



## HEROES OF THE FAITH

# JOSEPH: GOD PLANNED IT FOR GOOD

## GENESIS 37-50

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### MAIN IDEA

Believers can recognize the hand of God at work and trust His plans even when difficult things happen.

### INTRODUCTION

*As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.*

Think about a time when you experienced some unexpected tough times. Did you pout, cry, complain, blame others, whine, become bitter or turn from God? Although everyone has difficult things to deal with, how we handle those situations speaks volumes to the world around us and reveals much about our faith. What can seem unfair or undeserved can be used by God to do great and mighty things as we are going to see today.

- **How do you usually respond to difficulty?**
- **Do you think others watch to see how believers handle difficulties? Why or why not?**
- **What does the way you respond in difficult times reveal about your faith?**

**UNDERSTANDING**

*Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.*

> Have someone in your group read **Genesis 37:1-4, 23-28; 39:7-21; 40:12-15, 23.**

Just by looking at the highlights of each of these chapters, you can see how Joseph was dealt some tough circumstances in his life. From his own brothers hating him enough to sell him into slavery to being accused of doing wrong though he fled from the opportunity to sin with his boss's wife.

After being thrown in prison for what he did not do, his faithfulness to God continued to give him favor and allowed God to use him for big things. Joseph continually set an example as one who trusted God and wanted to please Him. Reading the story of Joseph, you might expect him to become bitter and blame God for the unfair things that kept happening to him but that was not the case. Instead, he remained faithful to the Lord time and again.

We also find some helpful insights on how to respond when faced with trials or temptations. When tempted by Potiphar's wife, Joseph fled the scene and recognized that all sin is against God. When given the opportunity to take credit for interpreting dreams and helping others, he gave all glory to God.

- **What difficulty of Joseph's life would you struggle with the most? Why?**
- **How does the example Joseph set by his response to trials and temptations speak to you?**
- **What do you think was the key to Joseph not becoming bitter about his situation even when it seemed bad?**

- **When have you ever felt like Joseph in some way?  
How can his story help you in that?**

> Have someone in your group read Genesis 41:8-16, 37-41, 55-57.

Finally, some good happened to Joseph. Like in Joseph's story, we may feel as though our daily obedience and faith in God doesn't make much difference. But in this lost world, people who live to please God and follow His commands will always stand out as different.

Following God has never meant we would not face tough times. Only that we will never face tough times on our own and that God has great plans for us. He promises to be with us in everything. Joseph's life reinforces these truths. Though the cupbearer had forgotten Joseph and left him in prison, God caused things to happen to bring Joseph back to mind.

At the age of 30, everything changed in Joseph's life. He was respected and given a position of power only exceeded by Pharaoh. Joseph's years of being faithful in things great and small was finally recognized and rewarded. He lived differently regardless of his circumstances, and it drew attention. Pharaoh commented that the spirit of God was evident in Joseph.

- **Joseph stayed faithful even when unjustly imprisoned. Why is it important to remain faithful to God even when we don't think anyone is around to notice?**
  
- **Why is it even more difficult to trust God and be faithful when your circumstances seem unfair?**

- **Who can you see the “spirit of God” in?**
- **How have you seen God’s hand at work in your own tough circumstances?**

> Have someone in your group read Genesis 50:7-9, 14-21, 24-26; Hebrews 11:2.

Have you ever kept the peace for the sake of someone else? Joseph’s brothers still weren’t sure that he wasn’t just pretending to forgive them for the sake of their father. Once Israel died, they expected Joseph to give them what they deserved for betraying him and turning his life upside down as a young man.

Again, Joseph surprised his brothers by choosing not to be bitter and blame them. He spoke one of the more famous lines of Scripture in verse 20 when he reminded them that it was God’s plan the whole time. Even when men choose evil plans, God can work them out for good. Joseph spoke in faith about how God would keep His promises to their ancestors. He believed God so strongly that he asked for his bones to be saved and taken back home to the promised land.

At the end of his life, Joseph was able to look back and see forgiveness, reconciliation, and the impact that comes from trusting God’s plans. He had every reason to blame, hate, and hold grudges against others but instead he chose not to give in to bitterness. He forgave even the worst of offenses and was able to see God’s hand at work over all his years.

