52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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6. Joseph

I. God’s Promise to Abraham

God made a sovereign promise to Abraham, didn’t he, back in Chapter 12? He promised that Abraham would become a great nation and then he later qualified that his promise would be accomplished through his very own son. Well, Genesis, Chapters 21-36, is the story of a God who is faithful to those covenantal promises. And Isaac eventually was born 25 years after the promise. Isaac married Rebecca, an amazing story of God’s sovereignty as he goes with Isaac’s servant to pick out just the right wife for Isaac. They have twin boys, Esau and Jacob, and the story of redemption focuses in on Jacob. Then through another act of sovereignty, Jacob marries two sisters, interesting story, Leah and Rachel, and during that process Jacob was renamed Israel. Between, Jacob, Leah and Rachel and a couple concubines they had twelve sons. These are the patriarchs, these are the twelve tribes of Israel. And then the story of redemption narrows once again on one of those sons, namely Joseph. Genesis Chapters 37-50 tell the story of Joseph. It obviously is much too long of a story to retell in any detail, and I would encourage you all to read it. It’s an amazing story of God’s faithfulness, that’s the overriding aspect of this story, that God is the main character, not Joseph, not Pharaoh, not the brothers, God. And that God is in the business of keeping his covenantal promises to Abraham to give him descendants and to make him a great nation. As we look at the Joseph story, there are many things that are being taught, but one certainly has to be the doctrine of God’s omnipotence. It’s a good word, if you or your children don’t know it, you need to know it. It means God’s power. The doctrine of God’s omnipotence means that God can do whatever he desires to do. And that’s a large part of what the story of Joseph is about, that God is omnipotent and that he can do whatever he desires to do. Another word that we use that is a synonym to “omnipotent” is “sovereign.” That God is sovereign, that God is the all-powerful King over all his creation and he is in control and he can do whatever he pleases to do. If I could state the theme that I would like to unpack this morning, it’s this: God is so powerful and so faithful to his covenantal promises that he will keep those promises even if it means working in the midst of human sin.

II. Story of Joseph

Obviously, I cannot tell in detail the story of Joseph, but let me go through just some of the highlights with you. Joseph was his father’s favorite. I’m often, should I say, amused, at people looking at the patriarchs to learn how to be good fathers. Isaac and Jacob and Joseph are not model fathers in many ways. In some ways they are, with their call to faithfulness and their belief in God. But they played favorites, and they played favorites big time, and Joseph was his father’s favorite. And so Jacob gives his son Joseph his coat of many colors as a sign of his favoritism. So, no duh, guess who hates Joseph? His eleven other brothers.

A. Sold As Slave

And eventually that hatred led them to sell their brother Joseph as a slave and Joseph ends up in Egypt and he’s a slave to the Egyptian captain of the guard, a gentleman by the name of Potiphar. He’s sold by his brothers into slavery, he’s in a foreign land, but
guess what happens? In the midst of his brothers’ sin, God is still sovereign. God is still accomplishing his purposes and God is still keeping his promises. Look at Genesis Chapter 39, please, verses 2-6, “The Lord was with Joseph and he became a successful man and he was in the house of his Egyptian master.” In other words, he was not out in the fields. “His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all to succeed in his hands, 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. From the time that he made Joseph 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 over all that he had in house and field.” So he left all that he had in Joseph’s charge and because of him, Potiphar had no concern about anything but the food.

When there is hurt, or when there is pain, whether it’s in Joseph’s life or in our own life, there is a human tendency to think that God has forgotten Joseph, isn’t there? There’s a tendency to think that God has forgotten us, that somehow because there is injustice, that because there is pain, that somehow God has lost control of the situation. But not only is God in control of Joseph’s situation, and Joseph is in the worst situation than I’ve ever been. I mean, I’ve never been sold by my brothers as a slave in a foreign land. But not only is God in control, he is bringing great blessing in the midst of the pain, in the midst of the hurt, God is bringing great blessings. Sometimes God keeps us from harm, doesn’t he? One of my favorite songs is an Amy Grant song where the line is, “The drunk ran out of gas before he ran out of me.” And the title of the song is “Angels Watching Over Me”. Many, many times God keeps us out of harm, he keeps us out of injustice, he keeps us out of the consequences of other people’s sin, and the problem, in a sense, is that he does such a good job of it that you don’t even know it would have happened. I mean, I can’t wait to see when I’m in heaven, I believe in guardian angels, I want to find out all the things that my angel or my Lord kept me from falling into because I don’t have a clue of the harm that God has kept me from. Well, I do have a clue in a few areas. But other times, God works in the midst of sin. He works in the midst of hurt, like he does with Joseph. And when he does that, he is still sovereign. He is so sovereign, he is so omnipotent, that his plans cannot be thwarted by human sin. That’s the message of the first part of the Joseph story.

