

Seeing God in Genesis

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[0 : 00] Okay, if you have been a Christian for any length of time, I'm sure you would agree that as we mature and as we grow up in the Christian faith, then what we desire in a worship service, it tends to change. I'll say that again to make sure that we all have it. That as we mature in the Christian faith, as we grow up, what we tend to desire in a worship service or from a worship service, it tends to change. I'm sure you see what I mean. When we're young in the faith and when we're immature, isn't it the case that largely our desires in church, they tend to center around ourselves? When we're immature in the faith, isn't that right?

We come to church and we want to be entertained. We want to be the ones who call the shots. We want to hear only what is immediately relevant to our own lives. But how does that develop as we mature? Does our desire not move ever closer towards this God of ours that we worship and adore? Isn't that right? That instead of being preoccupied with ourselves, a mature believer comes to church, or should I say ought to come to church, desperate to focus on, to hear from, and to worship the one true and living God? Well, as we turn back to the second half of this chapter that we've read, I genuinely think you and I should be greatly encouraged and enthused. Why? Because in this portion of Scripture this morning, we learn about our God. Yes, in Genesis 37, in a chapter that on the surface of things, it speaks about who? Jacob, Joseph and his brothers? Yes. But as we dig into it, it's an amazing thing to consider that we will be taught by God, but also taught about God, about Him, about His character, and about His work. A section of Scripture, of course, about our God. And I think this morning in our time together, we will see three things here. We will see something of God's care. We will see something of God's sacrifice, and we'll see something of God's providence. I'll give you those again so you've got the agenda for our time together. We see God's care here. We see something of a sacrifice, but we also see something here of God's providence.

It's providence. So, if you've got a copy of Holy Scripture, then please make sure you've turned back to Genesis 37 and from verse 12. Let's think first of all about God's care. Now, I'm sure that the parents in the room and the grandparents here, you will be able to empathize with me, but I find myself forever telling my children not to stare. They will see some strange things on the streets of Dundee, and they will pause and gawk. And I'm always telling them, stop it. Stop staring. But my rules, especially with my children, they tend to be there to be broken. And so, actually, this morning, that's what I want to do. In order for us to see, first of all, something of God's care, I want you and me, I want us to stare. And I want us to stare at two people to see something of God's care. I want us to stare, first of all, at Jacob, then to move our gaze, and then to stare at Joseph.

[3 : 46] You with me? We stare at two people. We stare, first of all, at Jacob, and then we stare at Joseph to see something of God's care. So, first of all, Jacob. Now, if you've got your Bible and you look at the start of this section, don't you agree that it's actually quite similar to the way that the first section that we read begins? Do you notice that? So, just as in verse 2, so here in verse 12, where are Joseph's 11 brothers? Do you notice where they are? They're out in the fields.

The 11 brothers are out tending sheep. But what happens here in the second section? Do you notice that Jacob, the dad, sends Joseph to his brothers? Now, you may be thinking that is not a particularly spectacular detail. Jacob sends Joseph to the 11 brothers. My granny would have said that's not a detail that sets the heather on fire in any way. Jacob sends Joseph to his brothers. But maybe there's a spark when you notice the location that's mentioned in verse 12. Do you see where the brothers are?

In verse 12, they are in Shechem. Does that mean anything to us? It will do. If you just turn back, just for a second, to Genesis 34, just for a brief moment. If you've got a Bible, just quickly turn to Genesis 34. Just have a little skim of that. If you don't have a Bible, let me just tell you what

everybody else is looking at in Genesis 34, okay? So, in Genesis 34, we learn of a daughter of Jacob. We've been looking at the brothers. It's a sister of these 11 brothers. Now, in Genesis 34, what happens is that this sister, Dinah, is defiled. Isn't she? Genesis 34, she's abused. Now, when these brothers hear about this, they take matters really quickly into their own hands.

Okay, what do they do? Some of the brothers, do we know the story? Can we remember the story? What do the brothers do? Not only do they trick the men and the warriors of Shechem, but listen, if you don't know the story, what they do, some of the brothers, is they slaughter all of the warriors, the men of Shechem. And it's an impulsive act. And it's an act, actually, that the father Jacob really condemns from them. Now, friends, if you've got the Bible and you turn back to our section in Genesis 37, you notice you don't have far to go. You notice that that event with Dinah has just occurred.

