

*FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF VILLA RICA, PCA*

**God's Sovereign Hand**

By

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Genesis 37:3-36

It ought onto surprise us that God has a plan. A God of infinite wisdom and power will surely surpass men in careful planning and execution of his purpose. If sinful men can make minute drawings of their buildings before they are constructed and then construct them according to a predetermined plan, if lawyers can build with logic a legal brief, if business men can plan ahead for years that have not yet arrived, if the farmer can map out his desired goals ahead of time and then implement those goals in what he plants and raises, how much more will God have a plan for his created universe and a purpose which is predetermined for his ultimate goal

A God who would be dependent on chance and caprice would not be God at all. If God be God then He must be a God who reigns supreme and who brings to pass whatsoever it pleases him to do.

Before we begin to discuss Joseph, however, let us refer to an event in the life of Abraham recorded in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis. The Scripture tells us that following a promise of God to Abraham that he was his exceeding great reward and that his descendants would be as numerous as the starry host of heaven that Abram worshipped the Lord and that when the sun was going down, <sup>12</sup> **a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.** <sup>13</sup> **God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.** <sup>14</sup> **"But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.** <sup>15</sup> **"As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age.** <sup>16</sup> **"Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." Gen. 15:12-16**

We see then that God revealed his plan and purpose to Abraham many years before Joseph was ever born. In fact Abraham and Sarah were still childless when this promise and revelation came to him

Now see Joseph, the great grandson of Abraham, in the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis it is recorded that he had two different dreams, both with the same message. In his first dream he is with his brothers were binding sheaves in the field and his brothers' sheaves made obeisance to his sheaf. In the second dream the sun and the moon and eleven stars bow him down to him. When he tells these dreams to his brothers his brothers despise him. They already hated Joseph because his father preferred him above his other sons. He had made him a coat of many colors and this had created a terrible resentment among the other brothers.

Now see what happens: the brothers are off tending the flocks in Shechem and Jacob sends Joseph to see if all is well. As he goes searching for his brothers they are not at Shechem but it so happens, by chance, or so it seems, he gets directions from a stranger that his brothers had gone to Dothan. Had this stranger not told Joseph where his brothers had gone, which he happened to overhear them say, then he no doubt wouldn't have found them.

Now keep in mind as we move along that God who sees and knows all things would have known the evil attitude of Joseph's brothers toward him. Had God wanted to overrule Joseph finding his brothers he could have easily done so by providentially guiding elsewhere the man who knew where they had gone.

Now see what happens as Joseph approaches his brothers. <sup>18</sup>**When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death.** <sup>19</sup>**They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer!** <sup>20</sup>**"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!" Gen. 37:18-20**

But Reuben, the oldest brother, didn't like that idea. He prevailed on them not to kill him, just cast him into a pit. The scripture tells us that Reuben planned to come back and rescue Joseph. And so they threw him into a pit without water. But just a little while later a caravan of Midianite merchants was coming through. So Judah suggested that instead of killing Joseph that they make some money by selling him as a slave. Then they killed a goat and dipped Joseph's coat into the blood and took it to their father and suggested that a wild animal had killed Joseph and devoured him.

Here we see how God presides over evil in such a way that his own holy character is not a party to the evil of wicked men but that he directs it all to an end he has in mind which fulfills the divine purpose spoken to Abraham years before any of them had been born.

The control of the universe includes "whatsoever comes to pass" otherwise there would be some things coming to pass that he had not designed or purposed

-- which is incredible and which would also defeat the purposes he had formed in reference to other things – which is equally incredible.

“The control of the greater must include,” says E G. Smith in his book *The Creed of Presbyterians*, “the control of the less, for not only are the great things made up of little things, but history shows how the veriest trifles are continually proving the pivots on which momentous events revolve. The persistence of a spider nerved a despairing man to fresh exertions, which shaped a nation’s future. The God who ordained the course of Scottish history must have planned and presided over the movements of the tiny insect that saved Robert Bruce from despair.”

And so Joseph, in the providence of God, is sent to Egypt by the evil intent of his brothers and the slave trading merchants.

<sup>1</sup>Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there. <sup>2</sup>The LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. <sup>3</sup>Now his master saw that the LORD was with him and how the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand. <sup>4</sup>So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge. <sup>5</sup>It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian’s house on account of Joseph; thus the LORD’S blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field. <sup>6</sup>So he left everything he owned in Joseph’s charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate.

Ah, but now consider that the wife of Potiphar begins to eye and ogle handsome Joseph. She began to continually tempt him to come and lie with her. But Joseph refused. He would not submit to her incessant temptations. But she would not be put off so easily. Finally one day, when none of the household servants were in the house, she was so insistent that she grasped his garment and pled with him to lie with her but he fled leaving the garment in her hand.

She was so enraged at his rejection she determined to get her revenge on Joseph. She falsely accused Joseph before the household servants of attempting to lie with her and when her husband came home she charged him with attempted rape.

Gen. 39:19-23 <sup>19</sup>Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your slave did to me," his anger burned. <sup>20</sup>So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail.

