

# Joseph, Prince of Egypt



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *Gen. 41:37–46, 1 Kings 3:12, Genesis 42, Rom. 5:7–11, Genesis 43, Genesis 44, Genesis 45.*

**Memory Text:** “And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt’ ” (*Genesis 41:41, NKJV*).

Joseph is now leader of Egypt, and his own brothers will bow before him without knowing who he is (*Genesis 42*). Joseph’s brothers will humble themselves when Joseph forces them to return with Benjamin (*Genesis 43*), and—when Benjamin’s safety is, they fear, threatened (*Genesis 44*)—they will plead for grace before this powerful man, whom they see as “like Pharaoh.” In the end, when Joseph reveals his identity, they will understand that, despite what they have done, God has brought good out of it all.

Interestingly, this whole next sequence of events, which were supposed to be about Joseph’s success, are more about his brothers’ repentance. Their back-and-forth journeys from Joseph to their father, and the obstacles they encounter, make them remember their wicked acts toward Joseph and their father, and they realize their iniquity toward God. Joseph’s brothers live that whole experience as a divine judgment. And yet, the moving emotional conclusion, which brings everyone to tears and joy, also contains a message of forgiveness for them, despite their unjustifiable acts of evil.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 18.

## Joseph’s Rise to Power

For Joseph, Pharaoh’s dreams revealed what God was “about to do” (*Gen. 41:28, NKJV*) in the land. Joseph, however, does not call on Pharaoh to believe in his God. Instead, Joseph’s immediate response is action. Joseph proposes an economic program. Interestingly, only the economic part of Joseph’s discourse is retained by Pharaoh, who seems more interested in the economic lesson than in the spiritual meaning of the dream and God’s role in producing it.

**Read** Genesis 41:37–57. What is God’s place in the success of Joseph?

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Pharaoh selects Joseph to take charge not so much because he has interpreted his dreams correctly and revealed the forthcoming problem of the land, but because he has a solution to that problem, because his “advice was good” (*Gen. 41:37, NKJV*), an opinion also shared by Pharaoh’s servants. Pharaoh’s choice seems to have been more pragmatic than religious. And yet, Pharaoh recognizes that the presence of “the Spirit of God” (*Gen. 41:38*) is in Joseph, who is qualified as “discerning and wise” (*Gen. 41:39*), an expression that characterizes the wisdom that God gives (*see Gen. 41:33; compare with 1 Kings 3:12*).

All the details reported in the biblical text fit the historical situation of Egypt at that time. Politically, the fact that Pharaoh appoints Joseph as vizier is not unusual in ancient Egypt, where cases of foreign viziers have been attested.

The next seven years are years of abundance in such a marked way that the grain production becomes “immeasurable” (*Gen. 41:49, NKJV*), a sign of supernatural providence. The comparison “as the sand of the sea” (*Gen. 41:49*) reveals that this is God’s blessing (*Gen. 22:17*). Joseph personally reflects that blessing in his own fruitfulness, a coincidence that evidences the presence of the same God behind the two phenomena. Joseph has two sons whose names show Joseph’s experience of God’s providence, which has transformed the memory of pain into joy (Manasseh) and the former affliction into fruitfulness (Ephraim). What a powerful example of how God turned something bad into something very good!

**What are ways that others should be able to see, from the kind of lives that we live, the reality of our God?**

## Joseph Confronts His Brothers

**Read** Genesis 42. What happened here, and how does it reveal the providence of God, despite human evil and malfeasance?

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The famine obliges Jacob to send his sons to Egypt to buy grain. Ironically, it is Jacob who initiates the project (*Gen 42:1*). The unfortunate old man, a victim of circumstances beyond his control, unknowingly sets in motion an amazing chain of events that will lead to being reunited with the son for whom he had mourned so long.

The providential nature of this meeting is highlighted through two fundamental characters. First, it is seen as a fulfillment of Joseph's dreams. The event—predicted in Joseph's prophetic dreams: “‘your sheaves . . . bowed down to my sheaf’ ” (*Gen. 37:7, NKJV*)—is now taking place. Joseph is identified as the “governor over the land” (*Gen. 42:6*) and “the lord of the land” (*Gen. 42:30, 33*). Joseph's powerful position contrasts with that of his needy brothers, who “bowed down before him with their faces to the earth” (*Gen. 42:6, NKJV*)—the same ten brothers who mocked Joseph about his dream and doubted its fulfillment (*Gen. 37:8*).