So, don't we all now see why Jacob is concerned? Don't we see it? Like, where are my sons? They're in Shechem. Okay, all of the warriors, all of the men there are slaughtered, but could not other groups take matters into their own hands and seek revenge here? Do you see why he's concerned?

[6 : 51] And isn't it amazing? If you just pause and think about it, isn't it amazing to consider what he does? Despite the fact that those brothers have rebelled against him in Shechem, despite the fact that those 11 have dishonored their father's name in Shechem, what does he do? He sends to them. He sends to them, Joseph. He sends to them his favorite. He sends to them his beloved son.

Now, perhaps it's the case this morning that the lesson in that about our God is really evident to you. Perhaps it is, but I think we should rest on it just for a moment, shouldn't we? I think we all know how our society tries to portray our God, the God of the Bible just now. Like, if you are on Twitter, you know this, that any engagement with media today will show you the same thing. How is God portrayed?

God is portrayed as being this mean, horrible old grandfather, isn't he? God is portrayed, the God of the Bible today, portrayed as being just critical and just immediately impatient and just overly judgmental. Now, we as his people, we know that's just ludicrous. It's ridiculous, that portrayal. But isn't it the case that even as his people, sometimes you and I, we slip into a similar misconception about our God, don't we? Like, when we think about our God in light of our feelings and our sin, do we not sometimes slip into thinking and assuming that God spends all of his time impatient with us because of our feelings and because of our sin? If you're anything like me, you sometimes think, oh, God just must be constantly disappointed with me, surely just consistently angry, such is my feelings, such is my sin. If you're a Christian and you really are this morning focusing on Jacob, are you not reminded immediately here in Genesis of what your God is really like, Christian friend? Our Heavenly Father is a God who loves you so much. Yes, despite your rebellion against him, and yes, despite your dishonoring of his name, God loves you so much. What has he done?

You can see it here. He has, out of concern and love, he has sent his only beloved son for you. Surely, you can't read Genesis 37 and not have John 3 16 ringing in your ears.

[9 : 42] You look at Jacob, don't you? You look at this father's concern and of what, yes, God so loved us. He so loved the world. What did he do? You see it here. It's a mirror image.

He gave us, he sent to us his son. So, we look, we stare, do we, at Jacob and we see something of God the Father's love. But then, hopefully, you remember what we were going to do, do you?

We move our vision. We stare now at Joseph. Now, as we do that, as you and I look at Joseph here, I think it's good to call to mind what we learned in that previous section. In the first reading, if you followed that first reading earlier on, perhaps you noticed the intense hatred that there was for Joseph from his brothers. Like, again, if you've got Scripture in front of you, you'll see it, that because of his status, remember, he's the beloved son, isn't he?

And because of his dreams, verse 4, his brothers hate him. Wait for it. Verse 5, his brothers hate him even more. Stick with me. Verse 8, they hate him even more than that.

And then by verse 11, they're just filled with just envy and jealousy. So, you're with me. The brothers, oh, they're filled with this passionate loathing for Joseph. Now, bear that in mind. If you keep that in mind, in light of that, isn't it amazing to see what you do in this text? Like, the first thing, just look with me, please, if you've got a Bible, at the end of verse 13, and notice Joseph's willingness. Now, think about his situation. So, he is being put yourself in the situation even. He has been asked to go a long way to a very dangerous place. And to whom? Think about it. He's been

asked to go to a group of people who hate him. And how does he respond?

[11:51] Actually depends on what version of the Bible you've got in front of you. So, the NIV says, do you see it in verse 13, in the end of verse 13? Joseph's response is very well. That could almost be read as though there's a reluctance there. That's not right. So, actually, it's more accurate to see. Listen to this. He's been asked to go to a group of people that hate him, travel a long way, dangerous place. And he says, here I am. Here I am. Send me.

Look, I'll go. So, there's the willingness. But then maybe you also noticed the determination here as well. Because if you followed it logically, did you notice what happens? He gets to Shechem and his brothers aren't there. So, what does he do? Let me just put it to you. What would you do? Can I tell you just what I would do? I'm going home. Absolutely.

If my dad sends me on a really dangerous mission to a people who hate me, and I get there, and they're not there. Dad, I tried, man. You know, I tried, but they weren't there in Shechem. I did my best.

Do you notice it's not like that? Do you notice he learns that his brothers are off in Dotham, and what does he do? Joseph pursues them, and he goes after them. Does that amaze you?

