

[Slide of a Pit] I invite you to look at this pit. It looks pretty deep, doesn't it? And there's no water in it. Now picture a 17-year-old teenager stuck in this waterless pit. His hands are bound. His ankles tied. His eyes are wet from tears. His voice is hoarse from crying. His brothers - yes *his brothers!* - sit down to eat and drink—all while the 17-year-old is screaming at the top of his lungs, "Let me out!"

[Genesis 37: 23-24 Slide] It sounds like a TV reality show, doesn't it? It's not. It's an account straight out of the Bible. Joseph—the 17 year-old—is captured by his brothers while they were sixty miles away from home and their father Jacob's watchful eye. "They stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a **waterless pit.**" (Genesis 37:23–24) These are harsh verbs. Murderous verbs: Stripped. Took. Threw. *Stripped. Took. Threw.* Into a waterless pit.

Joseph didn't see this coming. Joseph didn't see this coming at all! Joseph didn't get out of bed that morning and say, "I'd better pack some extra food and water and put on padded clothing because today my

brothers are going to throw me into a waterless pit.” The attack came as a complete surprise.

That’s how problems generally come at us in life. Unexpected. A Complete Surprise. A car accident. A heart attack. A worldwide pandemic. Or maybe it’s a sudden relapse into some “pet” sin, like losing your temper, cursing, gossiping, worrying, the list could go on. All of these things can make us feel as though we are prisoners like Joseph in a waterless pit; completely helpless and in a hopeless situation. Like we’ve been thrown into a waterless pit.

[Zech. 9:11 Slide] God has something to say about all this. “I will set your prisoners free from the **waterless pit.**” (Zech 9:11) Prisoners. Whether its to accidents, health ailments, or sins we just can’t seem to shake, God promises He will set us free!

Do you see Zechariah’s connection to Joseph? By using the term “waterless pit,” the prophet points us to Joseph—Joseph in the pit. He’s frantic. Desperate. Screaming. A prisoner. (And) Joseph’s story is our story as well.

Who wants us to stay stuck in a waterless pit? In hopeless despair? Anxious about money? Yelling at our children? Ready to give up hope and faith in God? You know his name. The ancient serpent who is devil and Satan. Satan wants to lock us up and throw away the key. The liar wants us to accept that our permanent home now reads WATERLESS PIT.

[A Mighty Fortress Slide] Luther knew Satan's strategy. He writes in his great Reformation hymn: "The old evil foe now means deadly woe; Deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight; on earth is not his equal." When we believe Satan's lies, we find ourselves going deeper and farther and longer, until we're bound, tied and fettered—in a waterless pit.

[Zech 9:12 Slide] Zechariah writes, "Return to your stronghold, **prisoners of hope.**" (Zech 9:12) Did you catch that? We're sometimes prisoners to unexpected and difficult situations, to a habitual sin, prisoners even, it has felt like, to the coronavirus, but we aren't "prisoners of despair." We aren't "prisoners of hopelessness." We aren't "prisoners of unending pain." We are "prisoners of **hope.**"

Biblical hope isn't "knock on wood." Biblical hope isn't, "Maybe we'll catch a lucky break." Biblical hope isn't a vague belief that the future will somehow be better than the past. Biblical hope is confidence in God's covenant blood.

[Zech 9:11 Slide] "Because of the **blood of my covenant** with you."

(Zech 9:11) When we're stuck in a waterless pit, someone from up there needs to rescue us down here. That someone is God and God comes to us with covenant blood.

[Exodus 24:8 Slide] Exodus 24:8 is the only other place in the Old Testament where "covenant" and "blood" appear together. Moses describes it this way. "Behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD made with you." God rescues His people with covenant blood. Passover blood. Shed blood. Cleansing blood. Christ's blood.

God isn't the great Terminator. God isn't the omnipotent Ogre. God isn't the cosmic Ebenezer Scrooge. God isn't a vengeful judge, a nitpicky tax accountant, or a cop waiting to give us a ticket. God is our Savior who rescues with covenant blood!

[The Blood Covenant Slide] Covenant blood is what Jesus gives us in Holy Communion; the meal which He instituted on this very night during Holy Week. “This is my blood of the covenant,” He says. With these words, Jesus begins to leave a trail of blood. After the Last Supper, Jesus leads his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane where Luke tells us Jesus sweats great drops of blood. After His arrest, Jesus is bound and taken to Annas, the high priest. He is slapped, spit upon, and sent to Caiaphas. Then, blindfolded, He is struck in the face with fists and beaten by guards. The next morning Jesus is taken to Pilate who passes Him off to Herod. Herod dresses him in a purple robe. Back before Pilate, soldiers strip and scourge Jesus—just short of death. Struck and spit upon again, Jesus walks the road to Golgotha. Finally, Roman soldiers stretch Jesus out on two pieces of wood and hammered three iron spikes into His flesh—blood splattered everywhere.

Just like Joseph. *Stripped. Took. Threw.*

[Crown of Thorns Slide] His friends ran away. His possessions were gambled away. His strength was ebbing away. Even His Father had turned away. All Christ had was blood—covenant blood.

But with covenant blood? The sacrifice? Complete. Death? Defeated. Paradise? Restored. Fear, anxiety and worry? Gone! Luther experienced this Gospel in his Tower Experience. “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”

Christ’s covenant blood sets us free from the condemnation of our sin; free from the pain of our past; free from worry about our future. No one can take this freedom from us. No quarantine or shelter in place can stop it, and no power on earth or hell can destroy it.

And there is more freedom to come! As we grow in our walk with Jesus, His covenant blood unlocks more and more prison doors. Finally, every believer will experience perfect freedom in the resurrection of the dead and in the life of the world to come.

[Zech. 9:12 Slide] “Even **today** I am declaring that I will restore you **two-fold**.” (Zechariah 9:12) When? Tomorrow? Next year? One of these

days? TODAY! And two-fold! God is generous! Jesus says in John 10:10- “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” In Romans 5:20 St. Paul proclaims, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” And as we read in 1 John 3:1, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and (that is what) we are.”

[Joseph and Brothers Slide] So, what ever happened to Joseph?

Twenty years later, the roles were reversed. Joseph was in power and his brothers weren't. The brothers came to Joseph in fear, assuming that he would settle the score and throw *them* into a waterless pit. But Joseph didn't. ***Joseph didn't do that!*** Genesis 50:20, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good!” These are words spoken by someone free from the waterless pit—free in every way. Free to live with God's perspective—even in a pandemic. “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”

[Power in the Blood Slide] How does all this happen? Covenant blood. In Jesus' name, this is God's gift to you! Amen.