The Hand of God in the Life of Joseph

an Apostolic Christian Church Bible Study
The story of Joseph is perhaps one of the best known and loved stories in the Old Testament. Herein we catch glimpses of God’s will and purpose exemplified in the life of Joseph. We see the hand of God in the life of Joseph, which demonstrates how God’s goodness is active in the lives of his people. Here, we encounter the whole of human reality: love, hate, jealousy, humility, temptation, betrayal, and best of all, good triumphing over evil.

This is a Bible Study that is intended for small group studies but use is not limited to that venue.

Brothers, sisters and friends going through this study should grow spiritually learning from the lessons from Joseph’s life.

Memory Verse

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

- Romans 8:28
Lesson 1
Family Relations

Setting the Stage
Sometimes we can look at scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament, and see many characters in “God’s Story” that foreshadow or bear resemblance to our Lord Jesus Christ. In some respects Jesus can be seen as a combination and perfection of these earlier heroes of faith. Noticing this foreshadowing of Christ can enhance our appreciation for the Messiah, of Promised and Miraculous Savior.

We are called to be disciples of Jesus. That is, we are to be learners of his ways. Jesus was tempted just as we are, but he neither sinned nor failed (Heb. 4:15). He was fully human, but also fully divine. We as disciples are more like the imperfect foreshadowers than the Perfect One who we long to be like. By looking at the various characters of the Bible we can see how others met the challenges of life. Hopefully we can be encouraged by their successes and warned of possible pitfalls by their failures. We can also develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of God by seeing his hand in both the ups and downs.

When we turn the spotlight on a certain character or set of characters, we always have to keep in mind that they are not the story; they are only characters in God’s story. God is the writer of the Story of Redemption and He is also the main character. Unlike the main character of many stories, God is often working behind the scenes. For an example we can look at the story of Joseph and his brothers.

Reflections
Picture God’s story as a play. Some of Joseph’s ancestors have already been on stage in earlier acts:

1. Who is Joseph’s father? ____________________________
2. Who is Joseph’s grandfather? ____________________________
3. Who is Joseph’s great-grandfather? ____________________________
Read Gen. 15:4-6.
What promises has God made to Joseph’s great-grandfather?

Read Gen. 26:3-5.
Was Joseph’s grandfather aware of these promises?

Was Joseph’s father aware of these promises?

Read Gen. 32:28.
What does God later change Jacob’s name to?

Genesis is a history of beginnings; we read of the beginnings of the earth, mankind, and God’s covenant with a chosen family. From the point God changes Jacob’s name, the history of what nation begins?

How do Bilbah and Zilpah end up on the stage?

NEW TESTAMENT CONNECTION
In I Tim.3:2 Paul states that an Elder should be a husband of one wife. What is the wisdom behind that instruction?

1. List in birth order each child and their mother.

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The Hand of God in the Life of Joseph

2. How would you describe the scene when Joseph makes his appearance?

3. What would you predict could happen if all of these half-brothers got together?

The story of Joseph is one of the most known and loved stories of the Bible. Joseph is a leading character who gets more mention than any of his predecessors in Genesis. Genesis is about beginnings, and through the story of Joseph we can see God orchestrating the beginning of a nation that we know as the children of Israel. These people are God’s agents in His plan for redeeming all of mankind even to the present time.

We see the hand of God working in Joseph’s life as he gains acceptance in an alien culture (Acts 7:9, 10). Residing under God’s hovering wing is a necessary and welcome aspect of the story. This study also looks at the lives of fallen men and women and how God took what was meant for evil and used it for the good of the children of Israel.

We read in Gen. 37:3 “Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colors.”
Review the circumstances surrounding Joseph’s birth later in Jacob’s life (Gen. 29:25-30:24).

Because of the cultural expectations for women to provide heirs, Rachel’s barrenness distressed her and brought contempt from others. She enlisted the aid of her maid in a childbearing war with her sister. The maid, or “substitute mother”, gave birth while literally sitting on the wife’s knees. This symbolized that the wife was the one providing the son and heir to her husband. One son born by this substitute system was Napthali, whose name literally means “wrestled with my sister.”

