

“Is God Sovereign?”
Genesis 45–50
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If it wasn't for this family called Briarwood Presbyterian Church, I know I would never have been in Atlanta planting the church we planted and having the fruit that we've experienced. I have stood on the shoulders of this church throughout its years, been friends with both of your previous pastors and have appreciated them both so much. So, it is a treat and a privilege to be here with you. I would like to say a few things to prepare us for the text.

The title of my message is simply “Is God Sovereign?” We could say, “let's agree on yes, and then we can close this down real early.” We don't have to say anything more, because I believe if I were to take a show of hands here in this congregation it would be hard to find a hand that was not raised, so why preach on it? I think we need to answer a few questions about it. The first question being what is meant by sovereignty? The reality is sovereignty is putting together two things – God's power and His authority. So, do we believe He's absolutely sovereign meaning He's sovereign over everything without limitation, which is what absolute means? It means then that He is sovereign over good and bad things, little and large things, and His sovereignty include man's eternal destiny. The reality is, if He's not absolutely sovereign, He's not sovereign. So, we have to put absolute in there to know it's without limit if we're going to say He is sovereign.

Here's the second question; What difference does it really make if He's not sovereign or He is, what does it really matter? Certainly, it matters. I was experiencing the reality of that while preparing this message to give just a short time back to my church where I'm full-time staff running a ministry of called Life on Life. During this preparation I was leaving to meet the guys who are editing the book that I have been writing, and I had been working on this book for over five years. Here's the oddity. I do not use a computer. I do not have email so I handwrite in pencil everything that I am writing. The night before, I was leaving for this meeting, I had a little cloth bag that was large enough for me to sit an inch and a half of paper to two inches in the very bottom of this bag. That night I filled up tumbler with water to put in my bag and would have sworn there was no way for water to get out but the spout on it has a way of looking closed when it's really open. After filling it with water, I didn't realize that when I put it back on, the spout was open. I dropped it on top of my book and all of the water came out without me knowing it through the night. The next morning, after getting ready I grabbed my bag and my wife, Carol happened to be in the room my bag was in and she said to me “Randy, there's water pouring out of your bag.” That 20 ounces tumbler had spilled all over that book and when water hits pencil it's gone.

I have been studying this text and this message on the sovereignty of God – do you believe He's sovereign? And my first response, without thought was “no, no” thinking this is the worst thing that could ever happen. Then this hit my mind, ‘only because I've been studying it all week for sure, so wait is God's sovereign? Of course He is and I believe that.’ And what I knew I hadn't considered until I started studying the text again, not this text, but just the subject matter. All of a sudden there was a rest and peace that came to me. I also thought “I'm going to lose it all but five years, whatever. That's a small thing in the problems of this world.” But it made all the difference in the world to me. How many of us as real Christians who believe the authority of God's Word, lose peace of mind day in and day out, where we lose that abundance that Jesus

promised in John 10 simply because we know our God, but we don't know Him as a sovereign God. We don't embrace Him as such. So it makes a lot of difference to know Him as sovereign.

Now that we've defined sovereignty, the third question is do you believe God is absolutely sovereign? Most likely, most of us probably put some limits on that. I had a lady come up to me after I gave this message at our church at Perimeter, and she says, "I have a question for you. I've just finished a book that's been the hardest book I've ever read in my life, and it's the story of the Holocaust. Are you, are you telling me that our loving God is absolutely sovereign, therefore sovereign over all things, therefore, sovereign over the Holocaust? You're going to tell me that's our God?" I will come back to what I said to her later but I realized here was a woman who I bet would say she believes in the sovereignty of God, but couldn't believe He was sovereign over that. When we put limitations, we fail to believe He is absolutely sovereign, which means we really question His sovereignty.

Now I want to say a word to the young people; you define that as you want to define it, but I'd ask you to really pay attention to this because this can be a game changer. This can change the way you see life forever if you embrace what God's Word teaches about His sovereignty. Don't be misled to think you can be a Christian but don't have to believe in absolutes. No, you have to believe it, not in order to become a Christian. I'm not saying that but if you're going to benefit from the fruit of what God gives us as His people knowing His Word you are missing so much.

Those who are reading this trying to figure out what the Christian faith is about, pay attention carefully because you're going to see something so rich, so good, so special that you don't want to miss this. You want to have this. You want to have a relationship with a God that you say 'He is absolutely sovereign and I believe.' Get ready for some peace of mind that you would never know in life. Get ready for some abundance that so many Christians are missing. So, take note for this is an important subject matter for sure.

