

The Sovereignty of God (1): Joseph

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[0 : 00] Why do things happen the way they do?

Is there any rhyme or reason to our lives? Why do things turn out the way they do? As we trust we come out of the coronavirus pandemic, perhaps there are some of us who are anxious and wondering whether it's God who's doing all this and what God is doing in all of this.

Maybe you're questioning whether God in fact is in control of anything and you're definitely questioning whether he has your good in mind. Perhaps you've been a Christian for many, many years but this situation has left you scratching your head and wondering whether God is in control or not.

It's a problem for us. There's no denying it or resolving it by offering glib answers to difficult questions.

Now we might also suppose that we've not got much in common with Joseph, the son of Isaac, the prince of Egypt, son of Jacob rather, grandson of Isaac, prince of Egypt.

[1 : 31] He lived nearly three and a half thousand years ago in a country far away but we are far more similar than we think. He faced even more painful situations than we do. And he must have asked the same kind of questions that we ask.

Is God really in control or do things just happen randomly without any deeper meaning? Over the next few Sunday evenings, starting tonight with Joseph, I want us to enter into the majestic and mysterious doctrine of the sovereignty of God.

And how as king and ruler of all, he wisely, powerfully and lovingly determines all that comes to pass in our lives. Or to put it another way, how he as our loving heavenly father through Jesus Christ expresses and demonstrates his care for us.

I make no apologies for the depth of this subject. I'll not try to complicate it with words or philosophies I don't need to use. But there's an undeniable depth to these truths.

They concern mysteries known only fully to God himself. But far from being abstract, these are the truths that we need not just to know, but also to experience.

[3 : 00] Because only in the acceptance, in fact, only in the joyful embrace of the sovereignty of God, shall we find peace in pain and contentment in chaos.

Well, back to Genesis 50, where Joseph says to his fearful brothers, in verses 19 through 21, Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive. Now, you'll know the story of Joseph and how, as a very young man, his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt.

Mistreated, falsely accused, Joseph's life is filled with misery and captivity. But through a series of miraculous reversals, Joseph becomes the prince of Egypt.

And his brothers, when they come to Egypt, to beg for food, they don't immediately recognize him. But after revealing himself to them, and having brought them and their families down into Egypt, Joseph assures them, his brothers who are terrified of his retribution, he assures them that he means them no harm, that he has no intentions to exact a painful revenge upon them.

[4 : 34] Joseph has contented himself in the knowledge that his sovereign God has been at work, directing his steps through the pit, into Potiphar's house, into prison, into Pharaoh's palace.

His brothers meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. And so again, we ask the question this evening, why do things happen the way they do?

Why do things turn out the way they do in our lives? And what can Joseph teach us? Well, it seems to me, as we look together at Genesis 50, and especially verse 20, we can learn at least two things.

First, the sovereignty of God understood, if such a thing is possible. Sovereignty of God understood. And second, the sovereignty of God applied. Applied.

Remember, my aim in these studies is not so much intellectual understanding, as much as it is in the acceptance and joyful embrace of our Heavenly Father's expression of care.

[5 : 48] First of all then, the sovereignty of God understood. Understood. It's only the puffed up fool who claims to understand the doctrine of God's sovereignty, or to know, or to claim to know, all that God is doing in their day-to-day lives.

Only a puffed up fool. And yet, there are certain things we can say about the sovereignty of God. We don't say them necessarily from experience, because experience can be a bad teacher. We say them from Scripture, which for us is light in a very dark place. And in Genesis 50, verse 20, we read these wonderful words, God meant it for good.

God meant it for good. This is the ultimate exercise of the sovereignty of God. As much as we dare say, God meant it for good.

All those hard circumstances, all those difficult times, all that pain and all those tears, God meant it for good.

[7 : 09] And I don't mean to be glib but unthinking or twee in anything I say, but there's the clear teaching of Genesis 50, 20, where Joseph, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as he reflects on all the hard things that he went through, says, God meant it for good.

Our Heavenly Father determined and directed all the things concerning His beloved children, toward good. That illness from which you suffer, either physically or mentally, that broken relationship, that disappointed dream, God meant it for good.

And man, that's easy to say. It's hard to accept. If God meant it for good as the centerpiece of this verse, consider the truths on either side which serve to shed light upon it.

Namely, God's sovereignty and evil on one side and God's sovereignty and us on the other. God's sovereignty and evil.

First of all, God's sovereignty and evil. You know, there are no normal families in the Bible. We were having lunch today with Campbell and Ruth and I reckon we're normal families, right?