B. Potiphar’s Wife
Well, things continue for a while. Joseph is blessed by God, but fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, he was also blessed in appearance. And Potiphar’s wife was unfaithful to her husband and pursued Joseph. We have the great statement of, “How can I sin against God?” Joseph says to Potiphar’s wife. Eventually he does what any man would do and he runs from her allurements and her enticements. If I were writing the story, at this point in Genesis when Joseph refuses to give into her adultery, I would have rewarded Joseph. I would have rewarded him for his sexual purity. I would have rewarded him for running from sin, but I didn’t write this story. And in response to his purity, Potiphar’s wife lies to her husband and has Joseph thrown in jail. Now imagine how Joseph feels at this point. I can almost hear him calling out, “God, isn’t it enough that my brothers sold me into slavery? Isn’t it enough that I’ve been separated from my family?” If you know the end of the story, the first question Joseph asks is, “Is my father still alive?” “Isn’t it enough that I’ve been separated from my dad, my brothers, isn’t that enough? Is this the thanks I get for retaining my purity?” What’s God’s response?
In the midst of the sin of Potiphar’s wife, God says to Joseph, “I am still sovereign. I will accomplish my purposes. I will still keep my promises.” Look at Genesis 39 verses 21 and following, “But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph’s charge because the Lord was with Joseph and whatever Joseph did, the Lord made it succeed.” Sound familiar? God, just like in Potiphar’s household, now in the jail, is still doing the same thing. He is still working in the midst of sin and injustice and blessing Joseph. God is still sovereign.

C. Joseph Interprets Dreams of Baker and Cupbearer
Well, the years go by, we don’t know for sure how many, we know there were multiple, and Joseph is given a chance to get out of jail because two of Pharaoh’s officials were thrown into jail. Eventually both of them have a dream and they find out that Joseph can interpret dreams, so they ask him to come and interpret their dreams. Look at Genesis 40:8. It almost seems like an historical aside comment, but it is actually incredibly important. They said to him, “We have had dreams and there is no one to interpret dreams. And Joseph said to them, “Yeah, I can do that.” That’s not what he said, is it? “Do not interpretations belong to God? Go ahead and tell me your dreams.”

You know from a human standpoint, from a non-God standpoint, someone might be tempted to think that Joseph has the right to be mad at God, but he’s not. He doesn’t even want to get the credit. He doesn’t want to get the glory for being able to interpret dreams. Even after everything that’s happened, Joseph is still intent on giving the glory to God and he is saying, “No, it’s God who interprets dreams. Go ahead and tell me your dreams.”

So they do. He interprets them, his interpretations come true, the baker is executed and the cupbearer is eventually returned to Pharaoh’s service and when he leaves, Joseph just asks one favor, one favor of this guy, Chapter 40, verse 14, “Only remember me when it is well with you and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh. And so get me out of this place. For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit. Just one simple little favor. I interpreted your dreams. I know that God knows what he’s talking about. Will you please get me out of here, I don’t belong here.” And so in great, deep heartfelt appreciation, the cupbearer gets out of jail and immediately forgets all about Joseph.

