

Saturday Communion Service

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Preacher: Rev. David Court

[0 : 00] Well, if you have a Bible, please turn to Genesis chapter 37 and to that passage that we read from a little earlier on.

Gary Hoy was a lawyer for the firm of Holden Day Wilson in Toronto, in Canada. He was a noted and respected corporate and securities law specialist.

He was a professional engineer. He completed an engineering degree before he entered the legal profession. And he died in a tragic accident on the 9th of July 1993.

It happened like this, in an attempt to prove to a group of prospective students that the glass in the Toronto Dominion Centre was unbreakable, he threw himself at a glass wall in the boardroom on the 24th floor.

It was a stunt that he had performed many, many times before. And each time he had done it, he had bounced harmlessly off the glass.

[1 : 25] But on this occasion, the window, frame and the glass gave way. It shattered and Hoy plunged to a tragic death.

It's a reminder that we live in a world where sometimes things are more fragile than they first appear.

Where things can shatter and break with often tragic consequences. The result shattered lives, broken relationships, damaged families, shattered hopes, shattered dreams.

And Genesis 37, the passage we read together, is a chapter that speaks to us of the tragic consequences of shattered lives and shattered relationships and indeed a shattered family, shattered hopes and shattered dreams.

Because in this passage and through it, we discover Joseph and his God given hopes and dreams lying and broken and shattered all about him.

[2 : 50] It's interesting that in the book of Genesis, it appears that God often speaks and communicates to his people through dreams. We have that, for example, in Genesis 15 and Genesis 20 and 28 and Genesis 31.

And here in this chapter, we discover that God speaks to Joseph in dreams and reveals to him something of his plan and purpose for his life and indeed his plan and purpose for the life of his whole family.

And though we are not told this in this opening chapter, it is important, I think, for us to understand that these dreams did not originate in Joseph's own subconscious, but rather they found their origin in God.

The dreams Joseph received were a revelation of God's plan and purpose for his people, for his family.

And it was a plan that would involve Joseph coming to a place of supremacy over his brothers. In time, God would bring this dream to fruition.

[4 : 03] And the rest of the Joseph story tells us how God's plans and purposes were indeed fulfilled. But the point is this, God's plans are shatterproof.

His plans can bear the weight of anything that is thrown at them, all manner of human rebellion and wickedness and evil and sin.

One can thwart or derail the shatterproof purpose and will of our God. And what I want us to do for a moment or two is just to look at this passage and to learn here what God says about himself and about his purposes.

And there are three things I want to draw to your attention this afternoon. And the first is this, is that here we learn of a God of extraordinary mercy, a God of extraordinary mercy.

Genesis 37 is a chapter that reveals to us a catalogue of mistakes and errors and outright rebellion against God.

[5 : 21] It's a messy chapter full of human sin and stupidity. You will know the popular musical by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, Joseph and the amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

And one of the songs from that production, these words are sung, I will not do you the service of attempting to sing them. Jacob, Jacob and Sons, a remarkable family in anyone's book.

And really that is what the story of these final chapters of the book of Genesis are all about. They're all about a remarkable family, the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the family of promise, the covenant people of God, God's chosen people, not just any family, a special family, the family of God, the church of God.

That is what we're reading about here. But this picture of God's special family, the one that is presented to us here is a far from ideal one.

In truth they are a mortally and unsavory crew. Jacob, the father, someone really who should have known all about the dangers of favoritism in the family.

[6 : 43] His own parents had made that mistake. And yet we discover Jacob himself repeats the self same error and mistake.

How often that happens in families. The richly ornamented robe, the coat of many colors, was a tangible symbol of the special place that Joseph had in his father's heart and in his father's affections.

And so it's small wonder perhaps that it becomes the focus of his brother's hatred. Joseph himself displays, I think, some arrogance and conceit towards his brothers.

He cliques on them. He grasses them up. He flaunts his robe and his position as his father's favorite before them. But of course it's the brothers who are the real villains of the peace.

They're told of their hatred towards Joseph in verses four and five and four and eight rather. Their intense jealousy of him is spoken in verse 11.

[7 : 48] And so when the opportunity presents itself, that hatred that had been simmering away under the surface and that jealousy manifests itself in a scheme designed to do away with their favorite brother for all time.

They're going to do away with Joseph altogether. The brothers' actions are particularly callous as they conspire to have Joseph killed.

The intervention of Reuben results in Joseph being spared. He's thrown into the pit. And the brothers, the picture there and the narrative is they are content to eat their lunch.

