

## “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable”

Genesis 45:1-15 • Psalm 133 • Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 • Matthew 15:21-28

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Mason, Michigan

August 20, 2023

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

We've got a couple things to cover this morning. The first is the Joseph story in the book of Genesis, which Jim began with you last week. The second is that complex section in Paul's epistle to the Romans, chapters 9-11, about the ultimate fate of the Jews, which I introduced to you two weeks ago. We're going to wrap up both of those themes today. That's a lot to cover, so let's get right to it!

The Joseph story begins in chapter 37 in the book of Genesis and continues more-or-less uninterrupted for fourteen whole chapters, all the way to the end of the book. It is one of the longest continuous narratives in the Bible. It is a delightful story, well-told, filled with interesting characters and plot twists. Ultimately, it's a story about a family ... a family broken ... a family restored. It's also a story about the wonderful providence and sovereignty of Almighty God, a story about how God uses the twists and turns and ups and downs of our lives, and brings about *good* even in the face of evil.

What Joseph's brothers did to Joseph – that was evil. They sold their kid brother into slavery. Then they lied about it to their father Jacob, making it look like a wild animal had killed him. They did it all because of jealousy – their sheer jealousy over the facts that (1) their father loved Joseph more than them, (2) that Jacob had made for Joseph a magnificent ornamented coat, (3) that Joseph was having dreams about all of his brothers bowing down before him. Granted, Joseph probably would have been wise not to tell his brothers about those dreams, and granted, Jacob would have been wise not to show such favoritism towards one son at the expense of the other eleven, but that in no way excuses what Joseph's brothers did: slavery, a staged death, and a whole pack of lies to their father.

Joseph is sold to a man named Potiphar, the captain of the guard for the Egyptian Pharaoh. Joseph made the best of a bad situation, doing his duties faithfully and well. He earned the respect of Potiphar, who put Joseph in charge of his entire household. For a slave, Joseph was doing pretty well.

Now Joseph was “handsome and good-looking.” Potiphar's wife likes looking at him, and in time she wants to do more than just *look*. She tries to seduce him. Joseph refuses, calling her desire to commit adultery against her husband a “great wickedness and sin against God.” She tries again another day, and another, and another. One day, she grabs hold of Joseph's garment. He “left his garment in her hand and fled and ran outside.” Well, if she can't sleep with him, she will do away with him. She screams for her household servants. She tells them, and later her husband, that Joseph tried to bed her. Joseph is arrested and thrown in prison, falsely accused of a crime he didn't commit.

A few hundred years later, God will give the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel. Among those are the commandment not to covet anything that belongs to your neighbor. Joseph's brothers were guilty of that. There is also the commandment not to bear false witness against your

neighbor. Potiphar's wife is guilty of that. Two of the worst things that people can do to other people were done to Joseph. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Great evil had been done to Joseph – but because Joseph was righteous, God was still with him. God never abandons *any* righteous person, no matter *what* evil may happen to them. Sometimes we wonder why bad things happen to good people. Evil is real, my friends, and all too often it wrecks utter havoc on the lives of good and righteous people. As Christians we don't get to live a life free from the realities of evil and suffering in this world. But we can trust that God can take even the most desperate situation and make something *wonderful* come out of it.

Joseph eventually earns his way out of prison, when it comes to Pharaoh's attention that Joseph has the ability to accurately interpret dreams. Pharaoh's dreams reveal that a severe famine is about to come over all the land. With Joseph's wise counsel, Egypt spends the next seven years storing up an extra seven-year supply of grain. Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of all that grain. "So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance—like the sand of the sea—that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure." Then the famine comes, and it is severe indeed. People come flocking to Egypt from all around. Among those who come are Joseph's brothers. It has been twenty-two years since Joseph and his brothers have seen each other. Joseph was 17 when he was sold into slavery; he is now 39. He recognizes them – they look pretty much the same, just older. But they do not recognize him. He dresses like an Egyptian; he grooms like an Egyptian; he talks like an Egyptian; he uses an Egyptian name; he's got an Egyptian wife and two half-Egyptian kids. Joseph doesn't make it easy for his brothers – you'll have to read those details for yourself – but eventually he can't keep up the charade any longer. His brothers had been so incredibly *hurtful* to him, and yet, deep down, they are still his family. He still *loves* them. He breaks down in tears and reveals his identity: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." But then Joseph does something remarkable: he explains how he sees *God's* hand at work, God's providential hand. For if Joseph had never come to Egypt, if he had never come to the attention of Pharaoh, if he hadn't correctly predicted the famine, if Egypt hadn't stored up all that grain, Joseph's whole entire family – *including Joseph himself* – would starve to death. "So," Joseph says, "it was not you who sent me here, but God." Ponder that! Joseph's brothers made their own free choices when they sold Joseph into slavery and staged his death. God didn't cause them to do those evil things. God was not responsible for their evil actions. But God found a way to turn that evil into something *good*. God used the evil that Joseph's brothers and Potiphar's wife did to Joseph to provide food throughout Egypt and far beyond during a time of severe famine, *and* God used that evil to save Joseph's own family, the family that was the inheritor of God's special blessings. So Joseph's entire family ends up moving from Canaan to Egypt: Joseph's eleven brothers, their wives, their children, Joseph's sister Dinah, and Joseph's father Jacob, who is, of course, overjoyed to see his son alive and prospering, after all these years. Seventy Israelites settle in the land of Egypt.

