

Saving the World

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Preacher: Stuart Weir

[0 : 00] Evening. Let's just pray briefly before we kick off here.

Father, give us ears to hear what your Spirit is saying, here and now, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, a couple of weeks ago, Darren unpacked the previous part of this narrative for us. But this week, we're switching from character Jacob, or Israel, as he's now dubbed, to Joseph. And we need to look at what this story presents for us. It's actually very exciting. And at the last minute, kind of, not at the last minute, but a bit in advance, as Martin switched around the passages.

And when I realized what he'd given me, I was elated. I was delighted. Because here is just such a brilliant story for our time, for all times, but based on a specific time as well.

[1 : 14] And it tells us something, and you guys have been tracking with this in the evening service, about the life of Joseph and his relation to his brothers and his dad and all of the carnage.

You've got human trafficking in there, injustice in there. It's just a bonker story, isn't it? But it's so textured and exciting and harrowing all in one.

And so I guess in this passage, when we get to everything that Ian's just read out, we are coming to the culmination, the high point in Joseph's career, in his working life.

So let's just go back over what Joseph accomplished, what this chapter gives us. What does the Bible present in this story?

Well, right off the mark on verse 13, we're launched into famine. Severe famine in Egypt. It spread from the promised land, and it was continuing through the promised land and into Egypt.

[2 : 17] And simultaneously, this famine was just terrorizing the lives of the natives. And here's Joseph in a place of seriously influential political power.

And there are four stages and four moves that he makes, four decisions that he takes in his work, which are fascinating to note.

As he stewards the resources of Egypt, which have a knock-on effect for Canaan as well. The first is he sells grain to the people with all of their remaining money.

They give him all of their remaining savings, cash, whatever they've got. And he banks it away in Pharaoh's coffers, and he gives them enough grain to survive, to cook with.

I mean, in and of itself, that is a remarkable thing for Egypt and Canaan to be in that desperate a situation.

[3 : 26] I mean, you quickly read over that, and the words go in, but I'm not sure how far they go in. And the more you read it, you realize, my goodness, how bad is this emergency in Egypt?

The second stage, and we don't know how far along after the first decision, as he asks that.

So, the first stage, the people come to him. But the second stage, Joseph approaches the people and says, Give me your livestock now, and I will exchange it for grain.

So, I ain't giving you this stuff for free. You need to trade with the state. Give me your sheep, your goats, whatever you've got, and I will give you grain to eat.

Then the people, so in the third stage, and again, we don't know the time scale between stages one and two and two and three.

[4 : 27] This third stage, the people offer all of their land. They, again, come to Joseph of their own volition and say, We will give you our land in return for grain.

And you can just sense the cumulative desperation of each stage. Can you imagine?

You give all of your cash. You offload everything from your bank account. All of your livestock.

Now your land. Is there anything left? Well, yes, there is. The fourth step is their very lives.

They give their very lives to Pharaoh. In bondage is the word used. We will give our lives in bondage to you if you just give us grain to eat.

[5 : 28] My goodness, how desperate is this? We are in a political emergency. And notice that he doesn't just, even in return for their slavery, their bondage, they have to still pay a fifth back to Pharaoh of the grain they're given.

What is really interesting to know, and certainly on the first reading I did not clock this, that Joseph actually puts all these people, regardless of trade, regardless of training, into work as agrarian farmers.

So now they've lost their money, they've lost all their livestock, they've lost all their land, they're enslaved to the state, but Joseph puts them to work on the land.

The land, which presumably was theirs before, and is now Pharaoh's. Who knows? And people are put to work regardless of that trade that they did before.

So as a consequence, we've got Pharaoh, via Joseph, owning all the land, all of Egypt, and all its assets. It is a mad, mad scene.

[6 : 58] And it just seems so harsh to our 21st century ears. Even some of the decisions that Joseph makes, we just think, goodness, that's a bit, come on now. Are you kidding me?

Why did you require a fifth back of the grain? These guys have got nothing left. They've just given their very lives. But nevertheless, those were the decisions they made. It was an extreme moment in history.

But the man Joseph, who was sold into slavery one day in his past, now becomes the chief steward of a myriad of slaves, in the midst of severe famine.

And what had come to pass, what had been honed in him, was maturity. Political nous under severe pressure.

To be able to make decisions, to keep a whole country alive. A whole country. His skill in stewarding natural resource, in order to keep everyone alive, is astounding.

[8 : 16] I don't know about you, but just visualizing this, slightly closer to home, not closer to home, but in history. When I grew up, when I was a little boy, when I hear the word famine, I automatically go to Ethiopia in the 80s, when I grew up.

