God Meant it for Good:  
Preaching the Gospel of Joseph

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Introduction

The Joseph narrative contains all the elements of a compelling drama: conflict, intrigue, temptation, betrayal, deceit and concealed identities, giving way to redemption, forgiveness, love and hope. It is a great story to preach, loaded with significance as God takes hold of Abraham’s great-grandchildren.

Ominously, all does not look well as we are introduced to the inter-personal dynamics of the fourth generation of Abraham’s family. This is the family that carries forward the Abrahamic promises (Gen 12:2-3). It is the fledgling Old Testament church, the community intended to bring blessing to the ends of the earth. Yet it is beset by favouritism, jealousy, deception and immorality. The unspoken question that looms at the beginning of the story is, what will God do to bring about his promises when those to whom the promises have been made are so far from being a faithful, covenant-keeping, God-honouring, blessing-bearing light to the nations? The narrative unfolds the answer to that question.

The Narrative within Genesis

At the beginning of this section of Genesis we are introduced to the toledot, (that is, the story, account, or generations) of Jacob (Gen 37:2). It is the tenth and final toledot of Genesis, each recounting the narrative of the children of
the person named. This section, then, is chiefly about Jacob’s children. It is essential to accurate interpretation and application to read it not as a narrative about one person but thirteen: Joseph, his eleven brothers and their father.

This toledot occupies a vast portion of Genesis as fourteen chapters unfold a narrative that covers some twenty-two years. Prior to this the Abrahamic promises have been confirmed, repeated and enlarged to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But the promises of becoming a great nation, of being blessed to be a blessing to all nations, and of a land that will be theirs, all have yet to be realized. Each generation has faced its own crises regarding the viability of the promise. Most notably, barrenness has threatened the continuation of the promised line in each of the preceding generations. Now, however, there are twelve heirs to the promise. Previously the promise was always given to just one descendent of father Abraham: to Isaac not Ishmael, to Jacob not Esau. In this story, the promise becomes the possession of the twelve sons of Jacob who are to be the leaders of twelve tribes and the heads of a nation.

The narrative therefore provides the transition from a nation of one to a nation of seventy, paving the way for the expansion of the nation recorded in the early chapters of Exodus. As such, it also provides the link between Genesis and Exodus, revealing to us how Israel came to be in Egypt, away from the land of promise and enslaved to the Egyptian Pharaoh.

The entire narrative holds together beautifully with a clear centre point, as highlighted by Bruce Waltke’s proposed concentric structure:

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1 \text{ The ten are: the account of the line of the heavens and the earth (2:4); of Adam’s line (5:1); of Noah’s line (6:9); of Noah’s sons (10:1); of Shem’s line (11:10); of Terah’s line (11:27); of Ishmael’s line (25:12); of Isaac’s line (25:19); and of Jacob’s line (37:2).}
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2 Gordon Wenham notes that the author “is interested in all the sons of Jacob, not simply Joseph” and adds, “Throughout Gen 37-50 the author shows his interest in the history of the whole family of Jacob, not just Jospeh.” Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 16-50 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 345.


4 See Andrew Reid, Genesis: Salvation Begins (Sydney: Aquila Press, 2000), 233-234.

This structure highlights the centre-piece of the story as the reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers, further emphasizing that this is not a story about one person but about a family.

The Jacob toledot lends itself to preaching. The story-line makes it naturally engaging, the themes make it highly applicatory, and the centrality of the Abrahamic promises to the narrative as a whole ensure that the message is
ultimately one concerning the advance of the gospel in the world. The narrative can be usefully preached in either larger or shorter series.⁶

**The Connection between Joseph and Jesus**

In preaching this narrative, it is essential to determine whether Joseph is to be treated as a type of Christ. That link is never overtly made in the New Testament which pays relatively little attention to Joseph or the narrative more generally.⁷

