McLean Bible Church Dr. David Platt March 3, 2019



Our Suffering & God's Sovereignty The Story of Scripture - Part 5

Today we're now one month into reading through the Story of Scripture together. Don't worry if you've fallen behind—just jump back in this week. Today we're going to dive into a story that we're in the middle of, the story of Joseph. I am so looking forward to walking through this story, because it is so applicable to our lives today.

Let me ask, has your life ever not gone as you planned? Have you ever been deeply hurt by someone else? Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you have wondered, "Why is this happening?" or even, "Where is God in the middle of this?"

A few weeks ago we looked in the Bible at what the book of Job teaches about our suffering and God's sovereignty. As I was walking through our Bible Reading Plan this week, I couldn't help but think that a Part 2 sermon on our suffering and God's sovereignty might be really helpful to consider, with a particular focus that's different from Job on suffering, the sovereignty of God and sin, as well as the hurt sin causes which is what the story of Joseph is all about.

So I want to walk you through this story that spans from Genesis 37 to Genesis 50. I want you to see Who God is and how God works in a world of sin and hurt, in a way that I pray will give you a rock-solid foundation to stand on when you hurt in different ways. Especially for those of you who would say you're not a follower of Jesus right now, I want you to know I'm glad you're here. You are always welcome here.

I know that for some non-Christians, one of the primary reasons they have yet to believe in Jesus or in God is because of all the evil and suffering in the world. They struggle to comprehend a God Who can be good and still allow evil like we see around us. I want to show you today what the Bible teaches about this. My prayer is that you might see God's greatness and goodness in a world of evil for the first time—not just generally in the world, but personally in your life.

Let's start by reading the Bible's introduction to Joseph in Genesis 37:1-11, then I'll tell the rest of the story from there.

Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. ² These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a

robe of many colors. ⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

⁵ Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. ⁶ He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: ⁷ Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." ⁸ His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

⁹ Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰ But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" ¹¹ And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

In your notes I've provided a quick overview of the story of Joseph and specifically of the suffering of Joseph, starting in what we just read. We're introduced here to Joseph as the favored son. From the first day he was born, Joseph was the golden child in his family. We read in our Bible plan about Jacob's love for his wife Rachel, who was barren for many years. But finally she gave birth to a son and they named him Joseph.

In Genesis 37:3 we read that Jacob "loved Joseph more than any other of his sons." He showed this love by giving Joseph a multi-colored robe as a picture of the close relationship they had. As a result of being the favored son, he was also the despised brother. He was a tattle-tale, running to Mom and Dad with all the things his brothers did wrong, so his brothers hated him. Of course it didn't help things when Joseph would come down to the breakfast table in the morning and say, "Guess what I dreamed about last night. All of you guys were bowing down at my feet. Pass the eggs."

So one day the brothers were together out in the fields and they saw Joseph coming their way, wearing that nice multi-colored coat, and they came up with a plan. The initial idea was to kill him, but then Reuben persuaded them to go with a different plan. He said, "Let's throw Joseph into a pit and leave him to die." Reuben was thinking to himself that he would come back later and rescue Joseph. But interestingly, Reuben's plan never came to fruition.

Instead Judah proposed another plan. I want you to notice throughout this story that Judah played an important role. When a caravan of Ishmaelites came down the road, Judah proposed that they sell Joseph off as a slave. These Ishmaelites, also called Midianites in the story, paid 20 shekels for the despised and now robeless brother.

The brothers took the robe, dipped it in blood, went back to their father and make up a story about how an animal had devoured Joseph. Jacob mourned for the next 22 years, thinking Joseph was dead. Little did he know that Judah's decision had spared Joseph's life.

This leads us to Genesis 39, where we see Joseph as a slave in a foreign land. Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and the captain of the guard, purchased Joseph from the Ishmaelites to be his slave in Egypt. Let's pick up the story in Genesis 39:2:

² The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. ³ His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. ⁴ So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. ⁵ From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. ⁶ So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

Do you see what's happening here? The promise God had made in Genesis, from Abraham to Isaac and Jacob, that through their offspring the blessing of God would come to the nations, was happening here, albeit in the least likely of circumstances: through Joseph as a slave in Egypt.