Second, this providential meeting is described as a response. The linguistic and thematic echoes between the two events underline the character of just retribution. The phrase “they said to one another” (*Gen. 42:21, NKJV*) also was used when they began to plot against Joseph (*Gen. 37:19*). The brothers' sojourn in prison (*Gen. 42:17*) echoes Joseph's sojourn in prison (*Gen. 40:3, 4*). In fact, Joseph's brothers relate what is currently happening to them to what they did to their brother perhaps 20 years ago. “Then they said to one another, ‘We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us’ ” (*Gen. 42:21, NKJV*).

Reuben's words, “‘his blood is now required of us’ ” (*Gen. 42:22, NKJV*), which echo his past warning to “‘shed no blood’ ” (*Gen. 37:22, NKJV*), reinforce the link between what they are now facing and what they had done.

**Most of us, surely, have done things for which we are sorry. How can we, to whatever degree possible, make up for what we have done? Also, why is accepting God's promises of forgiveness through Jesus so crucial for us (see *Rom. 5:7–11*)?**

## Joseph and Benjamin

Jacob could not easily allow the departure of Benjamin, his only son with Rachel who remained with him. He was afraid that he would lose him, as he already had lost Joseph (*Gen. 43:6–8*). It was only when there was no more food (*Gen. 43:2*) and when Judah pledged to guarantee the return of Benjamin (*Gen. 43:9*) that Jacob finally consented to a second visit to Egypt and allowed Benjamin to go with his brothers.

**Read** Genesis 43. What effect did Benjamin’s presence have on the course of events?

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Benjamin’s presence dominated the events. When all the brothers stand before Joseph, Benjamin is the only person whom Joseph sees (*Gen. 43:16*). Benjamin is the only one who is called “brother” (*Gen. 43:29, NKJV*). While Benjamin is called by name, all the other brothers are not identified; they are simply referred to as “men” (*Gen. 43:16*).

Joseph calls Benjamin “my son,” as a reassuring expression of special affection (*Gen. 43:29; compare with Gen. 22:8*). Joseph’s blessing refers to “grace” (*Gen. 43:29*), reminiscent of his begging for grace, which was not forthcoming (*Gen. 42:21*). Joseph returns to Benjamin the grace that he did not receive from his other brothers.

While Joseph’s brothers fear that they will be cast in prison because of the money that was returned, Joseph prepares a banquet for them because of Benjamin’s presence. It is as if Benjamin has a redeeming effect on the whole situation. When all the brothers are seated according to their ages and respecting the rules of honor, it is Benjamin, the youngest, who is served five times more than all the other brothers (*Gen. 43:33, 34*). And yet, this favoritism does not bother them unlike when Joseph was his father’s favorite many years ago, which led to their terrible actions toward both their half brother and their own father (*Gen. 37:3, 4*).

“By this token of favor to Benjamin he hoped to ascertain if the youngest brother was regarded with the envy and hatred that had been manifested toward himself. Still supposing that Joseph did not understand their language, the brothers freely conversed with one another; thus he had a good opportunity to learn their real feelings. Still he desired to test them further, and before their departure he ordered that his own drinking cup of silver should be concealed in the sack of the youngest.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 228, 229.

## The Divination Cup

**Read** Genesis 44. Why did Joseph put the divination cup in Benjamin's sack and not in another brother's sack?

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This story parallels the preceding one. As before, Joseph gives specific instructions; and, once again, he fills the men's sacks with food. This time, however, Joseph adds the strange command to put his precious cup in Benjamin's sack.

The events take, therefore, a different course. While in the preceding trip, the brothers returned to Canaan to take Benjamin with them, now they have to return to Egypt to face Joseph. Whereas in the preceding situation all the brothers found the same thing in their sacks, now Benjamin is singled out as the one who has Joseph's cup. Unexpectedly, Benjamin, who as the guest of honor had access to Joseph's cup, is now suspect and charged with having stolen that precious article. He will go to prison.

