in. You just can't do it.

He's, it doesn't, he didn't change his mind in wanting to go to Nineveh. He just realized at that moment, you cannot get away from where God is leading you. You just can't, you just cannot do it.

[14:05] So Jonah ended up in Nineveh through a series of disobedience, okay? But if God wanted him there, then just look at how God did it, okay? He did it by him jumping on a ship, going in the opposite direction by being thrown into the sea, swallowed by a fish, and lo and behold, he ends up in the place where God wants him. How does God get Joseph, a man who doesn't want to go to Egypt, to Egypt?

How does God get you to do what you don't want to do? In fact, if you're ever seeking God's guidance, okay, never ever tell God what you don't want to do. Because what will happen, trust me, I know, is God will make you do it. And I can say that with a smile on my face, because like Jonah, you can't get away. You can't get away. And your heart has to change so you can say, right, I know God has me here, okay? And that's not here in this particular church. That is a particular calling, you know, i.e. being a pastor or being a farmer or being, okay, it's not necessarily the place that you're in, but it could be the calling that you have. Now, Joseph understands this with maturity in Genesis chapter 50 verse 20. Upon seeing his brothers, he looks at them and says, right, I know you meant evil against me. You know, beating me, throwing me in the pit, selling me, that was your evil against me. I know why you did it. But God meant all of those things to get me to Egypt.

God was sending me to Egypt, okay? You were throwing me in a pit, but God was sending me to Egypt. This is what he's effectively saying. And why did God send him to Egypt? Well, he goes on to say in verse 20, to bring about, God meant it for good. Well, what is that good? And this is the good, God said, the end of verse 20, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today, okay? God did that to Joseph to keep thousands of people alive. Do you understand what's happening here? God did that to Joseph to keep thousands of people alive. God did that to Jonah, right? Because the very threat of judgment on Nineveh was the very message they needed to hear in order to repent, okay? In fact, when you hear words of judgment in the New Testament, like the old, it is true that judgment will come if you don't change, but Jesus understands that the very threat of judgment is able to change people towards God, right? I must repent in sackcloth and ashes.

Now, here's the principle understanding. You've heard me say it a lot, but here is where we have opportunity to sort of dig it out, to unfold it. And it's this, that whatever you are dealing with in life, okay, whatever, you're always dealing with God. Whether that be your graces that God has given you, or whether that be your sin. Whether that be someone else's grace towards you, or whether that be someone else's sin towards you. Whatever it is, whatever you're dealing with in life, you are always dealing with God. We're not to think that God is only in the comfortable things, that God is only in the grace gifts, when clearly he's in not the cause of, but actually involved in the sin of people. Now, Peter makes this abundantly clear when he preaches his sermon on the day of Pentecost, referring to the

Lord Jesus Christ. He says that two things are being displayed there. God's definite plan, who crucified Jesus? Whose idea was it to send Jesus to the cross? Who decided to send his son to die in the place of sinners? Who decided that? Well, God did. But who is it that actually crucified Jesus? Well, he was crucified at the hands of sinful men. Okay, who did it? They both did it. Okay, now God is not culpable of the sin, because it's God's mission to send Jesus to save people. But the way that he has determined that this should happen is to use these sinful men and women, knowing what they would do if God's son was sent, that they would do the very thing that would lead to their salvation. Thinking that they're getting rid of Jesus, they're actually sending him off to a place where in the end he will save them.

[19 : 05] It's a bit like Joseph's brothers. They're sending him off to a place where in the end they think they're getting rid of him, but actually in the end he's saving them. Peter's saying exactly the same thing. You thought you were getting rid of Jesus. You thought you were doing away with him, but look what's happened. Here you're hearing a message and in a moment you're going to, what shall we do? Repent and believe. Okay, repent and be baptized. Okay, you think you can get rid of Jesus, but the very one you get rid of only actually seeks to fulfill the plan of God to save you in the end.

And that's what you see in the story of Joseph. That Joseph keeps God's people alive and many others through a famine.

That Jesus, though crucified at the hands of sinful men, actually ends up saving those sinful men. And that's how Jesus saves. And God is using, okay, all of these things that whatever we are dealing with in life, we are always dealing with God. I want you to think about that.