Then, as if things were not difficult enough—working as a slave in a foreign land—one day Potiphar's wife approached Joseph. She had made various passes at him and he had resisted all of them. That's a helpful side note. May God help every single man and woman here today to flee every type of sexual sin. Whether it's looking at an image on the internet, flirting with somebody at work, anything—God, please raise up men and women who will, like Joseph, run from temptation.

This leads to the next picture of Joseph, the pure servant which is a total contrast from Judah in Genesis 38 and really in all these stories in Genesis. We see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were willing to compromise their integrity at certain points, giving their wives to foreign rulers. Here, when Joseph was sought by the wife of a foreign ruler, he resisted and ran.

That may be the word God wants many of you to hear today: run! I'm guessing there are some, maybe many, who are dabbling in sexual sin or temptation. At this point, God in His grace is saying to you and me in His Word right now: run! Don't rationalize. Run.

The problem for Joseph is that when he ran, his coat was left behind and as a result he was framed by Potiphar's wife. Subsequently he became a slandered prisoner. Through no fault of his own—Joseph was righteous, pure and holy—he was imprisoned for 13 years in a dungeon.

There, slandered and imprisoned, Joseph rose to leadership and after many years, one day the king's cupbearer and baker made a bad batch of food and drink and the king sent them to jail. One night they both had dreams that left them pretty confused the next morning. Joseph just so happened to walk by that morning, saw them confused and asked, "What's wrong?" They told him about their dreams and Joseph ended up interpreting them. Joseph told the cupbearer that he would live. The other, the baker, was told he would die. Joseph said to the cupbearer, "Hey, when you get out, don't forget about me. Tell Pharaoh about me, so I can get out of this prison."

What Joseph said would happen to the men did happen. The cupbearer lived, but he forgets Joseph. That is, he forgets until two years later, Pharaoh doesn't sleep well one night and he has a dream. No one in Egypt can interpret that dream. So while Pharaoh is sharing it with all his magicians, it just so happens that the cupbearer overhears what's going on. He tells Pharaoh, "I know just the guy to help you." And before you know it, Joseph is brought into Pharaoh's presence.

Once there, Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream, a dream that foretells seven years of plenty in the land of Egypt to be followed by seven years of famine. Joseph says to Pharaoh, "You'd better start storing up a reserve right now." Pharaoh is overwhelmed by the Spirit of God in Joseph and says, "You need to be over my house and over all the people in Egypt in order to lead us through this."

Check out Genesis 41:42 to see a total transformation here, where Joseph goes from being a slave imprisoned in a dungeon to this:

⁴² Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. ⁴³ And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt.

The favored son, despised brother, enslaved in a foreign land, becomes the leader over all the land. Joseph basically becomes the prime minister in Egypt, with authority over all the people of Egypt, but not just in Egypt. Because of the famine and the preparations made under Joseph's leadership, people from many nations would come to Egypt—specifically to Joseph—to beg for food. Thus the stage is set in Genesis 42:

¹ When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" ² And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die." ³ So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt.

If you've been reading with u, you know what happens next. In a winding plot, Jacob's sons are unknowingly brought before Joseph, their brother. They don't recognize this brother they sold into slavery, yet they are bowing down to him, begging for food. Through a series of circumstances leading up to Genesis 45, Joseph becomes the restorative brother.

There's so much in these chapters so many questions about why Joseph is doing things this way or that way. But I want you to notice one thing in particular in this story—Judah's prominent role. When you step back and look at it, you realize these chapters actually revolve around an interplay between Joseph and Judah. In their first journey to see Joseph, Joseph requests the brothers go home and bring Benjamin back with them. After they go back in Genesis 43, they're contemplating whether or not to make that second trip, this time with Benjamin. Jacob is trying to decide whether or not he should send off his son, and it's Judah who steps up and says, "I will take responsibility for Benjamin. We must go."

In Genesis 43:9, Judah basically offers himself as a pledge, a guarantee that Benjamin will be safe. The next chapter says Judah and his brothers appear before Joseph, then Judah is the one who speaks before Joseph. Judah is the one who offers himself as a substitute for Benjamin when Joseph says Benjamin must stay in Egypt.

