

Lesson 4 | September 24, 2023

Joseph's Story Begins

Study Text: Genesis 37:1–36

Central Truth: God is present with us through the Holy Spirit in good and bad times.

Key Verse: Genesis 39:2

The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian (KJV).

The LORD was with Joseph, so he succeeded in everything he did as he served in the home of his Egyptian master (NLT).

Learning Objectives:

- Students will examine the story of Joseph and his brothers, recognizing the dangers of favoritism and bitterness within the body of Christ.
- Students will be challenged to ask God to show them if they are allowing any destructive attitudes to be active in their lives.
- Students will seek God's help for peace and perspective when faced with trials and injustices.

Introducing the Study

Say: Maybe you've heard the saying, "The waiting is the hard part." Waiting for something good is hard enough, but it is far more difficult to remain patient in uncertainty—when we have to wait and see whether things will turn out right.

Opening Activity—Waiting

Ask: *What are some of the most exciting times of waiting in a person's life? What are some of the most challenging? Examples include waiting for a birthday or Christmas, looking forward to vacation or a family gathering, and awaiting results from a medical test.*

Say: Waiting can be filled with excited anticipation or anxious uncertainty. This is even true—sometimes *especially* true—for God's people. As we continue to move through early Israelite history and trace the fulfillment of God's covenant promises, we come today to Joseph—who endured unthinkable challenges and uncertainty with complete faith and trust in God. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Genesis 29:31 through 30:24 contains an interesting account of Jacob's growing family. It is a story of jealousy, heartache, joy, and ruthless competition. At the end of all this, Jacob's beloved wife Rachel gave birth to Joseph. His story comprises the remainder of Genesis and includes critical reminders of God's care for His people and the sovereignty of His plan. This lesson looks at Joseph's first great trial, which was brought about by family dysfunction, jealousy, malice, and treachery. However, this sad series of

events will set the stage for another marvelous display of God's power, provision, and promise.

Part 1—Joseph's Prophetic Dreams

Family Dysfunction

Genesis 37:1–4

Say: Every family has issues. Conflict is inevitable when people live together in close relationships for years. Many families move past these problems and enjoy each other's company for a lifetime. But on occasion, serious problems take root and grow, eventually dividing the family. We see the seeds of this sad reality begin to sprout in Genesis 37:1–4. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Genesis 37:1–2 introduces us to the next chapter in the lineage of Abraham as Joseph takes center stage—although he was (at that time) Jacob's youngest son. **(He probably was not.) Benjamin was born in Chapter 35.)** As we have seen time and again throughout Genesis, God's ways are different from human ways as He chooses people who might otherwise have been overlooked.

To review the story of Joseph and his brothers' births, we can look back to Genesis 29–30. Jacob loved Laban's daughter Rachel. He worked for seven years to marry her. But Laban deceived Jacob into marrying Rachel's older sister, Leah, instead. Jacob promised seven more years of work and was allowed to marry Rachel as well. Leah and the servants of both wives bore Jacob ten sons before his beloved Rachel bore him a son "in his old age" (verse 37:3, NLT) and named the boy Joseph. His name means "may he add," for Rachel said, "May the LORD add yet another son to my family" (30:24, NLT).

One might expect that Jacob would have learned from his own experience that parental favoritism and sibling rivalries lead to serious family problems. However, this kind of dysfunction festered not only between Leah and Rachel, but also among Jacob's own children. Genesis 37:3 is key to understanding this dysfunction: "Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children" (NLT).

Unsurprisingly, competition and rivalry played a significant role in Joseph's life. At age seventeen, when Joseph was watching his father's flocks with four of his brothers, he witnessed them doing "bad things" and reported it to Jacob (verse 2, NLT). It isn't difficult to imagine how animosity would develop between Joseph and his brothers.

Jacob's favor for Joseph took the form of a special gift: an elaborately decorated coat (verse 3). This garment would serve as a constant reminder to his brothers that Joseph held an elevated place in his father's heart. Some commentators suggest the coat was a sign that Jacob wanted to pass family leadership to Joseph, which would only have infuriated his brothers more. They ultimately grew to hate Joseph and expressed their hatred openly (verse 4).

We have read the end of Genesis, so we know God would eventually use Joseph to save his family and his people. But here in chapter 37, only God knew how things would turn out. Joseph's early family life was full of offenses, misunderstandings, and hostility. In fact, he faced many of the same family challenges we experience today. We can find hope in Joseph's story. Regardless of our upbringing or any issues or trauma we have experienced, God can use us to bring glory to His name when we trust and surrender to Him.

Discuss

? Favoritism is destructive and divisive. Scripture warns Christians against it (see James 2:1–10).

? [Jas 2:6-8 KJV] 6 But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? 7 Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called? 8 If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well:

? In what ways might Christians show favoritism and what damage might it do?

? What Scriptures or accounts in the Bible could bring hope to someone plagued by the trauma of a difficult childhood? Story of Job and of Joseph.

