

From Riches to Rags

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[0 : 00] So open, there's a lot going on. We're going to work through it together. And as we do that, we're not just studying God's Word as a book, as a text, but we want to hear from God, don't we? So let's pray for that now as we come to His Word. Father, we thank You that all Scripture is breathed out by You and is good for us. We thank You too that the Lord Jesus says that all Scripture before Him led us to Him. Everything written in the law, the prophets, and the Psalms had to be fulfilled.

And so we thank You as we come to this passage deep in the Old Testament that we know that it tells us of our Savior Jesus. Lead us to Him, we pray, and speak to us, we ask, for we do so in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Well, if you've ever started watching halfway through a movie or a TV series, you'll know what it's like to find out or to try to follow a story without knowing the beginning. Who's that? Why is she saying that? Why is he doing that? That happens to us in our family every time my sister comes to say. This time it was Motherland. Before that it was Derry Girls. That's actually the main way we find new stuff to watch on the TV, because I can't help but go back to catch up on the episodes that we've missed. I say that not only because we're dropping into what is effectively the final episode in the book of Genesis tonight, and no doubt we'll want to rewind a bit and catch up on the story so far, the first nine episodes, or we're going to be a little bit confused. Just ask Susie who the first episode of Star Wars that she ever watched was episode nine. Even for Star Wars, that is extreme.

But I also say that because the whole book of Genesis is in a way a catch-up or a preview, a prequel for God's people when it first came out. See, the people who first read Genesis had not just already seen, but actually lived through the book of Exodus. So imagine what kind of questions would you have if you had read the book of Exodus before the book of Genesis?

Lots of questions, but mainly, above all, I think, who is this God? And why exactly has he saved us?

[2 : 30] It's a little bit like that moment in a Marvel or a DC film where, you know, the hero, the masked hero rescues the people, and the helpless townspeople turn, and they say, wait, tell me, what is your name?

Who are you? Well, Genesis is here to introduce them, God's people, and us properly to the God who has saved them and his plans for them and for the world. And to do that, Genesis takes them and us back to the very beginning of time. Now, time would fail us to recap all of Genesis up to this point. However, there are 35 sermons on the website that do that, or you can just read the book in the week when you get home to catch up. But here is the non-AI-generated summary. Who is this God, the Lord? Well, he is the one and only God, the eternal God who created everything that exists. He is both infinitely good and fully in control of all that he has made. So why then is the world the way that it is? Because after God created the good world, the first human beings, our ancestors, broke it by rebelling against God and ruining our relationship with him. And so the world is both wonderfully created, but now also under a terrible curse for our sin.

So then why is God still interested in us after all that? Because, says Genesis, not only are we created in his image with a special place in his world, but also because God chose one family in the world, our family, to be his special people. How did that happen? Well, God made a covenant with our ancestor Abraham by making promises to be his God and the God of his children and their children, to give them a land and to bless them. Instead of his curse and punishment for sin, instead they would know his blessing and his smile. Well, this must be a really great family then for God to have chosen us.

Well, let me tell you the story and then we can talk about what kind of family this is. Because, oh, one other thing, God's purpose for this family is that through us he will bless every family of the earth. What's so special about us then?

Good question. Or is God actually the real hero of the story? We're picking up the backstory tonight then with chapter 37, verse 2. These are the generations of Jacob.

[5 : 38] That's Isaac's son, Abraham's grandson. That formula, the generations of, or family history of so-and-so. It acts like a bookmark in the book of Genesis.

This is the tenth and final time we get it. And this last episode covers 14 chapters out of 50 in total. So that's roughly a third of the whole book.

Which should suggest to us that this is the climactic episode in the book. Obviously, if you read a book, it has all been leading up, hasn't it, to this.

That might seem counterintuitive to us because it feels a little bit like Genesis begins with the climax. The creation of the heavens and the earth. Whereas Genesis seems to say that that is just the introduction to the real story, which is about how God gives back his blessing to people who have lost it through sin, through this one family, to the whole world.

So let's get into the finale then, Genesis, with three points tonight as the curtains open on Act 10 of Genesis. And we zoom in on Jacob's sons, firstly, destined for a throne.