Commentators vary in the extent to which they develop a link between Joseph and Christ. John Walton, for example, who assiduously avoids any moral lessons being drawn from Joseph’s life, also avoids making any direct connection between Joseph and Jesus.⁸ Similarly, neither Victor Hamilton, Andrew Reid nor Richard Belcher, draw any parallels between Joseph and Christ.⁹

Other commentators identify a connection between Joseph and Christ but do not develop it to any significant degree in their treatment of the narrative. John Calvin, for example, overtly states that in the Joseph narrative “a lively picture of Christ is presented”, yet in his commentary he never paints that picture.¹⁰ Derek Kidner is guarded, though he does note “a human pattern that runs through the OT to culminate at Calvary: the rejection of God’s chosen deliverer, through the envy and unbelief of their kith and kin – yet a rejection

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⁶ The author has preached the narrative in three different series. A short series of five messages from Gen 37, 42-43, 44, 45 and 50:15-21; a series of seven messages from Gen 37, 39-41, 42-43, 44, 45, 46-47 and 49-50; and a series of fourteen sermons covering the entire narrative.
⁷ The only NT references to the Joseph narrative are found in Acts 7:9-18 and Heb 11:22.
which is finally made to play its own part in bringing about the deliverance.”

Gordon Wenham notes that, “Christian exegetes have often seen Joseph as a type of Christ, the innocent man who through suffering brings reconciliation to his human brethren and life to the world. It is possible to go further and view him as a model for all believers, who like him must die to self it they are to make peace with their neighbour.”

Waltke is more forthcoming, speaking of Joseph “prefiguring” Moses, Daniel and Christ. He observes that there is a “remarkable parallel” between the Joseph and Jesus, stating that “the movement from humiliation to exaltation foreshadows the career of the Son of God.”

Similarly, Tremper Longman notes that although the New Testament makes no connection between them, “reading the story of Joseph in the light of the gospel leads the sensitive reader to note an analogy between the way God worked salvation though the life of Joseph and how he did so climactically in the life of Jesus.” In his more recent commentary he develops that analogy more fully, already noting in regard to Genesis 37 that “Joseph here anticipates an even greater rescue” in his suffering at the hands of others. He proceeds at a number of points to follow the typological approach propounded by Sidney Greidanus.

Greidanus interprets and applies the entire narrative in the light of Joseph being a type of Christ. “Joseph prefigures Jesus Christ”, and “reminds us of Jesus”. Greidanus urges the preacher to “Note the parallels in this narrative

17 See, for example, Longman, *Genesis*, 497-498.
between Joseph and Jesus”. A similar approach is taken by Iain Duguid. He contends that the narrative “foreshadows Christ’s life in profound ways” and “prepares” the gospel as Joseph “resembles Jesus”. According to Duguid, “Joseph pointed beyond himself to the true Messiah, who was yet to come. Joseph pointed forward to the Christ, who followed the same pattern of suffering and then exaltation, and public acclamation.” Commenting on Genesis 50:20, he notes, “The supreme example of the plans of wicked men being turned around for the good of God’s people comes at the cross…”

Finally, while Timothy Keller avoids the language of typology he nonetheless says, “Joseph is the true and better Joseph, who at the right hand of the King forgives those who betrayed and sold him and uses his new power to serve them.” His avoidance of the technical language of typology is deliberate. Speaking of narrative generally, he warns that “too rigid a formula (or set of formulas)” results in being predictable. Often the line to Christ is best perceived by intuition rather than composed by a defined method.

Whether one identifies Joseph as a “type” of Christ or not, the narrative contains patterns that are, to borrow a Dale Ralph Davis phrase, “vintage Yahweh”. These patterns occur again and again in Scripture and culminate in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. There are theme-tunes and motifs that run throughout God’s redemptive work. In the Joseph story, for example, there is the familiar pattern of God’s chosen leader being rejected by his own family, a prophet not being welcome in his own town and God’s

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20 Greidanus, Preaching Christ from Genesis, 431.
22 Duguid, Living in the Light, 26.
23 Duguid, Living in the Light, 27.
24 Duguid, Living in the Light, 84.
25 Duguid, Living in the Light, 192.
27 Keller, Preaching, 86.
28 See Dale Ralph Davis, 2 Kings: The Power and the Fury (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2005), 47.
deliverers being despised and rejected. There is the biblical pattern of humiliation preceding exaltation, of suffering before glory and pain before gain. There is the familiar motif of an unlikely, unexpected and unwelcome deliverer. There is the theme-tune, often repeated in Scripture, of sin being confronted, exposed, confessed and forgiven.