D. Joseph Interprets Pharaoh’s Dreams
In fact, he forgets him for about two years. But then, we’re in Genesis 41 at this point, then Pharaoh has a couple of dreams. The Cupbearer says, “Oh, I forgot, I forgot. There’s this young Hebrew boy in jail and he can interpret dreams.” Because none of Pharaoh’s magicians or wise men could. So they send for Joseph and he comes and Pharaoh says, “I hear you can interpret dreams,” Genesis 41:16. Joseph answered Pharaoh, “It is not in me. God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.” Guess who’s still in charge? Joseph knows that the power to interpret comes from God. So Pharaoh tells him his two dreams, Joseph says, “Here’s what they mean. There’s going to be seven years of great harvest and then there’s going to be seven years of horrible famine throughout the land of Egypt and beyond.” And then again, it almost reads as a little
postscript, but 41:32, “And the doubling of Pharaoh’s dream means that the thing is fixed by God and God will shortly bring it about.” Who’s in charge not only of Joseph, but Egypt and everything? It’s still God, isn’t it? There’s not a shadow of doubt, despite everything that’s happened to Joseph, who is in charge of the universe? It is still God. God is sovereign. He will accomplish his purposes. He will keep his promises in his way and in his time. So Pharaoh says, “I believe you.” And he appoints Joseph as second in charge, second only to Pharaoh, to collect grain during the seven good years so that the Egyptians would have something to eat during the seven years of famine. Please look at Chapter 41, verses 39 and following, “Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only in regards to the throne will I be greater than you.’ And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.’ 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. And he made him ride in the second chariot. And they called out before him, ‘Bow the knee.’ And thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I am Pharaoh and without your consent, no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.’” What’s going on? Same thing that happened in Potiphar’s house. The same thing that happened in jail. God is still sovereign. And in the midst of human sin, and in the midst of injustice, God is blessing his chosen one. He will accomplish his purposes. He will keep his promises in his way and in his time.

E. Joseph’s Brothers Come to Egypt

So Joseph’s interpretations come true; seven years of harvest, Joseph’s been gathering a fifth of the produce, and then the seven years of famine come. Everybody runs out of food and the famine’s not only in Egypt but extends up into Canaan as well. Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt to buy the grain. They don’t recognize Joseph, they think he’s dead by now most likely. He accuses them of being spies, they go home, they run out of food, they have to come back a second time. Joseph is playing with them, toying with them, trying to teach them a lesson. He accuses them of being thieves, if you don’t know the story, please read it. And you have to understand, these are ten men who are foreigners who have nothing but money, which they can’t eat, and they are speaking to the second in command of Egypt, the breadbasket of the ancient world. This is not a good situation to find yourself in, being accused of being a spy and a thief. Then in Genesis Chapter 45, we get to what I believe is the culmination of the story. “Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by. He cried, ‘Make everyone go out from me.’ So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud so the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?’ But his brothers could not answer him for they were dismayed at his presence.” Oh I’ll bet they were. “Dismayed” doesn’t strike me as the right description of what was really going through their hearts. They were scared. “So Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come near to me, please. Get in my face and look at me.’ And they came near and he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph whom’” (now please watch the pronouns), “whom you sold into Egypt.” Do you think their hearts sank? “And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and yet there are five
years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who set me here, but God.” I do not know of any more amazing statement in all of Scripture as to the amazing sovereign control that God executes over his creation. That even in the midst of horrible sin and horrible injustice, what you and I mean for sin, God in his omnipotence and sovereignty means for good. That’s the primary message of Genesis in this story of Joseph, what humans meant for sin, and it was really bad, wasn’t it? I mean, there’s not a lot of justice in this story. Human justice. But what humans meant for sin, God meant for good.

Eventually, all of Jacob’s family, seventy of them in all, are brought down to Egypt and settle there. And God, through Joseph, and the most unlikely of actors in this story as it were, Pharaoh, is faithful to his promises to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob to preserve them and to make them into a great nation and to bless them. On his deathbed several years later, Jacob is blessing and in a couple of cases cursing, his twelve sons. It’s interesting, in Genesis Chapter 49 when he gets to Joseph what he says, Genesis 49, verses 23 and 24, if there’s any question in Jacob’s mind as to the sovereignty of God, here’s his answer, speaking of Joseph, Jacob says, “The archers bitterly attacked him, shot at him, and harassed him severely.” That’s Jacob’s evaluation of his son’s life, and it was true, wasn’t it? Joseph was under attack. “Yet his bow remained unmoved, his arms were made agile by the hands of the mighty One of Jacob.” Jacob is acknowledging all the sin and all turmoil that Joseph has to deal with in his life, and yet in his blessing says, “Your hand wasn’t moved, you stayed strong. Not because you’re a stoic. Not because you’ve got that kind of personality, but because God, what were the words? “Because God made your hands agile. It is God who is in control of your life and it is God who is doing his work in the midst of sin.” Amazing statement!

