

Joseph, Master of Dreams



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Genesis 37; Matt. 20:26, 27; Acts 7:9; Genesis 38; Genesis 39; Gen. 40:1–41:36.*

Memory Text: “Then they said to one another, ‘Look, this dreamer is coming!’ ” (*Genesis 37:19, NKJV*).

The story of Joseph (*Genesis 37–50*) covers the last section of the book of Genesis, from his first dreams in Canaan (*Gen. 37:1–11*) to his death in Egypt (*Gen. 50:26*). In fact, Joseph occupies more space in the book of Genesis than does any other patriarch. Although Joseph is just one of Jacob's sons, he is presented in Genesis as a great patriarch, like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

As we will see, too, the life of Joseph highlights two important theological truths: first, God fulfills His promises; second, God can turn evil into good.

In this week's study, we will focus on the early life of Joseph. He is Jacob's favorite son, who is ironically nicknamed *ba'al hakhalomot*, the “dreamer” (*Gen. 37:19*), which means literally “master of dreams,” implying that he is an expert of dreams. This title fits him very well, because he not only receives, understands, and interprets prophetic dreams, but he also fulfills them in his life, as well.

In these chapters, we will see, again, that God's providence is affirmed, despite the evil and wickedness of the human heart.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 11.

Family Troubles

Jacob has, at last, settled in the land. While Isaac was only “a stranger,” the text also says that Jacob “dwelt in the land” (*Gen. 37:1*). Yet, it was then, as he was settling into the land, that the troubles began, this time from inside the family. The controversy does not concern the possession of the land or the use of a well; it is, mainly, spiritual.

Read Genesis 37:1–11. What family dynamic predisposed Joseph’s brothers to hate him so much?

From the very beginning, we understand that Joseph, the son of Jacob’s old age (*Gen. 37:3*), enjoyed a special relationship with his father, who “loved him more than all his brothers” (*Gen. 37:4, NKJV*). Jacob even went so far as to make Joseph “a tunic of many colors” (*Gen. 37:3, NKJV*), a prince’s garment (*2 Sam. 13:18*), an indication of Jacob’s secret intention to elevate Joseph, Rachel’s first son, to the status of firstborn.

The future will, indeed, confirm Jacob’s wishes because Joseph eventually will receive the rights of the firstborn (*1 Chron. 5:2*). No wonder, then, that Joseph’s brothers hated him so much and could not even engage in peaceful conversations with him (*Gen. 37:4*).

Furthermore, Joseph would bring bad reports to his father about any reprehensible behavior from his brothers (*Gen. 37:2*). No one likes a snitch.

So, when Joseph shared his dreams, suggesting that God would put him in a higher position and that they, his brothers, would bow before him, they hated him even more. The genuine prophetic character of the dreams was even ratified by the fact that they are repeated (*see Gen. 41:32*). Although Jacob openly rebuked his son (*Gen. 37:10*), he kept this incident in his mind, meditating on its meaning and waiting for its fulfillment (*Gen. 37:11*). The implication is that, perhaps, deep down he thought there might be something to these dreams after all. He was right, however much he couldn’t know it at the time.

Read Matthew 20:26, 27. What crucial principle is revealed here, and how can we learn to manifest in our own lives what it teaches?

The Attack on Joseph

However horrible the events that were to follow, they're not hard to comprehend. To be in that close proximity to, and even to be related to, someone whom you hated would inevitably lead, sooner or later, only to trouble.

And it did.

Read Genesis 37:12–36. What does this teach us about how dangerous and evil unregenerate hearts can be and what they can lead any one of us to do?

The brothers hate Joseph because they are jealous of God's favor (*Acts* 7:9), a favor that will be confirmed at each step in the next course of events. When Joseph has lost his way, a man finds him and guides him (*Gen.* 37:15). When Joseph's brothers plot to kill him, Reuben intervenes and suggests that he be thrown into a pit instead (*Gen.* 37:20–22).

It's hard to imagine the kind of hatred expressed here, especially for someone of their own household. How could these young men have done something so cruel? Did they not think, even for a few moments, about how this would impact their own father? Whatever resentment they might have had toward their father because he favored Joseph, to do this to one of his children was, truly, despicable. What a powerful manifestation of just how evil human beings can be.

