

Succeeding through Suffering

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, a short while ago, almost 10 years now actually, I lived in London for a couple of years. I didn't like it, to be honest. It's not my favourite place, but London is full of culture. I'm not cultured, that's probably why I didn't like it. But most of it was free, so I did sometimes go and have a look. I quite often walked past the Tate Modern, a massive gallery full of modern art. I didn't think much of that either, to be honest. I kind of have the same criteria for art as I do for jokes. If you have to explain it, it's not very good. But there was some amazing art in London, right? The National Gallery was full of masterpieces, incredible paintings, incredible detail, incredible size. Again, I'm not very cultured, so I couldn't tell you much about it, but I could still appreciate it. But where do most masterpieces begin? Michelangelo, when he painted the roof of the Sistine Chapel, he spent months before he picked up a paintbrush.
- [1 : 1 0] Because for the first few months, he knew he had to put a sketch together. He wanted to know where he was going before he put paint to the ceiling. The sketches themselves took months. Four years later, the work was finished. And the masterpiece has remained in place ever since. And more often than not, a masterpiece will begin with a sketch. Something that really does progress the work, but also gives any onlooker just a little glimpse of what the final picture is going to look like. I think what we have in Genesis 39, and I suppose much of Genesis really, is the masterpiece's sketch. God is a master craftsman. And in these verses, we see two things, don't we? We see in a very real sense that the work progressing, the work of redemption is moving on.
- [2 : 1 2] This book is not just a book of fables, it is history. This really is God working through time to bring about his perfect plan to completion. But in these early stages of God's masterpiece, we are already beginning to see the outline of the finished products. It's not been fully filled in yet. It will become far more beautiful in the pages that go on. But nonetheless, what we have in these verses is a very real glimpse into what we will see with glorious clarity as Scripture goes on. This evening, we are going to look at this passage in two points. First of all, we are going to look at really what we see unfold in chapter 39. And then in our second point this evening, we are just going to take just a little step back and see what we see here in chapter 39 in light of what we have seen in Genesis so far, particularly the last couple of weeks in Genesis. So let's just get straight into our first point. Focusing here on chapter 39 specifically, where we see blessing begin to flow. Two weeks ago, Joel left us on a bit of a cliffhanger at the end of chapter 37.

At the beginning of that chapter, Joseph had been given a dream, two dreams by God, that he would one day sit on a throne. But by the end of that chapter, by the end of chapter 37, Joseph was, well, he wasn't on a throne.

[3 : 50] He had been sold off into slavery and was on his way down to Egypt. And we were left with the question, will Joseph ever make it to the throne?

Where we left felt very far from a throne. But there was perhaps just a slight glimmer of hope. Because although Joseph was sold into slavery, he just so happened to be bought by a man called Potiphar.

And Potiphar just so happened to be an officer of Pharaoh. The path is by no means clear, is it? But perhaps we can start to imagine how this riches to rags story might return to riches.

And things do, indeed, they seem to start fairly well, don't they? I don't know if you noticed that in the first few verses. In the blink of an eye, by verse 4, right, Joseph is in charge of everything in Potiphar's house.

Everything. Nothing is left out. And Moses, writing this, I think, really wants to make sure we know that Joseph had everything in his house under his oversight. That the word all or everything is six times there between verse 3 and 6.

[5 : 08] And I think that emphasis is pointing us to two things. There is nothing in this house that the Lord's hand was not in. Right, that we are in Egypt now.

We are far from God's people. We are far from the promised land. The Lord is still in complete control. And Joseph was trusted.

Absolutely. It is, I think, testament to both the sovereignty of God and the character of Joseph. And for this boy who was cast into a pit, having been promised a crown, things are rapidly improving, aren't they?

Can you see the path to the throne, the road to the crown? But by verse 6, we can maybe see how this might go. He couldn't be more highly thought of by Potiphar.

Potiphar had direct access to the most powerful man in the world. Maybe there is going to be a connection there. Maybe Potiphar is going to recommend him to Pharaoh. Maybe Pharaoh is going to make him the governor of a far-off province somewhere.

[6 : 15] Maybe that would have his brothers bowing down before him. Even just a chance, a little glimmer. And we might see Joseph's dream come true.

