



Genesis

Joseph Imprisoned: Grace Under Fire

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church
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Introduction

Chapter 37 begins “the account of Jacob,” which is the last section of the book of Genesis. Genesis began with Creation and an account of the breach between man and God caused by sin, and we have been watching the way God laid a foundation for repairing that breach by forming a family for Himself and establishing it in a series of covenant promises. We saw that the initiative in this plan of redemption is all on God’s part; that man responds by faith and obedience to His call; and that God works patiently with man, using circumstances and testing to mold him and draw him to Himself.

God’s three-fold promise to Abraham of nation, land, and blessing passed first to Isaac and then to Jacob—both chosen by God to receive and pass down that promise and blessing to subsequent generations. Along the way, God began to fulfill the promises: Abraham was promised descendants as numerous as the stars, and Jacob now has 12 sons—the future fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. God promised that those descendants would possess the land of Canaan, and the first verse of Gen. 37 says that “Jacob dwelt in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan.” Where Abraham lived as a stranger, his descendants are now at home. But Jacob’s growing family, as we saw last week, is in constant danger of being assimilated by the Canaanites through intermarriage and the lure of their many gods. If Israel is to grow unfettered into a nation under God, they will need space to live apart from other cultures while they grow so they can preserve their identity.

During this final section of Genesis, the story focuses on Jacob’s son Joseph. It is difficult to place it exactly in time except to say that these events occur prior to the 13th century BC and Israel’s exodus from Egypt. It explains how the family comes to leave Canaan for Egypt, where they are given a fertile area of land to call their own, where they can live apart from foreign interference, prosper, and raise their families until they are ready to become a nation. Keep this in mind as you consider even these first three chapters: the underlying message of the closing chapters of Genesis is that God is guiding everything, even the bad things that happen, toward a good end.

Read Genesis 37-40 all the way through, then re-read Gen. 37 before answering the questions on the text that follow.

Genesis 37

1 Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. 2 This is the history of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a lad with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought an ill report of them to their father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a long robe with sleeves. 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. 5 Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they only hated him the more. 6 He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed:





Genesis 37 (cont.)

7 behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf." 8 His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him yet more for his dreams and for his words. 9 Then he dreamed another dream, and told it to his brothers, and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream; and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." 10 But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" 11 And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. 12 Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 13 And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." 14 So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers, and with the flock; and bring me word again." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. 15 And a man found him wandering in the fields; and the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" 16 "I am seeking my brothers," he said, "tell me, I pray you, where they are pasturing the flock." 17 And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. 18 They saw him afar off, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. 19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild beast has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." 21 But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." 22 And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; cast him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand upon him"--that he might rescue him out of their hand, to restore him to his father. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24 and they took him and cast him into a pit. The pit was empty, there was no water in it. 25 Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers heeded him. 28 Then Midianite traders passed by; and they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt. 29 When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes 30 and returned to his brothers, and said, "The lad is gone; and I, where shall I go?" 31 Then they took Joseph's robe, and killed a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood; 32 and they sent the long robe with sleeves and brought it to their father, and said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." 33 And he recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe; a wild beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." 34 Then Jacob rent his garments, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him. 36 Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.



Questions on the Text

Joseph's Dreams

Read Genesis Genesis 37:1-11

[Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob, and the first son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel (who is now dead). While the older sons grew up amid the strife and struggles of Jacob's life in Haran, Joseph was raised in a quieter time, after Jacob's experience with God at Peniel. It is probable that Jacob confided to this favorite son his own dreams and hopes based on God's promises. All these things would have set Joseph apart from his brothers, particularly the oldest ones.]

1. What reasons can you find in these verses for the jealousy and hatred Joseph's brothers had for him?
2. Compare and contrast the reactions of Jacob and his sons to Joseph's dreams. Review Gen. 27:25-29. What does this add to the picture?

Joseph Sold By His Brothers

Read Genesis Genesis 37:12-36

3. How do his brothers react when Joseph appears? What do they plot and why?
4. Assuming Joseph's dreams truly foretell the future and God's plan for this family, is there anything anyone could do that would derail that plan?
5. Where was God when Joseph was in the pit? What was Joseph to make of his dreams?