[8 : 45] But there are no normal families in the Bible. There's brother killing brother. There's jealousy between siblings. There's parental favoritism and so on.

Now, albeit all these stories take place in a very different cultural context from our own, great evil is committed within the family unit. Think of how Joseph was treated by his brothers, all of which they meant for evil.

They were jealous. his father Jacob loved him more than he loved them. Demonstrated in his coat of many colors. Joseph was a young man with big ideas, big dreams.

He dreamt even of his brothers and his father bowing down before him. And his brothers were green with envy and so from evil motives they planned to kill him by throwing him into a pit and leaving him there to die.

Even when Reuben, Joseph's older brother, stopped them from killing him, rather than come to their senses, they sold him as a slave to Ishmaelite traders.

[9 : 58] Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and became one of the earliest victims of that disgusting trade which today we call human trafficking.

He wasn't captured in battle and sold into slavery. he was betrayed by his nearest and his dearest. There had not been one speck of decency in the motive of his brothers at all.

Entirely evil. Because from that moment onwards, Joseph's life was not his own. He was sold to the Egyptian captain Potiphar who after a while, having believed his wife's false accusations, threw Joseph into an Egyptian jail and left him there to rot.

It couldn't have got much worse for Joseph and all because his brothers meant it for evil. And we know what happened from there.

That having interpreted a fellow prisoner's dreams, Joseph was called to interpret Pharaoh's dreams and having interpreted Pharaoh's dreams correctly, he was put in charge of Egypt's response to one of the world's most severe famines.

[11 : 16] This is where we find Joseph in Genesis 50, prince of Egypt, with his brothers bowing down to him. It is undeniable that what Joseph's brothers did to him was evil.

There is no other word for it. What they did to him was wrong, indefensible. And yet we read these words, God meant it for good.

And this would seem at first sight surely to be a paradox. But what man meant for evil, God meant for good. Does it mean that God condones the evil actions of evil men toward us? Does it mean that God is now in the business of calling evil things good and good things evil? Did the evil motives of his brothers and their hatred of Joseph, did that come from God? Did the coronavirus, with all its painful consequences, come from God? Did your illness come from God?

[12 : 27] Did those hurtful words that fellow Christians said to you, which have eroded your confidence, did they come from God? Did that broken dream come from God?

And so on. Does God do evil things that good may ultimately prevail? Does God use evil means to pursue good ends? I think that perhaps one of the most powerful, if not the most powerful truth I ever heard preached from this pulpit.

God did. I was in a car going on holiday, and I was listening in on Zoom, and it was preached by our beloved Bill Dunlop. When in preaching from Romans 8, verse 28, he said these words repeatedly from here.

He said, not everything is good. Not everything is good. How can we possibly say that what the brothers did to Joseph was good?

it was evil. How can we possibly say that all those deaths from the pandemic were good? They were not good.

[13 : 41] They were tragic. Not everything is good. There were hard words, Bill said that day, but good words that we need to hear over and over and over again.

Again. A few weeks ago, I was the victim, I believe, I was the victim of a decision, I believe, which was made from evil motives.

Somewhat smarting afterwards, I received an email from a senior friend who wrote these priceless words to me. He said to me, whatever part the folly of men played in that decision, it is the will of God.

God. And now he is asking you once again to make full proof of your ministry. Whatever part the folly of men played in that decision, it is the will of God.

And now God is asking you once again to make full proof of your ministry. God is not the author of evil in men's hearts, but in his powerful grace and in his victorious love, he can use even their evil actions for good.

[15 : 00] What they did to me was not good. But God weaves their evil and makes of it a tapestry of his grace.

He overcomes their evil. He overwhelms their folly. and in his sovereign grace and mercy, he causes their evil to work for our good.

That's the sovereignty of God in action. That even the messengers of Satan in our lives are reminders of the all sufficiency of the grace of Christ at work in our lives.

that the sin of man serves not to hinder the kingdom of God, but in his infinite wisdom, as we'll see in weeks to come, God uses it to propel forward his loving purposes for his world.

Think of that when you're tempted to fall down, utterly exhausted before the pit into which your brothers, whatever and whoever they may be, are trying to cast you.

[16 : 07] The situation you're facing is most certainly not good. God means all these things for good.

These are really easy words to say, I admit. They're hard to believe, but even harder to joyfully embrace. The sovereignty of God in evil, the sovereignty of God in us, second of all.