Division over Dreams

Genesis 37:5–11

Say: Jacob openly displayed favoritism to Rachel and then Joseph, showering them with special treatment and gifts. It is not hard to understand why animosity existed between Joseph and his brothers. But things were about to get much worse. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Genesis 37:5 records that Joseph had a dream (followed in verse 9 by a second, similar one). When he told his brothers, they hated him all the more. **In the Ancient Near East, dreams were associated with divine communication and prophecy. So in his brothers' eyes, Joseph was not only the favored younger son, but he now claimed God was prophesying about his future. Perhaps we can understand their response; after all, Joseph had dreamed he would one day rule over them** (verses 6–8).

This begs the question, What might have been Joseph's motivation for telling his brothers about the first dream? Verse 8 gives us a clue: "They hated him all the more because of his dreams and the way he talked about them" (NLT). **This suggests they found something offensive in his attitude.**

Joseph's insensitivity and immaturity might also be indicated in his father's rebuke after Joseph related the details of his second dream (verses 9–11). While Jacob recognized such dreams could have great significance, he also saw how divisive they could be. The implications of Joseph's dreams upended the entire social order of the family. Would the youngest son presume to exert dominion over even his parents? Perhaps Joseph would have been wise to keep the dreams to himself until he better understood their meaning.

His choices—and their results—may provide guidance for us as well. While any messages we receive from God are good and we may feel compelled to share them, it is often wise to keep such revelations to ourselves until God instructs us to share them.

Discuss

- ? Was Joseph wise to tell his family about his dreams? Why or why not?
- ? Why should we use discretion when talking about God’s work in our lives?

Part 2—Plot to Harm Joseph

The Trap Is Set

Genesis 37:12–20

Say: Has anyone ever plotted against you? Maybe they didn’t intend to physically harm you, but to undermine you at work or school. Such experiences can be extremely hurtful, and healing takes time. Genesis 37:12–20 records just such a vindictive plot against Joseph. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Joseph’s brothers had moved their flocks of sheep north to Shechem (37:12). **This trip of twenty miles created a communication challenge for the family. About two years earlier, the family had experienced a terrible tragedy and killed all the men in that town (see Genesis 34), so Jacob may have had good reasons to feel concerned for his sons’ well-being.** So he sent Joseph to check on them (37:13–14). When he arrived at Shechem, Joseph found his brothers had traveled twenty miles past Shechem to the town of Dothan (verses 15–17). To find them, Joseph had to travel far from the security and familiarity of Bethel.

Joseph finally located his brothers and the flocks in Dothan. Unsurprisingly, **his brothers were not happy to see him coming (verse 18), and before he even reached them, they began making plans to kill him. Joseph walked right into their trap.**

His brothers mockingly called Joseph “the dreamer” as he approached (verse 19, NLT), indicating the deep resentment they felt toward him. The brothers initially planned to kill Joseph and throw his body into a cistern (verse 20), which was a large, bottle-shaped pit or cavern hewn out of rock and used to store water. With a depth of up to twenty feet, a cistern made an excellent dungeon. The brothers reasoned that they would tell Jacob a wild beast had killed Joseph. Viewed strictly from a human perspective, this conspiracy threatened to thwart the promises Joseph had received from God through his dreams.

Crises often challenge our faith in God’s promises. But we must remember that hard times do not indicate our trust is misplaced, even when we cannot perceive how the situation will resolve. When we trust God’s promises, such times are opportunities for the Lord to receive even greater glory for fulfilling His Word.

Resource Packet Item 1: Our Response

Distribute the worksheet and have students complete it on their own. Discuss their responses to the degree that students feel comfortable sharing. Pray for one another, asking God to help any who face such feelings or situations today.

Discuss

- ? How should we interpret events that seem to contradict the promises God has given us?
- ? How do you usually respond to challenging circumstances?

Joseph Is Sold into Slavery

Genesis 37:21–28

Say: **Why do bad things happen to God's people?** This question has been discussed countless times through history. **It is a fact of life in this fallen world that no human is exempt from trouble.** Joseph was certainly no exception. Worse still, the injustice he suffered came at the hands of his own brothers. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

As the plan to kill Joseph was being formulated by the brothers, Reuben spoke up to intervene on Joseph's behalf (Genesis 37:21–22). As the oldest brother, Reuben took the lead in declaring they should spare Joseph's life so there would be no blood on their hands. Instead, they should throw him alive into a cistern. **Reuben planned to come back secretly to rescue Joseph and take him home to Jacob.**

When Joseph arrived, his brothers did precisely as Reuben had said (verses 23–24). Shortly afterwards, however, they spotted a caravan of traders passing by (verse 25). **With Reuben gone, Judah saw an opportunity to make a profit and get rid of their brother without committing murder** (verses 26–27). They sold Joseph to the merchants for twenty shekels of silver—**a couple hundred dollars in today's money**. The merchants, in turn, took Joseph to Egypt to be sold into enslavement. Joseph's dreams seemed to have been derailed.