In these patterns we see the gospel at work in the Old Testament among God’s old covenant people. It is, therefore, not hard to travel from the realities of the story to the realities of the gospel and, since Joseph is the God-provided deliverer, it is not hard to travel from him to the ultimate deliverer, Jesus Christ.

In handling the connection between Joseph and Jesus there are three matters that preachers should be bear in mind. First, they should not be in such a rush to move from Joseph to Jesus that the details of the narrative are largely glossed over. It is the unique drama with its twists and turns, tensions and resolutions, that sheds fresh light on the ways of God and the gospel. If we skim over them, hovering high above the narrative and preaching a biblical theological framework rather than the narrative itself, we will short-change our hearers, miss many jewels and become, as Keller indicated, overly predictable.29 There’s freshness in the story itself, so we should allow our hearers to live in it and enjoy it.

Second, insofar as the narrative reveals classic gospel theme tunes, we should not fail to go to where these great themes culminate: the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need not travel to the gospel of Christ by way of overt typology, but by “intuition”, to use Keller’s phrase, as we follow the themes of the narrative to their ultimate destination. This does not necessitate mapping each stage in the biblical theology journey, nor insisting that the parallels between Joseph and Christ are deliberate typology. It simply means that we preach not only the God of Joseph, but also the gospel of Joseph, pressing it on our hearers today in the light of the finished work of Christ.

29 Keller, Preaching, 86.
Such gospel application to our hearers today demands awareness of a third matter. As we join the dots between God’s work then, through Joseph, and his work now, through Jesus Christ, we should also join the dots between the eleven brothers and ourselves. In God’s plan, Joseph is not an Anyone, but a Someone, raised up to save his family. The brothers are the messy, sinful yet chosen family of God and our default setting should be to identify with them, with Israel, not with their Lord to whom they bow down.

Too easily, preachers have a default setting of drawing applicatory lessons from the life of the hero of a biblical story. While sometimes that is legitimate, more often than not it is preferable for our default setting to be identification with the ordinary people of God in a given narrative. We are better to identify with the Israelites cowering on the sidelines as Goliath intimidates them than with David as the God-appointed hero who defeats their enemy for them. We are better to identify with God’s people who cross the sea on dry ground than with Moses who leads them out from Egypt. And we are better to identify with the jealous, deceitful brothers than with the exalted Joseph whose dreams are fulfilled and to whom they bow down.

**Preaching the Great Themes of the Narrative**

Having examined the place of the Jacob *toledot* in Genesis and considered appropriate ways of preaching the connection between Joseph and Jesus, we turn now to the major themes of the narrative that will inevitably be at the heart of sermons we preach on this portion of God’s Word. There are five prominent themes to which we ought to give attention.

**1. A story of divine providence**

At the highest level this is the story of God preserving Abraham’s family because it is the family bearing the gospel promise. That is the express purpose stated at the end of the narrative as Joseph declares to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that
many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen 50:20). This perspective is pre-empted in his statements to them in Genesis 45:5, 8.

Through all the ups and downs of jealousy, betrayal, injustice, power, deceit and reconciliation, God was working at this higher level. He sent Joseph ahead of the family into Egypt so that when days of famine came they would be provided for royally. In this way the covenant family would not be extinguished, but would settle in Egypt where they would prosper and multiply. There they would become a great nation, far from the decaying influence of the Canaanites. God had already revealed that the sin of the Amorites had not yet reached ripeness for judgement (Gen 15:13-16), and that Abraham’s descendants would leave the promised land and be strangers in another land where they would be enslaved, mistreated but eventually leave with many riches. The entire Joseph story fulfils that prophecy.