And things seem only to get better at the end of verse 6. Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. Some people just seem to have all of the luck, don't they? But why are we getting this physical portrait?

It's a very rare thing in the Bible. I mean, we could say, couldn't we, that it serves a reminder to most of the young men here that Joseph looked quite different from you. Sorry, sometimes the door just opens and you have to go through it.

What it's really doing, right, is setting the scene for what comes next. Because Mrs. Potiphar likes what she sees and does everything she can to get Joseph to sleep with her.

And if we got a hint of Joseph's character in his being entrusted with everything, well, here we get it spelled out plainly for us, don't we? She is his master's wife, who is commanding him to lie with her.

[7 : 32] Look at Joseph's response, verse 8. He refused and said to his master's wife, Because of me, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge.

He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?

It does not end there for Joseph, though, does it? Day after day. But he would not listen to her.

He refused, he ran, and then she comes and grabs him by the garments. She's got hold of him. But still he runs, even though it's going to cost him everything.

This is what righteousness looks like in the face of sexual temptation. Joseph runs. Whatever the cost might be, Joseph runs.

[8 : 43] He runs from it when it was being begged of him. He runs from it even though there was no one around to see what would have happened. He ran. He ran. Let me just say, just stop off briefly here, perhaps particularly to the young men again, run.

When sexual temptation comes knocking, run. Because it is a sin against others. It is a greater sin against God. And there is no excuse.

Joseph, right, he could have had every excuse in the book, couldn't he? It would have been consensual. He was only doing what he was told. No one would have ever seen. Perhaps no one would have ever known. It is no less sinful.

There is only one right recourse, and that is to flee. That is what Joseph does day after day. But then, one day, his garments are left in the hands of his master's wife.

And she sees a chance for revenge. Joseph's falsely accused of a crime he never committed. And consigned to what he would have very really expected to be life in prison.

[10 : 07] Joseph ended chapter 37 in a pit. He ends chapter 39 in another pit. From riches to rags to rags.

And initially, we might think, mightn't we, surely this isn't how it was meant to go. Surely this isn't the plan. But from the beginning to the end of the chapter, there is a repeated phrase that informs us, tells us, shows us that even this, even this is part of the plan.

Just look there at verse 2 and 3. See if you can spot the repeated phrase there. If you're not sure yet, look down at verse 21. If you're not sure yet, look down at verse 21.

And then at verse 23. The Lord was with Joseph.

From start to end, the Lord was with him. It looks like everything's going from bad to worse. And yet, here is what Moses wants to make sure we know about this part of the story.

[11 : 33] It's actually an extremely rare phrase in Genesis. But in Joseph's journey from pit to pit, we need to know the Lord was with him. So how is a story like this within God's good plan?

Well, that is the question we're going to be answering with the rest of our time this evening. And we'll begin by looking at the suffering. The suffering of God's chosen king. The Lord was with Joseph.

The Lord was with Joseph. I wonder what you think life with the Lord by your side would or should look like. The answer we see in Genesis 39 is that for Joseph, life with the Lord by his side meant suffering.

I mentioned already back in chapter 37, Joseph had been given two dreams. Two dreams. Two dreams that God would set him apart as the one who would rule. He is God's chosen king.

And yet, what undergoes in this chapter is a far cry from the privileges we associate with royalty. You imagine a king, don't you? And there's royal robes. There's a crown.

[12 : 41] There's palaces. There's banquet halls. There is servants waiting on him. But here, as God's chosen king, with the Lord by his side from beginning to end, Joseph is not being served, is he?

He is serving. The passage begins with Joseph being brought down, brought down to Egypt, and then bought by Potiphar, sold into slavery, then tempted relentlessly to commit adultery, then falsely accused of a crime he didn't commit, then condemned despite his innocence, then imprisoned, though he had done no wrong.

From beginning to end, the Lord is with Joseph. From beginning to end, Joseph is suffering through this chapter. We'll come in a moment to focus on the relatively good treatment that he does receive from Potiphar and then from the keeper of the prison.

But I think it's important to remember, right, that as well treated as he is at those moments, he is, isn't he? He's a slave and then a prisoner.