Read Gen. 29:15-28.
1. How did it happen that Jacob had two wives?

2. How did Laban, Jacob’s uncle, create the situation for conflict to develop?

3. How would you describe the atmosphere in Jacob’s home?

Read Gen. 29:31, 32.
1. What did the Lord do to somewhat balance the situation?

With Joseph being a “son of his old age,” Jacob had more time to devote to Joseph. Joseph was the honored child of the wife that he loved. Would it be a surprise if his older siblings thought that he was spoiled and favored over them? In Joseph’s day most men had a cloak that served a variety of purposes. Jacob made Joseph a coat of many colors which wasn’t a cloak to be used for everyday activity but rather...
similar to one worn by royalty. A case can be made that Jacob was signifying who would be the next leader of the clan.

Given such favoritism, it is not surprising that Genesis 37:4 records “And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.”

2. Was there anything wrong with Jacob’s favoritism?

3. Which of the brothers would likely be the most disturbed by the coat?

Joseph dreamed a dream, and given the content of the dream, it seems that Joseph, the youngest, speaks out of place.

Read Gen. 37:5-10.
1. Do you think that Joseph was brash, naïve or indiscreet? Was there any reason to disclose the dream?

2. What underlying attitude grew into hatred (Gen. 37:11)?

3. Do we ever resemble Joseph’s brothers? Do we ever harbor or justify harmful attitudes such as envy? What should we do about such attitudes?
Perhaps these events only triggered established patterns of behavior. Not only was there conflict between Rachel and Leah, but Jacob also had conflicts both with his brother Esau and his Uncle Laban.

4. Aspects of Jacob’s culture (Gen. 29:29 for example) were an underlying source of conflict. What in our culture could foster conflict among us?

**For Further Reflection:**
Read Isaiah 61:10. What do the children of God have that would make a coat of colors pale in comparison?

**Read Gen. 37:18.**
1. What was the first option that Joseph’s brothers considered in their conspiracy against him?

Instead, Joseph’s brothers throw him into a pit, Reuben is absent at the moment that the Ishmaelite caravan appears, and Joseph is sold into slavery. Can you imagine what Joseph was thinking when he was in the pit? Was he seething with anger and eager for revenge? Was he thinking back on why he revealed his dreams? Did he realize that this might have displayed an attitude of superiority which fostered hatred?

**New Testament Connection**
Read John 15:18-25. Why might a Christian be hated?

**Read Luke 6:27-29.**
How does Jesus tell us to respond to those who hate us?
LESSON 2

TEMPTATION

“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

– 1 Corinthians 10:13

REFLECTIONS

Joseph's story didn't end as the caravan set out to Egypt and soon Joseph finds himself in a faraway kingdom among strangers. Though he was removed far from his family, neither the promises of God nor God himself were left behind. In fact, Genesis 39:2-3 tells us that when Joseph arrived in Egypt, Potiphar, “an officer of Pharaoh, and captain of the guard, an Egyptian…” purchased him. We read that “the LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD made all that he did to prosper in his hand. And Joseph found grace in his sight, and he served him: and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand” (Gen 39:1-5).

Read Gen. 39:4-20

Just when things are looking up for Joseph, he encounters his next challenge: Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce him. Joseph, however, refuses and tells her “Behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand; There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” Unlike many who rise in power, Joseph kept a clear perspective on his boundaries even when there would be no witnesses.
1. What is Joseph’s first strategy in dealing with this temptation?

Notice that Joseph does not say directly that it would defile her (Potiphar’s wife), or that it would defile himself, or even that it would be a sin against his master Potiphar. Rather, he states that it would be a sin against God.

2. Why did Joseph express his rejection of her advances in this way?

Potiphar’s wife spoke to Joseph day by day (Gen. 39:10). On this particular day perhaps he was distracted by his daily duties or had become too comfortable with his position and let his guard down. He goes into the house when no one else is around and she grabs him by his garment.

3. In retrospect, what might Joseph have done to reduce the chances of such an encounter?

4. What important strategy does Joseph employ now?

NEW TESTAMENT CONNECTION
Read I Cor. 6:18. What does it mean to flee temptation?