"But some of them [the brothers] were ill at ease; they did not feel the satisfaction they had anticipated from their revenge. Soon a company of travelers was seen approaching. It was a caravan of Ishmaelites from beyond Jordan, on their way to Egypt with spices and other merchandise. Judah now proposed to sell their brother to these heathen traders instead of leaving him to die. While he would be effectually put out of their way, they would remain clear of his blood."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 211.

After they cast him into the pit, planning to kill him later, a caravan passes, and Judah proposes to his brothers to sell Joseph to them (*Gen.* 37:26, 27). After Joseph is sold to the Midianites (*Gen.* 37:28), the Midianites sell him to someone in Egypt (*Gen.* 37:36), thus anticipating his future glory.

Why is it so important to seek God's power in order to change bad traits of character before they can manifest themselves in acts that, at one point in your life, you would never have imagined yourself doing?

Judah and Tamar

The story of Tamar is not out of place here. This incident follows chronologically the sale of Joseph in Egypt (*Gen. 38:1*), and it is consistent with the fact that Judah has just left his brothers, which points to his disagreement with them. In addition, the text shares a number of common words and motifs with the preceding chapter, and it carries the same theological lesson: an evil act will be turned into a positive event linked to salvation.

Read Genesis 38. Compare Judah’s behavior with that of the Canaanite Tamar. Who of the two is more righteous, and why?

Judah finds a Canaanite wife (*Gen. 38:2*) with whom he has three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah gives the Canaanite Tamar as wife to Er, his firstborn, in order to ensure proper genealogy. When Er and Onan are killed by God because of their wickedness, Judah promises his last son, Shelah, to Tamar.

When, after some time, Judah seems to have forgotten his promise, as he goes to comfort himself after the death of his wife, Tamar decides to play the prostitute in order to force him to fulfill his promise. Because Judah has no cash to pay the prostitute, whom he does not recognize, he promises to send her, later, a goat from his flock.

Tamar requires that, in the meantime, he give her his signet and cord and his staff as an immediate guarantee of payment. Tamar will get pregnant from this unique encounter. When, later, accused of playing the harlot, she will show to the accuser, Judah, his signet and cord and his staff. Judah understands and apologizes.

The conclusion of this sordid story is the birth of Perez, meaning “breaking through,” who, like Jacob, is born second, and becomes first, and is named in salvation history as the ancestor of David (*Ruth 4:18–22*), and ultimately of Jesus Christ (*Matt. 1:3*). As for Tamar, she is the first of the four women—followed by Rahab (*Matt. 1:5*), Ruth (*Matt. 1:5, 6*), and the wife of Uriah (*Matt. 1:6*)—who genealogically preceded Mary, the mother of Jesus (*Matt. 1:16*).

One lesson we can take from this story: just as God saved Tamar through His grace, transforming evil into good, so will He save His people through the cross of Jesus. And in the case of Joseph, He will turn his troubles into the salvation of Jacob and his sons.

Joseph, a Slave in Egypt

We now pick up the flow of Joseph's stories, which have been "interrupted" by the Tamar incident. Joseph is now working as a slave for the "captain of the guard," who is in charge of the prison for royal officials (*Gen. 40:3, 4; Gen. 41:10–12*).

Read Genesis 39. In light of the example of Joseph's working as a manager under Potiphar, what are the factors that led to such success?

Almost immediately, Joseph was characterized as a man of success (*Gen. 39:2, 3*). He was so good, and his master so trusted him that "all that he had he put into his hand," and Potiphar even made him "overseer over his house" (*Gen 39:4*).

Joseph's success, however, does not corrupt him. When Potiphar's wife notices him and wants to sleep with him, Joseph unambiguously refuses and prefers to lose his job and his security rather than "do this great wickedness, and sin against God" (*Gen. 39:9*). The woman, humiliated by Joseph's refusal, reports falsely to her servants and to her husband that Joseph wanted to rape her. As a result, Joseph is cast into prison.

Joseph experiences here what we all have experienced: the sense of abandonment by God, though, even in this difficult time, "the LORD was with Joseph" (*Gen. 39:21*).

