

Joseph
#thespoiledbrat
Read Genesis 37, 39-47

Background Information for Study Leaders

Dysfunction begins at home

Hands down, no contest, Joseph is the favorite son of Jacob. And let's be honest, Joseph's favored son status turned him into a spoiled brat. Scripture tells us Joseph was the son of his father's old age and as a symbol of Jacob's favoritism, he gave Joseph a "coat of many colors" or a richly ornamented robe. Joseph's robe was probably the kind worn by royalty and it only aggravated the already strained relationship between Joseph and his brothers. Never forget that Joseph was born into a blended family and many of us know the challenges that requires. But I suspect none of us have experienced the extent of Jacob's blended family. Jacob had two wives, Leah (6 sons), and Rachel (2 sons), but let's not forget Leah's servant, Zilpah, and Rachel's, servant, Bilhah, who added two sons apiece to the mix for a total of 12 sons. But there is more to Joseph's status as the favorite son.

Joseph was also the son of Jacob's beloved wife, Rachel. Jacob worked for his Uncle Laban for seven years to marry Rachel, but was tricked into marrying her older sister, Leah. Fortunately Jacob's uncle gave Rachel to him, but he still had to work an additional seven years. Can you just image the competition between the two sisters: the beautiful and much desired Rachel and the less attractive and unwanted Leah? But Leah had a powerful advantage especially in their culture. While Rachel struggled with infertility, Leah gave Jacob six strong sons. It was a recipe for dysfunction at its worst and I suspect the contentious attitudes between the warring sisters were also passed down to their sons. In case you haven't noticed, Joseph's story reminds us of a really bad soap opera.

Immaturity plus favoritism equals disaster

As a seventeen year old spoiled favorite son, it comes as no surprise that Joseph lorded it over his brothers. He was also quick to "tattle" about them to his father. Worst of all, Joseph had two dreams that showed his brothers bowing down to him and Joseph reigning over them. Unfortunately Joseph shared those dreams with his brothers which set in motion a reprehensible action that could not be undone. His jealous brothers, angered by their father's blatant favoritism and Joseph's immature attitude and boastful manner, took matters into their own hands and sold Joseph into slavery. They even dipped his beautiful coat into the blood of a goat to cover their trail. When Jacob was confronted with this "evidence" of Joseph's death, he wept bitterly and vowed to grieve until he died. In an ironic twist, Jacob who once deceived his own father was now deceived by his sons.

How low can you go

Joseph goes from being the spoiled, bratty, favorite son to being a slave in Egypt. It is hard to imagine the fear and anguish of a seventeen year old boy betrayed by his brothers and ripped from the only home and family he has ever known. Everything is different: the food, the language, the culture, and his social status. No spoiled brat slaves are allowed. However, despite our sympathy for Joseph, slavery was at least in part due to his own choices. Yes, his brothers sold him into slavery, but Joseph's spoiled behavior goaded them into a terrible decision of betrayal. Yet slavery in the Potiphar's

household changes not only the direction of Joseph's life, but the essence of who he was. Joseph puts his spoiled ways behind him and due to his hard work, dedication, and skills, becomes the head of Potiphar's household. But the trials and tribulations of Joseph are far from over. Enter Potiphar's wife. Scripture tells us that Joseph had grown into a well-built and handsome young man and this did not escape the attention of Potiphar's wife. She attempted on multiple occasions to seduce Joseph, but despite his status as a slave he refused her. Joseph was loyal to Potiphar and more importantly refused to sin against God. Rebuffed and angry, Potiphar's wife made a false accusation of attempted rape against Joseph and Potiphar had Joseph thrown into prison where the king's prisoners were kept. It is worth noting that death would be the usual punishment, but perhaps Potiphar did not believe his wife, but still had to do something to save face.

Making the best of any situation

Once again Joseph finds himself in a dire situation not of his own making and once again he makes the best of it. Despite his circumstances, the Lord was with Joseph and due to his administrative skills, he was put in charge of the entire prison. It just so happened that Pharaoh's chief cupbearer/wine steward and chief baker were in prison with Joseph. Once again dreams play a pivotal role in Joseph's life. Both the cupbearer and the baker have dreams they cannot understand, but Joseph volunteers to interpret them. There is good news and bad news. Joseph tells the cupbearer that in three days he will be restored to his former position and then Joseph asks him to put in a good word to Pharaoh so he too can be released from prison. Unfortunately the baker's dream was not positive. Joseph predicted accurately that the baker would be brought before Pharaoh and hanged. The cupbearer is restored to his position but didn't remember Joseph. He forgot all about him.