[7 : 00] As soon as the curtains open, the spotlight lands on one of Jacob's 12 sons, Joseph. We're reminded straight away in verse 2 that all 12 brothers don't share the same mum.

Rather, Jacob married two sisters, Leah and Rachel. And they then gave Jacob their female servants to be his concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah.

So Genesis immediately is not trying to hide away the dark and dirty history of this family. It actively reminds us where they've come from. If this was a TV series, it would definitely be on after 8 o'clock.

Verse 3 also sets the warning lights flashing. Have we seen something like this before in Genesis? Now Israel, that's Jacob's other name, same guy, loved Joseph more than any other of his sons. Favoritism has plagued this family for generations. Jacob was his mummy's golden boy while his brother Esau was his daddy's favorite.

[8 : 09] Jacob loved Rachel best. Leah was left in the shadows. Now Jacob loves Rachel's oldest best, Joseph. How do we think that's going to go? Unsurprisingly, as we've come to expect, we see rivalry, jealousy, hatred.

To say that this is an uninspiring start to the final season of Genesis would be a colossal understatement. If anything, we think history is about to repeat itself, but now disastrously to the power of 12.

But is it all bad? Or is God doing something? Joseph divides opinions in this chapter. It's quite common.

Maybe you've heard this. People say that Joseph starts the story as a bit of a spoiled brat, telling on his brothers, wearing his fancy coat, bragging about his dreams.

Now interesting, isn't it, that we would so naturally gravitate towards the opinion of his brothers that this guy basically deserves what he gets? If he didn't want to be hated, why is he so annoying?

[9 : 25] But is that the opinion of Genesis? What does it say and what doesn't it say? Well, verse 2, we're told that Joseph faithfully served his father's interests.

He went to work with his brothers, and given what we know these brothers are like in the rest of the chapter, well, we can well believe that his bad report was perfectly justified.

Verse 3, we're told that his dad lavished him with gifts. We're not told how Joseph felt about his preferential treatment. His brothers hate him because it was so obvious that their father loved him more than all his brothers.

We're not told that Joseph sought that or wanted it. And verse 5, we're simply told Joseph had a dream. Now this is not like Martin Luther King's dream, right?

That's often how we use that word, isn't it? Like a hope or a vision for the future. In fact, with this story, it's hard not to do that because probably, if you haven't seen it and you know of it, the musical, this is the wordplay at the heart of it, isn't it?

[10 : 31] Any dream will do. But Genesis is purely talking about what happens to us in the nighttime. And famously, we are not in control of what we dream about, are we?

It's one of the mysteries of life. Where do these dreams come from? Throughout the Old Testament, particularly in Genesis, it's clear that some dreams come from God.

In the surrounding cultures, it was a given that vivid dreams had a supernatural source and that they had a hidden meaning which kind of had to be unpacked.

That's going to become very important in a few chapters' time. Now, what do we do with that as Christians?

Hebrews 1 tells us that long ago, in many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

[11:45] So our worldview as Christians has to have room for the idea that the God who created and sustains the universe can speak to people in dreams.

Does he still do that? Well, Hebrews goes on. But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son.

Before the gospel went out into the world, God spoke in all kinds of ways. But now we have the gospel. That is the way we rely on to hear from God.

So to rewind back into Genesis, Joseph having a dream and telling his brothers is roughly equivalent to us hearing God's word in the Bible and sharing it with people in church or in our family.

To say that Joseph should have been embarrassed by his dreams and kept his big mouth shut is like saying we should be ashamed of the gospel and not tell it to anyone just in case we come across as a bit arrogant or they hate us.

[12:55] If anything, Genesis actually says Joseph was doing the right thing. How do we know that? Because after he's had one of these dreams and told his brothers what happens, verse 9, he's given an even more specific dream about the very same thing.

What's going on? God is confirming the message and affirming Joseph. So why did his brothers hate him for his dreams and, verse 8, for his words?

And why are we so naturally bent towards agreeing with them? Well, because Joseph's dreams are about nothing less than God setting him over his family to rule and to reign.

Dream 1. All the brothers are binding wheat in the field. Joseph's bundle stood up and all his brothers' bundles gathered round and bowed down to it. Dream 2.

