

From Prison Cell to Palace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 37:2–41:40.*

Memory Text: “There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art my wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (*Genesis 39:9*).

The story of Jacob continues, with twists and turns that, again, contrast the depravity of humanity with the goodness and mercy of God.

Genesis 34 tells of the rape of Jacob's daughter Dinah by a local ruler and the subsequent massacre of all the city's males by two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi. Jacob, fearing reprisal, flees and returns to Bethel (*Genesis 35*), where, despite all these horrendous events, the Lord again appears to him and reaffirms the covenant promises: “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins; and the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land” (*vss. 11, 12*).

The rest of Genesis 35 deals with the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel. Mention is also made of Reuben, who “lay with Bilhah his father's concubine” (*vs. 22*). The chapter ends with Jacob reuniting with Isaac, 180 years old, who dies and is buried by his two sons.

Genesis 36 covers the genealogy of Esau, the part of the family that, basically, fades from the immediate scene. Scripture then resumes (*Genesis 37*) with Jacob and his “chosen” seed.

A lesson in all this?

If, amid so much sin, God can nevertheless fulfill His will, imagine what would happen if all those who profess His name actually obeyed Him as He asks.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 23.*

The Dreamer

Read Genesis 37 and then answer the following questions:

1 Why did Joseph's brothers hate him so much?

2 How did Joseph aggravate the situation?

3 Read verses 21, 22. What irony exists in the fact that, of all the brothers, Reuben was the one who tried to do what was right?

4 Read verses 25-28. Why do you think they decided not to kill him?

5 Look back over Jacob's life. In what ways might he have brought this tragedy upon himself by his past actions and mistakes?

However horrific this story, considering the background of this family, it shouldn't be all that surprising. Jealousy, violence, and deceit marked these people in one way or another from the earliest days. And these boys—though raised by a father who worshiped the true God, who even received special revelations from God—showed that they themselves didn't know God, nor had they experienced the conversion of heart that's essential for all who truly want to serve Him.

Look at how far uncontrolled sin (in this case jealousy) took these people. What message should this story have for each of us regarding where sin, unless dealt with, can lead?

Key Text: *Genesis 37:3, 4*

Teachers Aims:

1. To examine the causes of the envious relationship between Joseph and his brothers.
2. To contrast the character of Joseph with that of his brothers.
3. To show how Joseph remained faithful to God in every circumstance.

Lesson Outline:

I. Joseph and His Brothers (*Gen. 37:2-11*)

- A. Joseph's father, Jacob, favors him above his brothers, and they despise him for it.
- B. Joseph gives Jacob bad reports of his brothers.
- C. Joseph has dreams that alienate him from his brothers even more.

II. The Sins of Jacob's Sons (*Gen. 35:22, 37:28, 38:11-16*)

- A. Reuben has an affair with his father's concubine, Bilhah.
- B. Prompted by hatred and greed, Joseph's brothers sell him to Egyptian traders.
- C. Judah treats his daughter-in-law unjustly, and she later conceives his child.

III. Joseph in Egypt (*Gen. 39:1-41:45*)

- A. As a slave in Potiphar's house, Joseph continues to be faithful to God.
- B. Joseph is falsely accused by Potiphar's wife of trying to seduce her and is thrown into prison.
- C. After interpreting Pharaoh's dream, Joseph becomes a ruler over all Egypt.

Summary: Joseph moves from a favored son in the house of Jacob to a slave in Potiphar's house; from a prisoner in an Egyptian dungeon to a ruler over all of Egypt. Through every experience Joseph remains faithful, and the Lord is with him. Though his brothers' experience is largely one of rebellion, greed, and infidelity, we can still see the hand of God working to fulfill His purpose in their lives.

COMMENTARY

The opening verses of the Joseph story depict a family destroying itself. We see how the harmful effects of partiality play out in the lives of Jacob and his sons, with disastrous effects. But even so, God is able to bring blessings out of our disasters, as he did with Joseph, who eventually was able to declare to the brothers who sold him into slavery, "Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life" (*Gen. 45:5*). But to trace that grief back to its origin takes us to the heart of a father who, in the words of Shakespeare, "loved not wisely but too well."

