

Joseph

A 6 part Bible study series from the UCCF U.K.

Introduction to Bible Study

'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.' And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:20-21)

'These words explain the greatness of Joseph. If we want to know why God exalted Joseph to the lofty position of Prime Minister of Egypt it is because he learned how to forgive. In a word: he learned to love.' (R T Kendall)

These 6 studies look at the story of Joseph, familiar to many people, even if only through the musical. We'll be picking out some of the themes of his story and asking how God made him the great, yet humble man he is by the end of the story.

Things don't look too promising at the beginning, when he is sold by his brothers. How can his story help us to come to terms with suffering and injustice? When the going is good, on the other hand, as it seems sometimes in Pharaoh's house, how do we avoid the problems and pitfalls that brings?

Joseph lived in the land of Canaan about 200 years after Abraham - probably within the years 1720-1550 BC.

Notes are based on the NIV.

Using these studies

This outline cannot lead the group study. It is only an aid to discovering the key themes of each passage, giving suggestions about how you could apply them to your lives, as individuals and as a group. You will find it helpful to read *Word in Actions: handbook for leaders and members of Bible study groups*. This gives advice on how to prepare, lead and evaluate your studies.

As leader, you still need to prepare the passage thoroughly yourself, working out:

- what it is saying - what don't I understand?
- what it means;
- what am I going to do about it?

Towards the end of your preparation, you will find it helpful to refer to *The Message of Genesis* by Joyce Baldwin (IVP) and the *Tyndale Commentary on Genesis* by Derek Kidner (*IVP). *God meant it for Good* by R T Kendall (Kingsway) would make interesting background reading too. But, as leader, you want to enable group members to discover the same as, if not more than, you have in your own preparation. Your task is to give them questions which will help them to go through the three stages already mentioned.

Questions, preferably worked out beforehand, need to be interesting, pitched at the right level, and requiring more than one-word answers. A statement, followed by a question, can stimulate thought. Or two or three questions, phrased slightly differently, but getting at the same point, are also good. Remember, you're not asking questions to get one right answer, but to trigger off thought and discussion arising from the passage.

Your aim in leading should be to see group members not only understanding Joseph a little better but actually growing in their relationship with God as they meet him through his Word. Their lives should be changed as a result of these studies. Be ambitious in your expectations and prayers for the group.

Bible Study 1 : Joseph had a Dream

GENESIS 37:1-36

The narrative plunges straight in with the story of Joseph, the coat which his father gives him, Joseph's dream and the jealousy of his brothers. Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob, but he was the first son of Jacob's favourite wife, Rachel.

- Look at the first few verses, how do you think Joseph's brothers would have felt about him? Why? In what ways did the dreams make them hate him still further? How had Jacob's own conduct towards Joseph made the situation worse? How would you sum up Joseph's character?
- Joseph has the first of many dreams. In Ancient Near-Eastern literature there are reference books about dream interpretation, so dreams were a recognized way of looking at the future. Can you think of other biblical examples? (Do this briefly.) Does God speak to us through dreams today? How can we test such experiences?
- Compare the actions and character of Reuben and Judah. What effect did Reuben have on his brothers? How did falsehood affect family relationships?
- Imagine you were thrown into the pit! How would you have felt? What kind of thoughts might have gone through Joseph's mind? How would he have felt when he was pulled out and sold?

God was in control of the whole story. What do you think he wanted to teach Joseph? (Discuss briefly, then keep the question in mind as you look at the rest of the story.)

Notes

v3 : richly ornamented robe. The 'coat of many colours' may in fact have been long-sleeved (cf RSV margin), but whatever it was it singled out Joseph as his father's favourite.

v27 : Ishmaelites. It appears that this covers certain of the Medianites (v28,36). 'Ishmaelites' may mean 'traders', who are identified on coming closer (v28) as from a particular people (see New Bible Commentary).

Bible Study 2 : Success and Temptation

GENESIS 39:1-23

- 'The Lord was with Joseph' (v2,21). What does it mean to say that the Lord is with someone? What was the cause of Joseph's success? Does this mean that success is a sign of God's favour - and failure the opposite? (Think about last week's study!). How should we regard success in our own lives?
- What privileges and responsibilities was Joseph given? What extra problems did this bring to him.?
- How did Joseph avoid the temptation of Potiphar's wife? Think of situations in which you are tempted to sin. Discuss how you can avoid them.
- Joseph describes sin as 'against God'. In what ways would this particular sin, and others you have just discussed, be 'against God'? (cf David in Psalm 51:4).
- How must Joseph have felt when he was thrown into prison? How did he react to the situation? In what situations might we find ourselves punished for doing right? What should our attitude be? Share any occasions on which this has happened to you, and how you see it in retrospect.
- If time, consider Romans 8:28 in the light of this study. Notes v20 in prison. The normal penalty for the crime Joseph was accused of was death; divine favour secured a milder penalty.

Before the next study: read chapter 40.