Our text for this study has two redemptive, which means salvation, stories. There are two stories being told here, and I'm going to call those stories the greater story and the lesser story. The greater redemptive story is God's sovereign redemptive plan for man's eternal salvation. So, it's the bigger Gospel story that's found from Old Testament through the New Testament. The Gospel is everywhere. It's the good work of God on our behalf and we're going to see how His sovereignty plays a such a role in this story. Then we'll look at the lesser redemptive story which is God's sovereign, redemptive plan for man's (meaning mankind – men and women) personal relationships and life circumstances. From the text, we'll zero in on the character of this particular episode that we're looking at in the whole story of a man who's called Joseph. When I say lesser, I don't mean not important. It's just it's not the magnitude for one is going to impact Israel and the church at large, and one is going to impact individuals such as you and me.

Here is the overview. There's a man named Jacob who comes from Abraham, then Isaac then Jacob. Jacob is a very important figure in Scripture. He has many sons. His youngest son is 17 years of age. His name is Joseph. His brothers are very jealous of Joseph because his father loves Joseph in a way that he hasn't shown love to his other children. Joseph is the special last one and so the jealous brothers have a plot against him. They don't kill him. They almost did but they put him up for sale and he is sold to Ishmaelites who end up going into Egypt and in Egypt they sell Joseph to a man named Potiphar, who is an Egyptian officer. He sees how quality a man Joseph is in so many respects so he puts him over all of his personal possessions in his home and so forth. Potiphar's wife gets attracted to Joseph and makes an advance toward him that he

pushed it away so much he fled. When that happened, she came up with a lie and told her husband Joseph tried to sexually assault her, so he threw him in prison.

Joseph spent many years in prison and Potiphar had thrown others in prison that were pretty well known. In fact, the cup bearer of Pharaoh himself had come to odds with Pharaoh and was thrown in prison. While Joseph is in prison, he interprets a dream the cup bearer has and the cup bearer gets released as he goes back to work for Pharaoh but as he's leaving, Joseph says to the cup bearer "Would you please give a good word for me for I'd like to get out of here." He forgets but then Pharaoh has a big dream, and he's so concerned about the dream, knowing what it means the cup bearer says 'Hey, there's a guy in prison where I was, and he interpreted in my dream, he may interpret yours.' Pharaoh releases Joseph and Joseph interprets the dream. It's such an amazing interpretation that Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge over all his possessions and they put him over all of Egypt. That's a lot in a very quick time and things began to prosper. Through the texts we will go over you will hear over and over – The Lord was with him.

Pharaoh's dream had to do with a big famine coming. Joseph told him he needed to put all of his stuff together – the abundance, put it away and store it up, and all the countries will come to us because you're going to be the only one that has what everyone needs. That's what happened. These many, many years later, here comes those brothers and who do they face but their younger brother but they don't they don't recognize it, but Joseph recognizes them and this is where our text begins.

Genesis 45:4-8a says [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."*

Joseph believed in the sovereignty of God. Now, in Genesis 46 and following Jacob and family move to Egypt. Jacob dies while he's there and the brothers get scared. They know their dad was there protecting them but now that he's gone, they believe that Joseph is going to pay them back for what they did to him. Now we pick up in Genesis 50, my last reading of the text.

Genesis 50:18-21 says [18] *His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." [19] But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? [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. [21] So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.*

So let's look at the greater redemptive story that we find here. What if there was no Joseph in the plot? The whole thing is that never happens. All of this never takes place. There's no Israelites in Egypt. There would be no bondage in Egypt. There would be no exodus from Egypt in time to come. There would not be a Passover lamb that would have been introduced. There would not be a Promised Land that was told to be coming. Think about this. There would be no pointing of God's people to the Lamb of God or to the promise that was for their future. All that was wrapped up in this bigger redemptive story that's going to ultimately bring the church as we know it today out of Israel. The bigger redemptive story is that it took all these things that were horrible for Joseph to happen. He was in prison for many years and the way he suffered and felt betrayed by his brothers that sell him away to slavery. Yet Joseph believed in the greater

redemptive story ultimately because he tells of it here as he interprets the dreams and explains to his brothers what's happened.

There's the lesser redemptive story. This is Joseph's story but you need to think about your story as we go through Joseph's, because you have a redemptive story as well. In this particular one of Joseph, I think there are three very important insights about the sovereignty of God. The first one is God is sovereign, therefore, no relationship or life circumstance is the result of chance. They are all God authored relationships, life circumstances, whether it be the brothers, the Ishmaelites, Potiphar's wife, the cup bearer, whether it be Pharaoh himself. All of those things were under the sovereignty of God to form a plan that could never have been understood as it began to take shape. Nobody could understand that.