Look, if it doesn't, it ought to, because I tried to chart the geography of this, and the journey that Joseph takes here to pursue his brothers is the equivalent of you and I after this service. Not right now. After this service, it's the equivalent of you and I going to walk, and walking out of the doors of Bon Accord and going on a walk to the center of Dundee.

[14:15] You fancy that? That's the equivalent. That's the distance that Joseph pursues these brothers. And so, if you saw, surely you did, but if you saw a shadow in Jacob of God the Father's care, don't you right now see a shadow of God the Son's care here? Like, if you are new to Christianity, you need to understand what has happened. So, before the creation of this world, what has happened in what the theologians call the covenant of redemption, what has happened is that God the Son has willingly embraced and accepted this mission from his Father.

willingly accepted. Now, you think about it, though it was a mission to go to a people who hate God, filled with enmity for God, though it was to a people who hate God the Son, what does God the Son do? In the hallways of eternity, hand up, here I am, I will go, send me. Isn't it beautiful? Don't we see something, a picture of it here? God the Son, He has come to seek and to save the lost. So, God's care. Secondly, more briefly, don't worry, God's sacrifice, God's sacrifice. I think it's probably without doubt that as a group of people in this hall, in this church, that we have joined much of the world in being appalled and outraged by some of the stuff that we've seen going on in Ukraine in the last few weeks, we've been appalled.

Surely that's the case. I can say that with a lot of confidence, that we are appalled by what we've seen. I think one aspect of that is our revulsion at particular details of what have gone on. You know what it's like in a situation like this. You're on your phone or on the TV or whatever, even if you're old school and you're like a big broadsheet paper. You're reading about the atrocities and what happens, you know this, don't you, that there'll be a little phrase or a little detail that will jump out at you and will bring the atrocity home to your heart. You know what that's like. You'll learn of a tactic one day that the Russians, you know, pursue or you'll read of the casualties on one particular day and there's a little phrase, yes, a little phrase that just bring the nature of the atrocity home to us in a new way. Well, as we're moving through this, we come now to the just the gross mistreatment that Joseph faces at the hands of the brothers and it is complicated. It is complicated, this mistreatment. And so I think the best way of us handling it is just by noticing just a few little phrases that seem to stand out from the rest of the text that really should bring this mistreatment home to you. So there's three, very quickly, three phrases. Would you look at the first with me? Look at verse 18. Let's try and find verse 18 with me, please. Just before you read it, remember the situation. Joseph has come to them out of love and he's traveled for so many miles willingly to these brothers. Now, read that, verse 18. What is their response? They saw him in the distance.

Before he reached them, they plotted against him, okay, but that's not, they plotted to kill him.

I think all of us in the room can see what's going on. What's he wearing? He's wearing his multicolored, richly ornamented robe. You can see this guy coming from a mile off. You think about it, this is their kid brother. I mean, this is their youngest sibling here. And there is no desire to protect him in this dangerous place. It's amazing to think about. There's no desire even to hear why he has traveled all of this way. Do you notice, like, there's this, what overtakes them? But there's just impulse, this desire to conspire, to put him to death, to murder him. Isn't it incredible? Now, at

that moment, Reuben steps in. I'd love to know what you think about Reuben stepping in. Maybe we're sort of, we're standing and applauding Reuben. But you've got to agree, it seems a bit half-hearted, doesn't it? And perhaps it is actually entirely self-seeking from Reuben. What do we know about

[19 : 20] Reuben? We know that he is the eldest brother, don't we? So he is the one who has to give an account and he's answerable to his dad. But what else do we know about Reuben from Genesis 35?

I mean, he has just recently slept with his father's concubine. Hasn't he? Is he not here, perhaps? At least trying to cover his tracks. But regardless, his brothers listened to Reuben.

And so instead of killing Joseph immediately, as they wanted to do, did you get the details? Did you see what happens? What do they do? Look at this. This is their youngest brother. They strip him of that robe that he cherished. So they strip him of that. And then the next detail, do you notice, they toss him into one of these pits that existed in the world at that point in time, this area of the world? These were pits cut out of limestone rock for gathering what they throw him in this. And it's there, right there, that we get to the second little phrase. And I'm going to go right ahead and say that I think this bit is the most awful detail in all of the chapter. Please look at verse 25.

Verse 25. Now, it's not an incidental as maybe you have in the text here. The text seems to slow down at the beginning of verse 25. And I'll read it as it is. Then the brothers sat down to eat.