Bible Study 3 : God's time has come

GENESIS 41:1-57

Chapter 40 recounts how Joseph met two other prisoners, a cupbearer and a baker. They both had dreams and Joseph was able to explain them - both correctly, as they shortly found out. Joseph asked the cupbearer to help him when he was back in favour - but the cupbearer forgot him. Joseph must have been disappointed: he was in prison for two more years. Perhaps 40:14-15 shows that he was still feeling self-righteous, and God had to teach him that he was in charge.

- Look at the character of Joseph as seen in this passage. In what ways is he different from when he was at home? How did Pharaoh regard him?
- Pharaoh sent for all the usual interpreters first (v8). Why did he send for Joseph? How was it that Joseph was able to interpret the dreams?
- Consider Joseph as a type of Christ. What points of similarity stand out in this passage? (cf Genesis 39:20 and Matthew 27:28-30; Genesis 41:14 and Acts 2:24; Genesis 41:40 and Ephesians 1:22; Genesis 41:56-7 and John 6:32,35)
- Joseph now has power to help people from 'all the world' (v57) who were suffering famine. In the light of the promises made to Abraham and Jacob (Genesis 12:2-3, 28:114-15) how could God use the famine for his purposes?

Notes

v45 : Zaphenath-Paneah. The meaning of his word is still uncertain. On, or Heliopolis, was cultic centre of the Egyptian sun-god.

Bible Study 4 : Down to Egypt

GENESIS 42 - 43

As there are two chapters to look at, encourage group members to read them before the meeting.

- 'He remembered his dreams about them' (42:9). Why did Joseph treat his brothers harshly? How do you think he felt as he did this? What clues are there of Joseph's ultimate plan (or God's ultimate plan!) for his family? See especially 42:15,24.
- Part of Joseph's motivation was the fact that he feared God (v18). What does it mean to 'fear God'?
- Joseph's brothers think they are being punished because of what they did to him. Are they right? They say in verse 28: 'What is this that God has done to us?' How do you answer people who are in trouble and ask what they have done to deserve it?
- Why do you think Joseph wept (42:24 and 43:30)?
- Look at the character of Jacob. How might Reuben have felt at this outburst in 42:36? How do you account for Jacob's words and actions in these chapters?

Notes

42:28 : They would have thought that if you were good you would be successful, and that if you suffered it was because you had done something wrong. (cf John 9:2)

Prayer

In this study we've seen the brothers gradually remember what they did to Joseph, and feel sorry. You might like to remind each other of the need to acknowledge sin, and of God's forgiveness (eg 1 John 1:8-10), and then spend time in confession and thankfulness.

Before the next study: read chapter 44, where Joseph tests the depth and sincerity of their repentance. When all the brothers returned, he was sure it was real.

Bible Study 5 : i am Joseph

GENESIS 45:1 - 46:7

It must have been very hard for Joseph to control his feelings through these tests of his brothers. Begin by briefly discussing Judah's plea in chapter 44. How could you use it as a model of intercessory prayer? In chapter 45 we see Joseph reveal himself to his brothers and show them that he forgave them.

- Compare 45:3,9,13, with 43:27. What does the first question Joseph asked show about his attitude towards his father? (cf 37:3)
- Why did Joseph forgive his brothers? How did he demonstrate it to them? Why is total forgiveness of others often so difficult? What can we learn from the story of Joseph which will help us in our relationships with each other? (cf Ephesians 4:32)
- Why, according to Joseph (45:5,7,8), did God send him to Egypt? Why does he now want to get the family together? What can we learn from the way in which God worked in Joseph's life?
- Imagine who Jacob must have felt when he heard the news of his son. Why was he afraid to go to Egypt? How did God reassure him?
- Think of the times God has asked you to do seemingly impossible things. What things have helped you to obey?

Notes

46:1 : Beersheba. Patriarchal altar-site on the southern borders of Israel.

46:4 : Jacob died in Egypt so this promise must apply to God's people as a nation.

Before the next study: read chapters 46:8 - 49:21

Bible Study 6 : God meant it for Good

GENESIS 49:22 - 50:26

Pharaoh makes Jacob and his family welcome, but they never really feel at home. As Jacob grows old, he asks not to be buried in Egypt. The last study sees his death, and also the end of Joseph's life. In chapter 49, Jacob first blesses each of his sons.

- 49:22-26 are Jacob's blessing on Joseph. What do you think is referred to in v23-24? How does Jacob 'bless' Joseph? What similarities can you see here between the character of Joseph and that of Jesus?
- Why did Jacob want to be buried in Canaan?
- 'What if Joseph holds a grudge against us?' (50:15). What does this statement reveal about the trust that the brothers had in Joseph? How did Joseph react to this? Can you think of occasions when you asked God to forgive you, but you did not really accept his forgiveness? What effect did that have on you? How did you realise you were truly forgiven?
- How was it that Joseph could say, 'God intended it for good'? Summarise the ways in which the harm they intended worked out for good. In what further ways does Joseph show that he really has forgiven them?
- Compare verses 24-25 with Hebrews 11:22. What does this show about faith? What can we learn from Joseph's life, as a whole, as a life of faith?

Notes

50:17 : It is probable that the brothers manufactured the message, since there is no other indication that Jacob knew the full story.

50:18 : Notice the fulfilment of Joseph's dream here.