

Genesis 37:12-36

*When Life Seems Out Of Control*

Have you ever looked out into the world and asked yourself, "Am I wrong for believing that God is in control?"

Our world is full of war, violence, and injustice. Innocent people suffer at the hands of terrorists. One push of a button could destroy life as we know it on this planet.

The purveyors of sin and evil are becoming more bold and forceful. Evil people seem to prosper and grow at the expense of the poor. Has God lost His grip on things? Has He turned His back on us? Can we honestly say that He is in control and working out His plan?

If anything is obvious from the Bible it's the teaching that God is a personal being who is intimately concerned with, and involved in, the affairs of men.

The Bible says that God is sovereign. He is in control and He is working out His plan and purpose for the planet. And nowhere is that concept laid out any plainer in the scriptures than in the book of Genesis and the life of Joseph.

The truth that God is in control of our world should give us confidence that God is also in control of our personal lives.

Romans 8:28 clearly tells us that *...all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.*

Joseph's life was an Old Testament demonstration of Romans 8:28.

But even though God causes all things to work together for good for His people, it is not always obvious what God is trying to accomplish.

When things get tough for us personally, it's easy to feel like God isn't in control of our personal lives just like we wonder about His control of our world. But see, Joseph's life can give us confidence that God has an overall plan. The thing we need to learn from Joseph is that God doesn't tell us His plan from the beginning. We don't know what is up ahead in life.

What we can learn from Joseph is that his confidence wasn't rooted in his ability to

understand everything about his circumstances. His confidence was in the God of all circumstances.

Study Joseph's life and you'll be encouraged to trust God in every situation. You will have a clear and definite answer to the questions, "Is God in control?" You'll know unquestionably that He is.

This morning we're going back and finish Genesis chapter 37.

### **Open Bible to Genesis 37 page 36**

*I. Even The Free Acts Of The Human Will Can Be Under The Sovereign Control of Almighty God*

#### **Read verses 12 - 14**

Joseph's 10 brothers had gone to Shechem, 60 miles to the north to feed the flocks. As we saw last week in the first 11 verses, by this time Joseph was hated intensely by his brothers. He was favored by his father, he was blessed by God and his brothers responded very bitterly against him.

But as we saw in the beginning of this chapter, Joseph as a 17 year old young man conducted himself in a godly manner. His brothers hatred was the first of many adverse situations that God used to strengthen and refine Joseph and prepare him.

Shechem was the place where Joseph's brothers Simeon and Levi had gotten into so much trouble. They had slaughtered the men of the city of Shechem and had taken their belongings.

Now as they've returned because of the fertile pasture land for the flocks, Jacob worries about their safety and sends Joseph to go check on them.

Now that seems natural. Jacob had a reason to worry. But even as he sends out Joseph, God is at work. And even though Jacob does what he does of his own volition and free will he was following God's sovereign plan down to the letter.

This was the first step in a series of events that would culminate with Joseph sitting on the throne of Egypt providing for his family during the most severe famine that

Middle East had ever know and allowing for his family to live in Egypt until they formed the nation of Israel. That was God's ultimate purpose.

And that shows us the extent of God's sovereignty. Even things that appear to be the acts of human free will can be directed by God.

I honestly believe that when Bible students and theologians tell us they have issues of God's sovereignty and human free will figured out they're mistaken. I'm not saying that we don't need to study theology in a systematic way, but we need to be real careful of saying we have the last word on the attributes of God.

We can describe what we know but we can't always make God fit into a neat package that makes total sense to human intellect. And you can see examples in so many areas.

We see it in the writing of scripture Paul could write letters to churches dealing with issues that he saw as important. Luke could write Acts and his gospel to give an account of the life of Christ and the early church.

Neither man was used by God as a typewriter to just mechanically write out the scriptures. They researched, they studied, they thought things through. Paul looked at situations and gave prayerful responses to problems.

But just like everybody that wrote the books of the Bible they wrote exactly the words God wanted them to write.

Luke's writings are the Word of God. They are God breathed, perfect, free from error, authoritative. And yet they were Luke's thought's transferred to paper. That is why Dr. Luke's writings are full of Greek medical terms.

Even things that appear to be the acts of man's free will can be directed by God.

We can see it so plainly in the crucifixion of Christ. Judas, Pilate, the Jewish Sanhedrin all did what they wanted to do. No one twisted their arm. No one forced them. They weren't unwilling puppets on a string or robots but they fulfilled God's plan down to the smallest detail.

Notice how the story progresses.

## **Read verses 15 - 17**

These things all seem like coincidences. Just accidental happenings but God is behind this meeting because it is the second step along the way for Joseph to get him where he needs to be. Free acts of man, coincidences of life? *All things work together for good for those who love God.*

Are we saying by all of that that God's responsible then for the sinful world in which we live? Are we saying that God's responsible for the heartache and the pain of life and that human beings aren't responsible? Are we saying that man can only do what God chooses for him to do? Not at all.