At this highest level, then, we see God at work across the centuries, carrying out his purposes, providing for his people and ensuring their ultimate survival. Strikingly, God does so not merely in spite of the sinful actions of his people, but via their sinful actions. It is the brothers’ rejection of Joseph, their selling of him to the Egyptians, his injustice at the hands of Potiphar’s wife, and his being forgotten for two years by the butler that are stepping stones in God’s plan to place Joseph in high position for the role he has predestined him to have in his family’s life. It is not hard to see the pattern of God turning evil to good, a pattern that climaxes in the death of Jesus (cf. Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).\(^{30}\)

Needless to say, the theme of providence has to be prominent in preaching this story. There will be ample opportunity to speak about the hidden but steady hand of God, guiding, overseeing, leading, protecting, turning evil to good, and accomplishing his purposes. Kidner regards this narrative the “\textit{locus classicus}” of God’s preservation of his people.

\(^{30}\) As Duguid says, “The supreme example of the plans of wicked men being turned around for the good of God’s people comes at the cross…”, \textit{Living in the Light}, 192.

\textit{Vox Reformata}, 2017
of providence.” Calvin speaks of it providing “a most beautiful example of Divine Providence”, showing “that the Lord performs his work by wonderful and unusual modes”.

This is the significance of the story beginning with Joseph’s two dreams that are eventually fulfilled. God, unnamed in Genesis 37, reveals from the beginning where this story is going. At that point, the road is unknown but the destination is already clear: Joseph will be exalted among his brothers. God’s revelation of that at the very beginning indicates this is a saga over which he is sovereign from beginning to end.

This narrative of divine providence is, nonetheless, remarkably elaborate. Surely God could have provided for them a little more simply! Why does Joseph have to be betrayed by his brothers? Why does he have to suffer injustice and imprisonment in Egypt? Why does Jacob have to suffer for twenty years under the mistaken belief that his favourite son was dead? Why does Joseph have to rise to prominence via injustice and imprisonment? Why must there be such an extensive and devastating famine? Why does Joseph put his brothers through such agony when they come to buy grain? And why does his clever taxation system end up being the very means by which they become enslaved to Pharaoh for 400 years? Genesis 50:20 is a wonderful statement of divine providence, but it raises almost as many questions as it answers.

To find resolution to these questions, preachers must descend from this highest level of interpretation, to a lower layer of the narrative.

2. A story of God creating a nation out of nothing

If God is ultimately preserving the nation he has chosen, it is also clear in these chapters that he is growing and establishing that nation. The question the opening chapters raise is, How will this family ever bring blessing to the ends

31 Kidner, Genesis, 179.
32 Calvin, Genesis, 261.
of the earth? How will these men, with all their bitterness and rivalry, become the leaders of twelve great tribes? How will God ever make them into the people they are meant to be?

The answer is that in the course of preserving and providing for them, God also breaks, shapes and makes them into the people he wants them to be. The reason for such a convoluted storyline is that as he providentially protects and provides for them, he also providentially sanctifies them. That, in itself, is loaded with applicatory significance.

In preaching this narrative, we must constantly have an eye to how he is working with this family. It is clear from the start that God chooses them and then changes them, not the reverse. This is the chosen family but clearly they are not chosen as a model family. Jacob has already been subject to God’s refining work for many decades yet he continues to be painfully given to favouritism. The brothers are full of spite, jealousy, brutality, deception and murderous intent.

Although it is a disturbing picture, it is encouraging to see who God actually uses and where his work begins. The first readers, through whose eyes we must initially interpret the narrative, would have been powerfully reminded that they were not chosen because they were amazing. Their roots were rotten, but God was making them into a holy nation.

