

Dreams, Pits and Slavery
Genesis 37

Friends, things are not looking good are they? From a purely superficial point of view we've just witnessed the consequences of a family feud that would have made the antics of the most dysfunctional families featured on any given Reality TV show seem tame in comparison.

A father seems to favor one son above the rest, the favored son flaunts it in the face of his brothers – almost deliberately antagonizing them with his dreams, and the brothers are so infuriated with the situation that had cooler heads not prevailed, Joseph would surely have been murdered by his brothers and his corpse left to rot and be eaten by wild animals at the bottom of a pit.

And as it turned out, they were only persuaded to abandon their plans for murder and sell him into slavery because it was less incriminating and cleaner – there would be no body to dispose of.

And so at first glance, the first chapter in the story of Joseph ends with a family torn apart, living with secrets and lies and a young man sentenced to a life of slavery.

And if you know a little bit about the family history, the history of the father Jacob, with his brother Esau and their father Isaac, and his father Abraham then you know that this sort of dysfunction runs in the family.

Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright and stole his father's blessing from him, and Isaac, fearing for his life while living among the Philistines, passes his wife off as his sister, which was exactly what his father Abraham had done – twice – to try to save his own life as well.

The apples do not fall far from the trees – right?

And what makes this dysfunction, which we see played out in Jacob's family, even more troubling is that Jacob and his family are the heirs of "The Promise."

Remember that amazing promise which God made with Abraham. *“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* (Gen 12:2-3)

This promise, and the land, and the covenant that go along with it, now belong to Jacob and his family.

And at first glance it is difficult to imagine how a family, plagued by infighting, living with deception, and devastated by loss is on their way to becoming a great nation through whom which all peoples on earth will be blessed!

They can't seem to get their act together – there is no way a house so divided can stand and become a great nation. Not to mention, if this is how they treat each other... how would they treat other peoples in a way that could be considered a blessing?

But what is most disturbing is God's apparent absence. After all He is the one who made the promise, and promised to fulfill it - but at first glance these recent turn of events do not give any indication that God is at work keeping his promise, and I'm sure that part of Jacob's grief over the loss of Joseph has to do with wondering why His God has allowed this to happen.

And that is of course precisely where we start to relate to this story, because friends – if you haven't asked that same question already in your life – at some point you will.

At some point you will experience circumstances in your life that will cause you to wonder where is God in all of this and how can He allow this to happen – in fact it doesn't even have to something you experience personally – many people wonder and ask this question every time some new catastrophe hits the news.

Where is God in all this and why is He allowing this to happen?

And this question might be even more painful and disturbing for those of us who have responded in faith to the good news that God loves us and has sent his son Jesus to die for our sin and forgive us and give us new life and blessings.

Losing our job, getting into a bad accident, having our savings wiped out in an economic crash, finding out you have a terminal illness, or losing a loved one... Why does God allow these things to happen to those who have been assured they belong to Him and are loved by Him?

Or even worse – why does God allow things to happen which contradict or prevent you from doing whatever specific thing He has called you to do in service to him?

Where is God in all this and why is He allowing this to happen?

Are you with me friends? Do you know what I'm talking about? Can you relate to this aspect of the story?

If you can - then let's take another look, a closer look, at God's apparent absence in the first chapter of the story of Joseph.

And as we do, we will see that while God is never mentioned, his fingerprints are actually all over this story.

We will see that God is working in mysterious ways in these circumstances, and that His promises are part of His plans, plans which He has been orchestrating, to fulfill His purposes, long before He ever revealed them to us.

So let's go back and look at how the first chapter has ended and what events have led to Joseph being sold as a slave in Egypt, but let's look at them in reverse order.

So the first event is Joseph is a slave in Egypt. The second event is Joseph traveling by caravan loaded with Spices, balm and myrrh. The third event is Joseph's brothers deciding to sell him into slavery while eating a meal. The fourth event is Joseph being thrown into a dry cistern – a place that should have had water in it but didn't.

The fifth event is Joseph being stripped of his robe that distinguished him and made Him the supervisor of his brothers. The sixth event is Joseph travelling through the open country and wandering around. The seventh event is Joseph leaving home in the land which God promised to his family.

And the reason we've looked at them in reverse order is that we will see the same series of events happening in this order some four hundred years later when God delivered the nation of Israel from Egypt – in essence undoing what had happened to Joseph and bringing something much greater out of it.