- **How would Joseph’s request about his bones speak to the coming generations that served in slavery in Egypt until the Exodus?**

- **What can you learn from Joseph's interaction with his brothers that can apply to you when people have betrayed you or let you down in some way?**
- **How would this story have been different if Joseph had given in to the temptation to become bitter?**
- **How does trusting God affect your ability to forgive others?**
- **What stands out to you most from Joseph's life?**

### **APPLICATION**

- **Pray about any relationships in your life where forgiveness needs to happen. Follow through with next steps in moving toward reconciliation.**
- **What has caused a root of bitterness or unforgiveness in you? Take a first step this week to cut off the growth of that bitterness in your life.**
- **What are we doing to display our faith in God so that others notice a difference about us?**

### **PRAY**

Thank the Lord for Joseph's life. Ask for strength to follow his example and trust God no matter what happens.

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## GENESIS 37:1-28

37:1 In contrast to Esau, who left the land promised to Abraham's descendants, Jacob remained in the land of Canaan, demonstrating Jacob's acceptance of God's gift of the land to him and his descendants (35:12).

**Notes:**

37:2–4 The family records of Jacob, which extend through the end of the book, constitute the eleventh and last of the (Hb) toledoth sections in Genesis. The account begins with a description of seventeen-year-old Joseph, the central human figure in this section; he is the subject of more than two hundred verbs within the narrative framework of the final fourteen chapters of Genesis. These opening verses continue the troubled portrait of Jacob's sons begun in chap. 35, as the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah—Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher—misbehaved. Jacob's unequal treatment of his sons (cp. 25:28) aroused great jealousy, so Joseph's brothers hated him. The robe of many colors probably marked Joseph as Jacob's chosen successor for clan leadership, especially since he was the firstborn of Rachel, the only woman Jacob had ever intended to marry.

37:5–11 Like his father Jacob (28:12–15; 31:10–13), Joseph received two dreams from God during his lifetime. Both portrayed Joseph as gaining a position of supremacy in his family, though the symbols differed greatly. The first dream used an agricultural image (v. 7). The second, more important and wider in scope than the first, was astronomical (vv. 9–10). The pairing of dreams with a shared meaning meant that God would certainly make the events happen (41:32). Ancient interpreters suggested that the moon signified Bilhah since Joseph's mother Rachel was dead at this time (35:19).

37:12–17 Israel (i.e., Jacob) made his teenage son Joseph a supervisor over his brothers. Joseph,

who had earlier given a bad report about his older brothers, was once again called upon to report how they were doing. Joseph traveled about fifty miles north to Shechem. Learning that his brothers had moved on, he finally found them at Dothan, some fifteen miles farther north.

**Notes:**

37:18–24 Joseph’s older brothers, all of whom hated him and were violent men (34:27–29) or even murderers (34:25–26), immediately plotted to kill him, calling him “the lord of the dreams” (that dream expert). Being skilled at deception as well (34:13), the brothers also concocted the lie that a vicious animal ate him. They threw him into a dry cistern designed to store water for the flocks. Reuben, probably out of concern for his reputation with his father rather than any affection for Joseph, objected to fratricide.

37:25–28 The fact that Joseph’s brothers sat down to eat a meal soon after they disposed of him reveals how brazenly sinful they were. Later Joseph would be free while the brothers were in prison (42:17). But on this day the brothers saw a caravan of Ishmaelites traveling south on the main road leading from Egypt to Damascus. Judah convinced seven of his brothers that it was more profitable to sell Joseph as a slave than to kill him. According to 42:21, Joseph pleaded with his brothers, but to no avail. They sold him for twenty pieces of silver, the standard price for a teenage male slave (Lv 27:5). Midianite is another designation for Ishmaelites in this narrative. Mention of the descendants of Ishmael (21:9–13) and Midian (25:1–6) call to mind the kind of sibling rivalry that is taking place here again.

**GENESIS 39:7-21**

39:7–10 In contrast to his brother Judah, who sacrificed his honor for the pleasure of a prostitute (38:15–16), Joseph refused the advances of

his master's wife. To commit adultery would have been an immense evil and a sin against God (cp. Ex 20:14). Potiphar's wife persisted, telling Joseph day after day to "lie beside her" (go to bed with her).

**Notes:**

39:11–15 When the subtle approach failed to seduce Joseph, Potiphar's wife resorted to a more direct method. Finding—or perhaps creating—a situation where none of the household servants except Joseph was in the house, she grabbed Joseph by his garment and ordered him to sleep with her. In a courageous display of godly self-control, Joseph resisted, escaped and ran outside ... leaving his garment in her hand. This is the second time that a woman used the personal effects of one of Jacob's sons (cp. Judah, 38:25) to get the upper hand in a situation where they would otherwise have been put to death. Potiphar's wife then lied to her household servants, perhaps playing upon the other slaves' jealousy that had been inflamed when Potiphar placed the Hebrew young man over them as their boss. The presence of Joseph's garment seemed like circumstantial evidence for her false claim.

