

This week, we conclude a three-week series on the life of Joseph and the will of God in our lives.¹ If you have any questions, feel free to email me at benjamin.j.williams@gmail.com

Sermon Outline

"How Does God Accomplish His Will? (Genesis 50)"

1. Introduction
 - a. *Genesis 50:20* – Joseph believes his own story illustrates God's providential care.
 - b. Four Views
 - i. God causes all things.
 - ii. God directs all things.
 - iii. God limits all things.
 - iv. God limits most things.
 - c. Two Analogies for the Problem of Providence: The issue for us finite minds is understanding how small details fit into the big picture.
 - i. A tiny fleck of paint in Seurat's "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" contributes to the whole scene.
 - ii. Remember that a rat saved the universe in Avengers: Endgame.
2. Mysterious Details in the Life of Joseph
 - a. *Genesis 37:15-17* – Joseph almost didn't find his brothers, but an unknown man found him lost in the fields. This man just happened to have overheard his brother's talking about their destination.
 - b. *Genesis 37:25-28* – A caravan of spice merchants and slave traders happened to pass by during lunch while Joseph was in the pit and Reuben wasn't around.
 - c. *Genesis 39:1-3* – Of all the potential slave owners in Egypt, Joseph is sold to Potiphar, the captain of the guard in Pharaoh's palace, whose wife happens to be scandalous.
 - d. *Genesis 39:20* – Because Potiphar worked in the palace, Joseph is imprisoned there.
 - e. *Genesis 39:21-23* – Joseph ends up running the palace dungeon.
 - f. *Genesis 40:1-4* – Joseph happens to be in prison at the same time as Pharaoh's cupbearer.
 - g. *Genesis 40:20-21* – The cupbearer somehow ends up back in Pharaoh's good graces.
 - h. *Genesis 41:1-13* – The cupbearer remembered Joseph two years later.
 - i. *Genesis 41:56-57* – Joseph ends up in charge of food distribution during the famine.
 - j. *Genesis 42:1-2* – Jacob points his family to Egypt for food.
 - k. *Genesis 50:20* – Joseph concludes that this story was an act of God.
3. Conclusions
 - a. *I believe in both the infinite knowledge and intimate knowledge of God.*
 - b. *God causes, directs, and limits the outcomes of His creation to His purpose.*
 - c. *God is worthy of your trust.*
 - d. *God is worthy of your praise.*

¹ My first book read in preparation for this series was John C. Lennox, *Joseph: A Story of Love, Hate, Slavery, Power, and Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

Bible Class Outline

Introduction: I'd like to for teachers to discuss a little more regarding the views of divine providence. Below I will outline the basic premise, give a biblical illustration or two, and then offer a thought for discussion.²

Four Views of Divine Providence

1. Perhaps God Causes All Things

- a. Basic Premise: "God is deemed omnipotent ... because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so overrules all things that nothing happens without his counsel." (**John Calvin**)
- b. Biblical Illustration:
 - i. "In him we live and move and have our being ..." (**Acts 17:28**)
 - ii. "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." (**Psalm 115:3**)
- c. Thought: Quite often in the Scriptures, it seems as though God gets whatever He wants and is directly responsible for everything that happens. He is the Almighty Creator.
- d. *Discussion: What else in Scripture makes you think that God causes all things?*

2. Perhaps God Directs All Things

- a. Basic Premise: In this view, God is a bit like the Ghost of Christian Future in *A Christmas Carol*. God knows what things could be, and He directs the creation toward his goals.
- b. Biblical Illustration:
 - i. During the civil war between David and Saul, David asks God whether or not the leaders of the city of Keilah will abandon him to Saul (**2 Samuel 23:11**). God responds by telling David what would happen (in short, "Yes they will betray you to Saul") so that David can make other plans (**v. 13-14**). God protected David by directing him, not compelling him.
 - ii. A better known example is where Jesus seems to know that "if" he built a worldly kingdom, it would lead to warfare and bloodshed (**John 18:36**).
- c. Thought: Quite often in the Scriptures, it seems as though God knows with certainty what could happen, and so directs the creation toward a desired end.
- d. *Discussion: What else in Scripture makes you think that God directs all things?*

3. Perhaps God Limits All Things

- a. Basic Premise: In this view, God loves to give His creatures freedom. God's role in providence is to limit that freedom so that freedom is never lost. His goal is to maintain a world where His creatures may always find Him.
- b. Biblical Illustration:
 - i. God has "determined allotted periods and the boundaries" of human history in the expectation that people would seek Him (**Acts 17:26-27**).
 - ii. Sin enslaved humanity, a problem which would have permanently defeated God's purpose if He had not acted. Instead, God frees us from the slavery of sin by Christ (**Romans 6:7-11**). However, rather than compelling us not to repeat

² Anyone wanting to dive further down this chasm of deep concepts, a helpful study guide is Paul Helseth, et al, *Four Views on Divine Providence*, Counterpoints Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

the same sins again, He uses persuasion to appeal to our free choice (**Romans 6:12-14**).

- c. Thought: Quite often in the Scriptures, God seems to limit what may happen, but only in a way that insures greater freedom of choice for us, even when we choose badly.
- d. *Discussion: What else in Scripture makes you think that God limits all things?*

4. Perhaps God Limits Most Things

- a. Basic Premise: This view takes the #3 position a step further. God limits the world, but sometimes even God doesn't get what He wants.
- b. Biblical Illustration:
 - i. Abraham once bartered with God about the judgment of Sodom (**Genesis 18:22-33**). It seems as though Abraham changed God's plans or at least influenced them.
 - ii. At Mount Sinai, God says, "Let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them" (**Exodus 32:10**). Moses pleads with God (**v. 11-13**), and the text says, "And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people" (**v. 14**). God seems to have changed His mind.
- c. Thought: From time to time in Scripture, it seems as though God does not get what He wants and is even willing to change His plan.
- d. *Discussion: What else in Scripture makes you think that God limits most things but does not always get His way?*

5. More Discussion Questions

- a. Are any of the views above contrary to the teachings of Scripture? Several might be partially true, but are any of them absolutely false? Why?
- b. Does it bother you that it is not entirely clear how God accomplishes His will in every case? Why? What bothers us about mystery and the unknown?
- c. Can we trust that God's will for the Creation will come to pass – that God wins in the end? Why?
- d. It is always easier to see how God worked AFTER the fact, but not while life is unfolding. What events in your own past illustrate a time when you believe ...
 - i. God caused something to happen?
 - ii. God directed events toward His goal?
 - iii. God limited events from getting out of hand?