We have our Westminster Confession of Faith, which is one of the most, in my opinion, outstanding writings used to help us understand God's Word. In chapter 3, it's says, "God from all eternity, did by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass." Briarwood strongly believes that and rightly so. In his book, Chosen by God, R.C. Sproul makes an important statement that I think is insightful. Sproul says, "To say that God foreordains all that comes to pass is simply to say that God is sovereign over His entire creation. If something could come to pass apart from His sovereign permission, then that which came to pass would frustrate His sovereignty. If God refused to permit something to happen and it happened anyway, then whatever caused it to happen would have more authority and power than God Himself. If there is any part of creation outside of God's sovereignty, then God is simply not sovereign. If God is not sovereign, then God is not God. If we reject divine sovereignty then we must embrace atheism."

If you are a skeptic after hearing this, I liken it to when I was parenting younger kids and they had to have this pair of shoes that they weren't going to get because they were too expensive but then the next thing you know the kid's world has ended because they didn't get those shoes. I mean, it's that bad. Well, this is not that. Trust me, if you were to dig through and go point by point what I just read from Sproul you would most likely say each point was true and therefore, that's what we're left with. That's how important the sovereignty of God is. If you're seeking to understand the faith, you're determining is God Almighty sovereign or is he not? And if He is, you're getting something that nobody can get anything to compare with. This is almighty sovereign God to be your friend, to be your Savior, to be your Redeemer, to give you all eternity. There's a lot to gain here. We want Him to be a sovereign God, no doubt about it.

Number two is God-authored relationships and life circumstances can be undesirable and painful ones which may or may not be the result of one's own bad choices or sinful behaviors. I say that because if you look at Joseph's situation, some of his stuff was because he did stupid things. A lot of his problems came about that God used so much. Joseph made some bad mistakes. He did some things to make his brothers jealous that he shouldn't have done but at the same time, he did some very good things. When Potiphar's wife made advances toward him Joseph could have said, 'fine, let's go ahead' but he ran and it ended up putting him into prison. So you can't just say, it's the good things or the bad things, no, it's all things. It can be because of bad choices. It can be even because of good choices or behavior.

Thirdly, for the believer, undesirable and painful relationships and life circumstances always work together for good and provide opportunities to honor God. Look at Israel and the churches bigger story, all those painful hardships and look what we get. We're in church today because of what happened. It was part of the story. It had to come about but look at Joseph's lesser story. Now think about your own story and think of the incredible blessing that came to

him personally. Look how he ended up in life. It's a great story. Could it have ended up and not be such a glorious ending for him and still glorify God? Absolutely. It's the story of Hosea. God gave him a hard life, but what a glory to God that illustration has been for the church through its history.

We have a text in the New Testament. It's Romans 8:28. It is familiar to most Christians who are very literate of the Scriptures. Romans 8:28 says [28] *And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.* So, what about your and my story? I don't know your story, but I guarantee you there are some hard relationships. There are some very difficult circumstances. You're walking through them. If you're not walking through them, those you love the most are and we can't help but feel, "Oh God, how can you allow that God? How can You do that? Why would You ever do that?" We don't see the bigger story. We don't see the lesser story in terms as big as it is. We don't see these stories. All are part of a sovereign plan designed to bring great glory to God.

As a teenager. I had a home that I thought was a better home than most and a better family than most. What a blessing. I'm real close with my dad. I don't remember having a conflict with him. He hugged me, kissed me, told me how much he loved me all the time. Sometimes I was embarrassed around other people as a little kid but I loved it. Then one day he leaves a note for my brother, my only sibling and me on the kitchen counter that says "Goodbye, I will never see you again. I'm gone. I can't explain it but if you ever marry, if you ever have children, kiss my grandchildren." That was it and he was gone. Painful? Yes, and I can say this with all integrity; I see the story now as I've grown in years. I see the story better and better and I truly can say and I have often, 'thank you, Father, for my family.'

I see now some things I have been blessed with in life. I don't think I would have ever know an experience had that not happened in my life. I can't go into the story and all the details, but that is my story. Now would I necessarily get to see that in life, for maybe that wouldn't have happened. That's when I have to trust that there are things I don't understand. I guess I have to believe but these three little applications of what God says are the truths that God says, they really are true, but we have two primary struggles, and I want to close with these.

Number one is to believe that God is sovereign over the painful sufferings of His people. It's just hard sometimes for us to believe that God is allowing certain painful things in life. It's too big to tackle in this message, and I'm not going to try it, but I will leave you with a quote and you let it go from there. It's a quote from Joni Eareckson Tada. She and Steve Estes wrote one of the most wonderful books titled When God Weeps. Joni is a quadriplegic from her teenage life and through her adult life. She is 73 and this woman probably has had more pain and suffering, than most anybody you'll ever meet. She writes from this book; "God ordains what He hates, to accomplish what He loves." Remember that, Christian. He ordains what He hates as much as you hate it but He knows what He loves.

