

### Joseph, dreams and unhappy brothers: Genesis 37

#### *Leader's reflection*

In Joseph we see again a theme that has been in the OT before and will re-appear with Samuel, David, Gideon and others; God choosing the unlikely person to be central to His plan for His people. At the start of the story Joseph is 17 years old; one of the younger sons of Jacob, but clearly favoured. This is apparent through the garment he is given by his father, and by the fact that he is sent by his father to check on his brothers. His role in the family business is that of a foreman, rather than the apprentice you might expect of a younger brother. However, this is not due to his own actions, but rather because he was a “child of his [father's] old age”, if Joseph had been more skilled or braver than his brothers, maybe they could have stomached his favoured status.

Joseph is a dreamer, and, it would seem a bit of a braggart. He dreams of his brothers and him collecting wheat in the fields, when his brother's wheat bows down to his. His brothers hear this and believe that he is saying they will bow down to him. Again, he dreams of being bowed down to, this time the moon, sun and stars bow down to his star. When he tells his father and brothers, his father apparently loses patience with him, not surprisingly. A sons' role was to serve his father and to sire sons to carry on the family line. To suggest a father would bow down to a son would be unthinkable, so his father reprimands him.

The idea of a younger brother being superior to an older brother would have been almost as unthinkable, inheriting authority was a serious issue, and the hierarchy among the brothers would have been set in stone.

Nevertheless, Joseph is told to go and check on his brothers looking after the flocks in Schechem. This is a serious responsibility, the journey from Hebron to Schechem would have been 143km, not exactly popping down to the fields to check on them. In this we can see how much Jacob trusted Joseph, but also how much he was ignoring the hierarchy amongst the brothers, and his own responsibility. When Joseph arrives

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he cannot find his brother and finds they have moved on to Dothan, a further 20km, but Joseph takes his responsibility seriously and continues on to find them.

Meanwhile, the brothers are clearly bothered by what has been going on. They are jealous of the favouritism that Jacob shows their brother, and sick of the dreams of dominance that Joseph has. The violence in the next few verses is difficult to read. They rip his coat from him, the symbol of his fathers' favour, and throw him in a cistern, a large bottle-shaped cutout in the earth in which seasonal rains would collect for use in dry seasons.

And then they sit down to eat their food. The cold-heartedness of this act shows how little they care for their brother. It's then hard to say if it gets better or worse for Joseph; his brothers spot a chance to profit and get rid of him. They sell him to some passing traders for 20 pieces of silver and send him off to Egypt, in their minds, never to see him again.

And then, to pile on top of their heinous acts, they deceive their father and make him believe that his favoured son is dead. Although he may as well be, as the chances of any of them seeing him again are astronomical.

Often we can view stories in the Old Testament with hindsight; we know how they end so it's ok. But to Joseph in the middle of all this, it's pretty horrendous. He is betrayed by his own family and sold to slavers. But at the end, we can see the next step, and the start of God's plan to save not only Joseph, but Egypt and eventually, his brothers. The man Joseph is sold to a man called Potiphar, an important official in Pharaoh's court.



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### **Aim**

Explore where God is in this story and why we might not be able to always see Him clearly

### **Main points to cover**

1. Joseph is one of the younger sons but is put in charge of his brothers.
2. Joseph's brothers really don't like him because of his dreams and his boasting.
3. This story doesn't end well for Joseph, but this isn't the end of his story.

Note: This story is the set up for the rest of the stories in Joseph's story. In telling this story, leave it as a cliffhanger and make it clear that it is part of a wider story we are covering over the next few weeks.

### **Focus On**

The actions of the people in the story and their motivation.

### **Activity ideas**

Put the young people into three groups. Tell the story in three parts: part 1 from the start until after Joseph's second dream; part 2 from then to verse 25, when Joseph is in the well and they are eating lunch; and part 3 from there until the end. Assign each group a character or group of characters in the story; Joseph, Jacob, Joseph's brothers. After each part of the story, get them to stop and answer the following question: What is your character feeling about the other people in this story? Explore their answers and try to get them to put themselves in the characters shoes.

Keeping in the same groups and using the ideas they have already come up with, explore what the motives of the different people in the story were and why they felt the way they did. This is not to try and excuse any character, but to approach the Bible in an imaginative way. Because of its style, it quite intentionally leaves us to wonder at what is going through the characters' heads in the story. Because of this, an approach to these stories that focuses on the imagination can help us to humanise these characters, and to help us see how we would act in the same situation.



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Where is God in this? Have the young people reflect back over the story and ask them where they see God in this story? They should struggle to see Him, as this is a dark and painful part of Joseph's life to read. Explain that Joseph was probably asking himself where God was and why He had let this happen to him, and that it is ok for us to feel the same. Have the young people listen to you read Psalm 88. Remind them that just because we feel abandoned by God, it doesn't mean we are, but that the Bible encourages us when we feel this way to see that others have felt this way before and that God has never abandoned them.