Dream a little dream with me

Two long years later, Pharaoh has two similar dreams that none of Egypt's religious experts could explain. Now the cupbearer finally remembers Joseph and his ability to interpret dream and suddenly Joseph is out of prison and standing before Pharaoh. Joseph tells Pharaoh his dreams are sent from God and they represent seven years of abundant crops for Egypt and then seven years of famine. The obvious solution is to appoint an intelligent, wise administrator to collect and store food during the abundant years and then use it to protect Egypt during the years of famine. The solution may be obvious, but Pharaoh's decision to put Joseph in charge bordered on unfathomable. A slave goes from prison to an appointment that places him second only to Pharaoh in power and authority. Now we are back in soap opera territory.

Vengeance versus Forgiveness

There is famine in many lands and Jacob sends 10 of his sons to Egypt to purchase grain. He keeps Benjamin at home, the only son of his beloved Rachel. Joseph recognizes his brothers but they are clueless. A hostile Joseph falsely accuses them of spying (the Egyptians were always alert about the security of their northeastern border since it was the border between Egypt and its major military rivals). Joseph uses his false allegation to gain more information from his brothers and forces them to go home and bring back Benjamin. Jacob is unwilling to part with Benjamin, but Judah guarantees Benjamin's safety on the trip. Judah does not know what that might mean for him, but he was determined to do his duty. In the end, it was Judah's stirring words that caused Joseph to break down with emotion and reveal himself to his brothers (Genesis: 18-34).

After planting Joseph's silver cup in Benjamin's baggage, the brothers are brought before Joseph. He assures them that only Benjamin will be punished by becoming a slave. In an extraordinary act of transformation, Judah who convinced his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery steps forward and offers to take Benjamin's place. This courageous act convinces Joseph that his brothers have dramatically changed for the better. Then Joseph reveals himself to his brothers who are terrified in his presence. But although Joseph was rejected, kidnapped, enslaved, and imprisoned, he finds it in his heart to forgive his brothers and even shares his prosperity with them. Jacob's family (including Jacob) moves to Egypt and settle as shepherds in the land of Goshen. After living in Egypt, Jacob blesses his sons and dies. Joseph wept and mourned his father for months but honored his request to be buried in Canaan. After their father's death, Joseph's brothers feared revenge from Joseph. Could he really have forgiven them for selling him into slavery? But Joseph reassured them and showed his forgiveness was real and complete. Quite a journey from a spoiled brat who only thought of himself, endured slavery and prison, rose to the highest office of the land, and was able to put away the human need for revenge and instead demonstrates God's forgiveness for us even when we don't deserve it, especially when we don't deserve it.

Questions (Please pick and choose which questions your group would like to cover)

1. There is a pattern of behavior in families that can be passed down to children. Jacob was his mother's favorite son; Esau, the oldest, was his father's favorite son. Jacob tricks his father into giving his brother's birthright to him. Later on, Jacob favors one wife over another. Do you think this family history cast a shadow over Joseph and his brothers' relationships? Why or why not?
2. What lessons are there for modern parents when we see the repercussions of favoritism in Jacob's family and throughout the Old Testament?
3. Does Joseph bear any responsibility in his brothers' actions to sell him into slavery? Why or why not?
4. Both Potiphar and the jailor could see the fruits of God's presence and strength in Joseph's life, even in the worst of circumstances – slavery and imprisonment. As Christ followers, we also have the same presence and strength of God within us. How can you make God's work in you obvious to those around you, especially in times of hardship?
5. Someone once said, "Refusing to forgive someone is like drinking poison and expecting someone else to die." Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
6. Forgiveness is a process and can take a lifetime. What consequences of their behavior did Joseph's brothers experience? What consequences did Joseph experience?
7. What lessons about forgiveness have you learned from Joseph's life?