39:16–20 When Potiphar's wife repeated the story to her husband, she framed the lie in a way that placed the blame squarely on him. Her story made Potiphar furious. Without investigating the truth of her claims, Potiphar declared Joseph guilty. But instead of killing him, he had him thrown into prison (lit "the round house"). Why? Ancient Jewish opinion held that Potiphar's wife intervened because she hoped to take advantage of Joseph later. Perhaps this is true. It is also possible that Potiphar already distrusted his wife and thus doubted the truth of her story.

39:21–23 The Lord, who is present in Sheol (Ps 139:8), was also with Joseph in prison. God, who is rich in "faithful love" (kindness; Hb *chesed*; see

Ex 34:7), demonstrated his love by granting Joseph favor with the prison warden. For the third time in his life (cp. v. 4; Gn 37:14), Joseph was given authority over his peers—in this case, all the prisoners who were in the prison. Mirroring Potiphar’s level of confidence in Joseph, the warden did not “see anything in his hand” (bother with anything under Joseph’s authority) because the Lord caused everything Joseph did to be successful (Hb mats-li-ach; cp. Ps 1:3 “prosper”).

**Notes:**

## GENESIS 40:12-23

40:9–15 The chief cupbearer, who was an adviser and security officer for Pharaoh, was the first to tell his dream to Joseph. While aspects of the dream seemed to portray something positive—blossoms ... grapes, placing the cup in Pharaoh’s hand—other aspects were doubtful, particularly the three branches. Joseph explained that the branches represented the next three days, after which Pharaoh would lift the cupbearer’s head (or release him from prison; cp. 2Kg 25:27) and restore him to his position. Confident that the interpretation was accurate, Joseph pleaded for the cupbearer to remember him, mention him to Pharaoh, and arrange to get him out of prison. Joseph’s release was a matter of simple justice since he had done nothing to deserve imprisonment. However, the cupbearer forgot about Joseph’s request (v. 23).

40:16–19 Heartened by Joseph’s positive interpretation of the cupbearer’s dream, the chief baker shared his dream. As with the previous dream, this one contained ambiguous elements—particularly the three baskets of white bread and the birds—that needed a clear interpretation. This time the meaning was a dark one: Pharaoh would decapitate the chief baker and hang him on a tree (or possibly “impale” him “on wood”). The birds eating white bread symbolized the birds that would eat the baker’s body.

40:20–23 Consistent with the dreams’ divinely inspired interpretations, the two officials were released from prison three days later, on the festive occasion of Pharaoh’s birthday. The “birthday” could either refer to Pharaoh’s physical birth or to his accession day, the day he became king and thus was believed to have become a son of the Egyptian god Horus. Just as Joseph had foretold, Pharaoh restored the chief cupbearer to his previous position, but hanged the chief baker.

**Notes:**

## GENESIS 41:8-16, 37-57

41:8–14 These dreams clearly indicated trouble, but exactly what trouble was the question. To unravel the mystery, Pharaoh summoned all the court magicians, who would have received instruction from ancient Egyptian scrolls of dream interpretation; some of these ancient scrolls, dating to the Twelfth Dynasty (1973–1786 BC), have been recovered by archaeologists. Pharaoh also summoned all of Egypt’s wise men to assist in the critical task of discerning the dreams’ meanings. However, no one could interpret the dreams satisfactorily.

The crisis caused the chief cupbearer to remember how Joseph had accurately interpreted two mysterious dreams two years earlier. Desperate for insight into his own dreams, Pharaoh immediately sent for Joseph. Prior to entering the royal court he had to be shaved—probably both his beard and scalp—and he put on clothes made of linen, as was appropriate for the Egyptian court. Joseph’s change in appearance mirrored the change that was about to occur in his career.

41:15–16 Fluent in the Egyptian language after thirteen years in the land, Joseph listened intently as Pharaoh described his problem. With humility Joseph confessed to Pharaoh that he was unable to interpret the dreams, but confidently added that his God would give Pharaoh the information he desired.

41:37–46 Joseph’s insight into the dream, along with his ability to devise such a prudent plan, convinced Pharaoh that Joseph had God’s spirit in him. Pharaoh gave Joseph the Egyptian name Zaphenath-paneah (“Then God Said, ‘Let Him Live’”) and a wife of high social status. Asenath (“She Who Belongs to the Goddess Neith”) was the daughter of Potiphera, a priest at On (Heliopolis), the prestigious religious center of solar worship in ancient Egypt. Joseph, who was now thirty years old, had been transformed by God in thirteen years from an imprisoned foreign slave to the world’s second most powerful man. He who had spent years in prison now went throughout the land of Egypt overseeing a project that would save the lives of untold thousands.