Because this is what it means, if I can put it as short as I can. That when I say whatever you're dealing with in life, you're always dealing with God. I'm including your sin, your desires, your prayer life, the absence of a prayer life. That God uses all of it. God is, because every moment that you live in is reflecting something about you to yourself and to God. And it could be, I don't want to go there. Or it could be, thank you, Lord, for sending this to me. Everything is a reflection. And this is how we see. So here are the important observations. When Joseph had the dream, the one dream in particular, it was, this is what he said.

Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field. And behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf. Well, if there was anything not to say to a group of brothers who already don't like you, okay, Joseph doesn't seem to have the wisdom here of what not to say. Keep it to yourself.

[21 : 27] Okay. But by the very fact that Joseph said it, and it's very unclear as to whether or not Joseph knew what it meant at the time. He certainly knew what it meant at the end, but whether or not he fully understood what it meant at the time. It's clear that his brothers didn't know what it meant, because the way that they took it is, are you saying that you're going to reign over us?

Now, in one sense, they're right, but in another sense, they're completely wrong. Now, I want you to think about what's just happened. Joseph has a dream which God gave him. He speaks that dream to his brothers, which he could have kept quiet about, because if it's going to happen, it's going to happen whether or not you say it or not, okay? Or is that true? My argument is it actually took the very action of Joseph speaking this dream for it all to unfold, because if he kept quiet, his brothers wouldn't have responded the way that they did. It's the very fact that Joseph didn't keep quiet that meant the dream went into overdrive. It began to happen. So I want to point out a few obvious things, and it's this, that the brothers' interpretation of the dream is both correct and incorrect. It is true that in the end, Joseph will reign over them, but not in the way that they think he will, okay? They're not, they don't have their mind on the end. They think this is immediate. You saying that you, the youngest brother, think that you can reign over me. Now, Joseph would eventually reign, but he would reign in a time of famine when he would keep his brothers alive in Egypt. That's what the reign will actually look like, but the brothers don't take it that way. They think that it's going to be some kind of perhaps dictatorial reign. But in the end, Genesis 50 verse 18, the brothers come to Egypt and they even bow down before Joseph, calling themselves servants of him. In other words, you have the very fulfillment of the dream that brothers come, they bow down before Joseph, but Joseph says to them, do not fear, am I in the place of God? In other words, you don't bow before me, I'm your brother. Only bow before God, okay? This is what Joseph is saying, that okay, it's right to bow, but you're bowing before the wrong person. Am I in the place of God? Am I to be bowed to? No, get up. You bow to God, not to me.

So the very reign of Joseph that they hated him for is the very reign of Jesus that actually saves them in the end. It's the very reign that keeps them alive. It's the very thing that turns out for their benefit. In fact, if I was a fly on the wall, you might wonder if these brothers were a little bit forward thinking and going, hey, isn't it good that we did sell him off to Egypt after all?

Right? I mean, if you're logically thinking this through, the brothers' actions meant that their own actions led to the fact that in the end, they were kept alive. Now, that would be slightly too simplistic of an understanding, but here's the less obvious one, and one that we need to realize.

Whatever we're dealing with in life, we're always dealing with God. Joseph is in Egypt in order to keep thousands of people alive. Joseph is in Egypt in order to keep his brothers alive. Why? Because God promised that the descendants of Abraham, of which Jacob was, and Jacob's sons were, and Joseph is, would flourish into great nations, a great nation.

[25 : 17] But that could only happen if they're kept alive. And so God is keeping his promise to Abraham in the very fact that he gave Joseph this dream. Now, here's the thing. Did God know that when he gave Joseph the dream that his brothers would act the way that they did?

Of course. Because that's how God got Joseph to Egypt. God didn't cause the brothers to act in that way. But God will bring things into your life to see how you respond to them. God is able to bring out your true colors every day. And it only takes a little opportunity, and to see how you respond to that opportunity, to see there's your true colors. There they're coming out. And God uses them, because whatever we're dealing with in life, we're always dealing with God, but God doesn't cause them.

Okay? God doesn't cause them. In other words, the way to think about this theologically in a simple way, but it really does need to be thought about, is that the same sun that hardens the clay softens the snow.

Okay? The same sun that hardens the clay softens the snow. And there is a difference between a shadow and a person. What creates the shadow?

