



# **Rags to Riches:**

**A Glance at the Providence of God**

**A Six Week Study in**

**Genesis 37 - 50**

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## **A Glance at the Providence of God**

Why do we love to cheer for the underdog? It seems there is something innate in each individual that knows the human potential for greatness and change. It is difficult to find a more dramatic, inspiring account of such a victory than the story found at the end of Genesis. What begins through a series of tragic events culminates into something wonderfully unexpected. As the conclusion to the first book of the Bible, Joseph's story is one of the oldest and most basic elements of Israel's history, explaining how the Israelites came to be located in Egypt, where they were later enslaved and held captive by Pharaoh and finally freed through the Exodus.

The story begins with a family portrait. Jacob (also called Israel) is the father of 12 sons, of which Joseph and Benjamin are the youngest. As the only children of Jacob's most beloved wife, Rachel, they are favored above the other brothers – especially Joseph. This favoritism leads to intense family tension and a course of events that can only be described as a display of God's awesome Providence. This is the story of...

### ***Joseph.***

*Session 1: Chapters 37, 39*  
*Sold & Seduced*

*Session 2: Chapters 40-41*  
*Dreams Deciphered*

*Session 3: Chapters 42-43*  
*Journeys to Egypt*

*Session 4: Chapters 44-45*  
*Identity*

*Session 5: Chapters 46-47*  
*Perfect Provision*

*Session 6: Chapters 48-50*  
*The End of the Road*

## Session 1: Chapters 37 & 39



### Sold & Seduced

#### Helpful Hints:

- This story takes place in the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1550 BC). Exact dates are widely debated.
- A sheaf = a bundle of harvested grain stalks.
- Joseph's "coat of many colors" was more precisely a long robe with sleeves extending to his wrists. This kind of coat was commonly worn by royalty and was thus very expensive.
- In v. 10 Joseph refers to "your mother and I." But Rachel is dead (35:19)! This probably means that Leah (Rachel's sister) became their step-mother after Rachel's death.

#### *Study Questions:*

1. From the outset Joseph was different.
  - a. Why did Israel favor Joseph over his other sons (according to 37:3)?
  
  - b. What did Joseph and Benjamin have in common? (See 35:24)
  
2. What kind of favoritism did Jacob grow up with in his family? (25:28)
  - a. It's probable that Jacob told his sons stories from his childhood (about how he overcame Esau in chapter 27, for example). How might this family history have affected the brothers' treatment of Joseph?
  
  - b. From your experience, what does favoritism do in families? In the workplace?
  
3. Joseph's dream painted a picture of what the Lord was going to do. What does the text say about why Joseph shared the dream with his family? (37:5).
  - a. What do you think motivated Joseph to tell the others about his dream?
  
  - b. Jacob rebukes Joseph for sharing the dream, but 37:11 says that he kept the matter "in mind." What do you think was going on in Jacob's mind?

4. As you read 37:12-14, do Jacob and Joseph appear aware of the intense jealousy the brothers are harboring?
5. Look back at Genesis 35:22. Why do you think Reuben attempted to save Joseph (37:21)? Pure brotherly love?
6. As you read 37:25-28, put yourself in Joseph's place. What emotions do you think he experienced during this ordeal?
7. After reading chapter 38, do you think Judah appears to be an honorable man?
8. By chapter 39, Joseph has been sold as a slave in Egypt. Despite betrayal and difficult circumstances, 39:2 says "the Lord was with Joseph, and he prospered."
  - a. What are some of the evidences in 39:2-7 of his "prospering?"
  - b. Can you think of a time when things were tough, but you "prospered?"
  - c. How does knowing that "the Lord is with you" affect your daily life?
9. In what ways does Joseph attempt to guard himself from sin in 39:8-10? What lessons can we draw from Joseph's example?

→ ***Take it to Work*** ←

Joseph was a great example for Christians who work in a secular environment. During his time in Potiphar's household, how did Joseph:

- (1) Maintain his integrity?
- (2) Evidence a great work ethic?