Sin With the Canaanites

Read Genesis 38. What is the essence of this story? What does it tell us about the character of Judah?

For some reason the story of Genesis 38 interrupts the Joseph story. Perhaps, if nothing else, the Lord wanted to contrast the immorality of Joseph's betrayer, Judah, with the moral character of the betrayed, Joseph.

Maybe even more important, Genesis 38 also helps us understand "that the sons of Jacob, forgetting the sacred vocation of their race, were in danger of perishing in the sins of Canaan. Had not God in mercy interposed to bring about the removal of the whole house of Jacob to Egypt, the chosen race might have succumbed to the corrupting influence of Canaanite customs. Thus, chapter 38 is an integral part of the early history of Israel."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 434.

However sinful Judah's actions were, how does he, even amid all this, show some moral fiber? *See vs. 26; see also Gen. 37:26.*

After being discovered, Judah could do little but admit his guilt. Again, as in the plot against Joseph, he revealed a spirit of fair play and sincerity beneath his sometimes scandalous and corrupt conduct. His frank confession, his subsequent treatment of Tamar, and his special place in the ancestral line of Christ (*Gen. 49:10*) indicate a thorough reform on his part. A character more excellent than that of his older brothers qualified him for the leadership of the family and his posterity for leadership in Israel (*see Gen. 49:3, 4, 8-10*).

Why must we be so careful in not passing judgment upon people? *Matt. 7:1*. How can we differentiate between judging actions and judging people? Why is that distinction so important?

I. A Family Destroying Itself

Jacob always loved Rachel more than Leah, and he continues to display that love even after Rachel's death. He manifests clear favoritism toward her two children, Joseph and Benjamin. Scripture first introduces Joseph as a 17-year-old shepherd helping some of his half brothers. Apparently they do something that disturbs Joseph, and he reports it to his father (*Gen. 37:2*). If Reuben's sin is any indication of the character of the rest of the brothers, it is no surprise that Joseph brings back an unfavorable report. Consequently, some have seen him as a snitch. But Inspiration tells us that Joseph loves his brothers. He can't bear to see them sin against God. He pleads with them to change. His exhortations go ignored. He confides in his father, hoping Jacob will persuade them to change. But Joseph's good intentions backfire. His report shames his brothers in their father's eyes, and they hate him for it.

Jacob dotes on Joseph because "he was the son of his old age" (*vs. 3*). But Inspiration tells us that this favoritism is more than just strong affection for the son of his favorite wife. In Joseph, Jacob sees a thirst and hunger for God. Joseph has a far different character than his brothers. A spirit of godliness dwells in him; he is pure, joyous, active, diligent, morally earnest, gentle, faithful, and truthful. He takes to heart the stories that his father tells of God's mercy and providence, and his heart yearns for God. Jacob sees the same love for God in his son that he himself holds so precious. No wonder Jacob loves him so!

To show his love, Jacob has "a long robe with sleeves" (*vs. 3, NRSV*) made for his beloved son. Traditional translations render it as a coat of many colors, but it is the material, fine weave, and length that makes it so valuable, a robe fit for royalty. Depictions of well-dressed Canaanites in Egyptian tomb paintings may give us a hint of what the coat looked like (see the end sheets of the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* for illustrations of the Beni Hasan tomb paintings). Clearly, Jacob intends the coat to represent Joseph's status and authority, as well as favor.

The robe indicates not only that Jacob favors Joseph over his other sons but that he ignores all they cherish about their place in family and society. The robe arouses the brothers' suspicions that their father means to subvert tradition and pass the birthright blessing on to Joseph instead of to the firstborn, Reuben. Their father earlier tears his family apart by trying to reverse birth order and birthright. Now he is unintentionally doing it again with his own sons, thus destroying vital family relationships. Such favoritism wrongs Joseph. He becomes overconfident and exacting in nature, causing his brothers to hate him more.