Chapter 38 provides a "story of Judah" that is parallel to the story of Joseph in time while being completely opposed in moral tone. It serves to set off the story of Joseph in a number of ways: both leave home, one voluntarily, the other against his will. One leaves to seek his fortune among the Canaanites, the other is sold as a slave to Egypt. One seeks out a prostitute, the other flees sexual temptation. What becomes of these men, who will father the two leading tribes of Israel, is a study in contrast. There is great irony in the outcome, for what appears to be true on the outside (one man moving freely and in control of his destiny; another man enslaved, in control of nothing but his response to the situation) does not take into account the unseen—the will and the presence of God.

Read Gen. 38 in your own Bible; it is not included here. Then answer the questions on the text that follow.

Tamar Deceives Joseph

Read Genesis Genesis 38

6. What kind of men were Judah's sons, and what happened to them? What impact would this have on his ability to father a tribe?
7. At the time of this story, the brother or nearest relative of a man who died childless was obligated to marry the widow to produce children for the first husband. The oldest son then became the legal heir to the dead man's property (this was later written into law; see Deut. 25:5-10). What was Onan's sin?
8. Read Ruth 4:12, 18-22. What is Tamar's role in "the big picture" of God's plan of redemption?

Genesis 39 picks up the story of Joseph where Gen. 37 left off. It begins to chart the ups and downs of his imprisonment in Egypt, a time that prepared him for the position he would soon occupy as Pharaoh's chief administrator and for the role he was to have in God's plan for Israel. Read it all the way through before answering the questions.



Catholic Scripture Study



Genesis 39

1 Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. 2 The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian, 3 and his master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. 4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. 5 From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was upon all that he had, in house and field. 6 So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and having him he had no concern for anything but the food which he ate. Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. 7 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph, and said, "Lie with me." 8 But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Lo, having me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand; 9 he is not greater in this house than I am; nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife; how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" 10 And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie with her or to be with her. 11 But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, 12 she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and got out of the house. 13 And when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, and had fled out of the house, 14 she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; 15 and when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment with me, and fled and got out of the house." 16 Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, 17 and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; 18 but as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment with me, and fled out of the house." 19 When his master heard the words which his wife spoke to him, "This is the way your servant treated me," his anger was kindled. 20 And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. 21 But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love, and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. 22 And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison; and whatever was done there, he was the doer of it; 23 the keeper of the prison paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.



Questions on the Text

Joseph in Potiphar's House Read Genesis 39:1-6

9. Having been sold into slavery, how does it appear that Joseph behaved? Are you surprised by this? How might he have acted instead?
10. Underline all the times you see "the Lord" mentioned in this chapter. What do these phrases reveal about God's care for Joseph?



Questions on the Text

Potiphar's Wife

Read Genesis 39:7-end

11. How did Joseph meet the test put to him by Potiphar's wife? Why did he respond in this way?
12. What does this incident teach you about how to avoid temptation? Read I Cor. 6:15-20 for some of St. Paul's instructions on this. How was Joseph was able to stand strong in the face of so many trials?

However responsible a position he held, Joseph remained a slave. What was he to make of the dreams he had so long ago, in which even his family bowed down before him? Chapter 40 features another pair of dreams that will figure in the fulfillment of the first. Read Gen. 40 in your own Bible; it is not included here. Then answer the questions on the text that follow.

Joseph in Prison

Read Genesis 40

13. a. Why was Joseph so confident that he could interpret the officers' dreams?
- b. What did Joseph hope to get in return for interpreting the dreams? Did he get it?
14. Review the major events in Joseph's life thus far, noting how his fortune rises and falls. What would you say is the outstanding characteristic of Joseph in the face of repeated misfortune?
15. What was the secret of Joseph's steadfastness?



Questions for Reflection

One of the best ways to meditate on God's Word is to take it deeply into your life through memorization. The suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the text (see Genesis 39 in this lesson), or you may choose one of your own. For further reflection, consider these:

1. Clearly Judah's choice to live with the Canaanites, to pick his wife and friends from among them, led to a great deal of grief and trouble. God would later impose strict laws on the Israelites to hold them separate from pagan cultures and their ungodly influence. We cannot so clearly choose whom to live among today, but we can choose those we are close to. Who do you choose to share your life with? Remember that Jesus admonishes us to be "in the world but not of it." How can you do that in your own life?
2. