

# “Trusting Our Sovereign God”

Genesis 40-50  
September 10, 2017

Today we're wrapping up a 3-part series on the life of Old Testament Joseph and we're going to consider a doctrine called the Sovereignty of God. The Sovereignty of God is a mysterious thing. The life of Joseph in the Old Testament was filled with peaks and valleys, but the LORD was with him all along the way.<sup>1</sup> One website describes it this way:

“The Sovereignty of God is the biblical teaching that all things are under God’s rule and control, and that nothing happens without His direction or permission. God works not just some things but all things according to the counsel of His own will...His purposes are all-inclusive and never thwarted...nothing takes Him by surprise.”<sup>2</sup>

Lots of things take humans by surprise. Consider Hurricane Harvey which ravaged the south end of the U.S. Consider Hurricane Irma, with 180 mile/hr. winds, it's the largest recorded hurricane in history... and it seems to be headed straight for Florida. From a limited, human perspective, it's hard to understand why God would ever allow these things. We know that Jesus can calm any storm in nature. But these hurricanes and the fires out west seem to rage away. Surely God sees all that is going on. But, He's not stopping it. What is God up to?

The Sovereignty of God is a mysterious thing. Consider the USS Fitzgerald. I heard a brief report on Minnesota Public Radio this week. This huge US Navy Destroyer almost sank off the coast of Japan after colliding with a container ship. The damage was so severe that in order to keep the entire ship from sinking, some of the lower compartments had to be sealed off with the emergency hatches. The real tragedy of this story, in my mind, was a horrifically difficult decision that certain sailors were forced to make. MPR was interviewing the family of one of the sailors who died in this tragedy. The report clarified that certain sailors were not able to be rescued because the hatches had to be sealed to prevent further loss of life. In other words, the sailors who sealed the hatches to prevent further flooding of the ship were heroes. They saved the ship and the rest of the crew. But, in order to do this, they had to seal some of their own shipmates in, to their doom.

Why do things like this happen? One report cites a security expert named Patrick Cronin. Cronin said, “Things like this [happen] because of human error, sometimes complicated by some technical difficulty.”<sup>3</sup> So where is the line between human responsibility and the sovereign control of the God of the universe? Well, Christ-followers have been asking this question for ages. It's a good question. Can we trust God in the midst of tragedy; in the midst of our struggle and pain and severe disappointments? Or, will we rebuke Him and scorn him? Will we tell Him that we don't like it when He is in control? Charles Spurgeon was reported to have said, “Men will allow God to be everywhere except on His throne.”<sup>4</sup> In one of his sermons Spurgeon preached that the Sovereignty of God is possibly “the most comforting and yet the most hated doctrine!”<sup>5</sup>

In the Old Testament book of Job, we read that Job loses almost everything: his sons/daughters, his servants, and his livestock, all in rapid succession. Job responds in a way that grabs our attention.

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<sup>1</sup> What an incredible journey Joseph has been on! He started out being born into a family filled with bitter jealousy. But, at least he was dad's favorite; he got a special robe to wear around to prove it. He was a young man with great dreams, dreams of how others would one day bow down to him. This favored status went badly early on though. At the tender age of 17 his brothers ganged up on him and threw him in a pit. And then, just as he was being pulled out of the pit and thought life was about to get better again, he was sold into slavery.

We can imagine the fear and distress he felt as he was taken away to Egypt against his will. To be in a caravan headed to the slave market. It's difficult for most of us to imagine what it would be like to have a price put on us and be sold to the highest bidder. But, that's what happened to Joseph. Now, as it turns out, he ended up serving in a really nice place. In fact, he was given an upper level management position. But, he was still a slave. And, Mrs. Potiphar took advantage of that when Joseph righteously spurned her advance. She had him unfairly thrown into jail: an innocent man.

So, once again, just when Joseph thought his life was getting better, he landed in jail. Now, incredibly, once again Joseph ends up in an upper level management position, even though he was a prisoner! Genesis 39:23 tells us, “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.”

<sup>2</sup> From Theopedia website: <https://www.theopedia.com/sovereignty-of-god>

<sup>3</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/traumatic-collision-that-killed-sailors-almost-sank-destroyer-us-navy-20170618-gwtokc.html>

<sup>4</sup> From a sermon by Charles Spurgeon, titled “Divine Sovereignty”

<http://blogs.blueletterbible.org/blb/2014/11/13/spurgeon-it-is-god-upon-his-throne-whom-we-trust/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://blogs.blueletterbible.org/blb/2014/11/13/spurgeon-it-is-god-upon-his-throne-whom-we-trust/>

Job 1:20-22 says, “At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.” In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.” The Sovereignty of God is a mysterious thing.<sup>6</sup> This level of trust does not come easily for most of us. Ultimately, God is in charge. Everything belongs to Him. We can choose to trust His sovereign plan or we can choose to reject it. We can waste our energy resisting God, fighting against God, or even hating God or we can submit to His rule in our world and in our lives.