A head of slaves and a head of prisoners, yes. But no less a slave, no less a prisoner. I don't think we can quite put either, can we, in the category of living like royalty.

[14 : 12] This is the life of God's chosen king. The Lord was with Joseph and Joseph suffered. And I think we want, don't we, instinctively to put a but or a yet in that sentence?

The Lord was with Joseph, but Joseph suffered. The Lord was with Joseph, yet he still suffered. We work on the assumption that the two things are antithetical, that they don't belong together.

But they very much do. The suffering of God's chosen king does not happen incidentally or accidentally.

As if it were something outside of God's plan or outside of his control. It is God's purpose for his king.

Are you seeing the sketch? The pencil outline of something greater that's going to come. Of a servant king. Of a servant king.

[15 : 21] Who would come not to enjoy the riches of royalty, but to suffer. The one who not only had the Lord with him, but who was the Lord.

And would walk this path. Suffering is not a sign of God's absence. We read earlier from 1 Peter 2. One of the things we saw there was Peter's expectation that Christians, particularly speaking to servants, would follow in the footsteps of Jesus on this very point.

I don't know if you picked up what suffering there was a sign of. It was not a sign of God's absence. It was a sign of God's grace.

A gracious thing in the sight of God. Just a few verses earlier in his letter, Peter wrote to these suffering Christians. He said, In God's unsearchable wisdom, this is the way.

This is the way. This is the way. The most precious thing in your life. Will be proven. Will be proven genuine. Will grow.

[16 : 58] And be sustained. Joe Helpfully reminded us last Sunday morning that not all suffering, not all persecution is alike.

But we should, however small scale it might be, still expect to suffer in some small way for our faith. Because that is what we have been called to.

To follow in the footsteps of the suffering king. Whether it is something as small as being ridiculed at work for your faith. Maybe during Freshers Week you've just simply been made fun of.

For trying to live as a Christian. It doesn't even have to be small scale persecution. It can just be suffering. You faithfully live for Christ and yet you cannot shake the dark days of depression.

You try your best to hold on to him and yet, for some reason, you feel desperately lonely or afraid. We can think, can't we? When we are suffering, whatever it might look like, we can think, is the Lord really with me?

[18 : 06] Is the Lord really with me? Or is he punishing me? Have I done something wrong? Is he just not in control? Well, look here.

Look at Joseph. Look at Joseph as he points us to Jesus. Suffering means you are following in his footsteps. However unjust it might be.

And however hard it might be for us to bear in our life, this would not have been easy for Joseph, would it? These would have been difficult days. That is God's grace at work in his life.

So what does it mean for the Lord to be with Joseph? The answer is not a life of comfort and ease. The answer is not a life free from temptation. The Lord was with Joseph and he was tempted severely day after day.

The answer is not a life of prosperity or a life free from temptation. Rather, the answer is a life of suffering. That would have never been easy.

[19 : 12] But as we'll see now as we turn to our next point, as difficult as the life of suffering would have been, it did amazing things.

For God's promises. For God's promises. For the gospel. For Christ. For Christ. Our next point, because God's chosen king sinlessly suffers. The nations begin to be blessed.

There's a little phrase tucked into this chapter that would be so, so easy to glance past. And I say that, I know that, because I glanced past it the first few times I read this chapter this week.

Very easy to glance over, but I think is hugely significant. Genesis has been punctuated by the most amazing promises of God.

To Adam, to Noah, to Abraham, and to each of his descendants. Way back in chapter 12, God promised Abraham that in him, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

[20 : 17] He reiterated that promise to Abraham in chapter 22. And the same promise was passed on word for word to Isaac and then to Jacob in chapter 26 and 28.

In you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Blessed. That is the amazing promise that kind of serves as the drumbeat of this book.

But so far, it has only been a promise. Since chapter 12 of Genesis, the only people who have been blessed by the Lord is the family of Abraham.

I don't know if you've seen videos of icebergs kind of calving from glaciers. That's how I use my spare time.

To be fair to myself though, it is pretty spectacular. Right? As this kind of colossal, unfathomably large chunk of ice crashes into the ocean.