And as Joseph's cries are heard calling out from the pit, they are absolutely hardened. And then they sell Joseph into slavery for 20 shekels of silver.

And then they proceed to cover up their sin to deceive their own father. They're utterly unmoved, it seems, by their father's pain and suffering and sorrow.

[8 : 54] And we say, well, what kind of dysfunctional family is this? These are God's chosen people. This is the family of promise.

You're having a laugh. These are the people that God has called to be his own. These are the people that God is going to use to bless the world.

This is the family through which a savior is going to come to rescue and to redeem the people for himself. The people of the covenant.

What on earth is God playing at? Could he not have found some more promising material to work with?

Friends, let us not forget that God's call upon our lives is not based upon our good characters.

[9 : 53] It is based solely and exclusively on God's extraordinary mercy. Because in truth, we are no different to Jacob, Jacob and sons.

It's a huge mistake for us to make to think that we are morally superior. And yet that's what we're all tempted to do, isn't it?

How often we forget that we are bankrupt sinners. We are men and women who are saved by grace alone. In the New Testament, Paul writes to the Christians in Crete.

This is what he says when he writes to Titus. We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us. Not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

[11 : 29] Friends, God calls us to himself in spite of who and what we really are. We must never forget that the basis of our relationship with God, the basis of belonging in God's family, is the extraordinary mercy of God.

He saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy. That's what we remember when we come to the Lord's table, isn't it? We remember that our salvation is not about us, but it's about him. It's not about what we've done.

It's all about what he has done for us. There's an old hymn of a man written by a man, John Stoker, says this, Thy mercy, my God, is the theme of my song, the joy of my heart and the boast of my tongue.

Thy free grace alone from the first to the last hath won my affections and bound my soul fast. Many years ago I read an obituary in the, I think it was the Glasgow Herald then, or it was just the Herald.

[13 : 00] It was the obituary of the Reverend Donald McCrae, who was for many years the Church of Scotland minister in Tarbert and Harris. And in the obituary the story was told of how a few days before he died a good man from Stornoway called to visit him and to see him.

And though weak, Mr McCrae eyed his visitor with a steely eye and put to him the question.

He said, and what will you have to say to the Lord on the day of judgment? Well the elder was a little disconcerted at this question and he responded well.

He said, you're the minister and you've been on the way a good many years, what will you say? Oh, said Mr McCrae.

Mercy, mercy, mercy. The extraordinary mercy of God.

[14 : 04] Friends, let's not forget it. Let's not move beyond it. That's what we see here in Genesis 37.

Not just the extraordinary mercy of God, however, we also see the God of mysterious ways. Not just the God of extraordinary mercy, the God also of mysterious ways.

Again, one of the things you come to notice about this chapter after reading it, and perhaps after reading it a couple of times you may have noticed as we read through, that there is actually no direct mention of God in the text.

Throughout the whole chapter he is conspicuous only by his absence. There is no mention of his name. There is no mention of his activity. Indeed, everything appears to be in human hands.

Human beings seem appear to be in total control. Sinful and immoral behavior goes unchecked. God appears to be absent. It's as if he's not there. He doesn't appear to speak.

[15 : 07] He doesn't appear to act. He doesn't appear to intervene. Here it seems our people doing their own thing, going their own way, fulfilling their own desires with calamitous results.

And we say, well, why doesn't God intervene? Why doesn't God stop things? Why does he allow things to escalate so? And that's a very contemporary question, isn't it?

Why doesn't God do something? That's the problem that at times we have with God's ways. He doesn't seem to care. He doesn't appear to be present.

And down through the centuries God's people have had to wrestle with this mystery of God's ways. What, chapter 18 of the Westminster Confession puts it like this, true believers may have the assurance of their salvation in diverse ways, shaken, diminished, and intermittent, as by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light.

What's it saying? It's saying sometimes God withdraws the light of his presence. Sometimes he appears to be far away from us.

[16 : 25] And that is what we see in Genesis 37. God doesn't seem to be at work at all. Everything appears to be working against the divine purpose and will.

It appears to be lying in pieces shattered at the hands of sinful men. And yet what the writer wants us to understand is that even though it appears that God has gone AWOL, that is simply not the case.

And of course as the story progresses, that becomes more apparent. But here God is still at work. He is at work blessing and providing for his people.

And you notice how Joseph, we're told in the narrative, met his brothers at Dothan. And it's at this place that Joseph is stripped and thrown into the pit.

You can imagine how he must have felt. His brothers, his kith and kin, throwing him into a pit. He was lonely.