All that leads to Genesis 45, where Joseph finally reveals his identity to his brothers. He says, "Go, get our father Jacob; bring him and all your families so you can be provided for here." Then in Genesis 46:28, Jacob sends Judah to lead the caravan into Egypt. Now through this interplay between Joseph and Judah, restoration happens in the family and ultimately the last picture of Joseph comes to the surface. Joseph becomes the reunited son. Genesis 46:28-30 give us this picture:

²⁸ [Jacob] had sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph to show the way before him in Goshen [another name for Egypt], and they came into the land of Goshen. ²⁹ Then Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen. He presented himself to him and fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while. ³⁰ Israel said to Joseph, "Now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive."

This leads to Genesis 47, where Jacob and all his sons settle in Egypt while Joseph rules. In chapter 48, Jacob blesses Joseph's two sons. In chapter 49 he blesses all of his sons, including both Judah and Joseph. And then Jacob dies, leaving Joseph in chapter 50 to fall on his face weeping as the reunited son—and that is the story of Joseph.

That leads me to pause for just a minute before we think about how this story relates to our lives. The favored son and despised brother—have you ever been part of family conflict? Maybe growing up, you were the favorite. Maybe you were not the favorite. Maybe you had a close relationship with your siblings. Maybe you have had conflict with your siblings.

Like Joseph—a slave in a foreign land—have you ever found yourself in a place of hurt and pain, maybe even at the hands of people you leaned on to love you? Joseph, a pure servant becomes a slandered prisoner. Have you ever taken a stand for purity, only to be penalized for it? Have you ever been wrongly accused of something? Have you ever been slandered by someone? Like the leader over all the land, the restored brother and the reunited son, have you ever longed for peace, restoration and resolution in your life or your family or your relationships? There are so many places within this story where I think all of us can identify.

All these pictures in Joseph's life come together to set the stage for the story's punch line—maybe the greatest punch line in all the Old Testament. It's our memory verse this week, even though we haven't read this chapter yet. So let's say it out loud together—Genesis 50:20: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

This is where I want us to see the sovereignty of God in the suffering of Joseph, not just in his story, but in our stories. In a world of sin and hurt and things not going like we planned, what does it mean for God to be sovereign and why is this so significant for our lives? Let's look at four truths.

1. In a world of sin and suffering, you are never alone.

For God to be sovereign in a world of sin and suffering means you are never alone. Please hear this right now. Go back to Genesis 39 with me. Remember Joseph in Potiphar's house and the story of Potiphar's wife? We've learned that when the Bible repeats something, we should sit up and take notice. Let me show you a phrase that is repeated four times in this one chapter. It's this phrase: "The Lord was with Joseph."

Right after Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officers, listen to what the Bible tells us in Genesis 39:2: "<u>The Lord was with Joseph</u>"—there it is, right at the beginning of the story—"and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him, and the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands." So twice we hear that when Joseph found himself a slave in Egypt and separated from his family and all that was familiar to him, the Lord was with him.

Then look how chapter 39 ends. After Joseph flees temptation, gets slandered and is thrown into prison, listen to what the Bible says beginning in verse 20:

²⁰ And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. ²¹ But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. ²² And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. ²³ The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed."

Two times in the beginning of Genesis 39 and two times at the end of the chapter, the Bible intentionally shows us that in the deepest, darkest moments of Joseph's life, the Lord was with him. And because God was with him, Joseph was able to stand and even rise in the midst of difficulties, because he was not alone. Do not miss this. In all that Joseph went through, he was never alone.

The Bible is showing us a truth here that does not just apply to Joseph. This is a truth that applies to all who trust in God. The same God Whose presence was with Joseph in that pit from which he was sold, in the house in which he served, in the prison in which he was thrown, before the Pharaoh to whom he was summoned—that same God is with you.

Hear what the Bible is saying to you today. God is with you in your highs and God is with you in your lows. When things are going great, the God of the universe is with you. And when things are at their worst, when nothing is going right, when things are not working out like you planned, the God of the

universe is with you. In those dark, hard, hurtful moments when you feel like you are alone, when you feel like no one else is understanding or no one else knows, God Himself is with you. He knows and understands. You are never alone.

