

# A View So High

Romans 8:28-30



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Every Christian denomination has its own distinctive traits. One of the common characteristics of Presbyterians is that we have a penchant for order. Passionately held views are expressed and votes are taken at presbytery meetings according to parliamentary procedure. Elected elders and deacons are expected to know church polity, and anyone who wants to become an ordained Presbyterian pastor must pass examinations not only in theology, bible, and worship, but also on the Presbyterian Book of Order. Clearly, the tendency toward orderliness underlies our church polity and procedures. It runs, however, much deeper than that.

It wasn't until I began studying John Calvin's writings that I began to appreciate how foundational the concern for order was to his, and thereby to the Presbyterian, understanding of God's relationship to the world. Armed with arguments on every side, Calvin developed and defended a theology in which order - order in creation and order in God's continuing providence - was to be maintained at all cost. So steeped was his theology, ethics, and ecclesiology in a concern for order that some scholars have concluded that it was indeed central to his thought.

What is important to note is that Calvin's concern for order was clearly motivated by his concerns as a pastor. Keenly aware of people's deepest anxieties and their highest hopes, as Calvin saw it, much was at stake in whether God's purpose and will were present or absent in the course of life. Without some kind of divine order at work in all things, life, Calvin thought, would be unbearable. As it was, life was full of danger, and its dangers could be born without despair only if we were to recognize that God was involved in all things, making all things work for an eventual good.

Listen to what he says about the dangers of life:

"Innumerable are the evils that beset human life; innumerable too the deaths that threaten it. We need not go beyond ourselves since our body is the receptacle of a thousand diseases. . . ,” but if you were to “embark upon a ship, you are one step away from death. Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is imperiled. Go through the city streets, you are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs. If there is a weapon in your hand or a friend's, harm awaits. . . . But if you try to shut yourself up in a walled garden, seemingly delightful, there a serpent sometimes lies hidden. . . . I pass over poisonings, ambushes, robberies, open violence, which in part besiege us at home, in part dog us abroad. Amid these tribulations must not man be most miserable since . . . he weakly draws his anxious and languid breath, as if he had a sword perpetually hanging over his neck?” (Institutes, Book I.17.10)

Clearly Calvin recognized that life is full of contingencies, contingencies beyond our immediate control. Beyond that, he recognized how such contingencies could threaten or upset our souls and psyches. If we were to view life as a series of one contingency after another, we would suffer from anxiety so great that we would undoubtedly fall into despair. Because it is not always evident that God is at work in the world, because God's providence is not something that we can always see, at least not in the present, Calvin thought it all the more imperative that we trust, especially at those times when all evidence points to the contrary, that in the end “all things work together for good,” according to God's purpose. So concerned was Calvin to comfort the hearts of the faithful that one of my professors used to say that in essence Calvin's doctrine of providence was intended to be a doctrine of comfort.

Calvin's teaching of divine providence has been characterized by theologians as a high view of God. It is a view that insists on the incomprehensibility of God, that God is too high for us to comprehend. So high is God that even the angels, Calvin wrote, cannot penetrate the providence of God (Susan Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 10).

This is precisely the view of God presented in the story of Joseph, from which John read this morning. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that here in the story of Joseph, we find for the first time in *Genesis* a view of God “so high that human action is declared irrelevant” (Genesis, 289). In the story of Joseph, God’s providence is at work regardless of human attitudes, intentions, and actions. Let’s see what he means.

The story of Joseph runs from chapter 37 to chapter 50, which ends the book of *Genesis*, and in the span of these many chapters, we follow Joseph through the dramatic twists and turns of his life. Remarkably, he begins life as a shepherd boy of a nomadic family and ends up becoming viceroy over Egypt. By no amount of his own ambition and planning could he have forged such a path for himself. Instead, we get the distinct sense that Joseph’s life is shaped more by things that happen to him than by things that he sets out to do. We get the sense that he is more a patient than an agent.

So that we can grasp how remarkably surprising his life turns out to be, let’s briefly review the dramatic sequence of events that make up the story of Joseph. Who could have thought it possible for a shepherd boy to become viceroy over Egypt? His older brothers certainly didn’t. They thought so little of him that they did everything in their power to get rid of him. Jealous because their father favored him, Joseph’s brothers plotted to kill him. On second thought, they decided that it would be more profitable for them to sell him into slavery. But before they were able to carry out that plan, a group of traveling Midianites happened to come upon him first, and with the same idea in mind, they trafficked Joseph with them in order to sell him into slavery. One unfortunate episode led to another, and Joseph found himself not only in Egypt, displaced far from home, but even thrown into prison, though innocent of the charges that put him there. While in prison, Joseph had a hand in helping a fellow inmate to get released. This man happened to be the former chief steward of Pharaoh. Upon the chief steward’s release from prison, Joseph bid him: “But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this place. For in fact I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon” (40:14-15). But the man forgot about Joseph until two years later, when something happened to prompt the steward’s memory: Pharaoh had a dream that required interpretation. It was only then that the steward remembered Joseph as the man who could interpret dreams. Asked to interpret Pharaoh’s dream, Joseph obliged. Interpreting a forecast of seven years of plenty to be followed by seven years of scarcity, Joseph proposed a solution that would save Egypt from ruin in the years of famine. As a result, Joseph was propelled from prisoner to prime minister. Years later, Joseph’s brothers made their way to Egypt, seeking salvation from the drought that had ruined all the land. In an ironic twist of events, their salvation was now at the hands of the brother they had sought to destroy years ago. Making his identity known to them, Joseph said: “Come closer to me. I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. . . . So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (45:4-8).

