

From Catastrophe to Opportunity | Callum Houston | Genesis 37:23-36

Today I'm going to be talking about that wonderful and fascinating passage we've just had read. So, the way that I'm going to analyse this passage is going to come in three parts.

- First, I'm going to do a basic exegesis (i.e. explanation or interpretation).
- Then, I'm going to talk about some of my own personal parallels with the scripture, how it applies to my own life and what I see of myself reflected back from it.
- And finally, I'm going to apply it in a wider contemporary context. What does this scripture mean for the wider world and for all of us?

Now, before I get started, I will explain that the reason I'm doing it in this way is because the way that I interpret scripture is through, or the way that I look at how scripture applies to my life, is using the Wesleyan quadrilateral, which is scripture, reason, tradition and personal experience. So, using these four things, that is how I inform myself about how to apply my faith to my life. Now, when Jesus preached, he often used parables. Parables to get across abstract information, points that are hard to explain with mere words alone. So, he would paint a story, he would tell a parable and through telling the parables you would find the information in the gaps. Jesus would make you do the work to learn what it is he's trying to say to you. And I hope to follow in his example and do the same.

Basic Exegesis

So, starting off with our exegesis, we're going to go through just a few bullet points through the passage that we've just read. So, first off, we have Joseph in his dazzling coat of many colours. A coat so wonderful that it distracted Joseph from himself. See, Joseph, he wasn't selfish, but he was self-absorbed. He was so wrapped up in his special place among his brothers and all the praise that had been heaped on him his whole life. I mean, to be raised being told that you're special; that you're greater than all of your brothers and that you're your father's favourite son, that did something to him. It made him have very small horizons, it made him very wrapped up in his own personal experience. He was emotionally immature.

Then, what happens next? Joseph has his robe removed from him by his brothers. He is stripped, he is humiliated, made vulnerable, just like our Lord was by the Romans after they finished mocking him before the crucifixion.

And you then have Reuben, who was too much of a coward to stand up for what he knew was right. He was too busy trying to save his own skin and not rustle feathers with his brothers. He was hoping to come back later on and to free Joseph, rather than putting his foot down and calling out the evil that his brothers were performing - a sin of omission.

Then the Bible specifies, once Joseph is thrown into the pit, that there is no water. Water gives life. All life forms on earth, whether they're mighty trees, elephants or cells, all need water to sustain themselves. And Jesus is the spring of living water. Then we see that Joseph's brothers are even eating while he's thrown into this pit of despair. Presumably he was hungry and thirsty as well, but the brothers thought, "Well it's okay, we've not laid hands on him, we've not killed him ourselves, we've not torn him apart or beaten him to a pulp." Yet they left him to die in that pit. But they thought that because it was detached from them, because there were extra steps, that what they did wasn't as bad.

Then we see the foreign traders coming along with promises of money and shiny things, dazzling and delightful things, things that they could give the brothers, if only they would give them their brother in return. So, Joseph, much like our Lord, was betrayed for silver.

Then we have Judah sacrificing a goat to hide his guilt. Now, to me this shows the imperfections of the law. The law was made for man, but the law doesn't have magical properties. It's not a book of spells. For example, if you sacrifice a goat or a sheep as a sin offering, that doesn't mean that the goat or the lamb has some kind of magical property that undoes your sin. It's an act of contrition. But here we see the others not actually repenting but rather trying to hide their guilt with the sacrifice of this poor goat.

Next the brothers go back to their father and break what would go on to become the ninth commandment. They bear false witness against their brother. And then finally Joseph is transported some two to three hundred miles to Egypt. It still sounds far to us today, but just imagine how incomprehensible that distance would have been back then. It's almost ten days travel from where Joseph was, and just imagine with every single day he was losing more and more hope. Things seemed more and more permanent.

Callum's Story

So that's a rough outline of the narrative. So how does this story apply to me personally? Well, the Bible is as personal as it is broad. We need to live biblically in order to imagine how it is that God wants us to live. We need to imagine our lives firmly rooted in the context of the Bible.