### Joseph and Potiphar's wife and prison: Genesis 39-40

#### *Leader's reflection*

A huge amount happens in these two chapters. It seems Joseph is incapable of having a quiet life; things are either going really well for him or everything is going wrong. At the start of this part of the story, we are reminded that Joseph is sold to Potiphar. He is made the personal aide of Potiphar, in charge of his household, an important person who has earned his trust. For a slave to move into such a position of trust speaks highly of Joseph's ability, and Potiphar's trust is repaid; the only thing he has to concern himself with is feeding himself.

However, Potiphar's wife is also fond of Joseph, and becomes infatuated with him. But Joseph's integrity wins. He knows that Potiphar trusts him, and to sleep with his wife would be a betrayal of that trust, and would be to sin against God.

She is not, however, willing to take no for an answer, and pesters him to pay her attention. When he refuses and runs out, leaving his coat in her hand, she accuses him of trying to sleep with her. Potiphar is understandably furious when he hears what his wife has to say and throws Joseph in prison. But even in prison, Joseph is shown favour and is put in charge of the other prisoners.

Soon Joseph has a chance to help others. The baker and Pharaoh's cupbearer are thrown into prison. These positions would have been highly coveted by others. The cup-bearer wouldn't just have been responsible for making sure the Pharaoh's cup was full, but also to ensure that no one poisoned him and that only the very best wine was served. The baker would have had similar responsibilities, as well as making sure that only the best possible baked goods were put on the table of the royal family.

On the same night they both have dreams. As we have seen previously, dreams were considered to give a window to the future. Their dreams must have caused them pain, because Joseph enquires as to why they look distressed. When he finds out that they have dreamed, he first states that the interpretation of dreams comes from God, before interpreting their dreams. In doing this, he gives glory to God rather than being

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considered wise in his own right.

Hearing the interpretation goes well for the cupbearer, less so for the baker. In three days one will be set free and restored, and one will be beheaded. Sure enough, three days come and go, and the cupbearer is restored, while the baker is beheaded.

There is a light at the end of the tunnel for Joseph, surely the cupbearer will remember his promise to Joseph and tell Pharaoh about him? No. The cupbearer doesn't give him a second thought and Joseph is left in the prison for two more years.

Joseph's story here is a reminder to us of God's plan compared to our plan. Joseph seems to fall on his feet while working for Potiphar, and then is thrown in prison. He again falls on his feet and is given authority over the prisoners, but then his chance to get out via the cupbearer is lost. But all is not lost, God is still working, and Joseph will be able to look back on this as part of God's plan for him and for his brothers.

### *Aim*

Integrity and reliance on God are possible, even when things don't seem to go to plan

### *Main points to cover*

1. Joseph was being looked after by God and was placed in a house where he was able to learn skills for later on in his life.
2. Joseph acted with integrity even when it was difficult for him and it would have been easier for him to give in.
3. Even when he is in prison, Joseph is able and willing to help those around him.

Note: The conversation around Potiphar's wife and her attraction to Joseph could bring up some awkward questions. Think through what those questions could be and how you would answer them.

### *Focus On*

Even when Joseph didn't have control over what happened to him, he made he was responsible with what he did have control over: his actions.



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### *Activity ideas*

Split the young people into small groups. Give them two pieces of paper, one with Good and Bad on either side and one with Fair and Unfair on either side. Tell the story and after each major occurrence, ask the young people to decide in groups if what happened to Joseph was good/bad or fair/unfair. Ask the young people to explain why they think that.

**Joseph's Character:** See if the young people can explain to you what the word Character means. In this context it should be something like, 'the mental and moral qualities of an individual.' Explain that the way the Bible shows us what people are like is different to the way modern books do. While modern books give us first person accounts, or explain a person's thoughts and feelings, the Bible uses external action to show internal character. Have the young people look at what happens to Joseph in this part of his story, and come up with some words to describe his character. Get them to explain their answers, rather than simply giving words. Once they have done this, have them pick one or two of them that they would like to see in themselves, but currently don't. Do this for yourself and explain why in an appropriate way.

**God shapes us:** Use the video God's Chisel by the Skit Guys on Youtube as a reflection for the young people. Explain before it that Joseph, like all of us, is being shaped by his experiences, and God is changing him. The same thing happens to all of us, and we can ask God to shape us more and more into His image, but that it isn't always comfortable. Show the clip, and at the end ask the young people what they think of what they have seen.