With all this in mind, let’s get back to Joseph’s story.

**1. The Sovereignty of God calls us to trust His TIMING.** The roller coaster ride of Joseph’s life is far from over. We picked things up this morning in Genesis 40. I mentioned in a previous sermon that Joseph impresses me, because for a guy who keeps getting handed lemons, he has an amazing ability to make lemonade; to make the best of tough situations. As I prepared this sermon, I realized that I need to be careful not to glorify Joseph’s predicament. After all, Joseph is in prison! And, to be frank, he is not real thrilled about it. In Genesis 40:14-15 he makes an appeal to the cupbearer who is about to be released from prison, “But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon.” Joseph wants out! Now! But, apparently, it wasn’t time yet. God had another plan, so he let Joseph sit in prison a while longer. We don’t know exactly how long Joseph was in prison, but the text gives us some clues.

After Joseph was thrown in prison, Genesis 40:1 tells us that it was “some time later” when the cupbearer and the baker are thrown into prison with him. Then, Genesis 41:1 reveals that after they are released from prison, Joseph doesn’t get out for another 2 full years. Genesis 40:23 describes it this way, “The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.” And, once again, it makes us wonder if Joseph may have thought to himself, “God must have forgotten me too.” ...But as it turns out, God had not forgotten him. God’s plan was in the works, but His TIMING was not what Joseph wanted it to be.

This always reminds me of a story my college Spanish teacher told me. When I attended the University of Northwestern in St. Paul, MN. Senora invited our class over to dinner with her and her husband (su esposo). As we were talking, the topic turned to how they’d met. Their faces turned a little red and they gave each other this embarrassing little smile as Senora proceeded to tell us their story. When she was about 19 years old, she was praying fervently for God to reveal to her who her husband was. Most of her friends were in serious dating relationships, and some were already engaged. She recounted how she’d pleaded with God, that even if she wasn’t going to marry him for a long time, she just needed to know who he was. And then, she would wait patiently for God’s timing. Well, God didn’t answer her; He didn’t show her who her future husband would be. Not until 21 years later, when she was about 40 years old, she met and married her husband. Her 27-year-old husband. He was 13 years younger than her. Which means, that if God had shown her, back at age 19, who her husband was, she would have seen him at the ripe old age of 6! We can trust God’s perfect timing.

Genesis 41:46 tells us, “Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” This means that between the ages of 17 and 30, Joseph spent 13 years in slavery and in prison! And, as bizarre as this might seem to our human intellect, this was all part of God’s sovereign plan. Joseph gets out of prison, he successfully interprets Pharaoh’s dream about a terrible, upcoming famine, and he becomes the right-hand man of Pharaoh. Genesis 41:41-44 tells us, “So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.” Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph’s finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people

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<sup>6</sup> Some of us may remember a movie called **Bruce Almighty**. Jim Carrey is given all the power and responsibility of being God. At one point in the movie, he is overwhelmed with millions of prayer requests. In a simplistic and selfish response, he decides to say “yes” to every single one. Mass chaos ensues. Bruce realizes that having sovereignty over millions of selfish people, each with their own free will, is ridiculously complex.

shouted before him, “Make way!” Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt.” Not bad for 30 years old.

It’s hard to understand why God waited 13 long years to get Joseph to this point, but He did. All Joseph could do during those 13 years was trust God and wait. The sovereignty of God calls us to trust His timing. And...

**2. The Sovereignty of God calls us to trust His AGENDA.** Whose agenda is more important, my agenda, your agenda, or God’s agenda? Our agendas are, at most, petty. By any stretch of comparison, they are a trifle. This does not mean we are unimportant, it just means that our importance stems from God’s agenda, not our own. Ephesians 1:11-12 teaches us, “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.”

It’s not about you.<sup>7</sup> It’s not about me. It’s about God’s glory. The Sovereignty of God calls us to submit to this priority; to seek after it. Nothing else and nothing less than God’s glory. Here’s a question: **Does my Christian faith recognize God’s right to intrude on MY plans?** Well, God certainly intruded on Joseph’s plans. And we have the privilege of seeing God’s ultimate agenda come to fruition.

