

Trusting¹

So how do we respond when we face trouble? Honest grieving and realistic “lamenting” or trust God’s unfathomable sovereignty. It’s not either-or, but both-and. The scriptures teach both; both responses are proper responses to difficulty. Trusting God in the midst of difficulty is an important element of a believer’s response to affliction. There is no better example of this than Joseph.

Joseph’s Story

We are familiar with Joseph’s story. But let’s look a little deeper at the development of personalities and dynamics in this family. When we meet Joseph he was an older teen. He was Jacob’s favorite, had expensive clothes, developing a prideful attitude and was already hated by his older brothers (Gen 37). He had two dreams in which his brothers and parents bow down to him. Did these dreams reflect an inner growing sense of superiority? (Why did he have to publicly announce those dreams?) Joseph was fast becoming an arrogant young man, a narcissist with unrealistic views of himself, who if unchecked would eventually have an inability to empathize with and love others. Joseph’s brothers craved their father’s love but didn’t get it, poisoning their hearts with bitterness. The dynamics of amazing story of Judah and Tamar (Gen 38) reflect further on the nature of the brothers, callous, selfish men capable of real cruelty. (Would you sell your brother into slavery just because he got on your side of the back seat of the car?) Then Jacob inadvertently provides an opportunity for the true nature of these men to be manifested. Joseph is sold into slavery. Problem solved.

We are not told much about Joseph’s spiritual life. But they say there are no foxhole atheists. If Joseph didn’t pray much before, he certainly did now! He certainly cried out from the cistern, the slaver’s caravan and pharaoh’s dungeons. Did God answer? Joseph probably prayed for years and years for help from God—and never received a single answer. It is clear that God was doing something in Joseph’s life in those dark years. God was using the darkness to form a man who would essentially become the savior of two nations! Later when the moment came when Joseph could extract revenge, God gave wisdom him on how to deal with his brothers. It may seem like Joseph was toying with his brothers, but could it be that God is using Joseph to force his brothers to relive their past and redeem them. Joseph actually gives them the opportunity to do with Benjamin what they had done with him. They now have the opportunity, once more, to rid themselves of their father’s favorite and sacrifice him in order to secure their own lives and freedom. Kidner comments, “Joseph’s strategy...now produces its master-stroke. Like the judgment of Solomon, the sudden threat to Benjamin was a thrust to the heart: in a moment the brothers stood revealed...all the conditions were present for another betrayal. ... The response by its unanimity (13), frankness (16), and constancy (for the offer was repeated v17), showed how well the chastening had done its work.” Judah goes so far as to offer himself as a substitutionary replacement! What a change.

The Hidden God

How does all of this relate to our suffering? From our perspective of history we look at Joseph’s dark years and see that God was not “missing in action” at all. But when Joseph was praying in the cistern, in the caravan, in the prison everything seemed to be going so wrong. Had God forgotten Joseph in Egypt? No, he was there and he was working. God was hidden, but he was also in complete control!

Think for a moment about the long string of “accidents” and “coincidences” that brought Joseph to the position of prime minister in Egypt. Jacob had to send Joseph to find his brothers; if Jacob had known they were in Dothan which was a remote place farther way, he probably wouldn’t have sent him. Joseph accidentally meets a stranger who accidentally overheard where the brothers were. The brothers were in an isolated location and could do what they wanted with Joseph; Reuben happened to be away when the caravan “happened” by. Joseph was sold to the home of a woman who happened to fall in lust and Joseph was falsely accused. Joseph happened to meet the cup bearer who had a dream, who forgot about Joseph, but happened to remember him later when Pharaoh had a dream at a time just right to prevent a famine. Coincidences? Unless every one of these little events had happened just as they did—and so many of them were bad, terrible things—Joseph would have never been sent to Egypt. And who knows what Joseph would have become

¹ Material taken/quoted from Tim Keller, *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, chapter 13.

had he not gone to Egypt. Joseph would have been corrupted by his pride, the brothers by their anger, and Jacob by his addictive, idolatrous love of his youngest sons.

Joseph's story is a vivid and powerful illustration of the theological concept of a sovereign God. God was present at every point, and was working even in the smallest details of the daily lives and schedules and choices of everyone. "All things work according to the counsel of God" (Eph. 1:10-11; Rom. 8:28). Were the actions of Jacob, Joseph and the brothers justified because they used those actions? No, they did wrong and no one forced them to do it. And they were being destroyed by the shame, inner guilt and depression. They needed a painful process by which they relived their evil behavior and were able to renounce it and get freedom and forgiveness. How did it come about? Through suffering. All went through terrible years of grief and depression. Yet how else could they have been saved physically and spiritually?