Now my life didn't quite follow the same sequence of events as Joseph's story, but there certainly are some parallels. But before I get into those, I will give you a little recap of my story just for those who don't know or if you've forgotten or if you weren't listening the first time. So, I've not always been a Christian. I was an atheist for most of my life. I was a proper anti-religious atheist, "Religion is stupid, it causes all of the wars and Christianity is all nonsense." And the way that I came to my faith was sort of the slow way round.

So, the way that it all started, the first brick out of the wall, was when I got lost at sea. So, you might not know this, but basically when I used to live in Spain, I had some close friends who would often once a week go out fishing in these very dodgy inflatable dinghies, the kind that you would literally buy on the seafront at the beach. And every week they'd go fishing in these dinghies. And every week they'd invite me, and every week I'd say "No, that sounds super dangerous." But after months and months of them doing this and no accidents, one day I decided, "What the hey, I'll take them up on the offer."

Things went wrong very quickly. So, I wound up drifting for over 11 hours, about four and a half miles out at sea, in the middle of the night, and I thought, "Well, this is it. This is how my story ends." But the thing about it is I wasn't actually too sad about that. I was actually thinking, "You know what? This is quite a poetic way for the book to be closed." I wasn't happy with my life. I was dealing with daily drug abuse from the age of 14. I was also just in a very unhappy relationship, and I didn't really care what happened next. And I thought, "You know what? If I drift off over the horizon, at least there's some poetry there." But when I looked at my friends, they were in a bad state. They were terrified. Turns out two of them couldn't even swim and they were very cold because it was March that we were out there at sea. So, at that point I could see the moon glowing in full brightness. I'd never seen anything like it, not before and not since.

And I just found myself overwhelmed with the Spirit. I felt a calling in my heart to say a prayer and I said, "Lord Jesus, if you save me, if you deliver me from this situation, I will devote my life to you." Not long after, the helicopter circled, the Coast Guard found us, they welcome us back onto the boat and take us back to shore. As soon as I was back on shore, I kissed the ground like the Pope and then immediately, proverbially, put two fingers up to the sky and said, "Well, I'm not doing any of that." And I felt like I'd duped "The Big Man. I thought, "Well, no. I didn't make a promise to God. That was a moment of intellectual weakness in the face of overwhelming stress." And that was where I really tried to leave it. But things kept happening. Those weird little God-incidences. He was hunting me down. He wasn't going to let me go that easily. And it wasn't until after I started coming to church that I found out that you don't get to make a prayer like that and walk away from it.

So, after many strange coincidences, I eventually started exploring paganism. Because I thought, "Well, why do I have to be a Christian? That's so lame. Why can't I explore something a bit more exotic?" So, I started exploring different kinds of spirituality and I essentially cherry-picked the most interesting things (the things that I thought were the most self-gratifying) and left out all of the other stuff. So, I was a bit of a jack-of-all-trades. I knew bits from different spiritual practices and I rejected certain things because they didn't quite sound good enough to be. And while I was exploring all of this stuff, it did draw me closer to God eventually. But it felt like there was something missing. It felt very hollow. It was a man-made spirituality. I was trying to build a Tower of Babel to reach God. But we all know how that goes. So eventually, after ignoring this voice for so long, there was this little voice that was saying, "You made a promise to Jesus. Not the universe or some vague sense of "the Creator", but to Jesus."

So, I bought a Bible and I started reading it. And every page broke my heart more. When I read Exodus, I wanted to be Moses before realising I was Pharaoh. But after a couple of weeks, I decided to download a Bible app. So, I messaged one of my friends, who recommended one. When I download it, a little strap line appeared at the top saying, "Email us for your free Bible." Now I never turned down something for free (because I grew up in Spain). So, what did I do? I sent them an email, and I said, "Oh, I would love one of your free Bibles. Here's my address." They replied straight away and said, "Oh, we know this is your address. It's a Bath address. We just so happen to be in Bath this Sunday. Would you like to meet up?" And I thought "Of course, I'll meet the strangers from the internet. What could possibly go wrong?" So, I met up with them and we started chatting.