II. "Behold, This Dreamer Cometh"

Joseph further angers his brothers by describing two of his

Joseph in Egypt *(Genesis 39)*

The caravan holding Joseph captive passed the hills where Jacob's tents stood. For a time the teenager "gave himself up to uncontrolled grief and terror."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 213. However, Joseph, remembering Jacob's stories about God's love and constancy shown to Abraham, Isaac, and him, decided to trust the Lord and act as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. With Joseph's descent into Egypt, divine Providence prepared the way for the deliverance of Jacob's family and for the foreign domination that Abraham's children were to experience until the sin of the Amorites in Canaan had reached its full measure (*Gen. 15:13-16*). It begins an incredible story of what the Lord can do through someone who, despite all odds, seeks to remain faithful to Him.

Considering the little that was revealed about Joseph before, not to mention the character of his family, what, if anything, was there from Joseph's past that would indicate he would be so faithful to the Lord? What lessons can we learn from the answer?

Considering, too, the problems with lust shown by other family members (*Gen. 35:22; 38:16, 18*), not to mention the common practice of polygamy (which no doubt fed the lower passions), Joseph's fortitude amid the constant badgering by the master's wife is a powerful testimony to his faith and character.

Here's Joseph, unjustly sold into slavery, then, unjustly, thrown into prison. Yet, three times Genesis 39 states that "the Lord was with" him. How are we to understand what that means? How could God be "with" him when so many bad things were happening to him?

One thing is clear: problems and trials are no indication that God has forsaken anyone. Joseph was unable to understand the providence of God; he couldn't see then what we can see so clearly now. Of course, from his perspective none of this made sense; he was, nevertheless, determined to remain faithful anyway.

What lessons about trusting God, despite outward appearances, can you learn from this story?

dreams. In the first he and his brothers are in the fields binding sheaves of grain, bundles of stalks quickly tied together and then tossed on the ground. But Joseph's bundle stands up while those made by his brothers gather around and bow down to it (*vs. 5-7*). Such dreams were a standard motif in the ancient Near East.

Joseph describes a second dream in which the sun, moon, and 11 stars bow to him (*vs. 9*). “ ‘What kind of dream is this that you have

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Genesis 40:8, 45:8, Proverbs 20:7, Jeremiah 23:32, Hebrews 11:22*

- 1 The behavior of Joseph's brothers—and maybe of Joseph himself—seems to indicate that Jacob has not succeeded in teaching them the lessons that he has worked so hard to learn and that God had tried so hard to teach him. Was Jacob, in some sense, at fault for this? How much of a child's behavior can be blamed on, or credited to, the parent(s)?
- 2 Joseph, as we first see him, seems to be a rather spoiled, boastful individual. Can we see anything in his character that would lead us to expect the exemplary behavior he displays in Egypt? What does this tell us about our capacity to judge other people's ultimate character or worth?
- 3 Joseph's true character emerges in extreme adversity. Could he have reached his full potential if his life had continued along its expected path, among his brothers, instead of in Egypt? Why, or why not? If not, what does this say about the role of trials and adversity in forming the Christian's character?
- 4 Does Joseph attempt to use his skills in dream interpretation to obtain release from prison? Why, or why not? Is it natural and right to attempt to change our situation? Does this conflict with other biblical statements that seem to say we should rejoice in affliction? Explain.
- 5 What can we say about the place that dream interpretation occupies in this story? We have examples of other Old Testament figures (Daniel, most notably) receiving or interpreting prophetic dreams. The dreams that Joseph interprets mostly involve mundane matters. How would we react to someone today who claimed to have the ability to tell us about our personal destiny through our dreams? What counsel does the Bible give us?

The Cupbearer and the Baker *(Genesis 40)*

Both the baker and the cupbearer were high-ranking officials at Pharaoh's court. (*Compare Neh. 1:11.*) They had themselves been thrown into jail (they may have been accused of plotting to overthrow Pharaoh) and had been placed under Joseph's care.

What further light do verses 6-8 shed upon Joseph's character and disposition?

Even here, in jail, Joseph not only sought to help others but witnessed for the Lord, as well (*see vs. 8*), giving God glory for the interpretation of the dreams.