Trusting the Hidden God

If God had given everything Joseph probably asked for in prayer, it would have had terrible consequences. God essentially said no relentlessly, over and over, to nearly all Joseph's specific requests for a period of about twenty years. Many people would say, "If God is going to shut the door in my face *every time* I pray, year in and year out, then I give up." Despite all the years of unanswered prayer, Joseph was still trusting God. (He turned to God for interpretation of the dreams.) The point is this—God *was* hearing and responding to Joseph's prayers for deliverance, rescue, and salvation, but not in the ways or forms or times Joseph asked for. God seemed hidden, but Joseph still trusted. He had an intact relationship with the Lord.

It might be that we are more like Job than Joseph. Some of us may be allowed to discern God's plans in our troubles. More of us, never get to see that much of God's plan for our lives. Like Job, we never hear God boast about us in the heavenly councils. Most of us will likely see some, perhaps a little more of God's purposes in our lives as the years go by, but will never understand God's full plan on this side of eternity. But regardless of how much we are able to discern, like Joseph, we must trust God regardless.

Another desperate cry for help to God happened at Dothan many years later (2 Kings 6:8-32). Dothan had become a city and was being besieged by Syrian troops. Elisha and his servant were trapped in the city and the servant was terrified. Elisha prayed and God allowed the servant to see the "chariots of fire" God sent to deliver the city. Deliverance was immediate.

What a contrast. In Joseph's case, God appears to do nothing at all. In Elisha's case, God answers with an immediate, massive miracle. Was God ignoring Joseph and responding to Elisha? No. God had been as watchful in his hiddenness as in any miracle. God was just as present and active in the slow answers to Joseph as in the swift answer to Elisha. God was just as lovingly involved in Joseph's situation as in Elisha's. It might be argued that Joseph's salvation, while less dramatic and supernatural, was greater in depth and breadth and effect. Joseph's story tells us that very often God does not give us what we ask for. Instead he gives us what we would have asked for if we had known everything he knows. We must never assume that we know enough to mistrust God's ways or be bitter against what he has allowed. We must also never think we have really ruined our lives, or have ruined God's good purposes in our lives. Ultimately we must trust God's love.

After Jacob died, the brothers again feared for their lives. Joseph's response (Gen 50:19-21) was "you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid." God took evil and purposed it for good. (Rom. 8:31-38). No matter how bad things get, believers can be assured that God loves them. In Rom. 8:38-39, Paul says that he is *absolutely* certain of this.

Everything Hangs Together

The story of Joseph shows us that everything that happens is part of God's plan, even the little things and bad things. Perhaps you have a testimony of how God used little things to bring about his plan in your life. Yet very seldom do we glimpse even a millionth of the ways that God is working all things together for good for those who love God. But he is, and therefore you can be assured that he will not abandon you.

John Newton, the 18th century minister, wrote to a grieving sister, God “has a sovereign right to do with us as he pleases...his sovereignty is exercised in a way of grace... everything is needful that he sends, nothing can be needful that he withholds...You have need of patience and if you ask, the Lord will give it. But there can be no settled peace till our will is in a measure subdued. Hide yourself under the shadow of his wings; rely upon his care and power; look upon him as a physician who has graciously undertaken to heal your soul of the worst sickness, sin. Yield to his prescriptions, and fight against every thought that would represent it as desirable to be permitted to choose for yourself. ... Above all keep close to the throne of grace. If we seem to get no good by attempting to draw near to him, we may be sure we shall get none by keeping away from him.”

The Ultimate Joseph

Jesus, like Joseph, suffered at the hands of people who harbored ill-will toward him. He died for his enemies, forgiving them because he understands God’s redeeming purpose behind it all. Imagine yourself a disciple of Jesus. He is doing great miracles, giving amazing teaching and drawing larger and larger crowds. You imagine a golden age for Israel under his leadership (as many really did!) Now he is betrayed, tried and hanging on a cross. You hear people say, “I’ve had it with this God. How could he abandon the best man I’ve ever seen? *I don’t see how God could bring any good out of this.*” What would you say? Would you agree? Yet you are standing there looking at the greatest, most brilliant thing God could ever do for the human race. On the cross, both justice and love are being satisfied—evil, sin, and death are being defeated. You are looking at an absolute beauty, but because you cannot fit it into your own limited understanding, you are in danger of walking away from God. Don’t do it. Do what Jesus did—trust God. Do what Joseph did—trust God even in the dungeon.

Again and again in the Bible, God shows that he is going to get his salvation done through weakness, not strength, because Jesus will triumph through defeat, will win by losing; he will come down in order to go up. In the same way, we get God’s saving power in our life only through the weakness of repentance and trust. And, so often, the grace of God grows more through our difficulties than our triumphs.