

THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

Chapter 3: Joseph: From Slave to Deputy Pharaoh

Key Question: What can we learn from Joseph about trusting God through hardship and betrayal?

From Favorite to Enslavement

Pages 29–31

Everyone knew Joseph was his dad’s favorite. His mother, Rachel, was the only wife his dad had truly loved.³⁷ She was barren, though, and his dad prayed many years for her to have a child. Finally when his dad, Jacob, was 91,³⁸ Rachel gave birth to Joseph, bringing joy to them both.

Joseph was Jacob’s eleventh son. Eventually Rachel became pregnant again, but grief struck when she died giving birth to little Benjamin.

Although the family was blessed in many ways, they suffered tragedies too, some from living in a harsh land and some from Joseph’s brothers’ bad choices,³⁹ including his oldest brother, Reuben, sleeping with his dad’s concubine.⁴⁰

When Joseph was seventeen, Jacob gave him a beautiful coat, inflaming his brothers’ jealousy.

1. (a) What are some of the reasons Joseph’s brothers hated him (Genesis 37:2–11)? (b) What are some areas in which Joseph’s character perhaps needed to grow? (c) What are ways that parents can combat rivalry among their children?

³⁷ Jacob fell in love with his cousin Rachel. His uncle agreed to give him Rachel as wife if Jacob worked for him seven years. Jacob did so, but on his wedding night, his uncle sent Leah into his dark tent. Leah slept with him, letting him think she was Rachel. When Jacob discovered the deception the next morning, he was furious and demanded Rachel as promised. His uncle let him marry Rachel a week later in return for another seven years’ labor. Leah envied Jacob’s love for Rachel. She bore four sons right away and hoped this would cause Jacob to love her like he loved Rachel. Rachel desperately wanted children and out of jealousy over Leah’s sons, gave Jacob her maidservant to bear children for her. The maidservant bore two sons. Leah stopped bearing children for awhile and, competing with Rachel, gave her maidservant to Jacob too. That maidservant also bore two boys. Leah bargained with Rachel to let her sleep with Jacob, and she bore two more sons and a daughter—seven children in all. Finally, Rachel became pregnant and bore Joseph.

³⁸ Jacob came to Egypt when he was 130 (Genesis 47:9) and Joseph was 39 (41:46–47; 45:6), making him 91 at Joseph’s birth.

³⁹ A Canaanite raped Joseph’s sister, and two of his furious brothers (Simeon and Levi) in revenge killed all the city’s men and plundered the city’s goods, women, and children (Genesis 34). Jacob later said their violence towards men and beasts was cruel and cursed (Genesis 49:5–7).

⁴⁰ Genesis 35:22. Firstborn sons inherited their father’s concubines, and Reuben was probably trying to claim prematurely what he thought would be his right one day.

Not long after Joseph had brought a bad report to his father about how his brothers tended their flocks, Jacob again sent Joseph to check on his brothers. The brothers saw him coming and plotted to kill him.

2. (a) How did the oldest brother, Reuben, attempt to rescue Joseph (Genesis 37:21–22)? (b) What plan did Judah—fourth oldest—devise (37:26–27)? (c) The other brothers followed Judah’s leadership. How might Reuben’s incest have eroded his moral authority and lessened his effectiveness as a leader among his brothers?

They sold Joseph to Ishmaelite merchants, who took him to Egypt. To cover their crime, the brothers dipped Joseph’s robe in goat’s blood and gave it to their father so he would think Joseph dead. Jacob was devastated.

Can It get Any Worse?

Pages 31–33

In Egypt, Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard, bought Joseph as a slave.

3. (a) What are some of the feelings Joseph may have had when he found himself a slave in Egypt? (b) Had he ended up in this situation because God had abandoned him (Genesis 39:2)? (c) In what ways did God bless Joseph (39:2–4)? (d) Briefly describe a hardship you endured and how God cared for you through it.

Potiphar's wife thought Joseph handsome and wanted to sleep with him.

4. (a) What did Joseph consider about his master that helped him resist sexual temptation (Genesis 39:8–9a)? (b) What did Joseph consider about God that helped him resist (39:9b)? (c) What actions did Joseph take to resist (39:10)? (d) When he found himself alone with her and entrapped, what did he do (39:11–12)? (e) What can we learn from Joseph about resisting sexual temptation?

The rebuffed temptress accused the young Hebrew of trying to sleep with her, and Potiphar threw Joseph in prison.

5. (a) Was Joseph in prison because God had abandoned him (Genesis 39:21)? (b) What evidence of God's presence did Joseph find (Genesis 39:21–23)? (c) Does faithfulness to God mean we'll never suffer wrongly from the schemes of the wicked on this earth?

The wicked must be permitted to succeed in some evil schemes to expose what's in their hearts and to justify judgment. Yet the New Testament tells us there is a time appointed when the Lord "will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God" (1 Corinthians 4:5).⁴¹

6. (a) What warning should we heed about motives being exposed? (b) What comfort can we derive from this verse when others believe false accusations about us?

⁴¹ In this passage, Paul was responding to false accusations regarding his motives. He says his conscience is clear, but he knows that doesn't mean he's innocent. He tells his accusers not to judge his motives, which are for now hidden in darkness but will be exposed and open to judgment at the appointed time.

Joseph again served faithfully in the difficult, undeserved circumstances in which he found himself. One night two fellow prisoners had prophetic dreams, and God showed Joseph their interpretations. He told one of the prisoners he would be freed in three days and asked for help clearing his name. The man was freed, but forgot Joseph.