The sun, moon, and stars were bowing down to him. Notice, not his star, but to Joseph himself. These are extraordinary dreams.

[14:10] And they are not hard for his family to work out what they mean, are they? Verse 8. Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us? Say his brothers. Verse 10.

His dad gives him a telling off. Shall I and your mother and brothers indeed bow ourselves to the ground before you? Remember, this is the man who had actually pushed Joseph out in front of his brothers.

It's actually possible that the coat of many colors might even be a sign that Jacob wanted Joseph to be the next head of the family after he died. But this is too much even for Jacob.

That he and Rachel might even bow down to him? Joseph is claiming to be destined for a throne, and he's claiming that message comes from God.

And that promise will hang over the whole rest of the book. Will God put Joseph to rule and reign over the family? Now, only time will tell.

[15:18] But here at the start, we're left with a question. What do we make of that message? Fast forward a bit in history, and God's family in Jesus' day had the same reaction to that message as God's family back then.

Jesus stood up in the synagogue one Sabbath and found where it says in the scroll of Isaiah, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he's anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Then he said, Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. In short, says Jesus, I am.

That promised, anointed, savior, king, sent from God. At which point the people in the pews turn to each other and start whispering, Isn't that the carpenter's boy?

[16:24] We know his mom. Our kids play together with his brothers and sisters. Who does he think he is, saying that he is the chosen king sent from God?

But Jesus kept on preaching, and moments later, we read, They rose up and drove him out of the town, and brought him to the brow of the hill where their town was built, so that they could throw him down off the cliff.

Friends, why are we so naturally inclined to agree with Joseph's brothers that he's speaking out of turn? Because we so naturally agree with the world in every age that we do not want this man to rule over us.

And yet, like Joseph, Jesus was destined, through the cross and the tomb, for a throne, where he sits today to rule and reign over us as God's people, and indeed as Lord of all.

But the rebelliousness of our first parents is still in us, and we wonder who this man is to claim that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus who was crucified.

[17 : 42] As we move through the story of Joseph and wonder whether and how God will ever fulfill his dreams, we'll have lots of opportunity to ask, too, whether or how God has set Jesus on the throne over us today, and to reflect on our response to that message.

As he rules and reigns over us, as he speaks to us in his word, do we hate him even more? Or do we see how by his ascension to the throne he has saved us, and so rejoice in him with our hearts full of thanks when we hear that good news?

Well, we know how Joseph's brothers feel at this point, and in our next point, we see how they act on their hatred, destined for a throne, secondly, thrown into a pit.

Sometime later, the brothers are off with the sheep in another part of the country, and Jacob asks Joseph to go and find out how they're getting on. And perhaps that's because Jacob knows that Joseph will give him an honest answer.

And perhaps, too, it's because he knows that the brothers need someone to keep an eye on them. Why ever Jacob sends Joseph, the striking thing is that Joseph unquestioningly goes.

[19 : 08] He doesn't say to his dad, oh, why do you want me to go and spy on those guys? He says, here I am. We might add, send me. And remember, this is when Joseph knows that his brothers hate him.

And yet, he does what his dad asks. He still goes. He's not sure where to find them, but getting lost doesn't put him off. Verse 16, I'm seeking my brothers. Only to discover they're away in Dothan, which is actually a further distance on from where their dad had sent them to work.

But on he goes to find them. Even in the face of very real danger and his family's hatred, Joseph is obedient to his father, isn't he, in seeking out his brothers.

But how did his brothers react to that? Well, in one sense, completely shockingly. And in another sense, entirely predictably. Verse 18, they saw him from afar, and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him.

The earliest recorded case of fratricide is found only four chapters into the Bible, only the second generation of humanity. Adam and Eve's sons, Cain and Abel.

[20 : 29] After he's done the deed, Cain asks the Lord pointedly, am I my brother's keeper? I think Joseph and his brothers would have two very different answers to that question.

Joseph has gone a long way to find out how his brothers are. His brothers want to bury him in a pit. The flood was enough to wash Abel's blood out of the ground, but it turns out it wasn't enough to wash Cain's murderous thoughts out of humanity's heart.