You think that's horrendous. It's actually perhaps more horrific than we're maybe realizing. Because in Genesis 42, the brothers look back and speak about this very moment. You know what they say?

[21 : 20] That at this very moment, Joseph is in that pit, begging for his life. You think about that. Their youngest sibling, they have thrown him away to starve today. And this young lad is crying out for his life. And what do they do, his brothers? But they sit down and have some lunch. It's cold.

Cold. Now, here, there's a gear change, isn't there? I think we have to understand that where they are in Dothan is on this main trading route. And it ran all the way from Damascus in the north, this trading route, all the way right down, all the way to Egypt in the south. And you can see what's happening as they eat some traders. Ishmaelite, Midianite traders appear on the scene. And yes, you read this correctly. The plan changes. Did you notice what they plan to do? They agree to sell, to sell their brother, to sell their youngest sibling for 20 pieces of silver, just the price of a slave. And then we come to the last of these phrases. Again, I'll ask you to get there with me.

So it's in verse 32. Can you look there, please? Verse 32 is the last phrase. And I highlight this partly to ask you if you can see what is so unusual about it in advance. So have a look at verse 32.

So they go back to their dad. They go back to Jacob, don't they? And they've killed a goat and they've poured the blood of the goat on this robe. And they present the robe, this blood-splattered robe, to their father. Do you see what is strange about what they say? They say to Jacob, Dad, examine it, this robe, to see whether it is your son's robe. What's unusual about that? What's horrible about that? Such is their hatred, they cannot even bring themselves to use Joseph's name. Such is their hatred and loathing that they cannot even bring themselves to call Joseph their brother. I am sure that you stand with me when I say that this is a dark section of Scripture. There is wickedness here to almost unimaginable extremes. But what do we do with it, on a court?

[23 : 44] What do we do with this? Well, yeah, I think genuinely there's so much in the way of practical application that we could look at. Don't you agree as you read this? I mean, surely we're seeing there's something of the real danger in our lives of allowing bitterness towards another or jealousy towards another, allowing that to fester. That can spiral out of all control. You can see that here.

And isn't there practical application with Reuben? Aren't we seeing here that as Christians today, we need to do better than Reuben? That we really need to take a proper stand, an actual stand when we see people in our lives desperate to pursue wrong. But we have gathered in this place this morning to look to God. And so surely you see here part of the reason that our God and His infinite wisdom has preserved this portion of Scripture through the centuries for us this morning. What do we see here?

Don't we see something of the cost? God's love for us is born. I mean, don't you look at this mistreatment of Joseph and see something of what God the Son has endured out of love for you, Christian friends? Because what did Jesus do? He came to His brothers. And what happened was that you know, you know the gospel. Christ came to His brothers and there was this immediate desire to conspire against them. He came to His brothers, God the Son, and there was more. There

was a desire quickly to put His life to an end.

God the Son, He came to His brothers. And what happened? He was taken and He was sold to Gentiles the price of a few pieces of silver. The price of a slave for you. God the Son, He comes to His brothers.

And what happens? But He is taken and His garment stripped off Him. And God the Son thrown in a pit, a grave, cut out of a rock. And as a Christian, we look at it and the similarities are striking, but perhaps it is the dissimilarity that is most arresting. Because where Joseph would have had no idea what was coming, it was different for Christ, wasn't it? Such is His love for you. He went into Jerusalem. He went to His brothers knowing full well what lay ahead. You look at Genesis 37.

[26 : 40] As we look ahead, go to the table tonight, we see something of the sacrifice of the Lord our God. And then we end, most briefly of all, with God's providence. And that word that I've just used there, friends, the providence of God, is a word that we band about in the life of the church so much, don't we? We talk about, if you're part of a Presbyterian church for any length of time or a Reformed church, we talk about providence a lot, don't we? Providence of God. Maybe for the benefit of some of the younger people, or maybe for those who are new to Christianity, maybe we just need to define our terms there. What's the providence of God? What is it? Well, we do not believe in karma.

We don't believe in luck, do we? We don't believe in chance. What do we rest in? The governance of God, would you say? No. We believe passionately in the good governance of God, don't we? We believe that, yes, through direct means, but also by the way of second causes, that God has ordained. And now, right now, God orchestrates all things. Do you want a definition really quickly? Even if you don't, I'm going to give you it because I love it so much. Here we go.