[17:37] He was isolated. He was depressed. He was fearful. He must have been asking, what is going on here? What is happening to me? Surely this isn't to be my destiny.

It's interesting that later on in the story, Joseph's brothers actually recall this incident in Genesis 42 in verse 21. This is what they say.

We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life. But we would not listen.

In that pit, Joseph cried out for mercy. He cried out for help. He cried out to his brothers and he cried out, no doubt he cried out to God.

But nothing happened. There was no great mighty intervention. He wasn't rescued. He wasn't delivered. He was sold into slavery.

[18:35] And at Dothan, Joseph did not see God at work and he didn't hear God answer his cries. And friends, sometimes that will be our experience too.

Sometimes we're at the end of our tether. We desire to be rescued. We cry out to God and nothing happens. We pray and we ask and we plead but nothing happens.

We feel ourselves deserted and abandoned but nothing happens. And we ask the question, why?

Why God? Why don't you do something? Why don't you intervene?

Why don't you answer my prayers? Why don't you heal that person? Why don't you help me, God?

And it's interesting that at Dothan is the same place later on in the Old Testament where Elisha is surrounded by the Aramaean army and where he prays and he receives in a sense the Lord's miraculous help in 2 Kings chapter 6.

Horses and chariots of fire surround them. And he's delivered and rescued. Dothan, Elisha knew God's help but Joseph did not.

[19:58] And yet friends, God was at work in the pain and suffering of Joseph as much as in the mighty miraculous deliverance of Elisha.

God does not always, indeed he seldom works by the miraculous and the supernatural. At work he does.

And sometimes it's in the harsh and difficult experiences of life that God uses to bless us and to further his purposes.

That's why Paul could write to the Christians at Rome, you remember, he says, we know that it all things. God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Friends we live in days, isn't it? It appears sometimes that God is absent. We call it the day of small things. But friends, God is at work because he's the God of mysterious ways.

[20:58] And he is working his purpose out as year succeeds year. It's the eye of faith that sees this and understands this.

And through Genesis 37, God asks us if we see it and we understand it.

Do we see not only the God of extraordinary mercy, but do we see the God of mysterious ways?

And that brings me to the third thing here.

Just the God of extraordinary grace or mercy, just the God of mysterious ways. But thirdly here the God of gracious providence.

We've already noted that God's hand is at work here in Genesis 37, but how? Perhaps there are two ways in which we can see this.

[21:56] As we said, we don't seem to hear God speak or act or intervene in any dramatic way. And yet nonetheless, there are tokens here of God's saving and preserving grace for those who have the eyes to see.

And the first one is here in verses 21 and 22 in Ruben's intervention as he seeks to save Joseph from imminent death.

And so Joseph rather than be killed, he's thrown into the pit. The pit is actually the place of his rescue. Better the pit than the grave.

We're told in the narrative there that the pit was empty and that there was no water in it. He would not be drowned there. Judah decides to try and make money from Joseph's plight. He persuades the brothers to sell him into slavery for profit rather than have his blood on their hands. Now, that's not a very noble motive, is it? Yet it was enough to rescue Joseph from death. [23 : 01] And in a strange way, Judah actually becomes Joseph's savior. So the darkness of the pit and the chains of slavery are in a peculiar way a blessing to Joseph.

They were God's providential blessings. Now, I don't think they would have felt much like that to Joseph, but that is what they were. They were hard, uncomfortable realities, but they became the means of Joseph's deliverance and tokens of God's kindness and goodness towards him. There's an old hymn by William Cowper that says this, ye fearful scents, fresh courage take, the clouds ye so much dread, are big with mercy and shall break in blessings upon your head. You see, the fact that situations are difficult and hard does not mean that God's sovereign providential hand is not at work. There may be unemployment, there may be illness, there may be unjust treatment, there may be relationship difficulties or a relationship breakdown or family problems.

And it all seems so hard and so painful and so unjust and so difficult at the time. And yet, these things can become the very means that God uses to save and to bless others.

[24 : 32] Sometimes we cannot see it at the time, but in retrospect, by God's grace, we can look back and say it was all part of God's blessing upon my life.

And many of us, I'm sure, can do that. We can look back over our lives and we can see how God has used difficult experiences.

To further His work in our life and to further His purposes. We need to remember that sometimes that pit or hole that we find ourselves in is all part of God's gracious plan.

Sometimes the shackles and chains that chafe us and bind us are instruments in the hand of God to bless and to further His work. There's a second way here, I think, we see the providence of God. The chapter, as I've mentioned before, is a catalogue of mistakes, errors, outright rebellion. There is actually a notable downward spiral that takes place through the chapter.