Eventually Jacob dies, Joseph’s brothers become nervous. “Ah, Dad’s gone now, now we’re going to get it.” There’s a great story line in this account about the power of guilt. And whenever you talk about Joseph’s brothers, you are seeing guilt at work. They were sure now that Joseph was going to get them, so they said, “Let’s lie. Let’s say Dad said you won’t do anything.” And in Chapter 50, verse 20, Joseph says, “As for you, you meant evil against me.” He’s not excusing his brothers at all, is he? “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive.” Even in the midst of all the injustice, all the pain, all the hurt, all the sin, Joseph still believes that God is sovereign over all, willing and able to keep his promises.

**III. What Do We Learn**

That’s the story of Joseph. What do we learn? Well, there are many, many, many things in this story of Joseph from which we can learn. But there are three that I want to emphasize.

**A. God is Omnipotent**

Number one: God is omnipotent. God is sovereign. God can do anything he jolly well pleases. He is the King over all. If you want a memory verse, especially for your children, Psalm 115:3, “God does all that he pleases.” If that doesn’t come through in this story, I don’t know what does, because there’s a lot of sin here, isn’t there? There’s a
lot of injustice. There are a lot of consequences, and yet no matter where Joseph found himself, as far as we know, he refused to curse God and die. He constantly gave God the credit, gave God the glory. And God was at work keeping his promise to Abraham by blessing Joseph wherever he went and at the end of the day, using Joseph and Pharaoh to accomplish his purposes to keep his promises. God is indeed omnipotent. He is indeed sovereign.

B. God Keeps His Promises
Secondly, God’s sovereignty allows him to keep his promises, even in the midst of human sin. I think it’s easy to understand or to think about God’s sovereignty when everything is good. It’s something else when things are bad. It’s something else when things are difficult. But the story of Joseph shows us that even in the bleakest of times, when we are engulfed by sin and its consequences, God is in control. When sin, when life seems out of control, faith says that God is in control. That is one of the promises that God asks us to believe about himself. Now, I’ve got to give two quick qualifications here. One: God does not do evil. Do you believe that? God does not do evil. He did not make Joseph’s brothers sell him into captivity. He did not make Potiphar’s wife lie. This is perhaps nowhere stated more strongly than in Job. After all the times that Job insisted he was righteous, and eventually accused God of sinning. And Elihu can’t stand it any longer and he speaks in Job 34, starting at verse 10, Elihu says, “Therefore hear me, you men of understanding.” And that is a very sarcastic phrase. “Far be it from God that he should do wickedness and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. For according to the work of a man, God will repay him, and according to a man’s ways, God will make it befall him. Of a truth God will not, God will not do wickedly and the Almighty will not pervert justice.” There are some people in their theological system that think that God does evil. He does not do evil. And yet, qualification number two: God holds the sinful party responsible. Joseph’s brothers were responsible for their sin. Even Judas was responsible for his sin, wasn’t he? Judas was the fulfillment of prophecy.

