

Can you trust a God who allows evil and suffering to exist? Can you trust a God who allows you and those you love to suffer? That's the question we're asking this month in this series on suffering. So far we've answered in two ways.

First, yes, you can, and you must, because that's the only God there is. Denying the existence of God because of the presence of evil and suffering doesn't help. It only makes matters worse because without God you not only have no way to make any sense out of evil and suffering, you have no hope that it will ever end.

And second, yes you can trust God because He not only allows evil and suffering, He personally entered into it, sending His own Son as one of us to endure ultimate suffering in our place, and to triumph over evil and suffering and sin and death so that we can be freed from it forever.

This morning we add a third answer, namely, yes you can trust a God who allows evil and suffering to exist, you can trust a God who allows you and those you love to suffer, *because* at work for good through all evil and suffering is the invisible hand of providence.

You say, "Besides a city in Rhode Island, what's "providence"? The Westminster Confession of Faith defines it this way: "God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, *to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy*" (5, i).

God didn't just create the universe and walk away; He upholds, directs, disposes, governs all of it – every creature, every action, everything, every day – to the fulfillment of His purposes.

Case in point: **Joseph**.

Today I want to tell you the Joseph story and then consider some of the implications of it for trusting God in our suffering. If you want to follow along, the story of Joseph is found in Genesis 37-50.

Long, long ago, in the land of Canaan, there was a boy named Joseph. Joseph was the 11<sup>th</sup> of 12 sons, not the youngest but the favorite of his aging father Jacob. To show his affection for Joseph, Jacob had given him a special coat. It's not clear from the Hebrew word whether the coat was *many-colored* or *long-sleeved* or *full length*, but in either case it was fancy, excessive, elaborate; and it distinguished Joseph as his daddy's favorite. And for this his brothers *hated him* and could not even speak to him on friendly terms (37:4).

When Joseph was 17 years old he had two dreams. In the first, they were all binding sheaves in the field and his sheaf rose up and stood erect and the other sheaves gathered around and bowed down to his. In the second, the sun and the moon and 11 stars were all bowing down to him. When they heard these fanciful dreams, all his brothers and even his father rebuked him and mocked him saying, "*What? Are you actually going to rule over us?*" And his brothers were jealous of him and hated him even more.

Soon the day came when they could vent their rage against their dreamer-brother. They were out pasturing the flocks in Shechem and Jacob sent Joseph to check on them. They see him coming in the distance and say in **37:19-20**, *“Here comes this dreamer! Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, ‘A wild beast devoured him.’ Then let us see what will become of his dreams.”*

Reuben, the oldest, who would surely give an account, talked them out of it – *“No, let’s not take his life, just throw him into a pit”* – intending to rescue him later and restore him to his father. So when Joseph arrives they strip him of his special coat and throw him into the pit.

While they’re having lunch, another more lucrative opportunity presents itself. They see the dust cloud of a traveling caravan of Midianite merchants on their way to Egypt. And Judah pipes up, *“What profit is it for us to kill our brother, let’s sell him.”* So they pulled him out of the pit and sold him for 20 shekels of silver, and they took his special coat, soaked it in animal blood, brought it back home to their father and said, *“This is all we found, looks like he was devoured by a wild animal.”*

And they think that is the end of that.

Jacob was heartbroken. Inconsolable. Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt as a slave to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s body guard. There Joseph, remarkably, submits to the invisible hand of providence and serves his master faithfully. In fact, he rises with trust and influence over all Potiphar’s household. He was so diligent and so trustworthy, Potiphar entrusted everything to his care. And the narrator tells us in **39:2-5** that the Lord was with Joseph and caused him to prosper and even blessed Potiphar’s house on account of him.

And you would think, “Finally, Joseph’s virtuous character will pay off, God will get him out of here and give this young innocent man the life he deserves. But Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And Potiphar’s wife took a likin’ to him and tried to seduce him. And one day she seized him and tried to force him to sleep with her, but he wisely did what Paul said in **1 Cor.6:18** we should all do, *“Flee immorality.”* He escaped from her grasp leaving his coat in her hands.