That's what I always think of. And you think of just how desperate that was, and how many lives were lost. And despite the extremity of all of this, and the mad decisions, seemingly mad decisions, he kept a whole country alive.

With wisdom. With canny. With nous. Here was a godly man, in politics. Someone who'd perspective on life, through his hardship.

Slavery, from his own family, enforced slavery. The injustices, that he had suffered, at the hands of Potiphar's wife, and then in prison.

And he was bringing all of this, garnering all of this, all welled up, into a person of faith now. Faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and his dad, to bear his service, for Pharaoh, and for a whole country.

[9 : 41] So Israel, step change here. Israel as a nation, were also subsumed, into the nation of Egypt, at this time. And here's where we see, in a way, a link, and a nice link, between the end of Genesis, because we're approaching, the end of Genesis, and into the Exodus.

We get there in verse 27, Israel were fruitful, and multiplied exceedingly, under this leadership. interesting language, language to use, when the same language, is used, and a very jealous, and paranoid, Pharaoh, a different Pharaoh, clocks this.

These Jews, breed well. They were fruitful, under extreme, and severe famine. And these are the first, indicators of a thriving, nation.

And what's really, significant about that, and Darren had picked up, on this two weeks ago, is that there was a promise, that went to Abraham, in chapter 12, of Genesis. Genesis 12, three, one of the scarlet threads, that runs the whole way, through the biblical story, when, as God says to Abraham, he says, in you, Abraham, all the families, of the earth, shall be blessed.

And peppered, throughout Genesis, and it continues, the whole way, through the trajectory, is the sense, that God's people, despite, unbelievable setbacks, despite the conditions, seemingly, always against them, they are burgeoning, they are growing.

[11 : 20] This promise, is absolutely, exploding. Genesis 12, three, right here, in Genesis 47, 27.

This is the beginning, of the story, of a thriving Israel, that will be crushed, under a different Pharaoh, in the same country. What, does this, passage, what does God, want us, to take away, from this?

Why give us, so much, information, about this, point in history? Like the opening, sermon, in this series, where Andy points out, God's not even mentioned, verbatim, in that text.

The same is here, in our text tonight. But we know, that God is, permeates, the whole way, through, this scenario. What is it, that God wants us, to clock?

Joseph's work, Joseph's work, was important, to God.

[12:35] Why give us, details, about a political, emergency, and situation? Why even bother? Why not just, sort of, jump to, Israel's death, at the end of the passage? What's the point, in unpacking, all of these details?

And the decisions, that he made. Brothers and sisters, there is no, sacred, secular, divide. When God, in the garden, at the beginning, of this book, brings, life into Adam, and Eve, there is no point, in that narrative, where he says, now that's the spiritual, stuff there, and this is the, kind of secular stuff, it's a bit of a, necessary evil, but you just have to, get on with it.

No, no, no, no. Shaping, and reshaping, the garden accordingly, was the stuff. Naming the animals, was the real stuff. That's being spiritual.

Working in accordance, with God's purposes, in this messy world, is the real stuff. Joseph's work, is important, to God.

Isn't it brilliant, how we're told, about the details, of what happens. Now you've got to give me, a fifth of that grain back, I know you're a slave, but you have to do that now. And goodness knows, what the backroom deals, were like, and how they negotiated, those things, but we have a lot, of really interesting information, from this trade, at this point.

[14:07] The details, of what Joseph did, were important, to God. They're essential, for us to know, for our instruction.

And the way, he went about, his job, and the significance, of the outcome, for the nation, are important, to God too. And therefore, to us. We can gloss over, whole episodes, of this in scripture, and we wonder, what the point is, where's God, or where's the epiphany, or where's the ladder, from earth to heaven, or sometimes, there's just no ladder, to heaven.

Sometimes, it's the grimy, gritty, sweat bearing, difficult decision stuff, that God also clocks. The mundane, which happens, to actually be, quite spectacular, for a whole country.

The fact is, that passages like this, have such, an important, place, in our lives, as followers of Jesus, because we spend, the bulk, of our waking hours, working.

Church, scattered. Now let me qualify, the term work, for just two seconds. When I say work, I mean, those in retirement, in the third age of life.

[15:37] When I say work, I mean school kids, primary, secondary, students at uni. When I say work, I mean people, in jobs, paid or unpaid. When I say work, I mean people, who are unemployed, and looking for work, which by the way, is exhausting work.

All inclusive. We all have a front line. That's where we spend, the bulk of our waking hours. And we need to have confidence, from this story, and many others, about how to be, as God's people, when we're out there, at work.