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Read I Cor. 10:13. What does God promise with every temptation?

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5. How can we use the word of God to expose the lies of the enemy? When we are unable to flee, how else can we resist temptation? How
Lesson 2, continued

6. What was the result of Joseph’s resisting temptation? What are the results of enduring/overcoming temptation in the life of a believer? (James 1:12; Revelation 3:5; Matt. 5:16; II Tim. 4:7-8)

The Lord did indeed make a way of escape for Joseph. He did not fall into sin. Instead, he ended up in prison, a place with far fewer temptations.

7. In our battle to resist temptation we, like Joseph, may suffer such afflictions. How should we handle and endure suffering that results from resisting temptation? Give examples. (See also James 5:10 and Heb. 12:3).
“And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

– Ephesians 4:32

REFLECTIONS

God’s unseen hand was at work. Joseph could have been sold to work in the mines or to do another occupation reserved for slaves who lead brief, anonymous lives. Instead God placed him with Potiphar, which lead to him being cast into prison (Gen. 39:1-6).

Read Gen. 39:21.
1. Who accompanied Joseph into prison?

It would appear that Joseph did not despair because he was put in charge of other prisoners. As for the prison “program,” as well as whatever else he did, “the LORD made it to prosper” (Gen. 39:23).

Eventually Joseph had some other company in prison. We find him telling the meaning of dreams to a baker and a butler. When he told the butler that he would be reconciled to the king, Joseph made one request: “But think on me when it shall be well on thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house:” (Gen. 40:14) The butler, however, failed and forgot to make mention of joseph to Pharaoh and Joseph remained in prison for two years.

2. If the butler had mentioned Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams to Pharaoh soon after he was released, do you think that it would have brought Joseph out of prison at that time? Why or why not?
New Testament Connection

Read 1 Cor. 11:1
It is Joseph's faith, trust and reliance upon things not seen that underscores his character and how he faces the challenges of life. Joseph predates the time in which our Lord walked in Galilee with his disciples. Nonetheless, followers of Jesus today can find His a good example to follow.

When Joseph is finally released, he has a meteoric rise from prisoner to ruler of all the land of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. In his position, he no doubt was accustomed to receiving honor. When his brothers bowed before him, it probably wasn't the first time that men had done such a thing. However, this was the fulfillment of his dream. It could certainly have resulted in pride or caused him to respond saying “I told you so.”

3. Had you been in Joseph's shoes, what do you think that your initial reaction would have been at the sight of your brothers?

4. Do you think Joseph ever reminded his brothers of his dreams (Gen. 37:5-9)? Why or why not? Would it have been helpful for him to do so?

5. Had Joseph harbored bitterness and resentment, how might he have exercised his power differently? There is a saying that a believer's life is not about getting even; it is about saving souls. Give some real-life examples of where this might apply.

Gen. 41:15-16. “And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, I have dreamed a dream, and there is none that can interpret it: and I have heard say of
thee, that thou canst understand a dream to interpret it. And Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace.”

6. God communicated with Joseph in dreams when he was quite young. How might this gift have affected his confidence and perseverance through the challenges and opportunities in his life?

Do you think he had any doubts?

7. Share a time in your life where things seemed pretty bleak. In what ways has God communicated encouragement to you in times of despair?

8. How could Pharaoh recognize that God was active in Joseph’s life? How do we recognize the spirit of God in a person’s life (Gen. 41:1-16, 38)?

9. Was Joseph’s humility and attitude towards his brothers affected by his ascension to power?
God uses his unseen hand again to alert Pharaoh to the upcoming famine by dreams which only Joseph could interpret. After Joseph interpreted the dreams, Pharaoh was moved to place Joseph in charge of ministering to the needs of people everywhere. “And the seven years of plenteousness, that was in the land of Egypt, were ended” (Gen. 41:53). As leanness came into the land, news spread that there was food in Egypt. “And all countries came into Egypt to Joseph for to buy corn; because that the famine was so sore in all lands” (Gen. 47:13-26).
“Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.”