Well a woman so spurned turns vicious and she lied and said *he* was the one assaulting *her*. So Joseph, who had done nothing wrong, was put in prison.

And in prison, totally unaware of why these bad things were happening to him, totally in the dark to what God was doing in all his misfortune and misery, Joseph again serves faithfully and rises with trust and influence to become the jailer’s right hand man in charge of everything and everyone in the jail.

Then one day Pharaoh’s butler and baker were thrown into the jail. And they each had a dream. And Joseph correctly interpreted their dreams – the baker was killed and the butler was restored to his position as Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer. Joseph’s only request was that he remember him and speak well of him to Pharaoh. But the butler forgot all about Joseph. For two years. Until Pharaoh had a dream. And Pharaoh told his dreams to all his cabinet and all his counselors and no one could interpret them. And then the butler remembered Joseph and Joseph was brought up out of the dungeon and bathed and shaved and dressed up and presented to Pharaoh to hear and interpret his dreams. Seven fat cows followed and devoured by seven lean cows. And seven full ears of corn followed and

devoured by seven thin ears. What did it mean? There would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of severe famine.

Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph's interpretation of the dream and with the wisdom of his strategy for dealing with the famine, that he put him in charge of everything; made him Vice-Pharaoh of Egypt. In **41:39** he says to him, "*Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you....See I have set you over all the land of Egypt.*" And **vs.46** notes, Joseph was 30 years old at this point. 13 years as a slave and a prisoner.

For 7 years he stored up grain. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of famine, guess what happened? His brothers got hungry. Word spread that there was grain in Egypt. And they came. And though they couldn't recognize him, they met this wise ruler over all of Egypt who preempted starvation by gathering huge reserves during the years of plenty. And finally it happened, **42:6** says they "*bowed down to him with their faces to the ground.*"

Joseph would go on to disclose himself to them, give them grain, and eventually invite them to live in Egypt, and Jacob brought the whole family and they settled in Goshen and Joseph provided all their needs and they all lived happily ever after – Jacob to a ripe old age of 147, Joseph to 110 – relationships restored, dreams fulfilled, just not the way anyone in a million years would ever have imagined.

A classic example of the providence of God at work.

Now what can we learn from the story of Joseph. So much. This is a preacher's gold-mine, so please know how much self-restraint I'm exercising this morning when I say I have but three points. Three thoughts that I think are relevant for us to think about as we think about our own suffering today.

**1. In this life, you can't long for your dreams to come true and then complain about *how* they come true.**

You can't boast of all the wonderful things God has planned for your life and then belly-ache about how He it makes those things reality in your life.

Hated, betrayed, and sold by his own brothers, Joseph spent 13 years in slavery and prison, 22 years total of being separated from his family, 93 years of his life in a foreign land not his home. Probably not the ideal life he imagined he would have when he dared to share his dreams. But we would be pretty short-sighted if we respond as we typically do when bad things happen to us or others and say, "How unfortunate, what a tragedy." That would be like saying, "Poor Joseph, what a terrific shepherd he would have made back in Canaan. He had such potential," as if his hardship and suffering ruined his life.

What if the circumstances in your life that you see only as a cruel joke or a rude interruption or an inconvenience to your perfectly planned out life are in fact the very circumstances that will guarantee that your life actually counts for something? What if the misfortune and misery that's happening in your life isn't *keeping you* from fulfilling God's perfect plan for your life, it's *enabling you* to; it *is* God's perfect plan for your life. Or to ask it another way, which would you rather be: safe and bored tending sheep in Canaan, or scared, lonely, mistreated, and profoundly useful in Egypt? I mean frankly, Joseph was mistreated either way, right?

We all have this picture of an ideal life. We all have ideas about how we expect things to go and how we expect things to turn out. And whenever something comes along that appears contrary to that picture – cancer, a miscarriage, a paralyzing injury, a layoff, a divorce, a death in the family – we assume the deal's off, that's it, there's no way our ideal can ever be realized now, our whole life has been derailed, Plan B is the best we have left. That's a faulty assumption. How do you know whether the bad things that happen are *preventing* the dream or *fulfilling* it? You don't.