[21 : 21] It is an amazing sight, but it always begins, I say always because I've watched quite a few of them. It always begins, right, with just a few small chunks.

Not even chunks, just sort of oversized ice cubes dropping off the face of the glacier and just plopping gently into the sea beneath. And when you see it at first, when you see those kind of oversized ice cubes dropping down with a little splash, you think, well, that's not that interesting.

But when you see what comes next, right, you look back at those few little chunks falling off a couple of minutes ago, and you realize, well, it didn't seem like much at the time.

It is the beginning, the first little indication that something huge is about to happen. Just look there with me at verse 5 of Genesis 39.

From the time that Potiphar made Joseph overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake.

[22 : 39] The blessing of the Lord was on all that he had in house and fields. You read over it, don't you, without much thought.

But did you see what just happened? Here is the first little ice cube dropping off from the face of the glacier.

Because of Jacob's offspring, this Egyptian's house has been blessed by the Lord.

And we don't get the same kind of specificity of language, but we see something very similar happen at the end of the chapter. Because Joseph was in prison, well, the keeper of the prison's life was made good, wasn't it?

Because Joseph was there, because he blessed Joseph, Joseph's presence was very good news for him. So it took two things, just very briefly from that. First of all, while it is just the beginning, it is the beginning of something amazing, something incredible, something huge.

[23 : 57] That blessing is going to have spread a long way by the end of this book. It is going to spread further and further as these pages go on.

This is a sketch, it is just a sketch, but the sketch is the start of the very real progress to create a very beautiful masterpiece. So that this household, being blessed through the descendant of Abraham, the first step, the first little step on the way to every family of the earth, being blessed by another descendant of Abraham.

So this is, it is just the beginning, but it is the beginning of something amazing. But secondly, remember how this blessing comes. Think about what we have just seen, what do we see in our first point this evening.

This house is blessed, the prison office is blessed, because of the suffering. Because of the suffering of God's chosen king. Through his innocent suffering, these people are blessed by the Lord.

As a slave and a prisoner. In verse 2, sorry, verse 3 and 23 there, we learn that the Lord caused Joseph to succeed.

[25 : 20] He succeeded. And yes, that was good news for him, but who were the primary beneficiaries of his success? Joseph in part, but more so an officer of Pharaoh and an Egyptian prison guard.

That is what success meant for Joseph. The Lord bringing success through Joseph would mean other people are blessed.

The Lord was with Joseph. That many suffered. The Lord brought Joseph success. That many others were blessed.

Now we can absolutely expect to follow this path as those who follow Jesus, but this is most of all, isn't it, about God's chosen king, about Joseph pointing us to Jesus. He came to suffer.

And the success that was brought about through him resulted in others. All the families of the earth being blessed. Because God's chosen king suffers, he brings about success, which results not first of all in his own good, but in the good of others.

[26 : 41] He brought himself down in order to live as a servant so that we would be blessed through him. Paul spells that out for us in Galatians 3 wonderfully where he writes that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.

The reason you and I are here this evening, as those who believe and trust in the Lord Jesus, as those who are part of God's chosen covenant family, is because of the suffering of God's king, is because he succeeded in order to bring blessing to others.

Not a blessing that brings an easy life, but blessed with a life that would turn away from wickedness, wickedness that would turn to be like Jesus, that would suffer like Jesus, and live forever like Jesus.

Here we see that blessing just begin to trickle over the edge. In Jesus we see it flow towards the ends of the earth. So in this chapter we see the beginning of this worldwide blessing.

But before we close, I just want us to take a step back briefly and just for a moment look at Genesis 39 in light in what we have seen over the last couple of weeks. I'm just going to turn to our second point here.

[28 : 20] Judgment falls on the innocent. If you were here last week, you will likely remember that we saw some pretty grim stuff, didn't we? In the middle of this Joseph narrative, a real kind of sticking out like a real sore thumb, we got a glimpse into the life of one of his brothers, Judah.

And what we saw was not pretty, was it? There was a man whose sin seemed to know no bounds.

He went down from his brothers. He took for himself a Canaanite wife. He raised some truly wicked sons. He despicably deceived his daughter-in-law, quite content to leave her living a life of solitude for the rest of her days.