That Joseph was using a divination cup did not mean that he believed in its power. Joseph "had never claimed the power of divination, but was willing to have them believe that he could read the secrets of their lives."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 229.

The magic cup was for Joseph a pretext to evoke the supernatural domain, and thus awaken in his brothers' hearts their sense of guilt toward God. This is how Judah interprets Joseph's implied message, because he refers to the iniquity that God has found in them (*Gen. 44:16*). Also, the stealing of that precious cup would justify a severe punishment and thus test the other brothers' thinking.

The intensity of the brothers' emotion and their reaction is significant. They all are united in the same pain, fearing for Benjamin, who will be lost as was Joseph, and like him become a slave in Egypt although he was, like him, innocent. This is why Judah proposes that he be taken as a slave "instead" of Benjamin (*Gen. 44:33*), just as the ram had been sacrificed "instead" of the innocent Isaac (*compare with Gen. 22:13*). Judah presents himself as a sacrifice, a substitution, whose purpose is precisely to cope with that "evil" that would devastate his father (*Gen. 44:34*).

**What principle of love, as exemplified in Judah's response, is implied in the process of substitution? How does this kind of love explain the biblical theology of salvation? (See Rom. 5:8.)**

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## “ ‘I Am Joseph Your Brother’ ”

**Read** Genesis 45. What lessons of love, faith, and hope can be found in this story?

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It was at that very moment, when Judah talked about the “ ‘evil’ ” that would fall upon ‘*avi*, “ ‘my father’ ” (*Gen. 44:34*), that Joseph “cried out” (*Gen. 45:1, NKJV*) and then “made himself known” to his brothers. This expression, often used to refer to God’s self-revelation (*Exod. 6:3, Ezek. 20:9*), suggests that it is God who had revealed Himself here, as well. That is, the Lord had shown that His providence reigns, even despite human foibles.

Joseph’s brothers cannot believe what they are hearing and seeing. Thus, Joseph is obliged to repeat, “ ‘I am Joseph your brother’ ” (*Gen. 45:4, NKJV*), and it is only the second time, when they hear the precise words “ ‘whom you sold into Egypt’ ” (*Gen. 45:4, NKJV*), that they believe.

Joseph then declares: “ ‘God sent me’ ” (*Gen. 45:5, NKJV*). This reference to God has a double purpose. It serves not only to reassure his brothers that Joseph does not have hard feelings toward them; but it also is a profound confession of faith, and an expression of hope, because what they did was necessary for the “ ‘great deliverance’ ” and the survival of a “ ‘posterity’ ” (*Gen. 45:7, NKJV*).

Joseph then urges his brothers to go to his father in order to prepare him to come to Egypt. He accompanies his call with specific words concerning the place where they will “ ‘dwell,’ ” that is, Goshen, famous for its rich pasture, “ ‘the best of the land’ ” (*Gen. 45:10, 18, NKJV*). He also takes care of the transportation: carts are provided, which will ultimately convince Jacob that his sons were not lying to him about what they had just experienced (*Gen. 45:27*). Jacob takes this visible demonstration as evidence that Joseph is alive, and this is enough for him to come alive again (*compare with Gen. 37:35, Gen. 44:29*).

Things are now good. Jacob’s 12 sons are alive. Jacob is now called “Israel” (*Gen. 45:28*), and the providence of God has been made manifest in a powerful way.

**Yes, Joseph was gracious to his brothers. He could afford to be. How, though, do we learn to be gracious to those whose evil toward us doesn’t turn out as well for us as what Joseph experienced?**

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**Further Thought:** Ellen G. White, “Joseph in Egypt,” pp. 213–223; “Joseph and His Brothers,” pp. 224–232, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“The three days of confinement were days of bitter sorrow with Jacob’s sons. They reflected upon their past wrong course, especially their cruelty to Joseph. They knew if they were convicted of being spies, and they could not bring evidence to clear themselves, they would all have to die, or become slaves. They doubted whether any effort any one of them might make would cause their father to consent to have Benjamin go from him, after the cruel death, as he thought, Joseph had suffered. They sold Joseph as a slave, and they were fearful that God designed to punish them by suffering them to become slaves. Joseph considers that his father and the families of his brethren, may be suffering for food, and he is convinced that his brethren have repented of their cruel treatment of him, and that they would in no case treat Benjamin as they had treated him.”—Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, book 3, pp. 155, 156.