I love sitting with lost people searching for the faith because they want to know how God allows those things and I love telling them why He uses those things. It causes me to let my grandchildren know about the three most unwanted gifts of God. They have to see these gifts. What are they? Suffering is one. God hates suffering, but it's a gift He gives to us. Number two is weakness. God doesn't like to see us with the weaknesses that we're experiencing, but what gifts they are. Then thirdly is denied abundance. Then I walk them through Scripture and can show them how these are gifts of God. Oh, how can it be? Oh, He hates using those, but He loves seeing what happens to us. God did the same thing with His Own Son, Jesus. We see His Son experience all and He loved this Son perfectly. Amazing!

The second primary struggle we have is to believe that God is sovereign over man's eternal destiny, choosing some people and not choosing others. I can't explain it. Does God's Word teach it? Yes. Some people say, "Well, it takes away man's free will." No, it does it. You can't show that in the Scripture. Not at all. Oh, it's a Biblical paradox. We don't understand it fully, but God's Word seems to make it very clear this is exactly what He does. We tend to say, 'I can see nothing good out of that. I don't like it. I don't see it.' Rather than me try to give any teaching on it, I close with this illustration.

It's a story of a young Christian who came to faith in high school. Then went to a conference for Christians, and there was a speaker who was one of the country's leading theologians and respected until he died. After he finished speaking I went up afterwards and he had talked something about choosing some people and not choosing others. I had read Romans 9 and then said to my liberal pastor "How do you explain this?" He said, 'I don't know. I tore that chapter out of my Bible. It just didn't make sense. It can't mean what it says.' That answer wasn't enough for me. I heard this guy say it and thought, "What in the world?" I said to the speaker, "I can't accept what you just said about choosing some and not others." He said very gently, "Why not?" I said, 'Because it doesn't make sense that's why.' He should respect that since I was only 17, 18 years of age. Then he said, "let me just show you something." He turns back to a big blackboard with chalk.

He to me said, 'You see that board?' I said, "Yeah." He said 'Is that board, finite or infinite?' I said, "Well, it's finite." He said, 'Yeah, it has limits, doesn't it?' I said, "Yeah." He said, 'Let this blank board represent the knowledge of God. Is the knowledge of God's finite, or is it infinite?' I said "it's infinite." He said, 'So that board should go forever in every direction, right? It should just keep going and going and going and going and never stop if it's infinite.' I said "that's correct." Then he said as he draws a big circle on that board, 'Let's let that circle represent the accumulated knowledge of all man from all mankind of all time. All right?' "Okay." He said, 'Would that knowledge be finite or infinite?' "It would be finite." He said, 'If so, that's probably a 10th of that screen of this board. Now this board is infinite, keep that in mind and that's finite so that circle is way too large.' I said, "Yes, sir."

Then he drew a little circle inside, that one about a 10th of that circle and said, "Let's let that circle represent the knowledge of the most intelligent human that's ever lived in the world so you have to say I've understated that because nobody has a 10th of all knowledge. So you agree I've understated this?" I said, 'Yeah, I agree.' I have no clue where he's going until he took the chalk and put a dot right in the middle of that circle and he said "That dot represents your knowledge. I've understated the biggest on this one here" as he looked at me. He said, "That's you right there. The middle of that dot is way too little on that board and that board goes forever and ever and ever and ever. You couldn't see that thing." So he erased all the other circles and leaves that one dot there and he says "That's you that's your knowledge." Then he put little X's all over the board and he said "those represent the ways of God. Now, let me ask you, are you telling me because all of His ways don't fall on your dot, that it couldn't happen?" When I heard that, it changed everything. Then I found myself falling on Mondays before the Lord, when I wake up in the morning and I'd say, "God, I don't understand Your ways, but why me? Thank you" and there was new surrender.

I would suggest to you young people, that you take the advice he gave me. He said, "Randi, when you see something in the Word of God, you believe this is the Word of God, you submit to it and watch His ways because they are far bigger. You will never be disappointed." Take the sovereignty of God and you always put it up with the love of God and that love of God

is easy to prove. You just go to Calvary's cross and you see a Savior who was the Son of Almighty God, who let it suffer, experience, weakness, and be deprived of much abundance but he loved Him. It was His Son. He loves us even though we walked through those very dark days but there's a plan, and it's one that we can have peace in because we say, "I don't understand but one day." Watch the love of God, go to Calvary's cross, bend the knee, invite Him to rule your life, see what happens. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Our Father in heaven we want to believe You. We want to trust You. I pray that each of us would have the ability to pray, even as so often say to you, 'Lord, help me to believe what I cannot see. Help me to know what I cannot prove. Thank you for faith that allows that' and give our friends here reading this who are without You, faith to trust You and love You. Give us as Christians, deeper faith and cause us to walk in love with You and accept whatever You bring our way as painful as it may be, teach us to say thank You. We love you in Jesus' Name, Amen.