And Janus 47, helps us with this. This is just the man, with decades of experience, of hardship, who can sympathize, and react rightly, to this circumstance.

no matter, what happens to us, because the sun shines, and the rain pours, on the good, and evil. Let's find, godly ways, to respond, to the miserable, and to the beautiful, that takes place, in our working lives.

[17:03] And you are able, to do this, because you are drawing, from passages, such as this. God himself, is in you. Holy Spirit, he is at work, with you.

Why is work, important though? It begs the question, doesn't it? Why is work, important? Brothers and sisters, the creation mandate, to rule, and subdue the earth, to shape, and reshape it, to tend, and look after that garden, is still binding, despite sin, having ruined, so much.

And God has built, into his creation, four key mandates, most of which, come out, in this book, of the Bible. So anyway, the creation mandate, is still binding, to rule and subdue the earth, to tend and keep the garden, but the four mandates, that comes out in Genesis, that are still binding, of which the reformers, and the reformation, were at pains, to emphasize, work, marriage, government, and church, are all, simultaneously, at play, in our world.

And we're mentioning, two of these tonight. But the first of these, is significant, because, if it was God's, original purpose, for his people, to co-work with him, here on this planet, on this earth, then

the story of Joseph, and the details therein, shows its importance, to God.

Why would he include, all of this? God's mandate, to keep the earth, to shape, and reshape it responsibly, is still valid, is still at play.

[19 : 02] We have been made, to work, with him, and for him. And in this way, as creatures, we reflect God's image, in a humble way, of working with him.

We can't create, out of nothing, like he did, that day, those days, I should say. But he gives us, room to make, and remake things, out of the stuff, that he's made.

Older evangelicals, used to use the analogy, God is the landlord, and we are his stewards, here on earth. And this is a really, helpful place, to understand, our location, and creation, in our relationship, to God.

He served the whole nation, with rations, towards survival. That is noteworthy. Indeed, I would actually go further, than what I've already said, and say that work, is the chief way, to love your neighbor.

Martin Luther said, once, if you're a manual laborer, you find that the Bible, has been put, in your workshop, in your hand, into your heart.

[20 : 30] It teaches, and preaches, how you should treat, your neighbor. Work, can be the main place, where we get to know, others, and their needs, their concerns, their gripes, their relationships.

Sometimes, this becomes personal, through one-to-one interactions, which gives you, more of an opportunity, to serve. Other times, depending on, the kind of job you do, but in the Joseph story, it's a macro situation, by which he is able, to love, his neighbors.

But no less effective. Work should not be understood, as wasted hours, between now, and eleven, next Sunday.

It is given from God, and it is good, when it is done, in cooperation with him. Even, if it doesn't, feel it. Boy, do we place a lot, of stock, in feelings.

Sometimes, to our detriment. What is the chief, takeaway point, for everyone tonight?

[21 : 51] Your work, matters to God. Your labor, to try and find a job. Your labor, to try and find a new job.

Your labor, to try and find, additional work. Your labor, is you try and do it, better, in the power of the spirit. These are two of my colleagues, by the way.

Louise, and Mark. As was mentioned, I work, for an organization, called CARE. Most of you know that. Some of you, don't have a clue, who I am, and that's alright. And, it's not escaped my notice, and to my joy, getting given this passage, it's all about politics.

It's not just our work, that matters to God. Boy, if we didn't know it, after Friday, politics, matters, to God. There couldn't, maybe be a more, appropriate story, for this weekend, right?

Politics, matters, to God. Government, is crucial, to the earth, as a means, towards shaping, and stewarding, people, and things.

[23 : 13] Society, requires rules, and boundaries. Of course, we know, that doesn't mean, that governments, aren't capable, of horrendous things. Of course, we know that.

That's so often, the case, even in democratic countries. Winston Churchill, is fabled, it's actually not, ratified that Winston, actually said this.

He said, democracy, is one of the worst, evils, of our world, but it's the best, we've got.

Government, is such, a big area of life, as we've just, rediscovered afresh, like a bomb, going off.

And, in the organization, I work for, Care for Scotland, we believe, it is worth, people, being the next, Joseph's. Working, their way up.

Getting, into places, of influence. Being, prepared, to be the people, on the ground, with the values, of the kingdom, inscribed, on their heart, coursing, through their veins.

[24 : 22] We have two interns, at the moment, in the Scottish Parliament. With MSPs. We have an intern, who's going to be working, with his, Her Majesty's, Chief Inspector, of prisons, next year.

Training, shaping them, helping them think, theologically, about how to serve, the God, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in Scotland today, in Westminster today.

