

Genesis (2011) 37D

- As I promised early in our study of Joseph and the *toledot* of Jacob, the sovereignty of God takes a leading role in the story
 - We're watching Jacob and his sons making decisions, devising schemes, following the sin in their hearts
 - But the real actor driving our narrative forward is the Lord Himself
 - He's fulfilling promises and deciding outcomes to fit His purposes
 - While men plan their ways, God is directing their steps
 - We've also focused on Joseph as a picture of Christ
 - From detail to detail, we find parallels between Joseph's life to the Lord, whether to the Lord's first coming or increasingly to His return
 - And from this point forward in the story of Joseph, these two stories merge in a powerful way
 - Scripture tells us that the Father saw fit to crush His Son, the One He loved, and He did so for the good of Creation

[Is. 53:10](#) But the LORD was pleased

To **crush** Him, putting Him to grief;
If He would render Himself as a guilt offering,
He will see His offspring,
He will prolong His days,
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.

- The Father crushed His own Son on the cross to bring about a glorious outcome, that is the redemption of Creation from sin
- The suffering of Jesus was a necessary step to that good and proper end
 - Likewise, the story of Joseph is moving in a disturbing direction
 - Joseph will suffer greatly in the cause of righteousness

- He will do so for no cause of his own, but like Job, he will suffer unjustly for God's good eternal purposes
- Just as Christ did for all of us
- So let's keep these two truths in mind
 - God is in control, causing all things to happen as He intends
 - And the suffering that results is part of a larger plan to bring good things to Joseph, Israel and the world

[Gen. 37:29](#) Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments.

[Gen. 37:30](#) He returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is not there; as for me, where am I to go?"

- We remember from last week how Reuben was secretly working behind the scenes to manipulate his brothers so he could save Joseph
 - Reuben was the oldest, so he would be held personally responsible for anything that happened to the brothers
 - When he learned that the brothers were intent on killing Joseph, he determined to secretly set Joseph free from the pit and send him home
 - Reuben's decision may have reflected his love for Joseph and for his father
 - But more likely, Reuben was acting to save his own skin
 - There was great potential that Jacob would hold Joseph's death against Reuben
 - But now we learn that Judah and the brothers sold Joseph to the slave traders while Reuben wasn't around
 - So as Reuben returns to the pit to save his brother, he discovers that Joseph was gone
 - Reuben immediately reacts with dismay, tearing his clothes

- This may seem like a strange tradition to us, but men in the east commonly rip clothing as a display of intense grief
- Reuben is severely stressed over his discovery and he confronts his brothers
 - They probably related the story to him, of how they sold Joseph while Reuben was away
- Reuben's first thought reveals his true concerns in this matter
 - Reuben asks what will become of him
 - Not "What will become of Joseph or Jacob"
 - Reuben's real concern is for how it will go for him when Jacob learns that Joseph was sold by his own brothers
- The story never tells us where Reuben went during the time when Joseph was sold
 - He may have returned to the flock for a time, or went in search of water
 - There are any number of scenarios that could explain his absence for a time
 - Whatever the earthly reason, we know the real cause for his absence was the Lord
 - The Lord, knowing Reuben's heart was inclined to save his brother, stepped in to prevent this from happening
 - He caused Reuben to be gone when the slave traders arrived
 - And then brought Reuben back after it was too late to intervene
- Can you look upon negative experiences in your life with an attitude that acknowledges God will sometimes work in this way?
 - Sometimes, the Lord will allow pain and suffering and disappointment and even heartbreak in our lives when it is the best way to bring about the eternal good He is intent on producing

- While we we may perceive those times as evidence that God doesn't love us or is "out to get us"…
 - The truth will always be very different
- Consider Reuben's situation
 - He thought he was doing the right thing
 - He wanted to free his brother so he could save his own skin
 - He might have thought that surely God would support him in that plan, since it was the right thing to do
 - But in reality, it was not God's desire to free Joseph
 - On the contrary, Joseph was destined to go into Egypt
 - And the brothers' evil plan was the mechanism God was intent on using to bring that result about
 - We too may find ourselves working for an outcome we assume is the right thing, the thing God Himself would want
 - But then for some reason the plan falls through
 - Remember, the Lord is still on the throne, which means He hasn't lost touch
 - He has reasons for what happens in each of our lives
 - And acknowledging that reality doesn't mean we've dismissed our circumstances as simply a matter of fate and outside our understanding
 - On the contrary, recognizing God works through difficulties will train us to ask why more often and seek that understanding as God permits
 - Knowing God is at work leads us to align with that work rather than to fight against it
- I believe we can group the opinions of Christians concerning God's sovereignty into essentially one of three groups

