

## Lesson 45

# Joseph Becomes a Slave

Joseph's envious brothers sold him as a slave.

# Overview

## Lesson Focus

Jacob favored Joseph over his other sons, which made them jealous. Joseph's dreams indicated that he would one day rule over his family. This made his brothers even angrier. So they sold Joseph into slavery, and he was taken to Egypt. In spite of the brothers' sin, God used these events to bring Joseph to Egypt and accomplish his sovereign plan.

## Key Passages

Genesis 37:5–7, 37:9, 37:20, 37:36

## Memory Verse

Proverbs 3:5–6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

## Prepare to Share

## Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

The history of Joseph, beginning in Genesis 37, is a fascinating biblical account demonstrating God's sovereignty and orchestration of circumstances to fulfill his plan. The characters are colorful; the plot takes amazing twists and turns; and we see the full gamut of human emotion and experience, including favoritism, envy, remorse, impatience, perseverance, temptation, self-control, resentment, hatred, lying, deceit, reconciliation, and faithfulness. But in the midst of it all, we recognize God at work accomplishing his eternal purposes, in spite of the sinful and deceitful nature of man.

In Genesis 35, God called Jacob to move from Shechem to Bethel. Bethel was the place where God had appeared to Jacob in his vision of the ladder (Genesis 28:12, 28:19). It was at Bethel that God changed Jacob's name to Israel and again confirmed that he would become a great nation and would inherit the land of Canaan (Genesis 35:1, 35:10–12). God changed the names of several people in the Bible (Abram, Sarai, Jacob, Simon Peter). Some believe this was to let these servants of God know that they were now marked for a life completely dedicated to him and to his purposes.

God blessed Jacob with twelve sons—six from Leah, two from Rachel, two from Bilhah (Rachel's maidservant), and two from Zilpah (Leah's maidservant). Jacob loved Rachel more than he loved Leah (Genesis 29:30), and he favored the two sons she bore to him—Joseph and Benjamin—above the others. Jacob's obvious

favoritism toward Joseph provoked the dramatic and grief-filled accounts of Joseph's early life.

It was Jacob's evident fondness for Joseph that led him to give Joseph a robe of many colors—an event that provoked his brothers to envy and hatred (Genesis 37:3–4). Joseph's description of his dreams, inferring that one day his family would bow down to him, further enraged his brothers. They were more than ready to take advantage of the opportunity to be rid of him when he joined them on the plains of Dothan. There they seized him and flung him into a pit (Genesis 37:23–24). This, of course, was all according to God's perfect plan and timing. A caravan of traders came by at this point, and Joseph was sold to them as a slave and taken to Egypt (Genesis 37:27–28). God was moving men to accomplish his great purpose. Because of Joseph's seemingly hopeless circumstances, the nation of Israel would be preserved during the coming famine. God's plans cannot be thwarted, and his counsel will stand forever (Psalm 33:10–11). He will use even the lawless actions of men to fulfill his purposes (Acts 2:22–23).

## **Historical/Apologetics Background**

The covenant God made with Abraham over 200 years earlier (Genesis 12:1–3), reaffirmed with Isaac (Genesis 26:1–5), and then proclaimed to Jacob (Genesis 28:13–17) was continuing through history to its fulfillment. God had woven his plan through generations and through his ordained circumstances to this point in history—Joseph's enslavement in Egypt—in order to continue leading his people to the promised land.

Jacob was 91 years old when Joseph was born to Rachel in Haran (Genesis 30:22–24). Joseph lived with his large family in Haran for another six years until Jacob finally fled from Laban, his father-in-law. After 20 years of servitude, Jacob returned to Canaan (Genesis 31:20–21).

On his return to Canaan, Jacob was reconciled with his brother Esau (Genesis 33:4). And then he at last made his way to Shechem, in the land of Canaan, where he erected an altar and worshipped the God of Israel (Genesis 33:18–20). However, Jacob was forced to leave Shechem after his sons Simeon and Levi killed every male and plundered the city as retribution for their sister Dinah's dishonorable treatment by Shechem, son of Hamor (Genesis 34:25–29). Although Jacob was concerned about retaliation for what happened at Shechem, God protected them as they traveled to Bethel, where God confirmed his promises to Jacob (Genesis 35:10–12). After the family left Bethel, Rachel gave birth to Benjamin near the town of Bethlehem, but she died and was buried there (Genesis 35:16–19). The family eventually came to Hebron, where Isaac was living. Isaac died at age 180 years, and Jacob and Esau buried him (Genesis 35:27–29).

While we understand and accept the Bible as true history, inspired and preserved by God, it is helpful to know that there are historical and archaeological evidences that confirm the Bible's history. The Scripture passage we are studying this week tells us that Joseph's brothers were pasturing their flocks near Dothan (Genesis 37:17). Joseph traveled from Hebron to Shechem

(about 60 miles) in search of his brothers, only to learn that they had moved on to Dothan (about 15 miles from Shechem).

The city of Dothan is identified with modern Tel Dothan in Israel. It lies along the ancient trading route called the Via Maris. This is probably the route the Midianite traders were taking when Joseph's brothers encountered them. This important route led from Damascus in the North, across the Jordan River, and then along the seacoast to Egypt—where Joseph would be enslaved according to God's plan.

In Tel Dothan today, archaeological evidences of old buildings and two ancient cisterns have been discovered. One of these may have been the very cistern Joseph was tossed into. The land is still rich for pasturing flocks, and a natural spring supplies water to the area. It would have provided a great place for Jacob's sons to feed their flocks. These details lend support to the biblical account and once again confirm the accuracy of Scripture.

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