Now, when I went into this, I was still trying not to be a Christian. I was exploring Gnosticism, and other third-century heresies. I was also looking into Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. I was really resisting Jesus. But when I started chatting to these guys, at first I thought, "let's throw them some hard questions. Let's play hardball with them. Let's make these Christians sweat. Let's be academic about this. Let's really probe what they're all about." And all they did was show me so much love and so much compassion that my whole plan just fell apart immediately. And then as we were talking, they then said, "Have you considered baptism?" Now in my head, I was thinking, "Whoa, slow down guys." What came out of my mouth was, "Yeah, alright." And up to that point, my idea of baptism was a christening, a sprinkling of water over the head. Easy. They go, "Great, where can we get full immersion?" So the next thing I know, the following Sunday, I'm then being baptized in Warleigh Weir in a white robe that my wonderful, bizarre, bonkers sister (who is a Witch), decided to make me as a gift. It looked very strange, but you know, it was a wonderful experience. It was really lovely.

And after I was baptized, it was Ash Wednesday, the coming Wednesday. Now up until that point, from the age of 14 to about 22, I'd been a polysubstance addict. I'd been taking drugs every single day. It wasn't about getting high, it was about not being sober. I couldn't cope. The longest I'd gone was maybe two or three nights before the night terrors, panic attacks, sweats, and nausea took me back to it. And for years, it had been "just one more day, then I'm gonna give this stuff up." And I never could. I couldn't find the strength within. But then that Wednesday, I said, "Okay, let's see if there's anything to this Jesus stuff. Jesus, if you're there, give me your strength to do this."

And I put it down on that Ash Wednesday. I gave it up for Lent, and then I gave it up forever. And I know that I didn't have the strength to do that. And that, for me, was the first miracle. And since then, it's been strength to strength. And the one thing that people didn't tell me about being a Christian is how spooky it can be sometimes. Because God is real. Unlike some of my other spiritual practices I explored, with this one, the number of coincidences and answers to prayer you get is a little bit spooky sometimes. But it's wonderful to know that he really is there and really is listening.

So, with that recap out the way, let's go in to how Joseph's story has parallels with my own, and my own personal take on this, what it says to me. So, first off, you have Joseph in his coat. Now, funnily enough, the reason I myself have an amazing technicolour "Dreamcoat" is because, when I was a pagan, I considered myself a bit of a shaman. And one thing that, ironically, you find in a lot of neo-pagans (the people who say that they're fighting their ego all the time), a massive spiritual ego. So, I had all these sorts of self-important robes and ceremonial axes and bells and things that would make me feel spiritual and important. Just like Joseph, I knew that I had some kind of calling on my life, and I knew it was something spiritual. But I got carried away in the momentum, carried away in my own pride.

But just like Joseph, God strips these things from me. Just like how God started his process of humiliating, of humbling Joseph by taking away his coat and having his brothers tear it up, God also came for me and made me give up all of these things that made me feel so important when I was exploring paganism. Then you have Joseph, of course, being stripped, which to me reminds me of my humbling of myself when I realized that, no, all power comes from God. It doesn't come from me or from these magic totems and items and crystals and tarot cards. All power comes from God, and everything we have that's good comes from him. I wasn't the centre of the universe. I wasn't the main character. He was.

But how wonderful that he wants me to be a part of his story. And I also realised the importance of submitting to Christ's authority and especially submitting to his authority through the church. I know a lot of young Christians these days don't like the thought of submitting to authority. We like to be independent, free thinkers, to forge our own path. But the church that God gave us is so important. He gave us a church for so many reasons: for wisdom, development, community, all of these important things. Because it's through church, and through the community, and through the things that the church offers, that we can come into the closest and easiest contact with Jesus. Every church is an embassy of the Kingdom of Heaven.

And then you have Joseph put in the pit of despair, which of course has parallels with me being lost at sea, giving up all hope, thinking “this is it.” Yet despite all of that, just like Joseph, I still had that spark of faith. Even though at that point I thought I was an atheist, when push came to shove, that primordial, that primeval spark, that awareness of God that we all have in our souls, glowed in the darkness and made me reach out to him. And it's the same with Joseph. They imprisoned his body, but they couldn't imprison his soul. They could take him away from his home and take his possessions from him, but they couldn't take God from him. And then you have Reuben's sin of omission. We're all guilty of sins by omission. And all too often when we think of sin, we think of sin as being intentional, malicious evil. “I deliberately did this to spite this person.” “I did this mean thing, this bad-spirited thing.” But actually, Jesus warns us about the sins that we commit by sticking our head in the sand, by turning our back and saying “This isn't my problem. God's merciful, he'll let me off with this one.” Yes, he will let you off, but how much better would it be to please him by doing the right thing when you don't have the energy?