He accomplished what was written about him. And yet what does Jesus say of Judas, Matthew 26:24, “The Son of Man” (Jesus), “goes as is written of him. Prophecy is being fulfilled. But woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” Joseph’s brothers, Judas, are responsible for their sins. But with those two qualifications to the side, please understand that God is so powerful, he is so wise, that he can work in the midst of human sin to accomplish his purposes. That is what the affirmations in Genesis 45 and in Genesis 50 are all about, “You meant it for evil. God meant it for good.” This is nowhere more clearly stated in the New Testament than in Romans 8:28-29. Do not ever quote 8:28 without quoting 29 at the same time, please. Paul tells the Roman church that we know that for those who love God, in other words, this is not a promise for anyone. This is not a promise for non-believers, despite some claim that God owes them. God doesn’t owe them squat. “But for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose.” But the key is to understand who defines the word “good”. And Paul says, “Let me define it in verse 29. ‘For those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.’ That’s good. ‘And those whom he predestined, he called, he justified and he glorified.” Nothing happens that God has decreed should not happen. That’s another way to look at the doctrine of sovereignty. God never loses control. Our actions of sin never thwart what God wants to accomplish.
And God is so sovereign, and he is so in control that he has promised us that no matter what happens, he is at work in the midst to accomplish his good and his good is that you look like his Son, Jesus Christ. His good is not the cessation of pain. His good is not “name it and claim it.” His good is that we be conformed to the image of his Son so that someday we will be glorified and when we see him, we will look like him, as John says in 1 John 3, because we will see him face to face. God’s sovereignty allows him to keep his promises even in the midst of sin. Even in the midst of sin, God is at work in me and in you, making us look like his Son.

C. We Are Called To Faith

Number three: what did we learn from the Joseph story? Again, the word is not used, but it is written between every line of the story, that you and I are called to faith. That you and I are called to believe in the promises of God. That you and I are called to confess that when life seems out of control, faith says God is in control. Like Joseph we are called to trust in God, to look beyond the immediate and believe that God is who he says he is and that he will do what he says he will do. And God has said, “I will reward righteousness. I will punish wickedness,” and you and I are called to believe that in his way and in his time that is exactly what he will do. The cool thing in this is that we don’t have to understand it at all. God does not call us to understand everything. He simply calls us to believe everything. Now fortunately, we don’t have to put our brains on a shelf. Christians can be thinking people. But what pleases God at the innermost part of his being is not that you and I understand him, but what pleases God is that you and I trust him, believe in him, especially in the difficult times of life. Isaiah 55, verses 8 and 9, “‘For my thoughts,’ God says, ‘are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.’” I can think of no better example of this truth than this week. Did God put a desire into my heart to preach a series on 52 Major Events of the Bible and time it so I hit the Joseph story this Sunday? Did God put it in my heart not to talk about the sin theology which I was originally going to do, and changed my heart to say, “No, talk about my sovereignty this week”? How can God get a preacher to preach on what he wants him to preach starting five or six weeks earlier, and then the police do what they do this week, and then Becky Haffner going into Holy Family this week, and Karen Krotzer’s brother dies this week. How does God do that? Do you know what? I don’t have the foggiest idea. I don’t have any idea how he does that. But I rejoice that he does it. I rejoice that he does it. And I look back at decisions I think that I make, or Steve makes, we look back and we see all along. Anna Ragland died this week. What a week to encourage us in the life of a faithful saint. I mean, how does he do that? I don’t know. I don’t have to know because without faith it is impossible to please God, not without a complete understanding of the sovereign mind of God. Because frankly, if I could understand God’s mind, I would not worship him. Because I do not worship that which is equal. I only worship that which is greater, infinitely greater.

The story of Joseph is not the greatest injustice in history. And it is not the greatest example of God’s sovereign work in the midst of human sin, is it? This week is not the greatest story of injustice in the history of the world. God worked in the midst of human sin when they killed his perfect Son. That is the greatest injustice that has ever been perpetrated in all of reality. And if God can work in the midst of that kind of depravity and in that kind of sin, he can work in the midst of your life and mine. The
question of Joseph is simply: Do you believe that God is sovereign? That’s the question. Do you believe with all your heart, “Oh God, help my unbelief, but I believe.” Do you believe that God is sovereign? Do you believe that when your life seems out of control that God is in control? This is the faith that God asks of us. This is the faith that God asked of Abraham, and this is the faith that pleases the God of the universe. Do you believe that He is sovereign?

Let’s pray: Father, our minds bend and snap at the events of this week. It is simply beyond our minds which came from dust and will return to dust how a sovereign God can be at work in the way that you are in the midst of my sin, and Steve’s sin, and the sin of us who are here. But, Father, we believe with all of our hearts that you are a sovereign God who loves his creation and is at work in his creation accomplishing your purposes, keeping your promises, in your way and in your time. We believe, God, help our unbelief. Amen.