Because here, so many generations later, that same thought crosses the minds of ten young men as they see their brother coming near. They said to one another, notice how they speak about him. Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of these pits. Then we'll see a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what has become of his dreams.

Notice it's not only fratricidal, it is also, in a sense, regicidal. It's the dreams and the dreamer that they want rid of, not only their younger brother, but also their future king.

[21 : 42] Now, only one brother, Reuben, comes out of this with any honour. Moses, who knew a thing or two about rescuing, writes that he rescued Joseph out of their hands. Reuben wants to do the pit thing, but not the murder thing, and plans to come back later and rescue Joseph out of the pit and send him home.

A plan which doesn't fully work out, but does actually save Joseph's life, which becomes very important, more important than Reuben knew, down the line, as we will find out.

So the brothers do that. They strip him of his robe. Notice the robe of many colours that he wore. Why the long description?

Well, if the coat is a sign of his being future head of the family, then stripping it off him is very telling. Not my president. Then they threw him in the pit, and verse 25, sat down to eat.

Now, how cold is that? How callous do you have to be to sit down for your lunch next to a pit where your kidnapped brother is?

[22 : 54] But it gets worse, verse 26. Some slave traders pass by, and Judah, one of the brothers, has a brilliant idea. What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?

Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh. Now, that's one way of looking after your own flesh and blood, isn't it?

Let's not kill him. Let's sell him and line our pockets. And so they do that. His brothers listen to Judah.

They get him out of the pit and sell Joseph for 20 shekels of silver, and so far as they think, wash their hands of him for good. We've got a book at home for the boys.

I can't actually remember what it's called, but we call it the shadow story. It talks about different people in the Old Testament and the way that they foreshadowed Jesus in some way.

[24 : 00] Well, what do we see here, brothers and sisters? What do we see here in the story of Joseph? In the shadow of Joseph, I see Jesus.

We read earlier from Philippians 2, which describes the coming down or the condescension of the Lord Jesus. He was and is truly God. Heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool, but he didn't see that as something to be clung on to, says Philippians.

Instead, the Son of God willingly made himself a servant of sinners. He obeyed his Father to the point of humiliation, suffering, and death on the cross.

We know that like Jesus, Joseph was destined for a throne, but here we see that like Jesus, Joseph was first humiliated.

He came down a long way and he did so willingly and obediently. He gave up his place in the Father's presence, in his love to suffer at the hands of sinners, as he faithfully sought their good.

[25 : 15] He was sold for silver coins into the hands of Gentiles who would sit in judgment over him. He was stripped of his clothes and openly mocked. Like Joseph's brothers ate lunch next to the pit, so the soldiers gambled in the shadow of the cross, where their rightful king was held to suffer, and all for his claim to the throne.

Friends, like Jesus' rescue story is V-shaped, his coming down and humiliation before his raising up and exaltation, so Joseph's rescue story is V-shaped, deep humiliation before a promised exaltation.

And so as we see Joseph's suffering over the coming chapters, we'll have lots of chances in the word of Hebrews to consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.

Lots of chances to think about our own suffering in light of his suffering and ultimate victory, and to think about God's ultimate purpose through his suffering, which, like Joseph, is for the salvation of many people.

You're reading Genesis 37. I was struck again this week by the bizarreness of it, the strange and the weirdness of this narrative, right? Moses is sitting down to write the history of a new nation chosen by God, freshly liberated, heading to their own promised land.

[26 : 58] Imagine the story any nation would want written about itself on the cusp of a golden age, a coming of age. What would you want written about the founders of your people?

If you ever visit Budapest, there's a place there, it's worth a visit, Heroes Square. It's very impressive. At the centerpiece of Heroes Square is a statue made to celebrate the thousandth anniversary of the Hungarian state, created in 896.

On a huge plinth are the seven chieftains of the Magyar, on their war horses riding from the east with their massive flags and enormous swords. It is very impressive.

The whole thing screams, these are the founders of our people and they are undisputed heroes of history.

Now imagine being a member of the tribe of Judah. It's go time for God's people. Here we go, promised land. I wonder what our founder Judah was like.