Eventually, the Lord acts, and it has an impact on Joseph's relationship with the officer of the prison. Here, too, as in his master's house, the Lord blesses Joseph. He obviously is a gifted man, and despite even worse circumstances now (after all, before, he was still a slave!), he seeks to make the best of it. Whatever his gifts, however, the text makes it clear that, in the end, it was only God who brought him success. "The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper" (*Gen. 39:23, NKJV*). How important that all who are gifted, all who are "successful," remember where it all comes from!

Read Genesis 39:7–12. How did Joseph resist the advances of Potiphar's wife? Why did Joseph specifically say that to do what she asked would be a sin against God? What understanding does he show of the nature of sin and what it is?

The Dreams of Pharaoh

Read Genesis 40:1–41:36. How are the dreams of Pharaoh related to the dreams of the officers? What is the significance of this parallel?

The providential character of the events continues. Over time, Joseph is put in charge of the prisoners, two of whom happen to be former officers of Pharaoh, a butler and a baker (*Gen. 41:9–11*). They are both troubled by dreams that they cannot understand, because “there is no interpreter” (*Gen. 40:8*). Joseph, then, interprets their respective dreams.

In a parallel to the two officers’ dreams, Pharaoh also has two dreams, which no one can interpret (*Gen. 41:1–8*). At that moment the butler providentially remembers Joseph and recommends him to Pharaoh (*Gen. 41:9–13*).

In a parallel to the other dreams, Pharaoh, like the officers, is troubled, and, like them, reveals his dreams (*Gen. 41:14–24*), and Joseph interprets them. Like the officers’ dreams, Pharaoh’s dreams display parallels of symbols: the two series of seven cows (fat and gaunt) just as the two series of heads of grain (plump and thin) represent two series of years, one good and one bad. The seven cows parallel the seven heads of grain, repeating the same message, an evidence of their divine origin, just like Joseph’s dreams (*Gen. 41:32; compare with Gen. 37:9*).

Though Joseph is the one who interpreted the dream for Pharaoh, Joseph makes certain that Pharaoh knows that it was God, *Elohim*, who showed the king the things that He, God, was going to do (*Gen. 41:25, 28*). It seems, too, that Pharaoh got the message because, when he decided to appoint someone to be over the land, his argument was as follows:

“ ‘Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word’ ” (*Gen. 41:39, 40, NKJV*).

How fascinating: thanks to God, Joseph goes from ruler over Potiphar’s house to ruler over the prison to ruler over all of Egypt. What a powerful story about how, even amid what look like terrible circumstances, God’s providences are revealed.

How can we learn to trust God and cling to His promises when events don’t appear providential at all, and indeed, God seems silent?

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

“In early life, just as they were passing from youth to manhood, Joseph and Daniel were separated from their homes and carried as captives to heathen lands. Especially was Joseph subject to the temptations that attend great changes of fortune. In his father’s home a tenderly cherished child; in the house of Potiphar a slave, then a confidant and companion; a man of affairs, educated by study, observation, contact with men; in Pharaoh’s dungeon a prisoner of state, condemned unjustly, without hope of vindication or prospect of release; called at a great crisis to the leadership of the nation—what enabled him to preserve his integrity? . . .

“In his childhood, Joseph had been taught the love and fear of God. Often in his father’s tent, under the Syrian stars, he had been told the story of the night vision at Bethel, of the ladder from heaven to earth, and the descending and ascending angels, and of Him who from the throne above revealed Himself to Jacob. He had been told the story of the conflict beside the Jabbok, when, renouncing cherished sins, Jacob stood conqueror, and received the title of a prince with God.

“A shepherd boy, tending his father’s flocks, Joseph’s pure and simple life had favored the development of both physical and mental power. By communion with God through nature and the study of the great truths handed down as a sacred trust from father to son, he had gained strength of mind and firmness of principle.

“In the crisis of his life, when making that terrible journey from his childhood home in Canaan to the bondage which awaited him in Egypt, looking for the last time on the hills that hid the tents of his kindred, Joseph remembered his father’s God. He remembered the lessons of his childhood, and his soul thrilled with the resolve to prove himself true—ever to act as became a subject of the King of heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, pp. 51, 52.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Compare Joseph with Daniel and Jesus. What are their common points? How do Joseph and Daniel, in their own ways, reveal aspects of what Jesus would be like?
- ② In class, talk about the question at the end of Thursday’s study. How do we learn to trust God when things don’t turn out as well for us as they did, eventually, for Joseph?