So if nothing else, we should learn from the Joseph story that there's no possible way to predict *how* God will accomplish His purposes in our lives, only *that* He will, but we should *never* assume that He will do so in a way that excludes suffering.

I remember several years ago when Andrew broke his arm, the doctor had to reset the bone. To reset a bone, you want the person to be as relaxed as possible. So the doctor didn't announce it: "Okay Andrew, listen very carefully. I'm going to reset your bone now. This is going to hurt like crazy. But I need you to stay perfectly relaxed. Are you ready? 1, 2, 3, ahhh!" No. That would defeat the purpose. Instead, he started talking about something totally unrelated and got Andrew distracted and then "snap" reset the bone before he even knew what hit him.

That's not unlike how God does His work in our lives. He doesn't announce what's coming because He knows that wouldn't make it any easier. If God told you *how* He was going to make you more like Jesus, or *how* He was going to make you more compassionate and patient, or *how* He was going to make you a better father, or *how* He was going to save your marriage, would that really make it easier for you to endure the process? I don't think so. And apparently He doesn't either.

So lesson number 1 from the story of Joseph:

If you like how the story *ends*, you gotta live with how it *unfolds*. Will pain be involved? Probably, but that's the deal.

A few weeks ago I stumbled across a quote that I loved, and when I found out it was from the Heidelberg Catechism, I looked it up. I read it all the way through to find the quote:

**Question 26:** What believest thou when thou sayest, "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth"?

**Answer:** That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (who of nothing made heaven and earth, with all that is in them; who likewise upholds and governs the same by his eternal counsel and providence) is for the sake of Christ his Son, my God and my Father; on whom I rely so entirely, that I have no doubt, but he will provide me with all things necessary for soul and body, and further, that he will make whatever evils he sends upon me in this valley of tears turn out to my advantage; for he is able to do it, being Almighty God, and willing to do it, being a faithful Father."

What do *you* mean when you say, "I believe in God?" If not all that, why do you believe in Him at all? If you can believe God for the fulfillment of the dream, you can trust him through this valley of tears it takes to get there.

## 2. You have to affirm God's sovereignty in your suffering.

To take God out of the equation and say, "God has nothing to do with this, this isn't His fault; things just happen sometimes, this is just evil people being evil," isn't true, and it isn't helpful. Nor will it do to say, "God permitted this, or God allowed this, but this wasn't really His will." There's no hope in that. How does that comfort you? No. God is absolutely sovereign over all things. Believe it. Cling to it. That's the most precious thing you've got.

Just listen to how Joseph describes all these events to his brothers. Two passages: Gen. 45:5 and 50:20. These are two most important verses in the story, and you should circle them in your Bible and refer to them often: **45:5** and **50:20**.

In **Gen.45**, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. Notice what he said. **READ 45:3-8**.

Who sent Joseph to Egypt? God. "Don't be dismayed, God sent me here not you! This was His doing not yours. Why? **Vs.5** – *"To preserve life.* **Vs.7** – *"To preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance."*

**God** sent me here. You weren't in control of me, God was. This wasn't chance or coincidence or fate or bad luck or good luck, this was the sovereign will and act of God.

And how ironic, how wonderfully ironic! Because when they sold him to the caravan they were utterly oblivious to what was really happening. They thought they were getting rid of him; they thought they were destroying the dreamer; they were really fulfilling his dreams! How often does God work that way? He takes the very sins of the destroyers and makes them the means of the destroyers' deliverance.

God sent me here not you.

And there's more to the story. Listen to the commentary in **Ps.105:16**. **Vs.17** repeats what Joseph said, *"God sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. But don't miss vs.16 – "And He called for a famine upon the land; He broke the whole staff of bread."* What is that saying? God not only sent Joseph, God sent the famine!

So it won't do to say "God saw that the devil was about to do something evil, or God saw that a horrible famine was coming by some freak of nature, and so He graciously took steps to insure that His people would survive the famine by sending Joseph to Egypt." That's how we normally think, but that's not what the Bible says. The Bible says God sent the famine *and* God sent Joseph.