## Session 2: Chapters 40-41



### Dreams Deciphered

#### Helpful Hints:

- Joseph's time serving in Potiphar's house and in prison totaled between 11-15 years.
- In the ancient Near East, dream interpretations were sought by experts who had been trained in the methods of the day. It was believed that the gods communicated through dreams but revealed their meanings through the wisdom of "magicians."
- The birthday of Pharaoh was one of only two days during the year that prisoners might be granted amnesty. The other day was the anniversary of Pharaoh's accession to the throne, which was considered his birth as a god.
- Egypt rarely suffered from famine since they depended on the Nile for water.

#### *Study Questions:*

1. In 40:4, we see that Joseph attends to the cupbearer and the baker. He is a servant even from prison!
  - a. How do you think these "menial" roles as a servant prepared Joseph to be a better leader?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. In what ways do you serve as a leader now? What experiences shaped you prior to coming into that role?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - c) In what ways are you a servant?
2. What elements of Joseph's character jump out to you in the following verses?
  - a. 40:7
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. 40:8
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - c. 40:16-19
3. In v. 23, the cupbearer "forgot" Joseph. He must have felt so discouraged and abandoned! But there is no indication that Joseph gave up hope. In fact, the next time he speaks (41:16), he boldly proclaims his faith in God. What is the difference between hoping in a situation and hoping in God?

4. C.S. Lewis wrote that, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience and shouts to us in our pains” (The Problem of Pain). When in your life has God used false accusations or painful circumstances to somehow teach or use you?
  
5. Since Pharaoh was considered to be Divine, it was unusual for him to seek a dream interpretation. With that in mind, what might have been the danger in Joseph’s proclamation in 41:16?
  
6. Joseph not only tells Pharaoh that God CAN give him the answer he desires, but that God WILL. To promise this and not provide an accurate answer would have meant Joseph’s life. Why do you think he was so sure God would provide the interpretation?
  
7. There have been three sets of dreams: Joseph’s, the Baker’s/Cupbearer’s and Pharaoh’s. What three levels of society did these dreams span, and might there be any significance in this?
  
8. In Genesis 22:18-19, God promises Abraham, “I swear by myself...that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

Does any part of this passage jump out to you as you read 41:57?

9. Joseph named his two sons Manasseh (which sounds like “forget”) and Ephraim (“twice fruitful”). He gives some insight into the reason he chose the names in 41:51-52. Having observed Joseph so far, how do you think he will be different from his own father? What kind of dad do you think Joseph was to these boys?

→ **Take it to Work** ←

Joseph was promoted to be Pharaoh’s right hand man and given the task of preparing Egypt for seven years of famine. What smart business decisions did he make in order to successfully carry out this task?

## Session 3: Chapters 42-43



### Journeys to Egypt

#### Helpful Hints:

- Benjamin, Joseph's only full brother, is probably in his twenties by this point in the story.
- Lice were a common problem in Egypt. Thus, Egyptians generally shaved all of their body hair. Egyptians found the full beards and long hair of the Hebrews repulsive. That is one reason 45:32 says the Egyptians would not eat with the Hebrews. Although as Governor Joseph was well-shaven and higher in status than the Egyptians who ate with the brothers, they still would not eat in his presence!
- Marrying Asenath ushered Joseph into one of the most powerful priestly families in Egypt and Pharaoh's approval of the marriage indicates that he wanted Joseph around permanently).

#### *Study Questions:*

1. The famine is severe, even in Canaan. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to get grain. All of his sons, that is, except Benjamin. How do you think Jacob's protection affected:
  - a. Benjamin?
  - b. The ten other brothers?
  - c. The family dynamic?
2. When Joseph saw his brothers, 42:9 says that he "remembered the dreams which he had about them." Do you think Joseph was surprised to see them? What thoughts and emotions might have come with remembering the dream and seeing his brothers?
3. The brothers believe Joseph to be a high status Egyptian. When he says, "I fear God" in 42:18, what do you think the brothers assume that means? What did Joseph truly mean?
4. Why do the brothers believe they are being tested by Pharaoh (42:21-23)?
5. Why did Joseph test his brothers?