So let's run through this again...

Joseph is a slave in Egypt – his descendants, the nation of Israel are slaves in Egypt

Joseph arrives in Egypt in a caravan with spices, balm and myrrh – which incidentally are important ingredients for Egyptians in the practice of embalming the dead.

When Joseph dies, his body is embalmed, and preserved so that He can be taken out of Egypt back to the Promised Land.

Joseph's brothers decide to enslave Joseph while eating a meal of bread together - their descendants would be freed from being slaves while eating the first Passover meal together.

Joseph was thrown into a dry cistern – the nation of Israel goes through the Red Sea on dry ground

Joseph was stripped of his special robe which elevated his status among his brother – Aaron is given a special robe – a priestly garment when He becomes the High Priest, mediator of God's presence with Israel, because God had chosen Israel among the nations to be his own people.

Joseph was wandering around in the countryside – the nation of Israel wandered in the wilderness for Forty years

Joseph leaves his home in the Land which God had given to Abraham Isaac and Jacob – Israel returns to the Land which God had given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

So, all the major events in the life of Joseph which resulted in his enslavement in Egypt are reversed as it were - when God brings his descendants and family out of Egypt some four hundred years later.

So God's fingerprints are all over this.

Now this doesn't make what happened in to Joseph and his family any easier to experience, nor does it justify what his brothers did.

And when we are in the midst of something like this we don't have the kind of perspective that we are afforded with Joseph's story that allows us in hindsight to see God's fingerprints when it appears that He is absent.

However the good news is that by learning to see how God was present in Joseph's circumstances we can learn that God works in this way, and then when we are going through similar events we are able to draw from the witness of scripture and trust that God is at work also in our circumstances.

That's why the apostle Paul writes in Romans 15:4 *"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope."*

Hope even when it seems like there is no hope – because we know how to endure the circumstances when it seems like God is absent, we're trusting and we are confident that God will take our circumstances and bring something good out of them – in his time.

Even though we may not have the hindsight and perspective on our own situation yet – we know that things are not truly as they seem to be, because we've seen God do this in the lives of others – like Joseph.

So, God's providence and how He works in mysterious ways are a big part of what we need to receive from this story.

However – as you may recall, a couple weeks back we looked at Sola Scriptura – by Scripture Alone and learned that at the heart of being a disciple of Christ is the confession that all scripture is able to make us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ.

And so there must be more to Joseph's story in this regard – we must look for the ways in which it points us to put our faith in Jesus Christ.

The most obvious way is acknowledging the part that Joseph's life and story plays in the larger story of the scripture.

We will see how God used and worked through the injustices and circumstances which seemed to dog Joseph, to eventually fulfill His promise to Abraham and bring blessings to all nations, first through Joseph, then through the nation of Israel, and finally the Christ and then through the Body of Christ... us

It's all connected and tied together and in fact our story is a continuation of the larger story that Joseph is a part of – and over the next month we'll see more and more how that is going to play out – I don't want to get ahead of myself in the story just yet.

However within the first chapter that we've looked at today it is Joseph's upstanding character, his relationship with his father, and his persecution by his brothers that points us to Christ.

Now normally when we read this story we tend to label Joseph as a bit of a spoiled brat and we think that Jacob is guilty of playing favorites, and so we lay some of the blame for how the first chapter turned out on them.

If Joseph hadn't been such a tattler, if Jacob hadn't played favorites, etc... etc...

However, if we are to have our faith strengthened in Christ then we ought to see Joseph's willingness to give his father a

bad report regarding his brothers not as tattling, but as loyalty and faithfulness.

What you may not know is that three or four chapters earlier, the eldest brother – Reuben, the one who should be the leader and the epitome of responsibility and loyalty to his father- tries to usurp his father by sleeping with one of Jacob’s concubines.

So Reuben is disqualified as a faithful loyal son.

And that role passes to the second born and third born sons – Simeon and Levi – who had also disqualified themselves by taking revenge on an entire city.

It happened because the prince of that city had forced himself upon their sister and then presumptuously insisted that she be given to him as his wife. Simeon and Levi were quietly outraged – and agreed to the marriage on the condition that every male in the city must be circumcised as they were.

The prince agreed and all the males were circumcise, which made them vulnerable while they recovered from such a sensitive procedure – at which point Simeon and Levi attacked the city and killed them all and took all their wives and children and possessions.