The sun or you? When you're out on a summer's day, and you're walking down the road, and your shadow is in front of you, what creates the shadow? The sun or you? Well, you say, well, without the sun, there would be no shadow. Okay? But without you, there would be no shadow. And this is how we're meant to think of this story. Why did Joseph end up in Egypt? Well, because God is involved. Whatever we're dealing with in life, God is involved. The sun is shining, but shadows are being created because of where lives are placed. Joseph's brothers send Joseph off to Egypt because of their evil intentions, which God used. Which God used. His brothers, by interpreting the dream incorrectly, ended up sending Joseph into Egypt. Yes, by the providence of God, but God used their evil, their sinfulness, in order to fulfill his plan of having Joseph where he wanted him to be.

[27 : 52] Okay? What does this mean? The lessons that come out of it. Well, the first lesson is this, that time and truth go hand in hand. That given enough time, the truth will always come out.

Okay? You know, sometimes you want to be seen as being right, and sometimes you just have to be satisfied, look, I'm not going to be able to prove to you that actually who's right here and who's wrong.

I know who's right and who's wrong, but I'm not going to be able to prove to you. And perhaps you've been in a similar situation where you know before God you're right, but the situation is just not allowing that truth to come out.

Okay? It's just, you're just, right? But the beauty of it is that time and truth go hand in hand. That given enough time, the truth always comes out. So, you know, be patient, sit back. Okay?

That's just the way it works. Why? Because whatever we're dealing with in life, we're always dealing with God. In the same way God uses the sinfulness of men to crucify Jesus, Jesus was crucified by the definite plan of God. You can't separate the two. The sun is shining and the shadows are being made. This is what's happening. God is using the sin of men and women, boys and girls, to fulfill his plan. And we don't like to think about that because we don't think God would work like that. There's a big difference between God using and God causing. God causes no person to sin ever. Ever. But in a world where you have sinful people, you know what it's like. You only have to say something and a person won't write, I'm going to do this now.

[29 : 29] And that's what's happening to Joseph's brothers. Joseph is given a dream by God, and God knows how the brothers will respond to that dream. And it's that very means by which God gets Joseph in the place where he wants him to be. But I want to add, not where Joseph wants to be.

In other words, nobody understands. And God does things without having the need to explain himself. That's a deep challenge because we want God to explain the future for us, where all of this is leading. Ultimately, he does. But the detail's not always the case. But ultimately, it all leads to the end. But what is the end? Well, at the time of Jesus, the rulers didn't understand Jesus at all.

And this is what it says. For if they had, that is, if they had understood what God was doing with Jesus Christ, if they had understood that, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

They wouldn't have done it. If they had understood, they wouldn't have touched Jesus. But they didn't understand. And so they crucified him. And it goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 2, 14, that the natural person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. They are folly to him.

And he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. In other words, the reason why we understand the things that we do is because God makes us understand.

[31 : 02] It's not because we're clever and that we're able to work it out by ourselves. No, God, in his grace, causes us to see. And sometimes over a long period of time. So we're able to say, who killed Jesus and come up with two answers? Who crucified Jesus and come up with two answers?

Well, he was delivered up by the definite plan of God. But he was delivered up by the hands of sinful men. Both is true. Well, who sent Joseph to Egypt? Well, God did. But actually his brothers did.

Both are true. What does this mean? Well, the lesson here should become fairly clear. That just like Joseph's brothers, they only come to see their sin when they come before the person who can eventually save them. And it seems to me that people who misunderstand Jesus, misunderstand what the ruling of Jesus means, reject him. And the same way the brothers misunderstanding the ruling of Joseph rejected him. But in the end, when you actually truly appreciate what that ruling is, that that ruling is there to save you, Joseph's ruling over his brothers actually saves them in the end. Jesus reigning at the right hand of the Father is the Savior who reigns, who is crucified. And yet people who reject that are rejecting the very thing that saves them. Here's the exhortation then. As we read this story or the New Testament story of Jesus, we need to understand what God does through the one person, Joseph, here, and through Jesus in the New Testament. We must also recognize that whatever God does is moving to a definite end, whether you're able to keep up mentally knowing where that is or not. God is also able to do whatever he wants to do without ever explaining himself first. In the end, we can look back on something and go, right, now I know why that happened. Joseph, at the end of his life, was able to look back on all that his brothers did and understand exactly what they did was evil, but understand exactly why God allowed them to do it.