The sovereignty of God in us. One of the questions that we're all tempted to ask, are we not, when we find ourselves in difficult situations is, why me? Why me?

Perhaps of all the questions we ask, this is the most powerfully poignant. Why me? And I guess that Joseph could have asked himself that question about the painful situation he found himself in, in the pit, in prison, whatever.

Why me in that pit? Why me in that prison? But isn't it amazing that you never find Joseph asking the question, why me?

[17 : 20] He sees things from an altogether different perspective. Describing the good that God has purposed from his sufferings, Joseph says to his brothers, look at the text with me, God meant it for good to bring about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.

So, we know the story. Famine had struck the Middle East, people were dying of hunger, but Joseph, thanks to his interpretations of Pharaoh's dream, had made ample provisions, not only for the people of Egypt, but also for many other peoples, others like the family of Joseph back in Canaan.

And so his brothers came to Egypt looking for food. You know, if it hadn't been for Joseph, they'd have all died from hunger, every one of them. Yes, his brothers, but also his father.

Yes, the whole covenant line of Abraham would have died in that famine. Surely the goodness of God, that good God meant, was that many people should be kept alive.

And there are two thoughts here I want to explore with you, and the first of them especially is something you will probably never have heard before. The first is this, the why me question is almost unique to our Western individualistic societies.

[18 : 52] The why me question is almost unique to our Western individualistic societies. We are so fiercely individualistic that we forget God made us to be communal.

What's of primary importance to the community is not my welfare, but its welfare. Well, that's the way societies which are more commonly based think.

Joseph took comfort in knowing that what happened to him was for the good of others, for the many who had been kept alive through all he suffered. If he'd not been sold into slavery by his brothers, they'd all be dead now, every one of them.

The cultures of the Bible weren't nearly as individualistic as ours. And so the question, why me? It didn't occur for them to ask that question.

My friend Mark Maynell, author of that wonderful book on depression, *When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend*, points out that in the world of the New Testament, people were not nearly as individualistic as they are today.

[20 : 07] And therefore, the suffering of the individual was seen in the context of the well-being of the community. And so speaking of his own experience of depression, Mark writes these words, So if my experiences of being a cave dweller, that's his words for being a depressive, help me to carry each other's burdens and in this way to fulfill the law of Christ, then I can genuinely see them as a gift.

I don't need to identify a causal link to my depression, to sense a divine purpose in it. My tears now have redemptive meaning.

That's why I've entitled this section, *God's Sovereignty in Us*, not *God's Sovereignty in Me*. Because the situations you face, you don't face them alone.

They belong to one family in Christ, mine to endure perhaps, but everyone's in which to share. But the second thought in this section is this, unless Joseph had suffered the way he did, there would have been no salvation for us.

Unless Joseph had suffered the way he did, there would be no salvation for us. Remember, God used what happened to Joseph to bring him to a position of prominence in Egypt whereby he was able to stockpile food to see his nation and his family through the famine.

[21 : 41] If Joseph had not been sold into slavery in Egypt by the evil intentions of his brothers, none of this would have happened. The whole family line of Jacob would have died of hunger in Canaan.

There would have been no Judah, Joseph's brother, from whom was descended Jesus. There would have been no Jesus, no salvation without Joseph's sufferings.

God used Joseph to preserve Abraham's family line through which eventually Jesus would be born, live, and die on a cross for our redemption.

In other words, no pit for Joseph, no salvation for you. no prison for Joseph, no salvation for me. In other words, Joseph was never more like Jesus than when he was in the pits and the prisons, put there by the hatred and the malice of men, but put there by God to save the very people who hated him so much.

And you are never more like Christ than when you're being falsely accused and misrepresented and made to suffer. And even though your sufferings don't have the same redemptive impact as those of Joseph and Jesus, how do you know what God's going to do through your suffering?

[23 : 11] How do you know whether the dignity and poise with which you suffer won't attract others to Jesus? You know, they say that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, and that's really tough for the martyrs, maybe.

But it's the living foundation of the church of Christ. I'm not trying to give you glib answers to impossible questions.

What I'm trying to do is to question your doubts, and to give you confidence that though you might not know what God is doing in your life right now, he knows.

God means it for good.

Sovereignty of God understood. Well, second, very briefly, the sovereignty of God applied. This is when it becomes really helpful.

[24 : 17] I've taken my time going through that doctrinal part of the sermon because it's only as you digest these truths on your own and drive them into your hearts through prayer and meditation, I hope you've remembered them, you'll get the benefit of them.