“Joseph was satisfied. He had proved his brethren, and had seen in them the fruits of true repentance for their sins.”—Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, book 3, p. 165.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, dwell on the question at the end of Thursday’s study. Do you think that Joseph would have been so gracious to his brothers had things not turned out so well for him? Of course, we can’t know for sure, but what indications, if any, in the entire story of Joseph reveal to us the kind of character that Joseph had, which could help explain his graciousness?
- 2 In what ways can we see in Joseph a kind of precursor to Christ and what Christ went through?
- 3 Joseph had tested his brothers. In what similar ways does God test us?
- 4 Even after all those years, the brothers realized their guilt in what they had done to Joseph. What does this teach us about how powerful guilt can be? And though we can be forgiven and accept God’s forgiveness, how do we learn to forgive ourselves, no matter how unworthy we are of that forgiveness?

## I Will Go!

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

The news about the tragic stabbing death of US volunteer Kirsten Elisabeth Wolcott during a morning jog on the Pacific island of Yap ricocheted across the campus of Southern Adventist University, where she had studied. The university in Collegedale, Tennessee, had sent out many student volunteers over the years, and now students were divided.

“We will not go,” some students said after the 20-year-old junior education major was killed by a drunken man in 2009. “It’s too dangerous.”

Others remembered the words of early Christian church father Tertullian, quoted in *The Great Controversy*: “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed” (page 41).

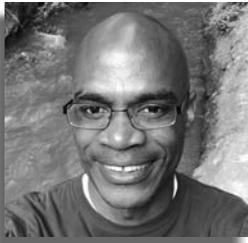
“We will go!” those students said. “We will honor Kirsten’s faith.”

The debate lingered in the mind of Winston Crawford, a 33-year-old theology student, as he walked across the campus on a Sabbath afternoon. He accidentally opened a wrong door and, before he knew it, found himself at an event for student volunteers. He hadn’t known about the event but, because he was there, decided to visit the booths. The woman at one booth spoke about the desperate need for volunteers to teach English in the former Soviet Union. “The program will end if they don’t get anyone,” she said.

Winston’s heart was touched. He hadn’t planned to take a year off, but he thought, *I will honor Kirsten’s faith. I will go.*

He sent away an application and received an invitation to teach in Moscow, Russia. Winston eagerly read about the country as he got his paperwork in order and raised money to buy air tickets. Twelve days before his arrival on April 10, 2010, twin suicide bombers killed 40 people in the Moscow subway. *What did I sign up for?* Winston wondered.

Then he thought about Paul, who had been beaten and left for dead many times. Paul was no coward. He remembered Revelation 21:8, which says the cowardly will not inherit eternal life. He recalled how he had stumbled, seemingly by accident, upon the event with the student volunteers. He remembered Kirsten. *Why would a bomb scare me?* he thought. *God called me to serve. I will go!* Winston went and, a decade later, has no regrets. He grew closer to Christ, and the influence that he had on his students will only be known in eternity. The year changed his life.




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*This mission story illustrates Mission Objective No. 1 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “I Will Go” strategic plan, “To revive the concept of worldwide mission and sacrifice for mission as a way of life involving not only pastors but every church member, young and old, in the joy of witnessing for Christ and making disciples.” Learn more: IWillGo2020.org.*

**Key Text:** *Genesis 41:41*

**Study Focus:** *Gen. 41:37–Gen. 45:28, Rom. 5:7–11.*

## ***Part I: Overview***

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**Introduction:** Joseph not only explains to Pharaoh the meaning of his dream, which concerns the future political and economic problem of the country of Egypt—he also provides Pharaoh with the solution. Joseph does not merely content himself with the revelation of God’s plans. Nor is he passive, waiting for God to perform another miracle. Joseph suggests to Pharaoh that he appoint a “discerning and wise man” (*Gen. 41:33, NKJV*) to manage the complex operation of preparing for the famine. The same words are used to qualify the wisdom that God gives to Solomon (*1 Kings 3:12*) to help him govern the country (*1 Kings 3:9*). Only divine guidance could help solve the impending problem. In addition to this spiritual lesson, Joseph provides a course in economics, and gives specific details about the method and the strategy needed to help Egypt survive the famine. Pharaoh understands, then, that Joseph is not just a dreamer; he also is a man of practical wisdom who knows what to do, as well as a man of action who can implement the right strategy to save the country.