- There are those who believe that God created the world and the universe, and then like someone spinning a top, He now stands back to watch it work itself to conclusion
 - And like the spinning top, God's hand never again touches His creation or intervenes in its course
- There is a second group who believe that God created the world and He continues to intervene in it to change the course of history from time to time
 - He intervenes in both natural and supernatural ways, and always for good purposes, ultimately to bring events to His desired outcome
 - Implicit in this second view is the principle that some things lie outside God's control – outside His sovereignty
 - For example, this view will see evil as an independent force, one that operates apart from God's desires and intentions and against His will
 - Many would also agree that man himself operates in freedom from the direct control of God – that God would not intervene to change the mind or will of man
- Finally, our third group are those whose view of God's sovereignty sees no limit; All things were created by Him and are sustained by Him
 - He doesn't just intervene to redirect history from time to time, He writes every page of history
 - He directs all things, controls all things, governs all events on Earth so that everything may happen according to a preordained plan
 - One example of this view can be seen in the 1689 Confession of faith for the historic Reformed Baptist movement in London:

God who, in infinite power and wisdom, has created all things, upholds, directs, controls, and governs them, both animate and inanimate, great and small, by a providence supremely wise and holy, and in accordance with His infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable decisions of His will. He fulfills the purposes for which He created them, so that His wisdom, power and justice, together with His infinite goodness and mercy, might be praised and glorified. Nothing happens by chance or outside the sphere of God's providence. As God is the First Cause of all events, they happen immutable and infallibly according to His foreknowledge and decree, to which they stand related. Yet by His

providence God controls them, that second causes, operating either as fixed laws, or freely, or in dependence upon other causes, play their part in bringing them about.

- Some might criticize those who hold this view as merely adhering to fatalism, to which Charles Spurgeon, himself a member of this third group, replied:

What is fate? Fate is this - Whatever is, must be. But there is a difference between that and Providence. Providence says, Whatever God ordains, must be; but the wisdom of God never ordains anything without a purpose. Everything in this world is working for some great end. Fate does not say that. . . . There is all the difference between fate and Providence that there is between a man with good eyes and a blind man.

- I believe it is fair to say that most unbelievers today likely fall into the first of these three groups (assuming they are not atheists)
 - They are content to acknowledge the existence of some higher power
 - But their pride and hard hearts will never allow them to concede that this higher power actually has influence over them, much less controls their lives and their future
 - Sadly, even a few Christians fall into this group
- Most Christians, on the other hand, probably fall into Group 2
 - They are aware of God's ultimate control over the larger events of the world and history
 - They believe in His prophecy, but they often attribute it to foreknowledge – His knowing the future – rather than to His providence – His determining the future
 - But their belief in His sovereignty turns to uncertainty when deciding where to draw the line in His control over smaller matters of everyday life, or over our personal choices or over the effects of sin and evil
- Few Christians today, however, are willing to venture into Group 3
 - In fact, few have even heard it suggested that there is no event God *doesn't* control
 - Not even the smallest meaningless events of our everyday lives lie outside His power and plan

- All personal decisions, whether impulsive or well-considered, operate under God's sovereignty
- Even our sins, though God is not their author, still fall into an overall plan God is orchestrating
- And yet, when we all consider some great tragedy in our lives or in the world, are not many people, both unbeliever and Christian, tempted to ask "How could a loving God allow such things?"
 - Ironically, when we ask such a question, we have unknowingly placed ourselves – if even for just a moment – into Group 3
 - Even just by asking the question we are implying that we believe God could have changed the course of events to bring about a different outcome
 - That He could have prevented the sons of Jacob from selling Joseph
 - That He could have ensured Reuben was present when the transaction took place so as to stop it from proceeding
 - And of course, He could have done that very thing, because the third viewpoint is the Biblical view of God – the Lord and Creator God
 - And therefore, the fact that the Lord took Reuben out of the way even though Reuben was trying to save his brother simply tells us that the Lord desired something greater than Joseph's freedom
 - Just as Jesus Himself sought for something greater than to preserve His comfort and earthly life
- Reuben hasn't acknowledged this fact yet, so he's crying "woe is me" and trying to protect himself from blame as he discovers his brother's absence
 - Poor Reuben
 - He seems to make the wrong decision at every turn
 - First, he violates his father's trust and honor by sleeping with the concubine
 - Now he tries to do what he thinks is right thing but he's still working against God

- He's an example of a man living entirely out of touch with the Lord and the Lord's work
- There will be only two times Reuben tries to do the right thing
 - And in both cases, it's done out of selfish motives and consequently they are both opposite of what God wants
 - The first example comes here in the selling of Joseph
 - The second comes later in the matter of Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin

[Gen. 37:31](#) So they took Joseph's tunic, and slaughtered a male goat and dipped the tunic in the blood;

[Gen. 37:32](#) and they sent the varicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, "We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not."