- a. Why keep Simeon (42:24)
  - b. Why make them bring Benjamin back (42:34)?
  - c. Why put their money back in their sacks (42:35)?
6. When the brothers attempt to return to Egypt with Benjamin, Jacob is distraught (42:36-37 & 43:6-12).
- a. Why do you think Judah is able to persuade his father but Reuben is not (hint: Genesis 35:22)?
  - b. Do you see differences in the way the two brothers approach the subject with their father?
  - c. How has Judah's character changed since the scandal in chapter 38?  
Has your character changed in any way over the last several years?
7. Joseph's brothers experience fear in these two chapters more than any other emotion (42:28 & 35, for example).
- a. What virtues are developed through fearful situations?
  - b. What did this time of testing teach Joseph's brothers?
  - c. Can you think of a time of fear in your life? What did it teach you?
8. In 43:11, Jacob permits his sons to travel to Egypt. He sends them with the finest products of the land to present to the Governor. In Asian culture, both gift giving and bribery are very common. Do you think this seems more like bribery or a generous gift?

→ *Take it to Work* ←

Many people would have used the power that Joseph received from Pharaoh to pay back enemies, but Joseph doesn't choose to do so. How does his use of power demonstrate strength of character and compassion?



## Session 4: Chapters 44-45



### Identity

#### Helpful Hints:

- The “Divination Cup” of 44:5 probably refers to the Ancient Near East custom of pouring water into oil or another liquid and determining the “will of the gods” based on the surface patterns that appeared.
- The original Genesis text would not have had chapter divisions – those were added much later. The section of 43:1-45:28 should be read as a single unit in the story.
- When Joseph “disappeared” it was only Jacob who tore his clothes (37:34), but in 44:13, all of the brothers tear their clothes at the thought of losing Benjamin – a sign of deep anguish.
- The exact location of Goshen is difficult to determine, but it was certainly in the Nile delta and close enough to the royal court in Memphis or Avaris for Joseph to visit his family routinely.

#### *Study Questions:*

1. What is the significance of this last test involving the divination cup in Benjamin’s bag? Why does Joseph insist that only Benjamin must stay as his slave (44:17)?
  
2. Would you have asserted your innocence as they did in 44:7?
  
3. Do you notice anything interesting about the conversation between the brothers and Joseph’s steward in 44:9-10? What was the steward doing?
  
4. What does 44:13 reveal about how the brothers have changed since chapter 37?
  
5. In 44:16, Judah says “God has found your servants’ misdeeds.” This indicates guilt, but the brothers didn’t take the cup! Which misdeeds do you think he’s referring to?
  
6. In 44:30, Judah says that “[Jacob’s] life is closely bound up with the boy’s life.” What New Testament values and commands come to mind when you read this verse?

7. What do you think the brothers experienced as Joseph revealed his identity to them?
8. Pharaoh's is incredibly hospitable and generous to Joseph's family (45:18). What does his willingness to provide "the best of the land" indicate about Joseph?
9. In 45:24, Joseph tells his brothers not to quarrel (the word could also mean "be worried") on the way home. Why do you think he says this to them?
10. Why do you think Joseph chose to forgive his brothers? What helped him forgive them (45:4-8)?
11. It is highly unlikely that Benjamin was present when Joseph was sold into slavery.
  - a. How do you think he reacted when he discovered what his brothers had done?
  - b. When Joseph distributes gifts, Benjamin gets significantly more than the other brothers. Do you think this is favoritism, guilt for using him to get back at his brothers, or something else?
  - c. When was the last time you were shocked by someone's confession? Was it done in repentance? Do you feel good about the way you responded?
12. Read 45:7. Joseph knows WHY he has his job and WHO placed him in his current position. Can you think of a time when you were clearly aware of God placing you in a particular position or place? Why do you think He put you there?

→ **Take it to Work** ←

What do you believe is God's purpose for you in your office?

## Session 5: Chapters 46-47



### Perfect Provision

#### Helpful Hints:

- Jacob goes to Beersheba to pray before he agrees to move his family to Egypt. Despite Joseph's high position, Jacob was nervous about leaving the Promised Land of Canaan. His grandfather, Abraham experienced trouble in Egypt, and his father, Isaac, was forbidden by God to journey there (Gen. 26).
- The listing of the family in chapter 46 is an important historical document as well as a source of great pride for the Jewish people. These are the names of the original nation of Israel.
- Goshen is an area in the Nile delta that is well watered and ideally suited for a sheep herding family.
- The act of placing the hand under the thigh while making a vow suggested a solemn and binding promise (47:29-31).