Because God had a good thing in mind. Joseph never wanted to go to Egypt, just like Jonah never wanted to go to Nineveh, but God wanted them there. Because God is doing something in the world, and the way that he does it is through men and women, boys and girls. And ultimately, the greatest work of God in the salvation of sinners at the cross, God sends his son, who unlike Joseph and unlike Jonah, is willingly. He willingly obeys the father in going where he is sent. He willingly does exactly what the father commands, knowing what it's going to entail. He willingly goes. It's only us who are reluctant. It's only us who wants to not do what God wants. And yet we think, like Jonah, we can get away. We can never get away. If we want God's future, then admit now that you can never get away. So as I said last week, all true believers do what the Bible says. All true believers do what the Bible says. And that means not that they necessarily willingly do it, but God is a means of making sure that they do it in the end, because they're God's people.

God will have us where he wants us. And you've got to remember that high standards in the Christian life. It's not a matter of Christian perfectionism. You just think you're perfect. Okay? It's not about that at all. Those who have high standards are those who repent a lot. Okay? High standards are joined with repentance. Okay? The whole idea of perfectionism isn't perfectionism at all. It's repentance.

[35 : 19] repentance. We know what God wants, and we try very, very hard to make sure that our lives are in line with that. And when we're reaching those standards or trying to reach those standards on the basis, we don't get there through being perfect. We only get there through being repentant.

That's what Jonah had to learn, whether he learned it. And Joseph, at the end, understands that he is where he is, and suddenly two things must happen. In this situation now, this new opportunity of the brothers meeting Joseph again are suddenly going to reveal their heart. On the other hand, on the brother's hand, what you have is, will they repent? On Joseph's side, will he forgive? You know, I've said a long time, and I don't know why people find it actually all that difficult to understand, but I'm not going to, it won't stop me from saying it. Sorry is such a very poor word to use in relational terms.

You know, teaching children to say sorry, it's not really that helpful, because it's a bit like trying to pay off your own debt. Asking for forgiveness and forgiving someone is the standard. Okay?

Because if someone says sorry to you, then that means that you can be in a position where you never have to forgive them, or you're never brought to a place where you have to forgive them. And that may mean that you may never forgive them. But it's that very fact of repentance and forgiving them that relates that relationship. If the brothers just came back and said, oh, we're sorry for what we've done. Okay? There's no obligation, or there's no burden on Joseph to say, I forgive you. But if the brothers come back repentant, we're sorry for what we've done. Will you forgive what we have done? Will you be merciful to us? Well, what they're doing is they're admitting their sin, but then that sin now has to be responded to by Joseph. What will Joseph do?

Destroy them or forgive them? So I hope you understand that. I hope that's not, you know, that when I say, you know, don't teach your children to say sorry, I'm not teaching them to be unrepentant. I'm actually teaching them to be repentant in the right way. Okay? And teaching them that asking for forgiveness and receiving forgiveness is the way God says it ought to be done. Not, not sorry. The burden is on both people here in this situation. One needs to ask for forgiveness and the other needs to forgive. Okay? There's a burden here placed at the feet of both people. So here's the final thought as we finish. It should be fairly clear to you where this story leads to in the New Testament. And what should have come to your mind already, but if it hasn't, I'll bring it to your mind, is the bread of life. Jesus is the bread of life.

[38 : 24] Jesus is the one who is rejected by his own people, but in the end is the one who keeps them alive, or rather gives them life. Jesus is the bread of life who is the savior of the world. Like Joseph, he is wrongly accused. Like Joseph, his own people reject him. But like Joseph also, in the end, the rejected one who seeks to reign over is actually the only one who can save. What we see here in the story of Joseph, we see in the story of Jesus. That whatever you're dealing with in life, you are always dealing with God, whether you're aware of it or not. And this is because God needs to make sure that what needs to happen, happens. Some things just need to happen. And God makes sure that they do.

And he will use everything that he chooses to, to make sure what happens, happens the way he wants it to. So understand this, that Jesus' rule over you and over the people out there is not what you may think it is. It is actually the very thing that gives you life. It is the very bread of life. So come and come to Jesus. Amen.