Pharaoh decides, then, to appoint Joseph as the man in charge over the whole country of Egypt and gives him all the power he needs for that purpose. After all the trials Joseph had to endure, this success story should inspire admiration for the hero Joseph. Yet, the focus of the biblical narrative is not Joseph. The happy ending is not about success but about repentance, forgiveness, and God’s invisible presence in the course of history.

## ***Part II: Commentary***

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### **Joseph, Vizier of Egypt**

That Joseph’s exceptional wisdom plays a part in Pharaoh’s decision to appoint him as the vizier of the land is congruent with Egyptian custom to select the viziers preferably from among the wise men (see, for instance, the cases of Ptahhotep and Kagemni, who were viziers and to whom are attributed great works of wisdom literature). The scope of his rule, over the whole land of Egypt (*Gen. 41:41*), suggests that Joseph has been appointed as the new vizier.

Cases of foreign and even Hebrew viziers are attested throughout Egyptian history. The vizier’s responsibilities were considerable; he was

administrator in charge of legal justice and the manager of the land. The fact that Joseph is placed over the entire land confirms that this vizier belongs to the Middle Kingdom or the Second Intermediate Period, when this official could be selected based on his qualities of wisdom (*Gen. 41:39*). In contrast to other periods, during the Second Intermediate Period under the rule of the Hyksos, the viziers were most powerful and provided the most stability despite short reigns.

The description of Pharaoh's investiture of Joseph fits the Egyptian context. The "signet ring" (*Gen. 41:42, NKJV*), which is called in the Hebrew text *tabba'at*, designates the Egyptian signet or seal, *djeba'ot*, a word derived from the word *djeba'*, meaning "finger," referring to its position around the finger. This signet ring extends full authority to Joseph to sign all official documents in the name of the king. The Hebrew term *shes*, designating the "vestures of fine linen" (*Gen. 41:42*), is an Egyptian word referring to linen cloth, which was the primary fabric used for clothing in ancient Egypt. The chain around Joseph's neck (*Gen. 41:42*) refers to the collar on which hung the symbol of the Maat, symbol of equity, which characterized the function of the "vizier," a Turkish word (derived from the Arabic) for the chief minister of state. The rank of "second" (*Gen. 41:43*) is attested in ancient Egypt as the title of the vizier, who was called "the second of the king." The vizier ceremony, involving someone riding on a chariot, preceded by people calling out to invite attention to his passing (*Gen. 41:43*), also is an Egyptian custom. The word *'abrek* (generally translated "bow the knee") that is used in our text is not Hebrew—but Egyptian. In Egyptian, the word *'abrek* means "attention," "make way" (*NIV*). Furthermore, Pharaoh gives Joseph an honorific name to mark the special distinction that is attached to his new function. The Egyptian name that Joseph receives, Zaphnath-Paaneah (*Gen. 41:45*), corresponds to the following Egyptian transliteration: *djfn t'pw' nkh*, meaning "food of the land, this is life."

This reading not only resonates with the present situation, but it also fits the historical context of ancient Egypt at that time, because the use of the introductory component *djfn* (food) is attested in names of high officials of the thirteenth and fourteenth dynasties, immediately preceding Hyksos rule. Pharaoh also gives Joseph an Egyptian wife, the daughter of the "priest of On," one of the most prestigious religious figures in Egypt (*Gen. 41:45*). Joseph is now well accepted in all Egyptian societies and can visit all the places of Egypt (*Gen. 41:45, 46*).