In fact, this was just the beginning of Joseph's story. **Seemingly hopeless circumstances do not mean God is angry with us or we have missed His will. Sometimes, other people's misguided or sinful behavior unavoidably impacts our lives.** When this happens, we must be careful not to allow our attitude toward God to be negatively affected. Instead, we must keep in mind that God is always working out His purposes for our lives and His glory.

Resource Packet Item 2: The Decision

Distribute the case study. Have students read it, and then discuss the questions in class. While we may not face the prospect of enslavement or physical harm, there will be times when God's plans bring opposition. We must be prepared to keep our focus through the hard times.

Discuss

? How would you respond to someone who asked, “Why do terrible things sometimes happen to people who have placed their trust in Christ?”

? Why is it important for Christians to remember and make peace with the fact we may face hardship directly because of our faith in Christ?

Part 3—Joseph Sold into Slavery The Plot Begins

Genesis 37:29–32

Say: Even when Joseph’s life seemed to hit rock bottom, not all hope was lost. **No human interference could keep God’s plan from continuing to unfold in Joseph’s life.** (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Reuben appears to have gone elsewhere after Joseph was dumped in the cistern. When he returned to find the cistern empty, he was distraught and filled with despair (Genesis 37:29). He tore his clothes in grief, indicating the love and concern he felt for his father Jacob, if not his brother Joseph. He lamented to his brothers, “The boy is gone! What will I do now?” (verse 30, NLT). He realized he could not go home to his father without Joseph—or at least a story of what had happened to him.

The brothers proceeded with their original plan to deceive Jacob, faking Joseph’s death by ripping his coat and soaking it in goat’s blood. Note the tragic irony here: Many years earlier, Jacob had slaughtered a goat to deceive his father at his brother’s expense. Now his sons slaughtered another goat to deceive him at their brother’s expense. Remember, while this was God’s chosen family, their struggles, weaknesses, and failures were all too real.

The brothers sent the remains of Joseph’s garment to their father, insinuating a tragedy had taken place (verses 31–32). Note the cunning nature of their message. They established their innocence by claiming not to know if the bloodied coat actually belonged to Joseph while also betraying their hatred for him by refusing to call him their brother: “Doesn’t this robe belong to your son?” (verse 32, NLT). Then, displaying unthinkable cruelty, they left it to their aged father to assume Joseph had died a horrible death.

Discuss

? In what ways can you see God’s mercy at work in this sad story?

Jacob Is Devastated; Joseph Arrives in Egypt

Genesis 37:33–36

Say: Two contrasting scenes unfold in Genesis 37:33–36. The first depicts horrible grief. The second indicates God’s plan is still moving forward. As you read, reflect on

the marvelous literature of Scripture: It tells an ongoing story while also reminding us that a larger story is unfolding. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

It is difficult to imagine the agony Jacob must have felt when he recognized the torn, bloody remains of the coat he had given his beloved son Joseph (verses 33–34). The one he cherished above all others had been violently taken from him. He had no idea his other sons were the true source of his grief. It is the height of hypocrisy that the brothers attempted to console Jacob rather than confessing their treachery and attempting to rescue Joseph while it remained a possibility.

Jacob refused to be comforted (verse 35), vowing to take his grief to the grave. His sorrow is understandable given the circumstances. Grief is a natural emotion. Even Jesus grieved, indicating that it is in no way sinful (see John 11:32–35). However, inconsolable grief is dangerous, because it can harden into bitterness against God and others.

The days to come would be difficult for both Jacob and Joseph, but Genesis 37:36 hints at the future of God's people. Joseph would be enslaved in Egypt, but his destiny would shift dramatically through God's intervention. Likewise, the people of God would be enslaved in Egypt, but God would ultimately deliver them into the Promised Land. That pattern of enslavement and redemption foreshadows our own exodus from sin to eternal life through Christ. It also reminds us that God's plan for our future may be far different from whatever circumstances we are facing today.

Resource Packet Item 3: Enduring Promises

Distribute the worksheet and encourage students to complete it during their personal devotion times throughout the week.

Discuss

- ? Describe a time when God and others helped you through a season of grief.
- ? What changes in a Christian's life when he or she recognizes God is always at work in every circumstance?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Viewed out of context, there is not much hope or joy evident in this lesson. Maybe you could say the same about your life today. But learn this truth from the story of Joseph: In His perfect time, God will keep His promises and His plan will come to pass. As you move forward in your walk with the Lord today, have faith. He holds your future in His hands.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Pray together that God will help you treat others equally, regardless of their status or your personal feelings.

- Take the initiative to seek unity and reconciliation with a fellow believer with whom you have differences.
- Seek out someone who is going through difficult circumstances and offer to pray with them.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Sin Prevented by a Dream.
Genesis 20:1–7

Tuesday:

God Revealed in a Dream.
Genesis 28:10–17

Wednesday:

Encouraged by a Dream.
Judges 7:9–18

Thursday:

Instructed by a Dream.
Matthew 1:18–25

Friday:

Warned by a Dream.
Matthew 2:7–12

Saturday:

Spirit-Inspired Dreams.
Acts 2:14–21