Two years later, Pharaoh had a disturbing dream, and the exonerated prisoner told him about Joseph.

7. (a) How did Joseph know what certain dreams meant (Genesis 41:16)? (b) Joseph told Pharaoh the dreams were God revealing to Pharaoh that seven years of abundance would be followed by seven years of famine. He advised Pharaoh on how to prepare for the famine. How did God exalt Joseph (41:39–40)?

Dreams Proved Prophetic

Pages 34–37

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered Pharaoh's service.⁴² He collected grain during the abundant years. When the predicted drought arrived and famine began to spread, he sold the grain to those in need. Joseph's ten older brothers were among those who came to buy grain. When they bowed before him, Joseph recognized them and realized the dreams he had told his brothers about when he was seventeen had now come to pass.

8. (a) How did the dreams let Joseph know he had been in God's hands through all the hard times? (b) Joseph said he wanted to find out if they were "honest men." The brothers assumed he meant only whether they were honest about not being spies. About what else might Joseph have wanted to know whether they were being honest (Genesis 42:19–20)? (c) Is it wise to test someone who has intentionally sinned against you before trusting him or her? Why or why not?

⁴² Genesis 41:46.

9. (a) Joseph overheard his brothers talking about how they had treated him two decades before. What were they feeling (42:21–23)? (b) What do you think it was like for them to carry their secret for over twenty years, knowing they'd greatly grieved both their brother and their father? (c) What did overhearing this conversation tell Joseph about his brothers? (d) Joseph kept Simeon⁴³ in prison until the others returned with Benjamin. Do you think Simeon felt this imprisonment was just? Why or why not (42:21, 24)?

Jacob wouldn't let them take Benjamin to Egypt until they ran out of food and he had no choice. Judah told his father he would be personally responsible for Benjamin's safe return, and the brothers returned to Egypt with Benjamin.

Secrets Revealed

Pages 37–40

Joseph had tests for the men who had once gone to extraordinary, dishonest means to get rid of a brother of whom they were jealous. He offered them an easy and legitimate way to dispose of another. First he served a meal and gave Benjamin five times the food as the rest. Then he had his steward place his silver cup in Benjamin's sack of grain. The next morning, the steward found the cup in Benjamin's sack.

10. (a) If the older brothers were still driven by jealousy, how would they have reacted to Benjamin's receiving more food than they (Genesis 43:34)? (b) When the steward found the cup in Benjamin's sack, what did Judah say had been uncovered, and what do you think he meant by it (44:16)?

⁴³ Simeon was the second oldest. Perhaps Joseph chose him because he now knew that Reuben, the oldest, had tried to rescue Joseph from the others.

Joseph said he would keep Benjamin as a slave while the rest returned to their father in peace.

11. (a) In what ways had Judah's heart changed since he devised the plan to sell Joseph (Genesis 44:33–34)? (b) What did Joseph now know about his brothers' intentions towards Benjamin?

Joseph sent away his attendants and wept loudly, the pain of all he'd suffered pouring from his heart and the knowledge that his brothers mourned their ill-treatment of him spreading salve over his wounds.⁴⁴ Speaking in Hebrew to them for the first time, he told them who he was.

12. (a) How did Joseph try to comfort his terrified brothers (Genesis 45:5)? (b) Why had God allowed the brothers to carry out their cruel act (45:5–8)? (c) If possible, describe a good that came out of a wrong done to you, without naming wrongdoers.

God's Plan

Pages 40–42

Joseph told his brothers to bring his father to Egypt. That meant confessing to their father the secret sin that had weighed on them so long.

13. If you've confessed a burdensome secret to someone mature who loved and accepted you, briefly describe your feelings before and after.

⁴⁴ For more on how Joseph triumphed over betrayal and forgave his brothers, see www.jeanejones.net/2012/06/joseph-triumph-over-betrayal.

The family lived together in Egypt. Seventeen years later, Jacob knew he was close to death and adopted Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, so they would inherit as one of his other children.⁴⁵ In this way he gave Joseph the double-inheritance of a firstborn son.⁴⁶ Then he blessed his twelve sons and prophesied over them. There was a special promise to Judah, who had been willing to lay down his life for his youngest brother for the sake of his love for his father:

The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his. *Genesis 49:10*

After Jacob died, the ten oldest brothers feared Joseph's wrath. They sent Joseph a message saying their father wanted him to forgive them, and they asked his forgiveness.

14. (a) How was the brothers' offering themselves as slaves appropriate (Genesis 50:18)? (b) How did Joseph demonstrate forgiveness (50:19–21)? (c) How can you demonstrate forgiveness to someone who wants your forgiveness?

Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

15. (a) How did God work all things in Joseph's life for good? (b) Why is faith in God's ability to work good out of bad circumstances necessary to forgive those who have wronged us in ways that seem irreparable?⁴⁷ (c) Describe the good God worked from a hardship that you couldn't imagine good coming from while you were in the midst of it. (d) What lessons do you need to remember to trust God through the current or next hardship you encounter?

Prophets' lives sometimes foretold momentous future events. Next week we'll see how just as Joseph went from favorite to enslavement to exaltation, so did the growing nation of Israel.

⁴⁵ Jacob also said that when their descendants returned to the Promised Land and the territories were named for the sons, Manasseh and Ephraim would have territories named for them (Genesis 48:5–6).

⁴⁶ The oldest son, Reuben, sacrificed his right to it when he slept with his father's concubine (Genesis 49:3–4).

⁴⁷ Sometimes we don't know the good God brings until heaven.