Not until this moment in the story, when Joseph is reunited with his family and must come to terms with his whole past, does he realize the sense of it all. Furthermore, it is not until this moment that he acknowledges God. Recognizing that things turned out as they did not because he or anyone else intended them -- certainly not his brothers, nor the chief steward, nor the all-powerful Pharaoh, he gives credit to God. “Do not be afraid!” Joseph says to his family. “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today” (50:19-20). Only God could turn the accidental events of his life into something beneficial and salvific for so many.

This is a high view of God’s providence. Underlying this view is an important assumption of faith: that whether we recognize it or not, whether we intend it or not, whether we give God the credit or not, the story of our lives -- of who we are, where we are, what we do, and what happens to us -- has a place in God’s story.

In his commentary on this story, Walter Brueggemann wonders out loud that this high view of providence made its way into ancient Israel’s mindset at a time when the values of an older era, tribal in outlook, were found wanting. “The old idiom of faith,” he writes, “had become unconvincing” (Genesis, 288). How could the values of family and tribe adequately make sense of all that would happen to Joseph, the figure who would

lead Israel onto an international scene? They couldn't. As the youngest of many sons, Joseph would never have been given even the least bit of authority; as the son of a nomadic sheep-herding family, he and his posterity would likely have continued in that way of life. Had Joseph lived his life according to the status quo into which he was born, according to the values of family and tribe that he inherited, he would certainly never have found himself as viceroy over Egypt.

The story about Joseph is a story about the growing pains that a man and, because of him, a tribe based on familial ties necessarily lived through as they stood on the brink of becoming a nation. In light of its new horizon, Israel could no longer rely on its old tribal worldview, tried and true as they might have been, to make sense of and to discern a new order. And yet, Israel, did not give up its trust and reliance upon God. Instead, it made the decision to take a high view of God, to trust, that through all the contingencies of life, God will continue to order, configure, and create a new and good reality.

Let me remind us of how the story of Joseph ends, for it is a remarkable ending. Joseph forgave his brothers. Despite their treachery and violence against him, Joseph forgave them. Saying to them, "Do not be afraid!" Joseph assured his brothers that he has indeed forgiven them and would not take revenge against them. These acts of giving and receiving forgiveness did not come easily. Forgiveness came with such intensity of emotional effort that when Joseph forgave them, he and his brothers felt such anguish and wept so loudly that the Egyptians and the household of Pharaoh heard it.

The act of forgiving is not incidental to the story. Only by ending the story with forgiveness is there the possibility of a truly new beginning, not only a new beginning personally meaningful to Joseph and his family, but also the new creation of a nation, a people re-ordered so that, no longer a tribe, they could survive and become Israel.

In her powerful book entitled *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt, writes so clearly about the creative power of forgiveness. As a Jew who lived in Germany under the Nazi regime and later fled to Paris and then to the United States, Arendt must have intimately struggled with the difficulty to forgive. And yet, as difficult as it is to forgive, she seems to have known the absolute necessity of it. She seems to have recognized that forgiveness is the necessary moral act by which truly new conditions can be created. She wrote:

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover. . . . Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven (Hannah Arendt, 237, 241, cited by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation*, 352).

Forgiveness is freedom. It is freedom from the baggage that we carry when someone has wronged us. But even more than that, forgiveness is freedom, because it is not a reaction to a provocation. Instead, it arises freely from within the forgiver. Despite the persecution and violence that she and her fellow Jews had to suffer, Arendt remarkably recognized that no matter what happens to us throughout the course of our lives, no matter all we must undergo, we nevertheless have the power and freedom to forgive.

Some people may be concerned, and rightly so, that a doctrine of providence implies a God who manipulates and controls human affairs, leaving no room for our freedom, so that in life we are patients more than agents. Could it be instead that God has given us the power to forgive, and that forgiveness is the cardinal manifestation of God's providence at work? Could it be that forgiveness is the most powerful, providential re-ordering of the world? Without erasing all the wrongs that happens in human affairs, could it be that forgiveness is what makes possible the formation of something truly new, a new heart, a new people, a new nation, a new reality, a new order?