In Genesis chapter 40 we read that the baker and the chief butler to Pharaoh were put in prison for offenses against Pharaoh. And after a long time they both had dreams in the night and the next day Joseph noticed that they were sad. He said to them, **Why are your faces so sad today?**" <sup>8</sup>Then they said to him, "We have had a dream and there is no one to interpret it." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please."

So the chief butler told Joseph his dream and Joseph interpreted it to mean that he would be restored to his former position. <sup>16</sup>When the chief baker saw that he had interpreted favorably, he said to Joseph, "I also saw in my dream, and behold, there were three baskets of white bread on my head; <sup>17</sup>and in the top basket there were some of all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, and the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head." <sup>18</sup>Then Joseph answered and said, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; <sup>19</sup>within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head from you and will hang you on a tree, and the birds will eat your flesh off you."

<sup>20</sup>Thus it came about on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday that he made a feast for all his servants; and he lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. <sup>21</sup>He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh's hand; <sup>22</sup>but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. <sup>23</sup>Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Two years later Pharaoh had two dreams that troubled him greatly and his wise men and magicians were not able to interpret his dreams. So now the chief butler remembers Joseph and his interpretations and tells Pharaoh. So Pharaoh sends for Joseph and he accurately interprets both dreams, which had to do with seven good years and seven lean years in Egypt. Because of his interpretation

Pharaoh makes Joseph second in command over all of Egypt and he stored up much grain during the seven good years and then dispensed it out carefully during the seven famine years.

Time will not permit me to recount all of the events that forced Jacob and Joseph's eleven brother to go to Egypt for grain during the famine and finally be brought with all their families to Egypt by Joseph. This will require another sermon. Let me simply say at this time that when their father Jacob died in Egypt and was buried we read in the last chapter of Genesis: <sup>15</sup>**When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!"** <sup>16</sup>**So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father charged before he died, saying,** <sup>17</sup>**"Thus you shall say to Joseph, "Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong."'** And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup>**Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants."** <sup>19</sup>**But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place?"** <sup>20</sup>**"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.**

The scripture narrative is but an inspired account of how God governs the world always and everywhere. The intricate happenings that issued in the migration of God's chosen people to Egypt were but the orderly fulfillment by providence of God's predetermined purpose.

There is a saying abroad in the earth, whatever will be will be. But this is not the Christian concept. The Christian concept is, *Wherever God has decreed and purposed shall be*. The first statement attributes the course of events to blind mechanical necessity, the other to the intelligent purpose of a personal God. The one is fatalism, the other foreordination, predestination, providence. The Bible does not say, whatever must be must be. It says in **Isa. 14:24** <sup>24</sup>**The LORD of hosts has sworn saying, "Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand.**

How God can be sovereign and yet man be free, how God as supreme Ruler can decree events beforehand and bring them to pass exactly as decreed without

interfering with the freedom of human agents, is a question man cannot answer. But God can and does it. God knows how to govern the natural world by fixed laws, the brute creation according to their instincts and human beings agreeably to their nature.

For example, Jacob's preference for Joseph, the wise and good child of his beloved Rachel, above the ten coarse and brutal sons of Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah was the natural prompting both of his judgment and his heart. Here is free agency; but here also is foreordination; for this partiality, as the result showed, was the first step in the fulfillment of God's plan for saving thousands of human lives.

Joseph's brethren hate him and sell him into slavery, seeking to carry out the free and unrestrained impulses of their jealous hearts; and the Ishmaelite merchants are naturally delighted to secure a young and handsome slave for a mere trifle. Here is free agency, attested in the conscience smitten cry: We are verily guilty concerning our brother; but here also is foreordination; for these people, while free agents, were also entirely God's agents that the scripture says it was God that sent Joseph into Egypt to preserve life.

Potiphar's wife was free in seeking to carry out her lust and revenge toward Joseph; the royal butler was free in carrying out his courtier like impulses toward Pharaoh; Pharaoh was free in carrying out his humane and statesmanlike impulses toward his famine threatened nation; Joseph was free in carrying out his filial impulses in sending for his beloved father. Here in each case was the most unquestionable free agency; but here also was the most unquestionable foreordination; for the result of it all was the exact fulfillment of a purpose which God had revealed to Abraham 200 years before, that not Canaan but fertile civilized Egypt should be the nursery of the chosen people.

And Joseph displayed a most commendable faith in all of his circumstances. When his brother bow down to him and demonstrate their penitence, he says,  
<sup>20</sup>**"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. Gen. 50:20**

Surely, he was a true man of faith, who with patience waited for God's promises and goodness in all of his sufferings and trials, who believed that all things work together for good to them that love God, who are the called according to his purpose.

Over sin as over all else, God reigns supreme. His sovereign providence orders and governs.

It is a doctrine unspeakably precious to the Christian heart amid the storms and darkness of this earthly pilgrimage to know that every trial, every burden, every bereavement, every sorrow, has been foreseen and fore appointed by a wisdom that cannot err and by a love that cannot change. To all of his enemies who

do him evil, the Christian can say with Joseph, **As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.**

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