A good example of this was when I was in Sheffield earlier this year. I went into a Gregg's with my friend and there was a homeless man sat outside. It was really cold, he was suffering, his hands were all swollen and purple and he asked me and my friend if we had any change. We said “Sorry, mate” and walked on in. And then once we went in, I thought “Well, that wasn't very Christian of me.” We had a chat and went “Yeah you get him a coffee and I'll get him a pasty. And then we came out and we gave him those things, and it made me realise just how easy it was to say that's not my problem and to walk past and to let go of it. But that's the thing – sometimes, evil is subtle. Sometimes, evil isn't intentional. Sometimes, evil is because we fail to do the right thing. And that's something that God reminds us - that it's not the easy path following him, but it's doing what's right.

Then of course we have Joseph being sold into slavery, which to me has parallels with me giving myself up to worldly pleasures: to drugs, to things that I thought could fill that hole in my heart. But that's a God-sized hole and only he can fill it.

What does this scripture mean for the wider world and for all of us?

So, next we go on to the contemporary context. How does this passage apply to the wider world?

Just like Joseph, we are all often too wrapped up in ourselves and our immediate surroundings, the things that people speak well of us, all these things that make us feel so good about ourselves. We can get so wrapped up in that that sometimes we can forget to look outwards rather than inwards or down. It's so important to remember how everything that we do impacts other people, whether that's positive or negative. And when we find ourselves affecting people in a negative way, how can we turn that into a positive instead, especially when we think of all those people in this world who lose their livelihood. Think about all the people fleeing war and persecution, especially our Christian brothers and sisters in parts of the world where they face brutalisation? Yet no matter what people lose, no matter what these people who flee these countries lose, the one thing that they often bring with them is their faith because God is always with us no matter what.

Then of course we have Reuben. So many people are on the fence about doing the right thing. People are fed up with the way the world is, especially the younger generation. But so many of us have become apathetic, thinking "What can we do? What can I do? Can I really make a difference?" We often think that there's nothing we can do as wars break out around us and ice caps melt. But fixing the world starts with fixing ourselves. We need to remove the plank in our own eye before we criticise the speck in our brothers'.

Now one thing that I do want to talk about a little bit as well, as we're talking about people being on the fence over right and wrong, and specifically about people being on the fence about Jesus. We find young people, especially Generation Z, are so hungry for something greater. They look at this world, they look at the suffering, they look at all the things the world has to offer, they look at the lives that their parents and grandparents have lived and they say "No." they want more. The Bible Society did a study which you may have heard of called *The Silent Revival*. The study revealed that 34% of people aged between 18 and 25 would come to church if invited. So, let's stop omitting. Let's stop saying "it's good enough," and let's invite these people in. Because you never know what one invitation to church could lead to in somebody's life.

Another statistic is that almost 80% of Gen Z believe in the Zodiac. And I don't necessarily see this as a bad thing. It means that they're seekers, they're looking for something greater, they're looking for more than the world has to offer. And as Christians I think we can give that to them. So, we need to stop sitting around, we need to stop being apathetic and with these young people. We need to encourage them. We need to get ready for this wave of revival that's coming. It's not quite here yet but it is coming. When these guys are a bit older we're going to have a lot of work to do so we better make sure that we're ready for the harvest when it comes. And I'm not exclusive or separate from this wave of revival. I was caught up in it myself. There's a few of us now, but there'll be more of us as time goes on and when this younger generation comes into fruition, I think that it's going to be an amazing thing. So, we need to think about how we can help them grow because they want a faith that is full fat. They don't want a faith that unoffensively affirms them and tells them how amazing they are and how amazing everything is going to be. They want a faith that can give them truth. They want something to be passionate about. And this is why you also notice an interesting thing with young people as they become Christian is that they usually tend to go down one of two paths. They either go for the sort of non-denominational very charismatic movement or they go for the more sort of Orthodox Catholic side of the church. And the reason for that is the same reason. It's because they want something passionate. They're on fire. They don't want a lukewarm church. They want a church that they can feel like they're on fire with. So, some young people reject the church institution, and they say "No. Myself, the Spirit, the Bible and Jesus - we're going work through this together and we're going to do what God wants. And then on the other hand you have the ones who are going "Okay, I want to be told what to do. I want this structure. I want this order. I want something that's serious that I can be a part of."