I don't know that we can necessarily answer every last question about God's sovereignty any more than we can answer every question about the inspiration of Scripture or the virgin birth of Christ.

We are natural finite people struggling to comprehend and explain supernatural, infinite concepts. But we can understand at least some of the way God's sovereignty works from what we read in the rest of this chapter.

*I. Even The Free Acts Of The Human Will Can Be Under The Sovereign Control of Almighty God*

*II. At Times God Restrains The Evil Of The Human Heart*

## **Read verses 18 - 20**

In the stuff that Joseph has to face we can see how often God and Satan are both at work. Satan's objective is to bring about our downfall. God's objective is to establish us in holiness and to accomplish His purpose.

In I Peter 5:8 we are warned *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.*

And then in verse 10 Peter writes *But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.*

There is the objective of Satan and the objective of God. Satan wants to devour us. God wants to perfect us.

Here Satan is at work. The brother's viciously plan to carry out Satan's purpose and kill Joseph. And behind all of this was Satan's plot to destroy this family and prevent the formation of the nation of Israel and the messianic line of Christ.

But God had other plans. And so he restrained the evil that Satan had plotted and Joseph's brothers had so willingly desired to carry out.

### **Read verse 21**

Reuben had apparently been away and not been in on the initial planning, but when he finds out he quickly speaks up.

Now Reuben the firstborn had lost the birthright to Joseph. He had hated Joseph because of the dreams and because of the coat of authority from Jacob. But Reuben couldn't go along with actually murdering his own brother.

### **Read verse 22**

Reuben planned on coming back and getting Joseph out and returning him to Jacob. We don't know why he wanted to do this. He might have even had the selfish motive of trying to get back in favor with his father by returning the favorite son to him.

But whatever the motive God was still at work and Reuben was used by God to restrain the others. He was the firstborn, he was the one they would all listen to and God used him here.

It's intriguing to me how with all their differences and selfish ways Joseph's brothers were so together on their hatred for him.

### **Read verses 23 and 24**

They wanted to kill him and the reason was because of his dreams. The first thing they said, was here comes the dreamer. Let's knock him off and see what happens to his dreams then.

If there was one thing they were determined never to do, it was to bow the knee to Joseph. It didn't matter that God himself had destined Joseph for preeminence and power. They weren't going to acknowledge it.

Joseph's dreams centered around his authority and their submission. They would put an end to that. But God restrained their wicked hearts.

And you know what? God is restraining wickedness and sinfulness in our world today. You say, "Wait a minute. It's bad out there. Is God holding anything back?" He is. Through the Holy Spirit God is restraining human beings in their wickedness.

What we see now is just a foretaste of what it will be like in the future after the rapture when God removes the restraint of His spirit.

Here in Genesis, although Satan was seeking to destroy God's plan, God overruled so that even unstable Reuben was used by God.

*I. Even The Free Acts Of The Human Will Can Be Under The Sovereign Control of Almighty God*

*II. At Times God Restrains The Evil Of The Human Heart*

*III. At Times God Allows The Evil Of The Human Will To Run It's Course*

Even though Joseph's life is preserved, he still suffers at the hands of his brothers.

When he gets to the camp they pounce on him like a pack of dogs. They ripped of his special coat and I imagine that they punched him until he dropped and them kicked him while he was down.

Their jealousy, their anger, their frustration was all being taken out on Joseph. Joseph suffered and God allowed it to happen. He didn't cause it to happen. He didn't force the hand of Joseph's brothers but He didn't choose to restrain them either.

What Satan designs for defeat, God uses to build strength and character and that is just what happens.

The sufferings of Joseph, like the sufferings of Job only caused him to be stronger in the end. Now all the props were gone. Joseph had no one to lean on but God. His father wasn't there to protect him. He was out from the security of home.

Now he was in a pit, hot and thirsty, bruised and bleeding, pleading for his life while his brothers coldly sat down for lunch.

**Read verses 25 - 27**

Over the horizon comes a caravan from Gilead, the land of spices. The Bible mentions balm of Gilead. *Is there no balm in Gilead, Is there no physician there? Why then is there no recovery For the health of the daughter of my people?* (Jeremiah 8:22)

They guys are traveling on the major caravan route. They have just crossed the River Jordan south of the sea of Galilee. They are coming across the plain of Jezreel and soon they will turn and go south to Egypt.

Egypt was a big market for spices. They used them for everything from cooking to medicine to embalming and perfume.

As the caravan just happens, coincidentally to pass by the brothers notice. And as they do it sparks a thought in Judah. "Why don't we make a buck while we're at it. If we sell Joseph as a slave we'll make some money and then his blood won't be on our hands."