It is also abundantly clear that as God undertakes this work, he takes his time. Joseph is sidelined from age seventeen to thirty, and then a further nine years pass before he is reconciled with his brothers. Jacob needlessly grieves for over two decades. The brothers make multiple trips from Canaan to Egypt.

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33 Walton comments, “God is determined to fulfill the covenant blessings despite the character flaws of his chosen family and despite obstacles that occur along the way. He is even able to bring good out of evil. These are the emphases that rise to the surface in the Joseph story.” See Walton, *Genesis*, 662.

34 Kidner notes the similarity of this length of time to the time for Abraham between promise and fulfillment, and for Jacob in service of Laban. , *Genesis*, 197.
return, each one taking many weeks. All this is part of a plan to take them to Egypt for 400 years. The first readers were reminded of where they had come from, where they were going, and that God is in no rush.

3. A story of God transforming his people

If the highest level of the narrative is a record of God preserving and providing for his people, and the second level is that of him creating a nation from the most unpromising raw material, the next level down is the detail of how he brings about a transformation of their individual characters and their family life. As Belcher comments, this is “more than the story of Joseph; it is also a story of how God takes a troubled family and works to bring the family together.”35 The story reveals that God effects a remarkable transformation largely through suffering and painful testing.

His work begins with Joseph, the older son of the favoured wife, Rachel. It is hard to assess Joseph’s character in chapter 37 where no character assessment is given by the narrator. Greidanus says he is depicted in the first half of the chapter as “immature, unwise, boastful, and extremely talkative.”36 That may be the case, and other commentators join in assessments of immaturity, insensitivity and indiscretion. Walton rightly notes, however, that “it is difficult to make that case from the text… it may be unjustified to see young Joseph as a “spoiled brat.”37 What we do know is that Joseph is caught up in the middle of all the favouritism and antagonism of this highly dysfunctional family.

After he is sold, however, he is suddenly alone in Egypt, far from his family and now subjected to temptation, false accusation, imprisonment and abandonment. In these trials he is forced to lean on God alone, every other support having been pulled from beneath him.

35 Belcher, Genesis, 219.
36 Greidanus, 338
37 Walton, Genesis, 692.
In Genesis 39, where he resists the temptation of Potiphar’s wife, the main theme is not the moralistic lesson of how to say no to sexual temptation, but the spiritual reality that the Lord was with him (Gen 39:2,3,21 and 32) and showed him kindness (hesed),\(^\text{38}\) highlighting to later readers that the Lord would be with them also, no matter what they faced, where they found themselves, and whether they rose or fell in society.

In naming his two sons after his rise to prominence in Egypt, Joseph looks back on years of hardship and affliction.\(^\text{39}\) In naming Manasseh he remarks that, “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house”, and with the naming of Ephraim, he says, “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction” (Gen 41:51-52). He emerged from the suffering of those years, however, with strong faith in God and complete peace of heart. The names, while referencing the hardship, focus on the profound sense of compensation he experienced. The pain was superseded by the later blessings, leading him to both forgetfulness and fruitfulness.

God having completed his lengthy work in Joseph’s life turns next to the work that still needed to be done in the eleven brothers, a work that is undertaken through the instrumentality of Joseph.

As we approach the climax of the story, Joseph is prime minister of Egypt, the famine is severe not only there but in all the world (Gen 41:57), and the brothers go to him to buy grain. Joseph is unrecognizable. Not only has he grown up, but contrary to Hebrew custom he has shaved, he is dressed in royal clothes, and he is speaking Egyptian. Immediately a remarkable thing happens: they bow down to him! His dreams had foretold this many years before and they had hated him for it. But now, without their knowing it, they fulfilled his dreams as they bowed low to their most despised brother.

\(^{38}\) Reid, *Genesis*, 255.