– I Corinthians 13:4

REFLECTIONS

The famine sets up an opportunity for Joseph to confront his brothers when he has the upper hand. It is here that we find Joseph’s true character, and fortunately for his brothers, Joseph has attributes that can very much remind us of our Lord. If he had any pent up anger, hatred, or desire for revenge, this was a golden opportunity.

1. What do you think prevented Joseph from doing great harm to his brothers?

2. Do you think that his hardships helped him or prevented him from becoming a forgiving person?

3. How aware do you believe that Joseph was of God presence or “unseen hand” in his life?

Judah’s impassioned plea persuaded Jacob to let Benjamin go with the brothers back to Egypt. Once there, Joseph began testing them again to determine the condition of their hearts (Gen. 44:1-18). When Joseph
The Hand of God in the Life of Joseph

Lesson 4, continued

accused them of theft, Judah's plea before Joseph is perhaps one of the most touching pleas recorded in the scripture (Gen. 44:16, 18-34).

4. How does the Judah who hated and sold his brother for profit (Gen. 37) and was indulged in immoral behavior (Gen. 38:11, 26) compare to the pleading Judah who passionately beseeches Joseph to keep him as his servant and release Benjamin (Gen. 43)?

5. What do you think might have caused Judah's transformation from selfish to selfless? Read Gen. 42:21-22.

New Testament Connection

Read I John 1:9. How does God respond to those who acknowledge their sinfulness before Him, recognize that they are sinners, and demonstrate willingness to surrender control of their lives to Him? (See also Luke 15:21-24).

6. What parallels do you see between your life and Judah's? Describe how the merciful, ready-to-forgive Josephs in your life have helped you.
Twice at the end of the story, Joseph tried to give his brothers assurance that they were not in danger because it was God's plan to do good. Even though Joseph gave this assurance at the time that he revealed himself, the brothers' fears returned when Jacob died. In response, Joseph made it clear that he was quite aware that they had sinned, but he still did not hold their transgressions against them.

7. Like Joseph's brothers, sometimes we can have doubts about God's forgiveness. How does God reassure us that we are forgiven (John 3:16-17)?

**NEW TESTAMENT CONNECTION**

Phil 1:29: “For unto you is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.” As a disciple of Jesus, do you anticipate that you will get to suffer for the benefit of others?

I Cor. 12:7-18 and Eph. 4:11-12 list several gifts. Which do you think that Joseph possessed? Explain how he displayed these gifts in word and deed. How did he apply them?

How did Joseph apply these gifts in the manner Paul describes in Eph. 4:12 and I Cor. 12:7-18?

8. Why should we forgive? Why is it wise to forgive even if the person who hurt us isn't sorry?
Lesson 4, continued

9. Remember that this is God’s story. What do you think that God’s larger purpose was in delivering Joseph from all of his afflictions and making him Governor over all Egypt?

Apparently Joseph knew and never forgot God’s promises to his father Jacob for he said to his brothers, “I die: and God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which he sware to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence” (Gen. 50:24-25).

Read Acts 7:17 and Heb. 11:22.
10. What sustained Joseph through all his trials?

Read Gal. 5:6 and I Cor. 13:4-7.
11. What do you think is the best evidence of Joseph’s faith? What is mentioned in the 15 or so chapters of Genesis that indicates Joseph’s faith?

When Joseph set out to find where his brothers were feeding their flocks, he had no idea what lay ahead in his life’s path. We too are on an unknown path. What assurance does the promise of Prov. 3:5-6 give us?
NEW TESTAMENT CONNECTION
As we have seen, the story of Joseph is really in large measure the story of God using his unseen hands behind the scenes.

Share an example of a time when God was guiding you and only later on did you see that his hand was guiding you.

Do you trust the “unseen hand of God” to be with you (Heb. 11:1)?
**REVIEW**

What have you gained from this study that will help you become a closer follower of our Lord Jesus Christ?

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Joseph is sometimes called a foreshadower of Christ. List some ways that Joseph’s attitudes and actions reflect Christ’s teachings or examples:

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