God was responsible for that. Not the evil – but the good. God is not responsible for the evil in the world. But God can *take* the evil – and *redeem* it. That's the business that God is in.

Fast-forward in time, roughly eighteen centuries, to the early decades of the church, and the ministry of the apostle Paul. He was a direct descendant of Benjamin, the youngest of the sons of Jacob. He was a devout Jew who had become one of the most – if not *the* most – ardent and passionate follower of Jesus Christ. Most of the earliest Christians were also Jews, descendants of those twelve sons of Jacob. A rift had formed within the Jewish people between those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and those who did not. For three whole chapters in the book of Romans, Paul wrestles with the question: *what's going to happen to the Jews who do not accept Jesus as the Messiah?* This was not an academic question. Paul's heart was breaking, for they were all members of his extended family.

In Romans 9, Paul lays out what's at stake. "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever." God had given the Jewish people *so many blessings*. And yet, Paul quickly goes on to say, "not all those descended from Israel are Israelites, and not all of Abraham's children are his descendants." Right away, Paul declares that "it is not the children of the *flesh* who are the children of God, but the children of the *promise*." He's talking about *faith* here, the kind of faith that the Christian believers have, regardless of whether they are descended from Jacob or not. Paul points out that there are a whole host of passages in the Old Testament that make it very plain that God is going to show mercy not just to Jews but also to gentiles – that is, to the other inhabitants of the world, those who *aren't* descended from Jacob. The people of Israel were given a set of laws to follow, which for the most part they weren't very good at keeping; while meanwhile there were a whole lot of gentiles who were believing in and following the God of the Jews. Time does not permit me to walk you through a detailed explanation of everything in these three chapters, but ultimately Paul comes around to this: Imagine an olive tree. That tree represents the Jewish people. But a bunch of branches have broken off. Those branches represent the Jews who did not accept the message about Jesus; those are the ones Paul was worried about. But meanwhile, there is a branch from another tree, a "wild olive shoot" as he calls it, that gets grafted into that olive tree. That "wild olive shoot" represents the gentiles who have come to believe in Jesus. That branch gets grafted in; it binds itself to the tree; the tissues from the original tree and the new branch join together, so that the new branch becomes *part of the tree*, taking its nourishment from the same root, as the tree continues to grow.

So now we have a tree that is the same, and yet different. And there are branches from that tree languishing on the ground. What's going to happen to them? Are they going to lie there and rot? Listen carefully; what Paul says is truly remarkable: "I want you to understand this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not claim to be wiser than you are: a hardening has come upon part of Israel *until* the full number of the gentiles has come in." Paul believes – to his core! – that eventually, in time, or maybe beyond time, once the "full number of the gentiles has come in," however broad that might be, those branches lying on the ground are *also* going to get grafted back into the tree. "Even those of Israel, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again." There will be a *second* round of grafting. The first round brought the gentiles in; the second round brings the faithful Jews back in. "For if you" – he's speaking to the gentiles here – "have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree."

What does this mean? In Paul's words: "all Israel will be saved." He doesn't say "a part" of Israel. He says "*all* Israel." "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew." He firmly believes that a day will come when *all* the Jews will be brought back in. Why? Because "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." They were called by God, way back in the Genesis. Even if many of the Israelites were disobedient in the pages of the Old Testament, even if many of the Jews rejected the message about Jesus in the pages of the New, even if the Jewish people, by and large, still do not affirm that Jesus is the Messiah, Paul believes that a day will come, in God's time, when "all Israel will be saved." Not just a part of it. "Because the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." How can that be? Paul calls it a "mystery." He concludes with these magnificent words: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen."

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