In understanding the sovereignty of God and in joyfully embracing his good purposes at work in you and through you, according to our text in Genesis 50, you're going to learn at least three things.

Humility, forgiveness, kindness. The first is humility. Humility. When Jacob dies, his brothers are sure that Joseph will now wreak his revenge upon them.

He's no longer restrained by his father, so now's the time. And yet, listen to what Joseph says in verse 19. Am I in the place of God?

He doesn't say to them, how dare you did all these things to me? Don't you know how I am? Who I am? Now it's time for you to suffer.

[25 : 27] Rather, he takes the lowest place and he says, am I in the place of God? He leaves just judgment to God and refuses himself to exact his own revenge.

you know, in general, the most humble Christians I've ever met, those with the least air of self-importance are those who have suffered the most.

They've had their own God complex beaten straight out of them by what they've suffered. They know that they're not the centers of the universe before whom all must bow and whose interests must come before all others.

They become like the Christ of Philippians 2, humble, putting others before themselves. There was a feature on the BBC website very recently about the Dundee United manager, Tam Cortz.

In that feature, Tam Cortz admitted that in his pursuit of success, he had left behind him significant collateral damage. In other words, he had used people to get to where he wanted to go.

[26 : 50] He used them to get to the top. If you can call managing Dundee United the top. Those who have suffered like Joseph don't leave collateral damage behind them because they're not self-important and they're not selfish.

Rather, they're self-giving and selfless. They're humble. That's what the sovereignty of God, rightly applied, will yield. A humble teachable selfless heart.

I'll be careful what you pray for. If you should pray for humility as we're encouraged to do in the Bible, be prepared to suffer. But mind, it's those who are put in spirit, those who are humble, Jesus said, God will cause to inherit the earth.

death. The second thing that the sovereignty of God will teach you is forgiveness. Forgiveness. Do you carry around with you a burden of grudge, a spirit of bitterness, an aid of unforgiveness?

When I think of those who have hurt and damaged me, I must confess there's still far too much of the grudge and bitterness about me. We all want to be in the place of God, to judge our enemies and to rain down burning sulfur on their heads.

[28 : 22] But again, consider what Joseph said. Am I in the place of God? Am I in the place of God? A knowledge of divine sovereignty enables and empowers our forgiveness of others.

Ah, they may have had evil intentions, toward us, just as Joseph's brothers did him. But ultimately, it is God who governs all the actions of men, and what he has done, he has done for our good.

The only person damaged by lack of forgiveness is the person who will not forgive others. That person who holds a grudge, who harbors the spirit of bitterness, and who breathes the stale and stinky aid of unforgiveness.

And so, in your mind right now, picture someone who's really hurt you, and ask yourself the question, how can I ever forgive them for throwing me into a pit and for selling me into slavery?

And I'm not saying it's easy for you, but the more you joyfully embrace the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, the more you'll be able to forgive them from the heart. And then finally, humility, forgiveness, kindness, kindness.

[29 : 50] To be humble and to forgive is one thing, but to be kind to those who have done us evil, that's a step beyond. end. We read of Joseph and his brothers, he comforted them and spoke kindly to them, end of verse 21.

He heaped burning coals on their heads by feeding them, providing for them and their little ones, even though they tried to kill him. How is it that Jesus could be so kind to the apostle Paul, formerly known as Saul the Pharisee?

After all, Saul had been complicit in the martyrdom of Stephen, Jesus' beloved follower. Could we be so kind to those who have tormented us, misrepresented us, mistreated us, yes, even to those who used us as pawns in their own petty games of chess and bore us only evil intentions?

what if we realized that their evil intentions are being weaved together in a tapestry for our good and for the good of God's holy church?

Sword begins to fall out of our hearts. It's replaced by a hand holding itself out in friendship and kindness. I'm not there yet and I guess few of us are there yet with those who have hurt us so badly.

[31 : 28] But Jesus is there and that's why Paul talks about how it was the kindness of God which led to our salvation. Though we had deserved condemnation, he extended to us the kindness of the cross and the offer of salvation.

why do things happen the way they do? Why do things turn out the way they do? I'm not here to give you glib answers to impossible questions, but I am here to question your doubts and to point you to the sovereign care of your loving heavenly father who meant for good in Joseph's life and means for good in yours also.

It may be hard to see it right now, and admittedly it was only in hindsight that Joseph was able to say these things to his brothers. But my challenge to you is this, understand and embrace joyfully the sovereignty of your loving heavenly father.

Let us pray. Amen.