So Joseph is brought up out of the pit and sold as a slave to a caravan heading for the land of Egypt.

### **Read verse 28**

Just looking at this from a natural viewpoint, it appeared like circumstances were on the brother's side. They had gotten rid of their brother, they had 20 shekels to split up, and they could explain it all away to their father.

From Joseph's viewpoint there's no telling what this looked like. Not very hopeful, that's for sure. He was hungry, tired, bruised, bleeding, and the captive of guys who thought of him as nothing more than something to be bought and sold.

If this doesn't stand out as a warning to us about putting too much stock in circumstances!

In Acts 7:9 Stephen referred to this incident by saying: *And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him.*

God was at work. And God allowed the evil plotting of Judah to influence the greed of the others, and so Joseph was sent on his way.

Out of the evil which God allowed them to show, came the opportunity for Joseph to go down into Egypt. There is no evil in this world, there is no wickedness, there is no disaster, or trial that God can't use for our good.

God's hands aren't tied behind his back. He's not out there saying "Oh my, now what am I going to do."

I like the NASB translation of Romans 8:28. It says, *And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God.*

God doesn't cause all things. He is not the author of sin and wickedness. But He can even cause the wickedness of man to work together so that in the end what He purposes happens.

See it wasn't God who moved the brothers to do evil. It was their own sinful hearts. It was Judah who came up with the slavery idea. Judah and his brothers are responsible for their evil.

Just like Pilate and Judas and the Sanhedrin were all responsible for their part in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Just like you and I are responsible when we sin.

I have strict Calvinist friends who say the only way God could be in control is to ordain everything. That makes Him the author of sin. In fact, in my mind it also makes Him a pretty small God. As I read the Bible, God is so big that He allows people to make choices and yet still works situations and events in such a way that His plan ends up being accomplished.

And out of the sin of humanity God can and often does cause good to take place. God is able to do that. God is not limited by man's disobedience.

So God restrains some evil and allows other evil to run its course. How does he decide which to restrain and which to allow? Only by a sovereign understanding of all things.

God is omniscient. And that means he not only knows what will happen in the future, but he also knows what would happen if something different happened today than was already happening. In other words in his infinite knowledge he knows every single option and every single result ad infinitum.



He knows, if I go this way in life, every single ramification all the way through history. He knows, if I go that way in life, every single ramification all the way down through history. Generation after generation.

The options are infinite and He knows every one. And it is on the basis of that unlimited knowledge that God makes His decisions.

Why don't we always understand? Because we are totally finite. Totally limited. Only God can know all and only God has the power to restrain and allow evil.

Herod wanted to kill baby Jesus and God restrained him. Later in his ministry several times the Jewish leaders wanted to murder Jesus Christ but they couldn't. The Bible says, *Therefore they sought to take Him; but no one laid a hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come.* (John 7:30)

But in the plan of God Jesus' hour finally did come. And then all of the evil and wickedness of man was allowed to run its course and Jesus was crucified. God allowed the evil of men for the express purpose of overruling their intent and using it for His purpose.

Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. That event which was the culmination of all of the hatred and wickedness provided the way for the price of sin to be paid and for us to be saved.

Through the evil of Joseph's brothers Joseph became the material savior of the world and a way was provided for the birth of the nation of Israel.

Through the evil of the people in Jesus' day Jesus became the spiritual Savior of the world and a way was provided for the birth of the church.

*I. Even The Free Acts Of The Human Will Can Be Under The Sovereign Control of Almighty God*

*II. At Times God Restrains The Evil Of The Human Heart*

*III. At Times God Allows The Evil Of The Human Will To Run It's Course*

*IV. Knowing About God's Sovereign Power is The Basis For Our Peace*

I can't think of any more comforting or enlightening thought than the idea that God causes all things to work together for good to those that love Him. And even if my plans fail or even if I slip in my walk with God, I can't frustrate the plan and purpose of God.

There is nothing that I or anybody else can do to keep God from working all things together for good.

Reuben and Jacob lacked that confidence.

**Read verse 29 - 35**

There was going to come a day in Reuben's life when he'd stand before his brother and thank God that his plan had failed. And the same with Jacob. In the most adverse circumstances we can rejoice that God is working out his purpose.

Joseph's brother tore his clothes in anguish. Joseph's father wept for him.

**But verse 36**

Jacob looked at the tunic covered with blood, instead of remembering the promise God had made through the two dreams.

And while he wept uncontrollably saying "I'm going to go to the grave mourning" God was causing good and Joseph was on his way into the court of Pharaoh.

Is God really in control in this world? Yes. Read the book of Revelation and you'll see how it all ends. Satan is thrown in the Lake of Fire and the New Heavens and Earth are created where only righteous dwell.

Is God really in control in our lives? He is. Allow that confidence to give you peace. *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.*