You say, "Wait a minute, God sends famines?" Yes, and floods and fires and plagues and fortune and misfortune and death and life. Listen to these verses:

**Isa.45:6** – *"I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things."*

**Lam.3:37** – *"Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?"*

So of course, God sent the famine.

And I'll show you why in a minute, but for now just let it sink in. These circumstances were not evil spiraling out of control and God scrambling to minimize the damage or make the most of a bad situation. These circumstances were ordained and orchestrated by God and *believing*

*that* about the circumstances of *your* life is the only way to have any hope or comfort in your suffering. Because if God is helpless, where does that leave you? If God is a victim, how much more are you?

**Eph.1:11** says “*God works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.*” God works all things after the counsel of His will!

What does that mean? Practically it means this: If it wasn't God's will it wouldn't have happened, so if it happened, it's according to the good pleasure and kind intention and counsel of His will for your good and His glory. And if there was a better way to accomplish all His good pleasure He would have done it the better way because God does all things well, which I take to mean, the very best way.

God is not a spectator in your life, mouth gagged and hands tied, wishing things were different but unable to do anything about it. God is the sovereign Lord of your life decreeing whatsoever comes to pass, providentially orchestrating everything according to His perfect plan, weaving all things together for good, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.

God sent Joseph. God sent the famine. The invisible hand of providence was orchestrating the whole thing. That's Gen.45.

Now look at **Gen.50**.

After Jacob died, the brothers were afraid that now perhaps Joseph will retaliate. But what does he say to them? **READ vs.19-20.**

What was going on in Joseph's life? *Concurrence* is what theologians call it. Two parallel and opposite intentions operating concurrently. “You meant it for evil; God meant it for good.” Let that sink in too.

Notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, “You meant it for evil, but God intervened and turned it to good.” That's how we think things work, but again that's not what the Bible says. Nor does he say, “God intended to bring me down to Egypt with first-class treatment all the way, but you guys fouled everything up and cost me 13 wasted years as a slave and prisoner. No. He says, “You had one set of intentions in all this and God had another set of intentions in all this, and both things were happening simultaneously. In the same actions – your sinful actions – that you meant for evil, God meant for good.

That's providence. That's the invisible hand of God at work in our world, and He's working like that in every circumstance of each of our lives every single day. Now you tell me, “Are you going to throw that out? That's your life preserver. That's your parachute.

In his excellent book *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, D.A. Carson writes, “The mystery of providence defies our attempt to tame it by reason. I do not mean that it is illogical. I mean that we do not know enough to be able to unpack it and domesticate it.” (201)

I don't understand God's providence either. I don't understand how God can be sovereign over all things, including sin and evil, without becoming in some way responsible for it. But I don't

have to understand it to benefit from it. I don't understand how heat pumps work either, but I'm glad it works.

Only by embracing and treasuring and trusting in the sovereignty of God (who is also perfectly loving, good, wise, and holy) can you find any comfort in your suffering, because if God is not sovereign then you have no assurance that suffering is not random or gratuitous or spiraling out of control. But because God is sovereign over all things, including evil and sin and suffering, you can know that your suffering is divinely appointed and purposeful and ultimately beneficial because whatever the intentions of others may be in any set of actions, the intentions of God are always for good. God literally works all things together for good.

Now here's why God sent the famine, and here's my third point.

### **3. You have to know that there's always a bigger picture than you can see. Your story and your suffering is always but a small part of a bigger whole.**

The 'Joseph' story is not even a valid title for Gen.37-50. It's not about Joseph. It's actually about Jacob. It's the Jacob narrative, not the Joseph narrative. **Look at 37:1-2.**

"These are the records of the generations of *Jacob*. This is the story of Jacob. Joseph plays a prominent role in the story, but the story is really about Jacob and how God kept Jacob and his descendants alive, number 1, and how God got them to Egypt, number 2.

And why are those two things important? Again, because there's a bigger story unfolding here than the story of Joseph or Jacob.

Turn back to **Gen.15**. In Gen.15, God made a covenant with Abram.