2. In a world of sin and suffering, things are never out of control.

Nowhere in Joseph's story do we find breathtaking displays of supernatural power. Instead what we have are subtle details that point us to the invisible hand of God Who is overseeing every single thing that's happening, even the worst things that are happening.

Think about it. Who's in control here? Joseph is sold into slavery and unjustly thrown into prison. Does that mean evil or sin are in control? Well, look at Genesis 45. When Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers, what do we expect Joseph to do? Let them have it, right? "Get down and prepare for your punishment." That's not what he does. Listen to Genesis 45, beginning in verse four:

⁴ So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry.

Verse five, "God sent me here. God did this." Verse seven, "God sent me before you." Verse eight, "It was not you who sent me here, but God." Verse nine, "God has made me lord over all Egypt." God did this. Notice what Joseph does not say. He doesn't say, "You sent me here and God did the best He could with what you had done." No, Joseph says, "God sent me here. It was God Who did it."

Listen to the language in our memory verse, Genesis 50:20. It's intentional. God meant it. God intended it. God purposed it. God did it. When Psalm 105:16-17 looks back at this story, the Bible says God is the One Who "summoned a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread, he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave." God did this.

Now, it's not that the brothers weren't responsible for their sin and what they did. But listen to Joseph's words. "You sold me to Egypt, but God sent me to Egypt." How does that work? Follow this with me, because we're seeing something here in the beginning of the Bible that we will see throughout the Bible after this. This needs to be clear in our minds.

People make choices. Human responsibility for sin cannot be denied. All through this story, Joseph's brothers are responsible for what they did to Joseph and in other facets of their lives. They're held responsible. We see this especially in Jacob's blessing and cursing of his sons in Genesis 49. Human

responsibility cannot be denied here. Every one of us is responsible before God for our actions, our choices, our decisions, our thoughts and desires. People make sinful choices for which we are responsible.

At the same time that we make choices though, God is in control and His will in the world cannot be stopped. Even in the worst of circumstances, God is working. That's the picture we're seeing here, in such a way that Joseph—after being sold into slavery and imprisoned in a dungeon—can say, "God sent me here." How this works, how God is sovereign while we are responsible, is a mystery.

Let me give you an illustration. I remember one overseas trip in which I was to travel to Indonesia and as soon as I arrived, my schedule was packed full for about a week—preaching and serving in different places, trying to encourage churches where there's little to no access to the gospel. A couple other guys were coming from other places and we were going to work together, but from the beginning my schedule was going to be intense.

So I go to the airport to fly to Indonesia and my flight was delayed. The weather was beautiful outside, but it was still delayed...for an hour, two hours, three hours. The connection flight would not happen. My frustration was growing. I was up at the counter talking with people. Long story short, 24 hours later I got on a plane. Needless to say, it took me a long time to get to Indonesia on what were now circuitous routes, so I got there a couple days late and missed out on all the things I was scheduled to do.

Now, was God sovereign over that? Sure He was. God was working in all kinds of ways. He knew the other guys needed to preach those sermons instead of me. And He was doing things in my life, teaching me all kinds of things about patience. In that whole picture, God was absolutely sovereign.

So I was there at the Delta counter talking with people, but God was sovereign. At the same time, Delta was responsible. I'm not calling up the Delta help line and saying to them, "Well, you know God is sovereign. Praise God if you believe that—and I believe that too—but you are still responsible for this."

Now, I use that as an example, but coming down to a more serious level, some of you have experienced this, or are experiencing it right now. You're suffering because of either something you have done or something someone else has done against you. We've all experienced all kinds of hurt in our lives, directly due to sin in us or in others. As we experience this, we must be careful to keep these two truths in tension. Men and women are responsible before God for sin—sin that causes suffering. We make choices that affect our lives, that affect other people's lives, and we are responsible for those choices. At the same time, in a mysterious way, God is still sovereign over all things, which means that things are never out of control. God is ultimately in control.