But I think that the Church of England is especially well poised for these people because we have the 'via media' (the 'middle way') and we can help both sides of that coin realise that they are part of the same Kingdom of God. In fact, one thing I love about the Church of England is coming to somewhere like All Saints and seeing us in our worship style, and then going somewhere like St. John's Bathwick with all the smells and bells, and knowing that we're both in communion with each other. Different as we are, we can go to each other's churches and share in that common cup. So, the revival is not fully here, but in the next coming five years or so, we better be ready.

And then next we think about Joseph being hungry and thirsty in the pit and we think about all those people in the world who are hungry and thirsty. The fact that it's 2025 and that there are people who are starving and thirsty, people with food insecurity who don't know when the next meal is going to come - it's unacceptable. We live in a world where there is not a lack of abundance but there is a lack of *access* to that abundance. We don't have a resource problem, we have a political problem. It's one of the greatest injustices I can think of, that we have food to go around and yet people still go hungry.

Then of course we have Joseph being sold and sadly all too often we sell ourselves out for material gain. We give up what's right for what's comfortable. Joseph was sacrificed on the altar of Mammon, just like so many of us have been. We now live in a world where the work life balance is harder than ever to manage. It's hard to have that sense of freedom and fulfilment. Some of my friends have talked to me about how difficult it is to find themselves in a world where they're always either working or trying to get that little bit of social life in. But I think one thing that's important is to remember the value of church. If you come here, you can look for something greater something higher have a fuller purpose and hopefully tip that balance in a way that's right.

And then we have the brothers bearing false witness. Of course, we have fake news and hatred in abundance these days. Our news sources feed us just enough information to make us feel like we have a moral obligation to worry about the entire world but are powerless to do anything about it. And I think that creates a lot of despair. But I think that we need to remember that if both of our hands are empty, no matter what the state of the world, we can still put them together in prayer. And that's what the monasteries were all about back in the day. They were prayer factories. They knew the value of praying for a sick world.

And then finally Joseph transported to Egypt. It reminds me of all the human trafficking we see in this world and the fact that the slave trade is bigger today than it ever has been in history. I just can't believe that. And we need to just be aware of all of those who are suffering and how lucky we are. But also knowing where we are and how we can have full stomachs and security we need to at least spare a thought and a prayer for these people because that is what we can do.

Conclusion

So, my conclusion. Like Joseph, over the past two years I've been going through a process of discerning. Discerning what kind of ministry it is. What kind of life cooling God has charged me with. And part of that process just like Joseph is humiliation. That is in the old sense of the word - to be humbled. To realise that some of my strengths weren't actually as strong as I thought and to realize that I do indeed have some weaknesses. But recognising weakness isn't a bad thing because it can serve as a mirror to find our strengths. Just like how when we acknowledge our imperfection and our sin before God it reminds us of his perfection and his glory. So, when life beats you down or gets hard it's not about avoiding difficulty but seeing through it and finding your ministry along the way.

What God calls you to be now in this moment might not be what he called you to be before or what he calls you to be later. Moses was 80 when he started his mission in earnest. So, whether we resist like Jonah or go willingly like Jesus or get swept up along with events like Joseph, God's hand will be on all things. As Job said, "Should I expect the good from God, and not the adversity?" (Job 2:10). Even if we're imprisoned like Paul, or enslaved like Joseph, God always has a way for us. A way towards him. A way which the world cannot take from us. But he didn't promise it would be easy. Remember, "narrow is the road that leads to eternal life." (Matthew 7:14). Joseph knew his calling, but didn't know how difficult it would be to get there. We all have a calling, we all have an adventure, and we all have a story. Amen.