We have an intern, in Brussels right now, working for an NGO. Isn't that interesting? Last month, we ran, two months ago, we ran an election, hustings right here.

Some of you were here. Wasn't it interesting, that the first question, that came up, was, why should we trust, you? We do not believe, people in politics, are trustworthy.

But at CAIR, this is exactly, what we're trying to do. one person at a time. Creating, training, trustworthy people, that will serve, a minister, and be people of influence.

[25 : 36] Are you trustworthy? Who is? We should always be on the, the ascent, towards trustworthiness, as Christ followers, shouldn't we?

Always. Always, always improving in the spirit, in trustworthiness. People of character. What if we could prepare, and train people, to go into the world, of politics, for Christ's sake.

And with the drip, drip effect, see that change. At key moments, like last week. just because, we have fatigue, with politics, doesn't mean, we shouldn't, attempt, to, be involved, in this area, of God's world, to improve it.

The Joseph story, here, shows us, so clearly, why is important, people of character, his people, are there, white hot, ready for the moment, to serve God, and change the world.

Sometimes dramatically, sometimes with a daft wee email, that just hits the spot. Sometimes it's mundane, sometimes it's spectacular.

[27 : 03] We could never, bring heaven to earth, with this dream, but nor are we meant to. We are trying to live, and work faithfully, in every sphere, education, politics, health care, media, architecture, art, law, energy, to effect, change.

Why? The creation mandate, is still binding. Continue to go, and rule, and subdue the earth.

Shape it, and reshape it, responsibly. Look, at my servant, Joseph, God says, from this chapter.

Look at him, and the way he dealt, with a foreign people. Look at the way, he eventually, showed remorse, and forgiveness, to his family, despite being, absolutely, walked all over.

He could have, harnessed, so much, bitterness, in slavery, and in injustice, in prison, and never been this man. It could have, eaten him up, completely, and utterly.

God may have, never, spoken to him, given him, discernment, of dreams, in such a way, as to be brought, before Pharaoh, and become, a person of influence, in Egyptian politics.

[28 : 32] It could have, eaten him up, but he, took all of that, all of his life, and used it, for good, for the Lord. Work is not, a necessary evil.

It's not, everything either. But it ought to be viewed, and practiced with joy, as we wipe our brows, until the Spirit releases, this creation from its bondage, Romans 8.

Romans 8. This is what Joseph, leaves for us, a worldly saint.

worldly, worldly, in that he was in this world, with his work, not in the cloister. A saint, in that he learned, how to be godly, to the Lord of all things, in that context.

Just as I close, I want to show you, just under a two minute video, from, the group that I work with.

[29 : 45] It's just, an example, of, Joseph's, in the world, lying and waiting, for Jesus, for moments, such as this.

A long, long time ago. And they've been working, like this ever since. Through our leadership program, we are committed, to see a generation, of young leaders, raised up, with a heart, to make an impact for God, in the public square.

What makes it, particularly unique, is it gives young graduates, an experience of working, at the highest level, when they're working, with an MP, four days a week, or in the other areas, that we place them.

But I think, the uniqueness comes, in the balance, of having, the study program, on a Friday, and study weekends, where they really, grapple, with the theological, with the theological, with the theological, with the theological, with the theological, underpinning, of what it means, to engage, with contemporary culture.

I've always wanted, to apply my faith, to work, but I never really, knew how to, and care has been, a great way, to open my eyes, into how, as Christians, we can be bold, and really apply faith, fully in what we do.

[31 : 00] The leadership program, gives you both a head, and a heart knowledge. I was the first care intern, in Scotland, in 1999, and since then, I've been working, in politics. We place them, in parliaments, and assemblies, working in the, advocacy departments, of non-governmental agencies, where they can grapple, with the whole issues, of politics, power, and servant leadership.

During the week, Monday to Thursday, I intern, at the Scottish Parliament, and I do all sorts, of things, from writing motions, press releases, and just really, getting involved, in the work, of the Parliament.

You're really encouraged, to challenge, your own ideas, in the context, of a secure, supported environment. I'd like to see, tomorrow's leaders, be some of our care interns.

And I know, from my experience, keeping in touch, with people, who have gone through the program, who've gone to fantastic jobs, in government relations, as councillors, as potential MPs, and MSPs, for the future.

It's not all about politics. Take away from this, tonight, tomorrow morning, your work, matters, to God.

[32 : 15] When we finish the liturgy, at the end of a morning service, I can't remember which one it's in, which one it's in, go in peace, to love, and serve the Lord, in the name of Christ.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.