**Notes:**

41:47–52 In addition to giving blessing on the harvests, God blessed Joseph’s personal life with two sons. Manasseh’s name reflected the fact that God had helped Joseph forget his hardship both in Egypt and in his whole family, with its sordid background of rape (34:2), murder (34:25–26), incest (35:22), deception (34:13), and betrayal (37:28). Ephraim’s name confessed that God had made Joseph fruitful in a land where he had once been treated as a despised felon.

41:53–57 As Joseph, guided by God’s revelation, had said, after seven years of abundance famine struck every land in the region, even beyond Egypt’s borders. Pharaoh directed the people to go to Joseph, who sold grain to the Egyptians to preserve the lives of his adopted countrymen. However, as other nations learned of Egypt’s food supply, they came to Joseph. In the centuries to come, Egypt proved to be the breadbasket for the Mediterranean world.

## GENESIS 50:7-26

50:4–9 When the seventy days of mourning were over, Joseph went to Pharaoh’s household, asking permission to bury his father in the land of Canaan. Joseph probably had reduced access to Pharaoh by now, which was about twelve years after the famine ended and the crisis Joseph

had handled so well was long past. Even so, Pharaoh granted him permission to go and bury his father, thus fulfilling the oath Joseph had made to his dying parent (47:29–31).

**Notes:**

As a sign of Pharaoh’s continuing gratitude for Joseph’s work, he permitted all his servants, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt—a considerable number of high-ranking Egyptian politicians—to accompany all the adult members of the clan of Jacob on the journey to Canaan. Horses and chariots, prestigious transportation used only by members of the Egyptian aristocracy, were part of a very impressive procession to Canaan.

50:10–14 The group camped at the open, level threshing floor of Atad and went through a Hebrew mourning ritual. The presence of a large number of Egyptians publicly displaying solemn mourning so impressed the local Canaanite inhabitants that they renamed the place Abel-mizraim (“The Meadow of Egypt”), a wordplay on a Semitic word for “weeping” (‘ebel). Proceeding westward to the cave at Machpelah two miles north of Hebron, Joseph buried his father, thus fulfilling what his father had commanded Joseph and his brothers to do.

50:15–21 Despite having lived under Joseph’s provision and protection for many years, and despite knowing that Joseph had named one son Manasseh (“God has made me forget all my hardship in my father’s house”), the brothers still doubted that Joseph had forgiven them. With Jacob now dead, Joseph’s older brothers feared for their lives and hoped that saying their father called for forgiveness before he died would protect them from Joseph’s wrath. They were so afraid of Joseph that they did not dare at first to come to him personally; instead, they only sent a message entreating him to forgive his brothers’ “rebellion” (transgression) and sin, especially since they were “slaves” (servants) of the God of your father—that is, they worshiped the same God that Joseph did. Perhaps the reason the brothers came to Joseph was that they heard he had wept when he received their message. To maximize their

chances of survival they bowed down before him (cp. 37:7, 9) and offered themselves as his personal slaves.

**Notes:**

Joseph refused their offer. They were slaves of God, not of him, and he would not put himself in the place of God to make them his slaves. He admitted that his older brothers planned evil against him, but with great spiritual insight he also confessed that God planned it for good to bring about ... the survival of many people. God had transformed the soot of human sin into a diamond of divine blessing (Rm 8:28; 1Pt 2:24). Far from being embittered, Joseph was emboldened to take care of the very ones who had tried to kill him, along with their children. He spoke kindly to them (lit “spoke upon their heart”; cp. Is 40:2) and comforted them.

50:22–23 God’s blessing on Joseph’s life is apparent as he lived 110 years, 93 of them in Egypt and 80 of them as a ruler there. He lived to see the third generation of descendants through Ephraim, a phrase that could refer either to great-grandsons or great-great-grandsons. A further sign of God’s blessing was the fact that Gilead (Nm 26:29) and other great-grandsons by Machir son of Manasseh “were born on the knees of Joseph,” that is, they were ritually adopted by him (Gn 30:3; Ru 4:16).

50:24–26 As Joseph was about to die, some fifty-four years after his father Jacob’s death, he called his brothers to him for one last time and gave them two prophetic promises. First, that God would certainly come to the aid of their descendants. Second, that God would indeed bring their descendants up from Egypt to the land he swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:7, 18; 24:7; 26:3; 28:13).

After Joseph died, he was embalmed—one of only two persons in the Bible said to have been embalmed. His preserved body was then placed ... in a coffin, awaiting a future day when it was to be carried by Moses and the Israelites to the promised land (Ex 13:19; Jos 24:32).