

If you haven't read the last 38 chapters of Genesis for a while it really is probably the best story in the whole Bible from a literary standpoint. The story of Abraham and Sarah is a heck of a story. It's like reading a biblical version of Yellowstone or whatever your favorite epic TV show is.

I'll tell a brief version of the story.

When you get right down to it, Abraham and Sarah created one dysfunctional family. Abraham and Sarah ultimately ended up being faithful. But their journey of faith had some detours.

The biggest detour is when they gave up on God and the promise of descendants for a little bit. They decided to take matters into their own hands and Sarah convinced Abraham to have a child by her servant Hagar. The child was Ishmael.

But even though it was Sarah's idea, she became resentful of Hagar and ultimately, when the promised son Isaac arrived, Hagar and Ishmael were cast out. Muslims consider Ishmael to be their connection to Abraham – or Ibrahim.

Then Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau became bitter rivals after Jacob tricked their aged, blind father out of the blessing and inheritance due Esau.

Then Jacob's two wives and two concubines got into a child-bearing competition with all sorts of resentments, gloating, and schemes...the sorts of things women in the time felt compelled to undertake when their power was reduced to reproduction.

Now, we get to Joseph. Joseph's story will occupy the rest of Genesis. And it continues to show family conflict, rivalries and near murderous rage.

If you are looking for the perfect family to be the ancestors of our faith, this one ain't it.

And yet they are the ones God sticks with. They are real humans with all their flaws and successes as opposed to some idealized version of humans.

Even in their dysfunction, God's promise to bless all the families of the earth really begins to work its way out through Joseph's story.

Joseph's life is a sort of roller coaster. He starts his life as the favored son of Jacob. He is the first son born to Rachel, his favored wife. He is given the gift of interpreting dreams. He's on top of the world.

As a teenager with 10 older brothers, he's also pretty arrogant. His dream that all of his family would one day bow down to him did not go over well with anyone.

The envy of his 10 older brothers got the better of them. When he showed up where they were grazing their sheep, they threw him in a pit, made it look like an animal had killed him, and told their father Joseph was dead.

Then they sold Joseph and he was taken as a slave to Egypt. The roller coaster plunges.

In Joseph's story, a repeated refrain is God was with Joseph.

But God never speaks directly to Joseph and God never directly intervenes on his behalf...and honestly it doesn't always look like it's true.

In Egypt, Joseph is bought by Pharaoh's Captain of the Guard, Potiphar. Joseph proved to be a very capable administrator and was given great authority and freedom by Potiphar. The roller coaster climbs to the top.

Then this happens with Potiphar's wife. The roller coaster plunges and Jacob is unjustly plunged into a dark, prison pit – perhaps not unlike the pit his brothers threw him in.

But the jailer also recognizes that Joseph is gifted and again he is given a certain amount of freedom and responsibility. The roller coaster starts going up.

But then it gets stuck. Joseph's ability to interpret dreams is discovered by two fellow prisoners when he interprets their dreams correctly.

One of them, Pharaoh's cupbearer, is set free and promises to speak to Pharaoh on Joseph's behalf. But the cup bearer forgets all about him.

Joseph continues to languish in prison. For two years.

Then Pharaoh has two strange dreams that nobody seems to be able to interpret. Finally, the cup bearer remembers – oh yeah...there's this guy in prison who's pretty good at that.

So Joseph is brought out of prison. He interprets the dream – one of them is that seven fat cows are eaten by seven emaciated cows. Joseph says it means there will be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine.

Not only did Joseph interpret the dream, he had a plan for how to save Egypt from famine.

Pharaoh chose Joseph to be in charge of the plan and Joseph rose back to power. The roller coaster goes back up – and this time it stays.

God was with Joseph at every apex and every valley of the roller coaster. God didn't really directly intervene.

Instead, God gave Joseph his gifts for dream interpretation and administration. And then Joseph did the work.

So that's the first take away from the story. For most of us, this is more like how God acts in our lives. Next week we'll be with Moses and the Israelites at the parting of the sea. God acts very directly and dramatically in that whole story.

But more often, we somehow learn to believe that God is with us, even if we can't see God. And we have whatever gifts God gave us to do the work...and God puts in our lives the people who can help and guides the way.

Now let's look at what I think is the most important take away from the story.

Last week we heard the three promises God made to Abraham. The first was land. And honestly by the end of Genesis, they no longer live in their the land.

The second is that they would become a great nation. By this point in the story the family has become large, but they are not yet a nation.

Finally, the family is blessed so that through them all the families of the earth will be blessed. Now that promise begins to work its way out in the rest of Joseph's story.

As soon as he is freed, he sets his plan in motion. For seven years under his direction, a certain portion of every harvest is stored.

When the famine hits, Egypt is ready. Joseph's strategy means all of Egypt is fed through the famine.

Then, in a surprising twist to the story, Joseph's family hears that there is food in Egypt. They pack up and travel there. They end up bowing before Joseph – just like his dream decades before said they would. But they don't recognize him.

To make a long story short, Joseph's family ends up being saved by Joseph's careful plan. And what's more they end up being reconciled – Joseph forgives his brothers.

And then Joseph utters one of the most important Old Testament lines. He tells his brothers, even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.

Stuff just kept coming at Joseph. God's promise to the whole tribe of Israel was in jeopardy. But through all the things that happened, God was with both Joseph and ultimately with the whole family.

God's presence wasn't just a comforting presence. It wasn't a presence that took away Joseph's suffering. What happened to him was not just and not how God intended to leave things.

God's presence was active, even if it didn't always look like it. And ultimately, through Joseph, God's blessing extended to all of Israel, to the Egyptians, and to anyone else in the land who survived the famine because of Joseph.

That's more often how God works than by divine miracle. God's work happens through often very flawed people, using their God-given gifts to bless the world.

For better or worse, God committed to this family to bring that blessing to the world. And now God is committed to us. Knowing we'll often get it wrong. Rejoicing when we are that blessing.

There's a pattern in these ancient stories that set the template for the rest of the biblical story. We've been talking about that pattern in confirmation.

The pattern goes like this: people mess up, there are consequences that threaten God's creation, but God finds a way to make a new beginning. God did that for Adam and Eve after the forbidden fruit debacle.

God did it again for Cain after he killed his brother. God did it again in the story of Noah and again in the Tower of Babel story.

God does it here for Joseph's family.

That pattern is the overarching biblical story of God and God's people. It's a pattern with names like redemption, salvation, grace.

And ultimately, it is a pattern that ushers us into resurrection...to the resurrected life in the here and now and into eternity.