### Joseph Meets His Brothers

After 20 years, Joseph meets again with his brothers. Joseph was 17 years of age when he last saw his brothers and 30 years of age when he became vizier of Egypt, and now, seven years later, at the onset of the famine,

he is 37. This is when his dreams about his father and his brothers bowing before him (*Gen. 37:7–10*) are fulfilled. The fulfillment of Joseph's dreams develops in three stages, because Joseph's brothers visit Egypt and meet with Joseph three times. The first meeting occurs with only ten of Joseph's brothers (*Genesis 42*), those who questioned his dreams and hated him because of these dreams (*Gen. 37:8, 19*). They now bow before Joseph for the first time (*Gen. 42:6*). The second meeting occurs with Joseph's ten brothers and with Joseph's younger brother Benjamin (*Genesis 43–45*); they all bow before Joseph twice (*Gen. 43:26, 28*). The third meeting occurs with Jacob, who comes for the first time to Egypt (*Genesis 46, Genesis 47*).

### Joseph Reveals His Identity

Twenty-two years have elapsed from the time that the 17-year-old Joseph first tells his dreams to his brothers and father to the time when the 39-year-old Joseph makes himself known to his brothers. The verb “made himself known” contains a veiled allusion to God. The only other occurrence of this verbal form in the Old Testament refers to God's revelation of Himself to Moses (*Num. 12:6*). The use of this form suggests that by making himself known to his brothers, Joseph will be the means by which God reveals Himself to them.

Joseph must have noticed their dismay at his revelation that he is their brother, because he repeats a second time: “I am Joseph” (*Gen. 45:3, 4*). The brothers are worried. They may even have doubts about Joseph's claim, because he does not provide any more information than the information that they imparted to him. All of this appears suspicious, particularly considering the more recent experiences they have had with this man. They are concerned for their lives. This is why Joseph repeats a second time, “I am Joseph,” but this time he is more precise and adds a piece of information no one knows, except his brothers: “ ‘Your brother whom you sold into Egypt’ ” (*Gen. 45:4, NKJV*). Then he adds that it was God who “sent” him. God sent him before his brothers for a specific purpose: “to preserve life” (*Gen. 45:5*). Joseph suggests that it was necessary that they sell him to ensure their survival. Thus, the brothers thought they had sold their brother, whereas, in fact, it was God who was leading in that operation.

The formula “father to Pharaoh” (*Gen. 45:8*) reflects the Egyptian title *itf-ntr*, meaning literally “father of God,” which refers to Pharaoh as a god. Joseph does not use the expression as it was in the Egyptian language for fear of sounding blasphemous to his brothers. This was a priestly title, which was borne by the highest officers, including viziers, such as Ptahhotep, vizier of Iseki (2675 B.C.). The other title of Joseph, “ruler throughout all the land of Egypt” (*Gen. 45:8*), refers to his rule

over the entire country of the two lands (Upper and Lower Egypt) and reflects another Egyptian title, *nb t3 wy*, “lord of the two lands,” which was an official permanent title borne by the deputy of Pharaoh. Note that the dual form of the Hebrew word *mitsrayim*, for “Egypt,” reflects the two divisions of Egypt. Joseph’s emphasis on his status in Egypt is intentional: it emphasizes his extraordinary position, thereby reminding his brothers of the dream, which had portrayed him as a ruler to whom all (including his father) would bow (*Gen. 37:9*). Alluding to the dream, Joseph is using the fulfillment of that dream as an implicit argument for God’s providence.

### ***Part III: Life Application***

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**Joseph, Vizier of Egypt.** Compare Joseph and Daniel as statesmen. In what way do these two men serve as models for godly people to be involved in politics? What are the qualities of Joseph in comparison to modern politicians? Why would it be difficult for a Seventh-day Adventist to become a prime minister today? What motivation guided Joseph to become a leader? What lessons of management could we learn from Joseph’s method? In class, discuss practical applications of these lessons in the family life, in your job, and in the church.

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**Joseph Meets His Brothers.** Why, and how, does the fulfillment of prophecy affect your ethical choices? Discuss the relation between how you behave in daily life and your awareness of the time of the end. Why should your hope in the kingdom of God inspire the way you treat others? Discuss with your class the scene of the meeting between Joseph and his brothers; imagine what feelings Joseph must have had. What must have been his feelings when he saw his brothers and his father bow before him? How should you consider your enemies when you see that they have failed, and you have succeeded?

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