Despite Joseph's "success" in the prison and his faithfulness to God, what does Joseph say that shows just how keenly aware he is of the unjust treatment he has faced and how badly he wanted to get out of that jail?

Regardless of his faith, Joseph still sought human help in securing his own release. Again, not knowing the future, not knowing the Lord's intentions, he did what he could to try to get out of his situation. This is certainly human and understandable. Unfortunately, as the chapter shows, it didn't work. Once released, the chief butler forgot all about Joseph. Of course, in fairness to the chief butler, what could he have said: "Hey, Pharaoh, there's a Hebrew in the dungeon who's good at interpreting dreams; why don't you let him out"? And as we'll see in Genesis 41, he did eventually make mention of Joseph when the time was right. Until then, Joseph had to struggle with doubt and discouragement as he sat for two more years in that jail.

No doubt Joseph's disappointment must have been bitter regarding his situation. How easily he could have given up all faith and hope. What do we do when we find ourselves, like Joseph, bitterly disappointed by events in our life? How can we maintain faith and hope amid such disappointments?

had?”” Jacob demands. “ ‘Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?’ ” (*vs. 10, NRSV*). His brothers’ jealousy only worsens. They react as though the dreams were fuel tossed into the furnace of their hatred. Their rage nearly erupts in murder. Instead, they sell Joseph for 20 pieces of silver. They tell their father that his son is dead, but the awful truth lies buried inside them and festers.

III. “Out of the Pit”

Terror seizes Joseph on the way to Egypt. But he resolves to give himself fully to God on the journey. In doing so, he goes from petted child to a self-possessed man of character. Faith in God enables him to withstand present and future hardships. Although he experienced betrayal and desertion by his own family, was sexually tempted, and then imprisoned for doing the right thing, Joseph makes the most of each situation and casts himself on God’s mercy. God exalts him, raising him from out of a sheep pit and into the palace of Pharaoh.

Witnessing

Perhaps your neighbor has just confided to you that she has been diagnosed with an incurable disease. Maybe your dad, just months away from retirement, is inconsolable after learning that his organization’s retirement plan is underfunded to the point of insolvency. What if you heard that the latest case of arson, in a string of unsolved cases, left a co-worker and family homeless and destitute? Is your response to those so deeply affected by these tragedies one of hope or hopelessness?

When tragedy strikes, encouragement—genuine optimism—is desperately needed to remind us that “Hardships may be a blessing. They were to Joseph. But the blessing is not in the hardship; it is in the way it is met and borne. Bear it impatiently, and with grumbling . . . , and the trial will be a curse, not a blessing. . . . The suffering that was designed to enrich . . . , borne impatiently, will impoverish.

“Bear in mind that God is never lacking in ways and means to turn our captivity into deliverance. We may see no way of escape from the hard conditions that oppress us, but God’s discernment is not thus limited. Because we see no way out we are prone to think such a way does not exist, that our state is hopeless. We should learn to lift our eyes from conditions that to us are quite impossible, and fix them upon our God, with whom nothing is impossible. Human help may not be able to reach us; He can always reach us.”—Carlyle B. Haynes, *God Sent a Man* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1962), pp. 120, 121.

God can always reach us. What hope! What optimism! What infinite comfort is found in that statement. This is the response we should share with others whenever possible!

Joseph's Release *(Gen. 41:1-40)*

This chapter introduces us to a typical Egyptian setting. We read of cows cooling off as they stand half submerged in the river. Reed grasses are mentioned (*Gen. 41:2, NIV*). And Joseph shaves as he leaves prison (Semites are identifiable in Egyptian drawings because they wear beards). Because Egyptians regarded the Nile as the source of life, the portrayal of lean cows coming up from the river must have scared the Egyptians.

How does the chief butler finally come through for Joseph?

Notice also how Joseph, even after all these disappointments, still expressed his faith in the God of his fathers. This is seen in verse 16, where Joseph states so clearly that it was only through his God that he could interpret the dream. This is remarkable because, considering his circumstances, it would have been very easy for him to credit all this to himself in order to make himself look better before Pharaoh. Instead, we see again Joseph's faith in action.