What's the confession tell us? God, who is God? God, the creator of all things. You ready for it? He does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, all actions, and all things, from the greatest even to the least by his most wise and holy providence. Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it a great definition from the confession? Now, when we think about the story of Joseph, well, part of the reason I'm preaching on this today is my assumption that you know it well, but when we think about the story of Joseph as a whole, I reckon there's one verse that probably stands kind of high above all the others in terms of our familiarity, isn't there? In Genesis 50, verse 20, I won't get you to fill in the blanks, but you know it, I'm sure. Joseph is speaking to his brothers, and he says this, he says, you meant it for evil. You meant this for evil, but God meant it for good. Now, hopefully you see what that means for this present chapter in this section of scripture that we're in just now, don't you?

That though this seems, as you read it, like this litany of unchecked misery and wickedness from man, what do you know as you read it? God is in action here behind the scenes. Isn't that right? Well, this seems awful, just nothing but wickedness. It's evil, but we know that God is using this, why? To bring Joseph all the way safely down to Egypt and then have him rise up that he might do what? You know the story, that he might rise up and save multitudes of people from this famine, right, that's about to occur. Now, I know time is gone, but let me just point you to a couple of instances where really our minds should be blown by the hidden providential hand of God here. So, stick with me. Look at verse 15. I want to ask you as you look at verse 15 in the reading, did you notice the man here? Did you notice the man? In sermon preparation, I've aged, lost hair, hair's gone gray, wrestling with this man. Did you notice the man? Did you notice? It's like Joseph goes to Shechem and we establish that his brothers were not there and then the Bible gives all of this really unusual emphasis to this guy and he's just this unnamed bloke who appears from nowhere, but he's this man who seems to know everything and he knows exactly where the brothers have gone and he's able to point Joseph to Dothan.

[31 : 08] Don't you read that? In fact, you just take a step back and marvel. What do you say? But God is in action there. God has provided this man. And then you think about that meal. Do you remember what we said about it? It's just, it's just so cold. They sat down to have lunch and we marvel at the wickedness of that, but do you not, Christian friend? See how that meal was used by those men, those eleven, sitting down, pausing to eat? It provided exactly enough time for the Midianite traders to appear on the scene. If they hadn't paused to eat, Joseph would have been left in that pit to starve and die.

They meant it for evil. Our God meant it for good. And then the last thing, I would ask you to just note the final phrase of this chapter, the final phrase. You know the story, you can see it, but look at it.

Meanwhile, the Midianite sold Joseph in Egypt to whom? To Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. Something that clearly anticipates how the story will go on, but isn't it something that makes you go, wow. At every twist, every turn, God Almighty is involved here to make sure that Joseph is brought safely to Egypt, but look at that. He also ensures that Joseph is in position so he might rise up and he might be in position to save his people from starvation. Now, you know as well as I do, there's a multitude, a plethora of applications to God's province. I will just say this to you.

If you are a Christian this morning that is going through a terrible, terrible, terrible time, if you are struggling at this point, then from Genesis 37, by the Holy Spirit of God, be reminded that God is involved in your life right now. You are not alone in this. Listen, you are not going through something meaningless. God loves you. He uses wickedness, evil, difficulty, and he promises you from his word that he uses that for your good, for eternal good. Unless you're sitting there needing further convincing of that, where do you look? Where do you look to be utterly convinced that our God uses evil for good? You know, we look to Golgotha and does God not here in Genesis 37 send you there to Calvary?

Think about what you've got here. As God uses for good these brothers slaughtering a goat, sprinkling the blood, presenting it to their father. What do you know has happened at Calvary? Did God not do more there?

[34 : 30] Did God not at Calvary use men's evil to ensure that the blood of the eternal scapegoat was spilled? At Calvary, did God not use men's evil to ensure that that atoning blood for your sin, my sin, was presented to God the Father? In Genesis 37, behold, you are God. He is a God who loves you.

He's a God of sacrifice who bears the cost. But in Ukraine, in Aberdeen, in your life, remember, he is a God who rules all things with his most wise and holy providence. Friends, let's bow our heads and pray to God. Gracious, eternal God, we thank you for Jacob in this account, his concern for these eleven who had dishonored his father, their father, and how this points to your love, sending your son to us despite our sin and our hatred. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for the cost that you have borne to save us from our sin. And oh, heavenly God, we thank you for your sovereign control.

Forgive us as we so often forget every detail of our life. You are with us orchestrating all things for our good, but also for your eternal glory and honor. And we do pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.