#### *Study Questions:*

1. Chapter 46 opens with Jacob (Israel) struggling with the difficult decision of whether to move his family to Egypt (see helpful hint #1).
  - a. Israel set out with \_\_\_\_\_ and came to \_\_\_\_\_, where he offered \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_. (46:1).
  - b. Jacob went away by himself to pray, like Jesus frequently did. Why do you think solitude was/is so important?
  - c. If you have regular times of solitude with the Lord, how does it affect you? If not, what gets in your way?
2. Paul Harvey said, "Providence is God acting anonymously." Israel moved his family to Egypt so that they might survive the famine and because Joseph was there. But how does this move (in chapter 46) play into the big picture history of Israel?
3. How does Joseph intend to use the racist attitude of the Egyptians to his family's advantage? (46:34)

Does it work? (47:6)

4. When Joseph presented his father Jacob to Pharaoh, Jacob blessed Pharaoh. How might the most powerful man in the world have received this gesture?
5. Jacob tells Pharaoh that his years have been “few and unpleasant.”
  - a. Few in comparison to whom?
  - b. What “unpleasant” events can you think of from Jacob’s life? Use the passages below as a guide, but feel free to add others.

Gen. 27:19

Gen. 28:5

Gen. 29:21-27

Gen. 30:1-2

→ ***Take It to Work*** ←

6. Read 47:13 – 25  
Do you think that this was a brilliant business maneuver or a breach of character on Joseph’s part? Why do you think it was wise or unwise?

Do you think Joseph’s decision to make the people indentured servants helped them? Do you think it glorified God?

7. In 47:26, we see that only the Egyptian priests were exempted from the one-fifth tax. This enabled them to continue leading the people in worship of false gods. Joseph may have had no choice about their exemption, or it might have been a family favor, since he was married into a priestly family. Do you think Joseph did the right thing by not objecting to the exemption?
8. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like your work was benefiting something you couldn’t morally endorse? What was the situation and what did you do?

## Session 6: Chapters 48-50



### Perfect Providence

#### Helpful Hints:

- Both Jacob and Joseph were embalmed (50:1, 26) before burial, which was a distinctly Egyptian practice. Although mummification in Egypt usually had religious implications, Jacob and Joseph's embalming probably served as a practical measure – since they were to be buried far away.
- The right hand represented a position of power, strength, honor and glory in Ancient Near East culture, which is why a blessing was given with the right hand (see 48:14).
- “May be called by my name” in 48:16 serves like an edict pronouncing that Manasseh and Ephraim are considered as Israel's sons (and therefore as part of the twelve tribes).
- On average, Egyptians lived about 110 years (considerably less than Hebrews).

#### *Study Questions:*

1. Jacob begins his last words by remembering when the Lord first called him (48:3-4).  
What does this reveal about Jacob?

Why do you think it was especially important for Joseph to hear this reminder about the heritage of his people, Israel?

2. What does Jacob mean in 48:5 when he says, “Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are mine?” Why do you think he says Reuben and Simeon?
3. In 48:19-20, Jacob places the younger son ahead of the older son, a pattern that is repeated throughout Scripture. What significance do you see in this pattern? Why might the lineage of Christ be full of second born sons?
4. In one or two words, sum up what each son is remembered for and/or promised to become:

<b>Reuben</b>	<b><u>Firstborn; Adulterous/ Will no longer excel</u></b>
Simeon/Levi	_____
Judah	_____
Zebulun	_____
Issachar	_____
Dan	_____
Gad	_____
Asher	_____
Naphtali	_____
Joseph	_____
Benjamin	_____

5. Joseph reassures his brothers in 50:20 by saying, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good....” What painful experiences have you seen God use for good?
  
6. Since this story is a narrative, it is by nature *descriptive*, but not necessarily *prescriptive*. Joseph was a Godly man, but also a sinner. Looking back over Genesis 47-50, what did Joseph do well? Are there things he should have done differently?

→ **Take it to Work** ←

7. How is Joseph’s treatment of his brothers in Ch. 50 an important example for you in the business world?

## Bibliography

(These are great sources to consider for further reference)

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