\(^{39}\) Hardship or toil, Wenham suggests, “probably refers to his work as a slave (cf. Deut 26:7; Judg 10:16)”, and affliction or oppression “is used in Exod 3:7; 17; 4:31; Deut 26:7 of the Israelite bondage in Egypt. So here Joseph’s experience anticipates that of his descendants.”, *Genesis*, 398.
While it was impossible for the brothers to recognize him it was far easier for him to identify them. A vital key to understanding the following chapters is given in Genesis 42:9. Joseph steels himself, sensing, it seems, that there is work to be done before they learn of his identity. Given the denial of his own pent-up emotion, it appears that his subsequent actions are not to be interpreted as revenge but as Joseph assuming a role he senses God has prepared him to play in his own family, as revealed by his dreams. Until the dreams are fulfilled, with his entire family bowing before him, he will not unveil his identity.

He assumes this role by embarking on three rounds of testing. The first round of tests in chapter 42 are designed to elicit information and expose their hearts. He tests them first by accusing them of being spies (Gen 42:9), then by imprisoning them (42:14-17), next by detaining Simeon and sending the rest home to get their youngest brother (42:18-20), and finally by blessing them with the unexpected blessing of money being returned to them (42:25-26).

These tests prise open the lid of their hearts and reveal the presence of guilty consciences, unresolved tensions, ongoing divisions and fear (Gen 42:21-23; 28). It is important to note that Joseph is deeply moved by what he hears (Gen 42:24), turning away to weep, but he knows he has been placed in this position to effect change in their lives, and so he withholds public expression of the emotion he feels.

He therefore presses on with the second round of tests, in Genesis 43, designed to soften their hearts. He tests them by putting them in a position where they

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40 Waltke regards “Joseph's motives in using harsh words against his brothers” as “ambiguous and probably complex.” He nonetheless suggests that “his harsh words are part of his developing strategy based on his dream to discipline and test his brothers” (Genesis, 543). Kidner also believes that the dreams require the entire family to bow before him so he is not yet ready to reveal himself (Genesis, 199). Duguid concurs, interpreting his actions as merciful provision for the family until all bow before him (Living in the Light, 90-91). Alter, by contrast, argues that no causal link between his memories and his words is indicated by the narrator, leaving a range of possibilities for the reader to ponder. See Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 163-164.
must put their lives on the line for sake of their brother, Benjamin. If they are to return for further grain, they must bring Benjamin with them. That places Jacob in a position where he must release his beloved son of his favourite wife. With great pain he reluctantly does so, calling on *El Shaddai* (God Almighty), the name God gave to himself when he appeared to Abraham in Genesis 17. Jacob’s prayer in Genesis 43:14 is scarcely one of robust faith, but he does, nonetheless, surrender his son, casting himself on God. This, in turn, prompts Judah to step up, undertaking to ensure the boy’s safety. His statement in Genesis 43:8-9 signals the start of a new attitude.

So the brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin. On their return, their honesty and integrity is tested. What will they do about the money put back in their sacks? In the past, they had callously sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver. Now they are at pains to make amends and return the money, though they had never stolen it in the first place.

At this point they face the most mysterious test of all. Taken to the home of their interrogator, they are told their money had been received even though they found it in their sacks. Joseph then pronounces a blessing on Benjamin. To their dismay they are seated in order of their age and then, when they are served, Benjamin is shown special favour, receiving five times as much food from the master’s table.

This, then, is the test of their attitude to one of Rachel’s sons being shown special favour.41 Once that had produced in their hearts murderous intent. Now we find no hint of envy, resentment or bitterness.

Throughout the second round of tests their hearts are being softened by the work of God. But there remains a third round of testing with one more shattering experience ahead of them. No doubt they would have been relieved to finally leave Egypt with their sacks bulging with grain and all eleven brothers safe. But Joseph had planted his silver cup in Benjamin’s sack.

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What is the point of this most staged test? Previously they were tested on their response when he, the favoured son of the favoured wife, was blessed. Now they are tested in their response to him falling into trouble. Both are fine tests of our hearts and in particular of our love for others. How do we respond when someone else is highly honoured? And how do we react when someone we are responsible for brings trouble not only on themselves but on us?