[Gen. 37:33](#) Then he examined it and said, "It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!"

[Gen. 37:34](#) So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days.

[Gen. 37:35](#) Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, "Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son." So his father wept for him.

- Because Reuben doesn't want to be blamed for Joseph's disappearance, he concocts a story that Joseph was eaten by an animal before ever arriving to Dotham
 - They slaughter a male goat and dip the tunic in his blood
 - The goal was to make it appear as if Joseph had met with some tragic fate
 - His unique robe is so distinctive, it will serve as conclusive proof for Jacob of Joseph's death
 - And yet it appears to happen without the sons' involvement whatsoever
 - The death of the goat draws an interesting parallel to Christ's own death
 - In Leviticus 16, the Law provides for a certain ritual on the day of atonement
 - Two goats are involved

- One goat has the sins of Israel placed upon it, and then it is sent outside the city and outside the assembly of Israel
- The second is killed, and its blood is poured on the altar in the temple
- Jesus is pictured by both goats
 - Jesus is the One crucified outside the city walls carrying the sin of the world
 - And Jesus is the One who's blood is spilled to atone for the guilt of men and cleanse the altar in Heaven
- In this scene, we find both goats
 - Joseph pictures Christ sent outside the assembly of Israel, carrying the weight of his brother's sin
 - While the other goat is sacrificed in an effort to cover the brother's guilt by means of its blood
- When the brothers get home, they meet their father and send for the tunic
 - When the text says they sent for the robe, it means they asked one of their servants to produce it
 - They act as if someone had come upon it, and they were merely reporting the find to their father
 - Of course, they know Jacob will immediately recognize the robe and notice the blood and draw the obvious conclusion
 - Jacob produces his own lie
 - Jacob concludes that a wild beast has devoured his beloved son
 - No one even has to suggest the storyline...Jacob fills in the blanks for himself
 - Remember how Jacob obtained what he wanted from his father?
 - He presented himself as Esau and deceived his father by use of a goat's skin
 - Now we see him deceiving himself, so to speak, with goat's blood

- Do you see the hand of God visiting Jacob's sins upon himself? I do
- Jacob is understandably crushed by the supposed loss of Joseph
 - Like Reuben did earlier, Jacob rips his clothing and cries in distress
 - His mourning goes on for many days, and he refuses to be consoled by anyone
 - He even laments that he will go down to Sheol in his mourning
 - Sheol is a reference to the place of departed souls prior to Christ's death and resurrection
 - Before Christ's death and payment for sin, men couldn't enter into the Lord's presence upon death
 - So they were held temporarily in a place called Sheol, which scripture describes as a combination of two places
 - A good side for the saints and a bad place for the rest
 - Obviously, Jacob would expect to be held in the blessed place
 - So the point of his statement is simply that he is so sad for Joseph that he feels he will die from mourning
- I wonder if the depths of Jacob's mourning surprised his sons?
 - Did his suffering cause regret? Did they have second thoughts about what they did?
 - Jacob's response must have been a powerful reminder to his sons that sin has consequences
 - And those consequences extend far beyond ourselves
 - They wanted Joseph gone so that they could feel better
 - But they caused their father untold pain, to say nothing of Joseph's misery
 - How did Joseph feel sitting in that caravan in chains as he made the journey to Egypt?

- How many tears did he shed reflecting on how his own flesh and blood betrayed him in this way?
- Our sins have the potential to bring terrible consequences on us, and others, even many years later
 - We can't begin to understand what kind of seeds we are sowing as we sin
 - And by the time we understand those consequences, it will be too late to reverse them
 - Better to avoid the sin in the first place, in fear of the Lord and in fear of what kind of future misery we are preparing for ourselves and others
- So as we leave Chapter 37 and prepare to enter Chapter 38 next time, let's consider where we stand
 - Joseph is on his way to Egypt, the brothers are guilty of great sin, and Jacob is the victim of the seeds he sowed decades earlier
 - Above everything, God is at work to bring out His promises to Abraham
 - The family is about to be moved into Egypt as God declared
 - But there is a second reason for sending Israel into Egypt
 - The second reason is still an issue of sin in the family of Israel, but sin of a different sort
 - In Chapter 38 we'll discover why the nation must spend centuries in Egypt in slavery
 - And once again, the reason traces back to a promise of God and an eternal work God is intent on accomplishing for the sake of His glory and His Son