Let’s finish Joseph’s story together. I wish we could read all of chapters 40-50 together, but time does not allow. Consider doing this in your quiet times with God this week. For now, let’s hit a few high points. Due to the famine, Joseph’s brothers end up coming to Egypt for food. Genesis 42:6-7 says, “Now Joseph was the governor of the land, the person who sold grain to all its people. So when Joseph’s brothers arrived, they bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. As soon as Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he pretended to be a stranger...”

Now, if Joseph was my little brother, I can imagine him letting me know it’s him and pointing at me and saying, hey! remember that dream I had back when I was 17? Told you so! But, Joseph didn’t do that. They didn’t recognize Joseph. So, he keeps his identity a secret. Then, a whole back/forth exchange occurs where Joseph accuses them of being spies and lying about their younger brother Benjamin. He ends up giving them food and they go back to their father Jacob and try to explain what went on.

Jacob gets mad because he doesn’t want to lose his son Benjamin like he’d lost his son Joseph many years earlier. But, the brothers didn’t have any choice. The 2<sup>nd</sup> most powerful man in Egypt had demanded that Benjamin must come to Egypt to prove the veracity of their story. They were in a real pickle but they had no choice but to make a 2<sup>nd</sup> trip to Egypt. They go down to Egypt with Benjamin and Joseph hides a silver cup in Benjamin’s sack of grain and then accuses him of stealing it. Due to this trick, Joseph has his brothers right where he wanted them. Benjamin is now Joseph’s slave and the rest of the brothers are told that they are free to go home; to go back and tell their father what happened.

At this point, their brother Judah steps up as a leader. In Genesis 44:33-34 Judah says, “Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord’s slave in place of the boy (Benjamin), and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come on my father.” You see, Judah had watched his father suffer for many years after losing Joseph. He’d learned his lesson. Judah was willing to exchange his own life to avoid repeating the same mistake. And Judah’s offer of self-sacrifice breaks Joseph’s heart.<sup>8</sup> He can maintain this ruse no longer. With loud weeping, Joseph finally makes himself known to his brothers.

However, when the brothers realize who Joseph is, they don’t respond with tears. Genesis 45:3 reveals that, “Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still living?” But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.” After all these years, the

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<sup>7</sup> Consider reading *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002

<sup>8</sup> The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 3, H-L, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p. 695.

guilt and shame and regret had been lingering.<sup>9</sup> They never would have imagined in a thousand years they'd ever see the brother they'd betrayed again. And now, he stood before them as the 2<sup>nd</sup> most powerful man in Egypt. They were at his mercy and they couldn't fathom getting anything from him except swift and terrible vengeance.

And here is where the goodness and Sovereignty of God shines brightly. Genesis 45:4-8 tells us, "Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. **"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God..."**"

Joseph embraced God's agenda for his life. Any questions that Joseph might have ever had about God's timing or God's goodness were answered completely. Joseph sets us a godly example: We need to surrender to God's leadership in our lives. Even if we are never permitted to see what God is up to or why He's allowing certain things to happen. We need to trust God's sovereignty.

But his brothers just couldn't see beyond their human vantage point. In fact, even 17 years after this family reunion, the brothers are still worried that Joseph is plotting some final revenge. Genesis 47:28 says that, "Jacob lived in Egypt seventeen years...." So, it is now 17 years after being reunited w/ his brothers. Over all these years, Joseph still hadn't done anything to take revenge on his brothers. But, Genesis 50:15 tells us, "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" They just couldn't understand how Joseph could possibly NOT be holding a grudge. How could Joseph not be bitter? **How could he just forgive them and trust God's sovereignty? Who does that? ...Joseph does.**

We talked about Hebrews 12:14-15 in a previous sermon, "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." Just imagine the vengeance Joseph could have brought upon his brothers. But, he never did. In fact, near the end of Genesis, Joseph makes it clear one more time; the Sovereignty of God calls us to trust His agenda. Genesis 50:19-21 tells us, "But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them."<sup>10</sup>

**Once we learn to trust God's sovereignty, we can find peace and hope through any situation.**<sup>11</sup> Therefore, brothers and sisters in Christ, let us trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding. In all our ways, let us submit to Him and He will make our paths straight.

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<sup>9</sup> Reflect back on **Genesis 37:18-20**, "But they saw [Joseph] in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. 19 "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. 20 "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. **Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.**" No human scheme or plotting of humans can stop what God has planned!

<sup>10</sup> Acts 4:25-28 says, "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.' 27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. 28 **They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.**" When things around us get dicey, we needn't worry if things are out of control. Things are never out of God's ultimate control and sovereign plan; despite how it may look and feel to us.

<sup>11</sup> Consider the *Serenity Prayer* by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. ...Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen." (This is a call to surrender to God's leadership in my life.)