

# Biblical Theology: Reading the Bible in Context

SOCM Training Series

# Introduction

- What do churches that preach a form of prosperity gospel, moralism, or legalism have in common? It's not that these churches don't believe in the Bible. According to leading experts, including Mark Dever, author of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, they all lack a solid grounding in biblical theology
- Forms of the prosperity gospel tend to:
  - read the Bible selectively,
  - take passages out of context, and
  - Mis-interpret portions that contradict their views

# Biblical Theology

- Definition: Biblical theology is the interpretation of Scripture, when the reader asks questions about God along the temporal flow of the Bible's storyline
- Example: How does the theme of the "atonement" unfold itself in the Bible's storyline?
- Aim: To trace the development of a theme through the Scripture's storyline, and to determine the unique contribution of a particular book (e.g., Exodus) to the whole of Scripture

# Systematic Theology

- Definition: Systematic theology is the interpretation of Scripture, when the reader asks atemporal questions about God and his relation to his creation organized in categories or topics
- Examples: What is God like? What is sin? How is one saved?
- Aim: To explain the “mind of God” on particular topics of biblical revelation

# Reading the Bible in Context

- Once we understand that the books of the Bible are parsed out in a storyline, we can explain how they fit uniquely in the storyline
- The task of the reader is to read a particular passage in context—what comes before and after the passage
- We must follow the flow of the text, making theological connections from one paragraph to another

## Gen 39

- **39** Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.
- <sup>2</sup>The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup>When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, <sup>4</sup>Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. <sup>5</sup>From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. <sup>6</sup>So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.
- Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, <sup>7</sup>and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"
- <sup>8</sup>But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. <sup>9</sup>No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" <sup>10</sup>And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

# Gen 39

- <sup>11</sup> One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. <sup>12</sup> She caught him by his cloak and said, “Come to bed with me!” But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.
- <sup>13</sup> When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, <sup>14</sup> she called her household servants. “Look,” she said to them, “this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. <sup>15</sup> When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.”
- <sup>16</sup> She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. <sup>17</sup> Then she told him this story: “That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. <sup>18</sup> But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.”
- <sup>19</sup> When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, “This is how your slave treated me,” he burned with anger. <sup>20</sup> Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined.
- But while Joseph was there in the prison, <sup>21</sup> the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. <sup>22</sup> So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. <sup>23</sup> The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph’s care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

# Gen 39 in Context

- Gen 39 is basically about Joseph and Potiphar's wife and his resistance to temptation
- If we read and apply this chapter as a stand-alone passage or a topical message, we will likely focus on the moral or ethical aspect like how to overcome temptation
- If you approach it from a BT perspective, you will ask what is the placement of Gen 39 within the book? What is discussed in Gen 38 and Gen 40?
- By reading in context, you'll realise that Gen 38 is set in contrast to Gen 39 and 39 is a set up for 40



# Gen 39 in Context

- Gen 38—Tamar marries Judah's son, Er. Because of his wickedness, Er was killed by God. Judah then asks his second son, Onan, to provide an offspring for Tamar so that the family seed line may continue
- In contrast, Joseph was faithful to God landed him in prison. However, the Lord gave him success for whatever he did (v. 20)
- Gen 39 is about how God's providential care over Joseph that even as a slave he still lived with integrity, which set him up for high office in the Egyptian court, which, in turn, allowed him to save his family, which, then allowed him to preserve the promised messianic seed

# Gen 39 in Context

- Gen 39 is a turning point because Joseph did not sin. Thus, Jesus was later born and we are eventually saved by God's grace
- Gen 39 is tied to the cross because of Joseph's faithfulness and the entire family is preserved through famine, which is a set up for the Exodus
- Gen 40—Joseph is in prison and there he interpreted dreams and is introduced to the cupbearer, baker, and the Pharaoh

# Birth Narratives

- Before the introduction of the miraculous conception of Jesus, there is the theme of the barren woman throughout the Bible
- Starting with the redemptive history associated with Abraham in the OT, a pattern of miracles is introduced
- God's promise to Abraham and Sarah requires an heir
- Since God promised Abraham a land, a people, and a divine relationship, people had to be born and raised
- In fact, every one of the patriarch's wife is described as barren. These include Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah, and Naomi who was associated with David
- At every key juncture, God's promises had to be transmitted with barren women

# Birth Narratives

- The point is that God's ability to keep his promises is reliable, and no humans can affect that
- God has the ability to supernaturally intervene. Otherwise, the promises cannot be transmitted to the next generation
- By the time we come to Luke, we are told that Elizabeth is also barren, which should be connected with the OT background. God is at work again!
- Luke describes Mary as barren, but as a virgin. She cannot conceive without the intervention of the Holy Spirit (Lu 1:26-35)
- In 1:35, the Holy Spirit will "overshadow" you (cf. Gen 1:2—the same Greek term in the LXX)
- The Holy Spirit created the heavens and the earth and he is now instrumental in recreation. A new thing begins!

# Conclusion

- There is diversity and unity within the Bible—readers need to read the Bible in context and learn to connect themes
- Readers should model good reading skills by way of a biblical-theological understanding of the Bible storyline—the trajectory to the Cross and Gospel of Jesus Christ
- When confronted with interpretative difficulties, readers need systematic theology (the one mind of God) to guide the accurate reading of the Bible storyline and to safeguard sound doctrine