### Joseph, famine and reunited with his brothers: Genesis 41-45

#### *Leader's reflection*

It can be easy to forget that the story jumps two years here. When we re-tell this story we can ignore the time between the cup-bearer being released and Joseph seeing Pharaoh, but right at the start of chapter 41 we are told we are now two years later.

Pharaoh has a dream, a dream about healthy cows being eaten by sickly cows; about healthy heads of grain being swallowed by thin heads of grain, and is troubled by this. He summons all the wise men and magicians to him to interpret this dream for him, but no one can.

And then, finally, the cup bearer remembers Joseph. He tells Pharaoh about his experience with Joseph and the correct interpretation of dreams and Pharaoh summons Joseph to him.

Imagine being there when Joseph met the cupbearer again after two years. The cupbearer had promised that he would remember Joseph, and he had, but it must have been a bit awkward. Joseph interprets the dreams, and tells Pharaoh he needs to find a good, wise man to administer to the arrangements to ensure that Egypt will survive the famine that is coming. Pharaoh goes further than that though, he asks for a man who has "God's spirit in him?" This is a very strange thing to happen in that time and place. A ruler, who worships a pantheon of gods, in a culture where the ruler can declare themselves a god or descendent of the gods, asks for a man who has God's spirit in him. What did Pharaoh see in Joseph that meant he trusted in God rather than gods? Was it the interpretation of the dreams? Was it something more about Joseph? We'll never know, but Joseph's rollercoaster of a life continues, and he goes from Prison to Prime Minister in a few short sentences.

Here we can see how God was preparing Joseph for this time. Through interpreting dreams correctly though insensitively as a young man, through having responsibility



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over his brothers, through managing Potiphar's household, through overseeing the prison; God has trusted Joseph with a little and he has shown he can manage it, so he is given responsibility over more.

The famine hits, the country has been prepared and so there is enough for people to eat. And more than that, people come from the surrounding country to collect food, because their own lands are affected by the same famine. One of those groups is made up of Joseph's brothers.

Imagine what Joseph must have felt when they appeared. The brothers, who hated him so much they wanted to kill him; who threw him into a pit and then sat down to eat their lunch; who sold him into slavery, have appeared at his door. And Joseph has the power and authority to have them thrown in prison or executed. But he doesn't. He gives them a chance to see if they have changed.

So through various trials he tests them to see if they are the same. And, thankfully for everyone involved, they have changed. They are different, they regret their actions and know they were wrong.

In this story we see echoes of the gospel. Joseph has the power of life and death over his brothers, but he doesn't act rashly, he doesn't act out of his anger, but out of his love to save them from famine, and to bring them to a better life in Egypt. In the same way, God doesn't act out of His anger against our sin, but out of His love for us, to bring us to a better life with Him.



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### **Aim**

Explore how integrity is demonstrated by actions, and the power of forgiveness

### **Main points to cover**

1. Joseph has been placed in the right place at the right time to fulfil God's plan in his life.
2. Joseph acts out of love for the people of Egypt- he had been kept a prisoner and may have been angry about that and wanted to turn his back on them, but also out of love for his brothers when they came before him.
3. Joseph forgave freely. When he saw the regret in his brothers, he wanted to forgive them and for things to be made right with them.

Note: There is a lot to cover in this story. A shortened version of Joseph's interaction with his brothers would work well to communicate the central message of Joseph's forgiveness without the too-ing and fro-ing of the story.

### **Focus On**

All of Joseph's life had led up to this point, even though it had seemed bleak at points.

### **Activity ideas**

Looking back over the story, see how it all fits together. Ask the young people if they remember how Joseph became an advisor for Pharaoh, then move further back in the story asking the young people how each part of the story led from the previous bit right back to the start. Map this out on a large piece of paper if it will help the young people visualise it. Ask them what it shows us about Joseph and God's plan for him.

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Imagine... Having looked at the shape of Joseph's story up to this point, have the young people imagine what must have gone through his head when his brothers turned up in Egypt to ask for food. Remind the young people of the power that Joseph had over them. Split the young people into two and have them think through the possible repercussions of Joseph choosing to punish and forgive his brothers. It is worth noting here that Joseph would have faced no external repercussions for punishing his brothers; he was the law in Egypt at the time.

**An image of Jesus:** In this part of the story Joseph can point us forward to Jesus, and help us understand just how radical what Jesus did for us was. Like Joseph, Jesus was abandoned by those closest to him, faced punishment for crimes he did not commit, yet chooses to offer us love and grace rather than punishment and wrath. Have the young people imagine themselves as Joseph's brothers realising who they were standing before. Explain that this is a way for us to think about how we feel when we come to Jesus and ask forgiveness for things we do wrong. Have some physical way for the young people to mark that they have realised this, and have asked Jesus for forgiveness for the things they have done against Him.



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**Aim: Focus: Suggested activities:**