[25 : 38] There's a strong sense of irony in the fact that Jacob, who you remember tricked his own father with a goat skin, is himself deceived by his sons in a similar vein, with the blood of a goat smeared on Joseph's robe.

How true the scriptures are. A man reaps what he sows. So lies in deceit today and you will have it back with interest tomorrow.

Jacob is unwise. He's foolish. He seems to have ruined everything. Sometimes we can find ourselves in that kind of situation. We've made mistakes.

We've made errors of judgment. We've taken wrong decisions. Sometimes we feel everything's gone wrong. Everything's come apart at the seams. Perhaps like Jacob, it can even be with our families.

Sometimes we're overcome with feelings of regret. We feel there's no way forward. We've let others down. We've let ourselves down. We've let God down.

[26 : 38] And yet what this story is telling us is that God is bigger than our mistakes and he is bigger and greater even than our sins. Charles Wesley wrote, Oh, Jesus, full of pardoning grace, more full of grace than I have sinned.

That's what, for example, the apostle Peter came to discover after he denied his Lord three times. That's what the psalmist wrote about when he said in Psalm 23, he restores my soul.

The God of Jacob is the God who restores, who can restore the years, the locusts of eaten. Because these things lie within the sphere of his sovereign rule.

God is able to use and to further his purposes despite our sinful rebellion. That is not to condone our sin or excuse it, but to place it within the sphere of his sovereign rule.

And Joseph, of course, declares as much at the end of the story when he tells his brother, in those famous words, we'll look at them briefly tonight. You meant it for evil, but God planned it for good.

[27 : 46] Well, there's a sense, I think, in which the story of Joseph points us further forward to that greatest and most mysterious act of divine providence and provision at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It was to Jesus that men said, this is the heir, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours. It was on the cross that Jesus descended to the depths, abandoned and forsaken, not just by his closest

followers, but in some mysterious way by his father.

It was on the cross that Jesus was left in a place where God appeared to be absent. It was on the cross that Jesus cried out with a loud cry, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Like Joseph, Jesus got no answer. He received no reply, just the taunts and the mocking of others. And yet friends, this is the very place where the great and mysterious purposes of God's grace for the world were being advanced to the saving of many lives.

[29 : 06] It's at the cross, where a table spread with bread and wine, that we most clearly see the shatterproof purpose of God.

Here is where God in Christ bore the weight of all our sin and evil. Here at the cross we see his gracious providence, the mystery of his ways, his extraordinary mercy.

It's at the cross that we see most clearly of all the extraordinary mercy of our God, mercy towards sinners like us.

Here is the God who has reached out to us in Jesus Christ to bear our sin and guilt, to bring us into his kingdom of love and peace and forgiveness.

It's at the cross we see most clearly the mystery of his ways, the cruel injustice of Calvary becomes the very place where sinners are reconciled, a place of death and brutality and human wickedness.

[30 : 31] It becomes a place of life and light and salvation for all who are the Lord's people. It's at the cross we see the gracious providence of our God who works out all things for his people's good and for his greater glory.

Here we see the unshakable, unbreakable purpose of God. May we rest and our faith and our trust in that cross and upon the one who hung upon it bearing our own sins upon his body upon the tree, that one who was raised up and given the name that's above every name, one day at that name, every niche of bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of our God and Father.

Amen. Let's close our time together by singing Psalm 146 from Sing Psalms.

It's a Psalm of praise that speaks of looking to help to Jacob's God. Praise the Lord my soul, O praise him, I'll extol him all my days.

May that be true for all of us this afternoon. Praise the Lord my soul, O praise him, I'll extol him all my days.

[32 : 26] Why I live to God my Savior from my heart I will sing praise.

Do not put your trust in princes, mortal men who cannot sing, all their plans will come to nothing when they perish in the grave.

Blessed is the one who truly looks for help to Jacob's God.

Blessed is the one who blesses all his hope upon the Lord.

He who made the earth and heaven on the seas with all their store, he who thinks is every promise, who is faithful evermore.

[33 : 53] He delivers from oppression and release the hungry's plight.

He releases those in prison to the light the Lord gives sign.

Those who are bowed down, he raises all delight in righteousness.

He protects and cares for strangers, widows and the fatherless.

He restricts the wicked's purpose so the Lord through endless days reigns to every generation.

[35 : 01] Praise your God, O Zion praise. May the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever.

Amen.