Here's why this is so important. I've mentioned this before, but there are a lot of people today—even some professing Christians—who believe God is doing the best He can when it comes to evil and sin in the world, but they think some things are just out of His control. I want you to see what a hopeless, hollow and ultimately unbiblical worldview that is. Imagine Joseph with that worldview, seeing himself

as a victim of hopeless chance. His brothers sell him off, he's thrown into prison and God is with him, but what does that really matter? God couldn't keep him from being thrown in there. There's no guarantee he'll ever get out. God is apparently powerless against evil and sin, which means Joseph would have no reason for hope in any kind of better future.

But no, this is not how Joseph thinks, because Joseph knows the sovereignty of God. He knows that God is in control, even in the worst of circumstances. So after years in slavery, after 13 years in a dungeon, he doesn't go off and slander Potiphar's wife, who had lied about him. He doesn't bring down the cupbearer who for years had forgotten about him. And when he sees his brothers, he doesn't condemn them for selling him into slavery. Instead he says, "Come near to me and listen. God ultimately did all this. God sent me here, He led me here, He has been in control.

3. In a world of sin and suffering, God is always working for our good.

Brothers and sisters, in a world of sin and suffering, take heart. Things are never ultimately out of control. This leads right into the third truth that's so huge. For God to be sovereign means that He's with us, He's ultimately in control, and in a world of sin and suffering, God is always working for our good. As we just said, God's will can't be stopped.

So what is His will? Hear His will in Romans 8:28:. "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." What is the will of God? Here it is, straight from the Bible. God's will is to work all things together for good for those who love and trust Him and are called according to His purpose. This means that as you look to God, you can know that God is never overlooking any of the details in your life.

Let's be honest—sometimes we wonder if He is. Don't you sometimes wonder, "Does God see this? Is God aware of what's happening right now?" We begin to wonder if God sees or if God cares. We wonder if He's overlooking some of the details in our lives. This is where I want to remind you, brothers and sisters—all who trust in God—He is ever orchestrating all the details in your lives. Again, not in some way that people aren't responsible for sin. That's not what we're seeing in this story. Instead, what we're seeing is a God Who is working behind the scenes every second.

God is using a variety of circumstances. Think about Joseph's life. You could take any incident that happened to him and write "tragedy" over the top of it. But when you put them all together, you see a beautiful picture of what God was doing in it all.

Think about Joseph in prison. He tells the cupbearer what his dream means and says, "Please don't forget me." But the cupbearer totally forgets him. Well, praise God he forgot Joseph, so that at just the right time, when Pharaoh needs a dream interpreted, the cupbearer just happens to be standing there at that moment and says, "I know a guy who can help you interpret that dream." You don't plan that—God has this thing rigged. God is orchestrating a variety of circumstances through a variety of people.

Do you realize today that your life is not the only life God is working in? I mean, the world does not revolve around you!

So we go back to the cupbearer situation. The only reason the cupbearer is in prison is because he had apparently done something minor that had upset Pharaoh. So God uses a bad mood one day in Pharaoh's life to send a cupbearer to prison, so he could have a dream one night, look confused the next morning, and Joseph walked by at that moment. This is not just how God works in Joseph's life; this is how God works in everybody's life.

Realize this: when you or I ask, "God, what are You doing in my life?" the answer may be what God is doing in somebody else's life. When you get that diagnosis and you're sitting with that unbelieving doctor, and you're showing a faith in Jesus that supersedes any diagnosis in the world, there's something that's happening in that doctor's heart and life. There are countless examples. What God is doing in your life may be an integral part of what God is doing in somebody else's life and vice versa. God is orchestrating a variety of circumstances in a variety of people for a variety of goals.

He brings Joseph to a point of humility, joy and gladness. He brings Joseph's brothers to a point of confession and honesty. God is bringing Jacob to ultimate fulfillment. And for God's people, this is the whole point of Genesis 50:20. All of these goals are ultimately good. God is able to take evil and turn it into good.

Think about this; this is huge. Even the wicked words and actions of sinful men who wanted nothing but to harm Joseph, God used for good. Even the actions of sinful people who want nothing but to harm you, God will ultimately use for good. God is able to take evil and turn it to good; God is able to take suffering and turn it into satisfaction.