Far from abandoning or blaming him, they stand by him and head back to Egypt. There, Judah makes the longest and arguably the greatest speech of the entire book of Genesis (Gen 44:18-34). It is a speech full of humility, love for his father, integrity, and self-sacrifice. The climax in Genesis 44:33 is a remarkable contrast to the attitude of the brothers in Genesis 37: “Please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my Lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers.”

It is when Joseph sees that level of love between them that the testing is over and, in a flood of pent-up emotion, he reveals himself to them. It is clear at that point that not only has God provided for them, but he has significantly changed them. The twelve brothers are now united, humbled, truthful and loving. God has not only preserved them but he has transformed them and made them the people he wanted them to be.

Along with the first readers, we are reminded that the God who graciously calls us when we are utterly unworthy, is the God who deals with our sin, exposing it, turning it back on us, piercing our consciences, and producing change within us.

This was the gospel of grace at work in the Old Testament and it is highly instructive of how the gospel works in our lives as well. If we bow before Christ, the one God has exalted to save us, he will not leave us as we are. He will expose

our sin, pierce our consciences and work deep in our hearts to make us his holy people. His work may well be slow, painful and thorough, but eventually it will lead to the most glorious reconciliation and revelation. Since we are Abraham’s descendants by faith, we should expect that just as God had to break and shape them into order to make them into a nation that brings blessing to the ends of the earth, so he will have to do that to us.

In applying the narrative today, preachers must not only work with the highest level (God’s providence) or the second level (God’s forming a nation from these twelve men), but this third level that details the ways in which God’s works brings about profound transformation in his people’s lives. We will need to preach these tests of the heart to ourselves and our hearers.

As we do so, two further theme tunes of the narrative deserve attention.

4. A story of salvation surprises

A reader following the storyline of Genesis should constantly be looking for the seed who will crush the serpent’s head as promised in Genesis 3:15, and it would be a valid assumption, when reading the Joseph narrative, to think that Joseph, if not the promised saviour himself, will be the line to the seed. Of course most naturally, the narrative that has moved from Adam via Seth to Noah, and then to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, should move to the oldest son, Reuben, but the mantle is not cast on him because of the way he had disgraced himself (Gen 35:22). It would seem logical, then, for Simeon, as the second oldest to assume this position, although the Jacob toledot sets us up to anticipate that Joseph, the oldest son of the second wife, will be the one. One would also expect that of his two children, the oldest would be the one to continue the promised line. But in blessing these children, old Jacob crosses his arms and blesses Ephraim not Manasseh (Gen 48:17-20). He then proceeds to prophecy that Judah, not Joseph, is the one who will hold the sceptre. The Messiah will be the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the tribe of the fourth son of the second wife.
All this is quite odd and unconventional, but the reality is, God repeatedly makes choices contrary to human expectation. Why Jacob and not Esau? Why Ephraim and not Manasseh? And now, why Judah?

Early in the story, Judah’s sexual unfaithfulness in Genesis 38 is contrasted with Joseph’s faithfulness in chapter 39. In that story, it is a Gentile woman, Tamar, who is the hero, showing more concern about the seed than Judah. She becomes the mother of Judah’s children, Perez and Zerah. But while dishonourable in Genesis 38, Judah increasingly distinguishes himself and eventually, as we have seen, delivers that the greatest speech of the entire narrative, evidencing profound personal transformation (Gen 45:18-33). He has been readied for the role God has prepared for him as head of the tribe from which the Messiah will come.

In preaching the narrative, therefore, it is important to preach the God of salvation surprises, who raises up those we would least expect and appoints unlikely saviours. Little wonder that at the other end of the Bible we read of the Lion of the tribe of Judah stepping forward, but looking like a lamb that has been slain (Rev 5). God’s ways of salvation are unusual and unpredictable.