[28 : 08] Oh, a hateful, murderous man who sold his brother into slavery. I'm sorry to say that next week it is going to get very much worse.

And parents, if you'd like to read the chapter ahead before you bring your family, that is welcome. Still come, but come prepared. Reuben gets a bit of a better time, but by this point his name is already tarnished by incest and adultery.

All the other brothers are accomplices in this incredibly wicked plan. Why on earth would Moses sit down to write the history of God's nation and come up with this? Well, because he was not in the business of writing national myths and legends.

He was writing real life history, the inspired record of God's family's origins. And it is incredibly hard reading.

It says, we have nothing to boast about in ourselves. We are worse than nobodies. We are descended from the scum of the earth and we, today, their children, share the family likeness.

[29 : 22] It says, the only thing that redeems us is God's unwavering promise to still be our God in spite of who we are and to continue to redeem and rescue and forgive us out of our sinful wickedness.

Friends, as we spend time in this final episode of Genesis, that is what we'll see again and again and again, that God is the hero of the story. He is the hero of history.

He is the hero of his people today, the church, not us. And we'll see again and again what an amazing thing that he would love and save us in the face of who we truly are and what we've done against him through the suffering, humiliation, and exaltation of his chosen king.

And let the response of our hearts as we see that more and more be, hallelujah, what a savior. Destined for a throne, thrown into a pit, and finally and briefly as we close, sold to be a slave in Egypt.

The brothers continue to dig themselves into an ever deeper hole by deceiving their father using their brother's fancy clothes and goat blood, which, if you were to rewind, is eerily similar to the way that Jacob deceived his father using his brother's hairy clothes and goat stew.

[30 : 54] See how it runs in the family? Meanwhile, Joseph is being carted off as a slave to Egypt, verse 28. Now that would have sparked very poignant memories in God's people reading this in the time of Moses, who of course up till recently had been slaves in Egypt themselves.

There's a sense here that we shouldn't miss, I think, that Joseph is going before them, that he is in some sense the forerunner both of their suffering and their eventual freedom.

It's no coincidence that as they leave Egypt, they are taking the bones of Joseph with them to be laid to rest in the promised land. In a very poetic sense, their journey into Egypt begins with Joseph and his journey out of Egypt ends with them.

But even more significantly, verse 36 leaves us with a cliffhanger because the slave traders sell Joseph not to a plantation owner or a building contractor to be worked to an early grave, but to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and Potiphar is the captain of the guard.

Joseph, the would-be ruler, has been sold to somebody with very high royal connections. Now, we're not told what Joseph thought of this, but it certainly prompts us to think, doesn't it, at the end of this rollercoaster of a chapter, that God's quiet providence and purposes are still at work to carry out his promises.

[32 : 37] Did you notice that all through this chapter, his name is not mentioned once, no mention of God in this chapter? And yet, behind the scenes, friends, we're supposed to think and see, aren't we, that he is very much directing the action according to his perfect scripts to bring about his purposes.

And it gives us a glimmer of hope that God will indeed raise his chosen one, Joseph, up from the pit and into the place of power, honor, and glory that he has promised for the salvation of many people.

And so, as we finish this chapter and this first installment of this final act of Genesis, we are left asking, aren't we, will Joseph make it to the throne?

Will this family ever learn? And even more, will the nations ever receive God's blessing through them?

Amen. Come back next time for the rest of the series as we conclude the book of Genesis.

[33 : 50] Let's pray together. Our Father, how we thank you that in your word, in the shadow of Joseph, we see ever so clearly our Savior Jesus and how we are led, our Father, to adore him and to hold him, treasure him in our heart, he who left the glories of heaven, your love, your presence, to become sin for us, to suffer, to be humiliated, and to die the painful and shameful death of the cross for us.

Lord, Joseph's story is but a taste of that, and yet, Lord, you lead us even deeper into understanding the suffering of our Savior.

And so we thank you, and we pray, Lord, that you would bless us as we come to this stage in Genesis, that as a church family, we would see more and more of Jesus and grow it in our relationship with him.

Lord, that you would lead us to him again and again and grow us in our faith, our love for him, and our love for your word as we see him revealed in its every page.

This we ask in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.