Jacob was furious with them because their reckless actions could have started a blood feud with the Canaanites and they had to relocate from Shechem to Hebron.

So – the fact that Joseph, as the second youngest son had the courage and fortitude to report honestly about his brothers to his father was commendable – and Jacob could see that in this son there was the kind of character needed to be trustworthy and loyal and see that the will of his father was carried out.

This is why Jacob sets Joseph over his brothers by giving him an ornate robe – or better translated - a coat with sleeves – not at all suited to doing hard labor, but for the role of overseer.

The garment is not a sentimental gift of a doting father but the elevation of Joseph to the position of overseer in the family business because Jacob sees his son is absolutely loyal to him, and this is important because Jacob is the heir of Abraham's promise and he wants to see that promise and blessing passed on to a suitable heir when he is gone.

I wonder if we've misconstrued Jacob's love and promotion of Joseph of Joseph as favoritism – when in fact he is doing what is best for the entire family.

He sees Joseph has all the qualities to be the kind of man who had the potential to become a great nation, and perhaps lead his brothers – this is why he only rebukes Joseph for the dream where He bows down to his son – that's inappropriate and out of order.

However, even there the scripture says he kept the matter in his mind – will he live to see Joseph surpass him in such a way that his wisdom and years will bow to his son?

So, Joseph's upstanding character, his loyalty and faithfulness to his father and his suitability to inherit the Promise to Abraham, they all foreshadow Jesus' righteousness and loyalty and faithfulness to Yahweh – His father, and his suitability to be the one faithful and loyal covenant partner – and fulfill the Promise to Abraham.

And when we see Joseph in such a light – we need to understand that his character is portrayed in this way not so that we can moralize it and say – here, when we face such situations we ought to be like Joseph.

No, it's so that Joseph's righteousness will point us to the ultimate righteousness of Jesus Christ.

And friends, if we find ourselves in this story, apart from relating to why God allows circumstances to happen this way, we ought to find ourselves relating to Joseph's brothers.

For who among us does not feel ourselves resisting when the issue of loyalty and faithfulness and obedience to God is brought up?

Friends, when God says to us; “I want you to do this...” is not our first response to want to do the opposite? Or perhaps say – ok, but... as long as...

When God says “no” to our requests – is not our first response to question why God wouldn’t give us what we ask for?

And ultimately isn’t part of us what’s really at the root of why it is so difficult to go through tough circumstances where we don’t see God at work?

But friends - It seems that the only kind of salvation which is truly effective, and brings about the kinds of blessings that God has in mind, is a salvation that comes about through suffering and sacrifice.

When Jacob says to Joseph “go and check on your brothers” Joseph replies “very well” and I’m going to suggest that Joseph knew full well how his brothers felt about him and that they would not receive him well.

Yet this is what Joseph knew he must do if his is to oversee the family and be faithful to his father – if his brothers were up to no good they must be stopped, and called back to live in faithfulness to their father.

Little does Joseph know that it is only through their betrayal of him, and having to live with the consequences over the years that will eventually result in a change of heart towards him – but again let’s not get ahead of ourselves in the story.

The point here is that Joseph is portrayed as a willing servant of his father, who is betrayed and sold in his efforts to save his family.

And just when it seems like that salvation is impossible because Joseph has been sent away – that is precisely the

place where God is at work – in that suffering and sacrifice – working towards salvation.

And if that doesn't quicken your hearts and increase our faith and love towards our Lord Jesus Christ... If you don't recognize the gospel in this friends – then hear it for the first time! And believe it and become wise for salvation in Jesus Christ.

And be encouraged, endure whatever circumstances you might be going through – because the God who saved you through Christ's suffering, pain, and abandonment is working with whatever you will go through to bring salvation into the lives of others.

So, this first chapter of Joseph's story has ended in a bad place – and we acknowledge that and we're going stay with that.

Because the message of God's providence must not be used to push away or downplay the pain and the suffering and misfortune that other people are going through.

Instead we need to allow the Providence of God to help us embrace it, share it, enter in to it – so that God might bring Christ's salvation – a salvation through suffering and sacrifice- into that suffering and so continue to fulfill the Promise to Abraham to bless all nations.

Friends – things are not looking so good – but that's alright.

Amen.