Actually, in chapter 12, He had already declared His intentions. **12:1** - "*Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*" By sovereign grace owing to nothing in Abram, God chose Abram of Ur to be the father of a nation, the people from whom the Savior of the world would come and all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

In chapter 15 God seals the deal with a covenant ritual – cutting animals in half and walking between them, which to my understanding was a way to say, "*If I don't keep my end of the bargain, may this be what happens to me.*" And Abram was asleep, so God was really swearing to Himself to keep this covenant.

But notice what God speaks to Abram in **vs.13**.

**READ Gen. 15:13-16.**

This is a prophecy about Israel's slavery in Egypt. So the plan all the way back with Abraham was for them to be in Egypt. How did God get them there? He sent a famine. How did they survive that famine? He sent Joseph ahead of them to store up grain.

And notice a couple of interesting items here.

First that they would be in Egypt 400 years. Do you see that? Abram, your descendants will be My chosen people, and as such I want them to begin with 400 years of slavery and oppression. What a deal right? God is making a covenant, singling out Abram's descendants as His special, chosen, privileged people, holy nation, and how would their relationship with God begin? With 400 years of affliction. Does that put **Acts 14:22** in perspective, *"through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."* Does that put your affliction in perspective? That's the pattern. That's the plan for all of us!

Second, notice the reason *why* they were to be in Egypt for 400 years? *"For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."*

Get a load of that. God left Israel in Egypt for 400 years so that when Joshua entered the promised land and began the conquest, destroying city after city, it would make sense, it would be clear that God's judgment upon the inhabitants of Canaan was long overdue and perfectly just.

But that's not the whole picture either. Turn to the end. **Gen.49**. Jacob's about to die so he gathers all 12 sons together to bless them. Notice what he says to Judah. **READ vs.8-10**. Who is this lion, this ruler, from whom the scepter shall not depart? Jesus.

So put all that together, here's what you get. No fancy coat...no jealous brothers, no vice-president in Egypt to interpret Pharaoh's dream, no grain to feed Jacob's family during the famine, no conquest of the Promised Land, no fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, no Lion from the tribe of Judah, no Savior to die for your sins.

It's not about Joseph. It's about Jesus. The Joseph story is about God keeping His promise to redeem a people for His name by sending Jesus to save us from our sins and bring blessing to all the nations of the world. Everything in Joseph's life fit within that bigger picture, and I'm convinced that everything in your life does too.

Your story and your suffering is just as important as Joseph's. God is all about one thing and that is glorifying His name by redeeming sinners through faith in Jesus Christ. And everything in your life fits within that somehow, somewhere. No extra pieces, no unnecessary parts, every one fits.

It's like a tapestry. Corrie Ten Boom is credited with the analogy of the carpet or rug. We're looking up at it from underneath. Not too pretty on the bottom. All we see are random threads of various colors running this way and that with no discernable pattern; it's a mess; everything seems chaotic, completely arbitrary and pointless. But God is working on the other side and from above it's obvious what's going on and how everything fits and it's beautiful. God is creating a masterpiece, working wonders so marvelous that if we could see them we would fall on our faces in worship and never doubt Him again.

John Sinclair gave me this quote by George MacDonald. "There are tender-hearted people who object to the whole scheme of creation; they would neither have force used nor pain suffered; they talk as if kindness could do everything, even where it is not felt. Millions of human beings but for suffering would never develop an atom of affection. The man who would spare due suffering is not wise. It is folly to conclude a thing ought not to be done because it hurts. There are powers to be born, creations to be perfected, sinners to be redeemed, through the ministry of pain that could be born, perfected, redeemed in no other way.

Will there be pain in your life? Yes. Suffering? Yes. Does that make God less good? I hope you learn from the story of Joseph that the answer is clearly and emphatically, No. God is good, and all the circumstances of your life He intends for good or they wouldn't be.

God's in control, not evil. Providence is at work, not fate or chance. Give God some credit, He knows what He's doing. Trust and wait and see. Good things are coming for those who love Christ and are called according to His purpose. Is that you? Turn to Him and be saved – that's the ultimate good that God wills for your life.

Let's pray.