After Joseph interprets the dream, what does he say that, in another way, witnesses to his God?

For Joseph, all the events he predicted were the result of the action of God. In other words, He saw the hand of the Lord in all that would take place. Again, his words show that he trusted in the sovereignty and the power of God, which certainly helps explain why he was able to keep his faith even while in jail.

Notice, too, that after Joseph interpreted the dream, he started giving the king advice about what to do, which included setting someone up to take charge of storing grain. What in the dream, at least as recorded in Scripture, could have been interpreted in that manner? Nothing. Perhaps Joseph, sensing an opening that could get him out of jail, was angling for the spot himself. All things considered, why not? It would be the human thing to do, even for a human who loved God and was faithful to Him.

“An upright character is of greater worth than the gold of Ophir. Without it none can rise to an honorable eminence. . . . The formation of a noble character is the work of a lifetime and must be the result of diligent and persevering effort. *God gives opportunities; success depends upon the use made of them.*”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 223, emphasis supplied.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Share what it was like to take a trip to an interesting place or another country. What made that place different from where you live? The pictures in travel brochures of Egypt make it a place that would be intriguing to visit. Imagine what it was like for Joseph as he entered Egypt, a captive. We know the end of his story. At the time, Joseph did not know that things would turn out so well. God knows the whole story of our lives. How does Joseph’s experience help you trust in God’s presence and guidance to take you through your own personal Egypt?

Thought Questions:

① Pampered and spoiled: This might be an apt description of Joseph’s early life. How does this contrast with being cast into a pit by his brothers who plotted his death? It seems that Joseph’s early life could not prepare him for his later trials. Through an invitation for God to draw close, how do even the weak survive appalling emotional trauma? How would a testimony of God’s presence during a difficult time in your life help and bless a friend who is facing a discouraging trial? Plan to share your good news with that person this week.

② Sold at a slave auction, Joseph becomes the manager of Potiphar’s household. What lessons did he learn in childhood that helped him fulfill these duties? What prepared him for his confrontation with Potiphar’s wife? He was being seduced into a different type of slavery. How can we remain pure when tempted by what is immoral in our culture?

Application Question:

The cupbearer and the baker were given insights into their futures through the mercy of God, with Joseph as the mouthpiece. When the cupbearer was returned to his favorable position, he forgot about this amazing kindness. What kept Joseph from becoming despondent, even bitter? How would the story have ended if Joseph had given in to the adversary as he whispered doubt into his ears? Type out a list of God’s promises to post where you can read and memorize them. Plan to share your list with a co-worker or neighbor.

Further Study: “From the dungeon Joseph was exalted to be ruler over all the land of Egypt. It was a position of high honor, yet it was beset with difficulty and peril. One cannot stand upon a lofty height without danger. As the tempest leaves unharmed the lowly flower of the valley, while it uproots the stately tree upon the mountaintop, so those who have maintained their integrity in humble life may be dragged down to the pit by the temptations that assail worldly success and honor. But Joseph’s character bore the test alike of adversity and prosperity. The same fidelity to God was manifest when he stood in the palace of the Pharaohs as when in a prisoner’s cell. He was still a stranger in a heathen land, separated from his kindred, the worshipers of God; but he fully believed that the divine hand had directed his steps, and in constant reliance upon God he faithfully discharged the duties of his position.” —Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 222.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** In the lesson for this week, dreams and their interpretations played a big role in how God worked because in this part of the ancient world, in that culture, dreams were considered omens from the various gods. Does God today work through dreams and interpretations as He did back then? Or might He do so more in one culture today than in another, where dreams and interpretations aren’t taken as seriously? If the Joseph story were placed in a contemporary setting—say, in your own culture—how might the Lord have revealed Himself and His plans?
- 2** Let class members who are willing talk about some of their own personal “Joseph” stories, accounts of painful experiences that, viewed from later on, revealed the amazing providence of God.
- 3** Some people go through bitter experiences and come out stronger in faith; others have their faith destroyed. As a class, discuss the question: What makes the difference between the two outcomes?