Listen to chapter 41:50-52. When Joseph has two sons, listen to what he names them after his whole journey:

⁵⁰ Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore them to him. ⁵¹ Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." ⁵² The name of the second he called Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

Memorize that verse: "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." Let me give you an example of this. It's something I've shared with you before, but it's pretty fresh on my heart right now for reasons you'll see.

I've shared with you before about how Heather and I struggled for many years through infertility. We longed to have kids for about five years. Year after year, month after agonizing, heartbreaking month, we wrestled with God over why He wasn't answering our prayers, some days we wondered if He was even hearing them. But little did we know God was working, not just in our lives during those years, but

in others' lives, including a mom in Kazakhstan who, for reasons we don't know, was not able to care for her baby boy.

Soon after birth, he was in an orphanage and God was using our infertility to open our hearts to adoption. That would one day lead us to go into that orphanage in Kazakhstan and meet this boy, who—12 years ago this Thursday—became our first son. Years later—after miraculously having another son born the natural way which surprised and shocked us—because of that infertility journey that started years earlier, God led us to an orphanage in China, where a sweet precious little girl named Mara became our daughter. Then, to our shock and surprise, she was followed by another child born the natural way.

Now, just to share with you and ask you to be praying for us, as a result of what we've been walking through in the Word even as a church over the last few months, Heather and I believe God is leading us to adopt again, specifically and hopefully from China, potentially from near where Mara was born. Lord willing, that could happen sometime in 2020.

But all this to say, we look back today and we praise God for five years and many heartbreaking months of infertility. We praise God that in a world where children are often alone, God is the father to the fatherless, He uses even hard circumstances in lives over here to bring hope and joy. When I think about four, and Lord willing five, kids, I think "fruitful in the land of affliction."

This is just one story of how God is ever orchestrating a variety of circumstances in a variety of people for a variety of goals, ultimately always for the good of those who trust in Him. I know it's hard to see in the moment, isn't it? It's really hard to see and believe. Even still some are not convinced. Even still some ask, "How do we know that God will take evil and turn it into good? How do we know that God takes suffering and turns it into satisfaction?"

4. In a world of sin and suffering, God will ultimately save us for His glory.

Some of you are in the middle of deep pain and hurt right now and you're wondering, "How can I really know that God is going to make me fruitful in the land of my affliction? That question leads to the fourth truth here. For God to be sovereign means that in a world of sin and suffering, God will ultimately save us for His glory.

You see, this story in Genesis is not ultimately about Joseph or Judah. This story is about Jesus and His love for you and His promises to you. You say, "What do you mean?" Well, see the parallels here between the stories of Joseph and Jesus. In both, God sovereignly uses a dreadful sin to save His people. Here with Joseph, God uses brothers who want to kill him, but who settle for selling their brother into slavery. How horrible is that? Yet God uses that horrible sin to bring about salvation for many lives.

That sets the stage for one day when God will use the horrible sin of men and women who falsely accuse and slander Jesus, the Son of God, and sentence Him to death, nail Him to a cross—the

most cruel form of death imaginable. God will use their horrible, dreadful, murderous sin ultimately to bring about salvation for many lives—including yours and mine.

This is breathtaking. God sovereignly transforms the actions of sinners into the accomplishment of their salvation. God used the brothers' sin to save the brothers' lives from famine. And in the same mysteriously beautiful way, God used the sins of people who were nailing Jesus to a cross. In committing that sin, they were actually making the way for them to be forgiven of their sin. Look at the picture here. Go back to these brothers. They're standing before the brother they had sold into slavery and Joseph weeps, saying, "Come close. Because of your sin against me, I will now provide for you."