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43 There is a fascinating chronology, well summarized by Waltke, that sees the events of Genesis 38 covering a similar timeframe to the entire Joseph narrative, so that “Judah’s confession of wrong against Tamar occurs near the same time as the confession of all the brothers in their wrongs against Joseph (cf. Gen 38:26 with 42:21). Perhaps Judah’s confession regarding Tamar prepares him for the other.” Waltke, Genesis, 507-508.

44 Walton addresses the way chapter 38 relates to the Joseph narrative by suggesting that the detail about the birth order of Perez and Zerah is a “montage”, used to indicate that the younger will triumph. It is inserted unexpectedly in the Joseph narrative, just after Joseph has been sold into slavery, but the juxtaposition indicates that he will yet triumph. See, Genesis, 690-691. Walton’s explanation of the blessings in Genesis 48-49 is as follows: “Genesis 48 is the transition that adopts Ephraim and Manasseh as replacements for the disgraced Reuben and Simeon. Genesis 49 is a… transition targeting the more distant future, when the tribe of Judah will move into a place of leadership among the tribes. Joseph is to be leader among the sons; Judah is to be leader among the tribes. The unfolding of the canon will eventually find in this the specific targets of David and Jesus” (Genesis, 722).
5. A story of hope

The toledot of Jacob ends with two deaths. When Jacob finally died at the age of 147, there was but one place he wanted his mummified body to be laid to rest: back in the one field the family owned in Canaan (Gen 49:29-32). Bought by Abraham when Sarah died, the family burial plot by this time contained the remains of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Leah and now Jacob. This was all they owned in the promised land where they lived as aliens and strangers. But they clung to the promise that God would give it to them and if they didn’t see it in their lifetime, they at least wanted to be buried there, believing God would give it to their descendants.

So Jacob’s request was a final act of faith in God’s promise, and the massive journey back there kept the promise before the whole family, reminding them that Egypt was not their permanent home. As Calvin writes, “it was profitable that the memory of the promise should be renewed, by this symbol, among his surviving sons, in order that they might aspire to it.”45 Waltke adds further to the significance of scene by seeing in Jacob a foreshadowing of Christ: “This grand funeral procession and this exaltation of Jacob as a king by the Egyptians foreshadows Israel’s exodus from the world and gives a foretaste of the time when the nations hail a son of Jacob as King.”46

The same faith in the same promise is seen at the end of Joseph’s life as well. Over 50 years later he makes a similar request, asking for his bones to be taken back to Canaan (Gen 50:24-25). He spoke in faith of a day when God would visit them and deliver them from Egypt and, when that happened 400 years later, his bones were collected and taken through the Red Sea, carried around the desert for forty years and eventually buried in the promised land (cf. Ex 13:19; Josh 24:32). Calvin again comments astutely: “it was of great consequence, as an example, that it should be known to all the people, that he

45 Calvin, Genesis, 472.
46 Waltke, Genesis, 618.
who held the second place in the kingdom of Egypt, regardless of so great an honour, was contented with his own condition, which was only that of the heir of a bare promise.”

These men of faith were looking for more than they had in Egypt, and more than Canaan promised as well. They knew God’s promise was greater than a piece of land, and so in faith had a sense of something beyond the grave (cf. Heb 11:13-16)

As we preach the narratives today, we do so having seen what they hoped for (cf. Heb 11:39-40). We have, then, stepped into the story. We are not mere onlookers, analysing an ancient narrative, but participants in the story as God continues to provide for and sanctify a people for his own glory, not now through the instrumentality of Joseph, but through his own Son, Jesus. Preachers need to convey that there is nothing more thrilling, exciting, moving, difficult and wonderful than being part of this story.

The story itself furnishes preachers with endless colourful options for preaching God’s providence in protecting, providing for, transforming, blessing and using his people. These narratives allow us to preach for confident faith in God and humble submission to him as, through Christ, he sovereignly turns evil to good, both in our lives and in this world, in order to bring about the salvation of many people.

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47 Calvin, Genesis, 491.