He then later slept with that same daughter-in-law, assuming that she was a prostitute. And then when he found out that she had committed adultery, not knowing that was by sleeping with him, he callously condemned her to death and was ready to watch her burn.

Remember that guy? Well, this chapter 39 is kind of the mirror image of Judah's life.

[29 : 52] Judah and Joseph both went away from their brothers. But for very different reasons, didn't they? Judah went down willingly away from his brothers to the Canaanites. Joseph was sent down from his brothers.

Both faced sexual temptation, didn't they? But could not have handled it more differently. Tamar stood idly at the side of the road and Judah made a beeline straight forward.

He dove head first straight into it. He went looking for sex while Joseph went running from it. Later on in both stories, their belongings are brought out.

Judah's staff, his signet and his ring are brought out as a true testimony of the horrendous depths of his sin.

Joseph's garment is brought out as a false testimony of his non-existent sin. Judah pronounced a death sentence against Tamar.

[31 : 02] Joseph silently endured a life sentence pronounced against him. They could not really have lived more different lives, could they?

One full of sin from start to finish, plumbing the very depths of disgrace. The other righteous, completely innocent, never setting a foot wrong.

But what happened next? What happened to Judah? What happened to the serial sinner who sinned against others and sinned against God?

What consequence did he face for his grievous sin? Do you remember? Correct. Nothing.

Nothing at all. In fact, he will receive an incredible blessing in a few chapters' time. What happened to Joseph? What happened to Joseph?

[32 : 10] What happened to the suffering servants who fled from sin? What happened to the man who refused to sin against others or God?

What was he rewarded with for his righteousness? Joseph's master took him and put him into prison.

Last week we saw, didn't we, the incredible mercy of God. of God, the incredible mercy of God, that a sinner like Judah, that sinners like us, because of God's mercy, can walk free, that Jesus came to people like us for people like us, so that we would never face the consequence of even the very worst of our sin. Never.

But this week, I think we get a glimpse at the other side of the coin. While the sinner walks free, God's king goes from one pit to another.

While Judah is blessed, Joseph is cursed, cast into the darkness for a sin that he did not commit.

[33 : 58] But as with all that we see here, this is just the sketch, the outline that is there, but the full picture will arrive later. For all the desperate deaths of Judah's sin, while he did not suffer, there was still a price to pay.

And that price, that cost, that debt, would fall on the innocent shoulders of God's chosen king.

We read earlier from 1 Peter 2 that he committed no sin. Neither was deceit found in his mouth.

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten. But then we also read that he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

By his wounds, we have been healed. Joseph's suffering was pretty serious.

[35 : 23] It was nothing compared to the infinitely greater suffering of Christ. Joseph was cast down into prison.

Jesus would be cast down into a grave, bearing the punishment of every single one of our sins, from the mildest to the very, very worst.

Because our sinless Savior died, our sinful souls are accounted free. We are blessed because he bore our curse.

If you, like me, felt that the immense weight come off your shoulders last week because of the unfathomable depths of God's mercy, then I want you to turn this evening.

Turn with me and offer every ounce of praise, every ounce of praise that exists in your heart to the one who bore it all for us.

[36 : 42] He willingly went to that cross, carrying your sin on his shoulders so that you and all the families of the earth might be blessed through his suffering.

In a moment, I'm going to pray, and then we're going to sing together. Before we do that, I'm just going to read again from the verses we sung from Isaiah 53.

Just listen to these words, and then we'll pray before we sing our final hymn together. We all, like sheep, have gone astray.

Each of us has turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth.

He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away.

[38 : 04] Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living. For the transgression of my people he was punished.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Father, we thank you and praise you for the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who bore our sin on his shoulders, the king who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

We thank you that because of his suffering, which was part of your perfect plan, or because of his suffering, we have been blessed.

Because he bore our curse for us, we can know the blessing now and forever of forgiveness from our sins, and the sure and certain hope of everlasting life with you.

[39 : 22] So help us now to follow in his footsteps and live for his glory in all that we do. In the precious name of Jesus we pray. Amen. Amen.