This makes no sense, but this is the gospel. We stand before Jesus—God in the flesh, against Whom all of us have sinned—and He says to us, "Come close. Because of your sin against Me, I will now provide for you." Then on a bigger picture level, think about the stories of Judah and Jesus. I point out this interplay between Joseph and Judah, because the story is here for a reason. Yes, it's Joseph whom God uses to provide for His people. But it was Judah's idea to sell Joseph into slavery. It was Judah's insistence that brought the brothers back to Joseph a second time. And in the end, it was Judah who led the people of God into the land and there Jacob blesses his sons. Look at Genesis 49, where Jacob blesses his sons. When he gets to Judah, listen to what he says in 49:8-10:

⁸ Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. ⁹ Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? ¹⁰ The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

Now it's Judah to whom the father's sons will bow down. It's Judah who will be the lion; it's Judah who will one day have a King, a Ruler, the scepter's staff. It will be a King from his line to Whom shall be the obedience of all the peoples. The point of the story in Genesis is ultimately to preserve the line of Judah, because one day God will take the lion of Judah in Genesis and make Him the Lamb Who was slain for us. This promise in Genesis 49, in the beginning of the Bible, is ultimately fulfilled in the end of the Bible. So a little spoiler alert, but this is where the story is headed: Revelation 5:5-10:

⁵ "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

⁶ And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying,

"Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, ¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

Jesus is the Lion of Judah, before Whom all people and nations will one day bow. This leads us then to the story of you and Jesus. You and I, we all are sinners and we're all surrounded by sinners in this world. We live with them. We work with them. We're led by them. As a result, you and I all suffer in all kinds of way that we would not plan. But please hear this good news. In this world of sin and suffering, you are not alone. The God of the universe is with you. And in this world of sin and suffering, things are not out of control. See every detail in our lives right now and remember that you are not in control; I'm not in control. Evil and sin are not in control. God is ultimately in control. Even in the midst of the worst things, God is ultimately in control, and He has promised to work all things together—every detail in a world of sin and suffering—for your good. He is able to take evil and turn it into good. He's able to take sorrow and turn it into satisfaction.

If you're having a hard time believing this, I invite you to look at the cross of Jesus Christ where God took the most evil act ever committed in the world, the murderous crucifixion of His Son, and He turned it into the greatest act ever committed in the world, salvation for your soul. This is the gospel. Especially for those of you who've not trusted in Jesus, this is the good news we celebrate every week, every moment in our lives. It's that we have sinned against God, we're separated from Him in our sin, but He has not left us alone in our sin. God has come to us in the Person of Jesus. Jesus has paid the price for our sin. He is not distant from us in a world of sin and suffering. He came to us and He paid the price for our sin. He suffered on our behalf. And then the good news keeps getting better, because He didn't just die for our sins, He rose from the grave in victory over sin. Because of this, you and I can be forgiven and restored to God. Praise God! Because He is sovereign, your sin does not have to be the end of your story. God has taken the suffering of His Son on a cross for you and made a way for you to have eternal satisfaction. So you can look to Him and trust in Him. Believe today that the God Who is with you and Who is in control is working for your good and ultimately for His glory. And the One Who saves you from sin promises to one day glorify you with Him.

Picture this part of the story: Joseph and his brothers all surrounding him, enjoying the land, with plenty, not in famine. Now know this: No matter how hard it gets in this world of sin and suffering, no matter how dark the days are and how deep the hurt is—and you don't even want to get out of bed some days—there is coming a day when all who trust in Jesus will be completely restored to Him in a land where there is no more sin, no more famine, no more suffering, no more hurt and no more pain. This is a promise from God Who is able to keep His promises, because God is sovereign.

Let's pray.

O God, I don't presume, we don't presume, to be able to grasp all that we've just seen in our finite minds and hurting hearts. We don't understand what the purpose is. God, we sure are thankful that sin and evil are not in control and that we—or others in our sinfulness—are not in control, but that You ultimately are in control. So we look to You and we trust in You.

We pray for grace to trust in You. God, I pray for faith, that amidst all kinds of hurt and pain, we would know that You are with us. I pray that every man and woman within the sound of my voice would know You are with them, that You are ultimately sovereign over all and that You are working all details together for the good of those who love You and who are called according to Your purpose.

You have promised that one day sin, hurt, suffering and pain will be no more. We praise You, Jesus, for that guarantee. We praise You that this world is not all there is. We praise You for Your help in the midst of this world, for the hope we have that these trials are momentary and that eternal glory awaits all who trust in You. Jesus, we praise You for making that possible through Your death on the cross for us and Your resurrection from the grave. So help us trust in Your sovereignty amidst our suffering. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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