

Joseph, Prince of Egypt



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?

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?

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?

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?

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.)

“ ‘I Am Joseph Your Brother’ ”

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

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?

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?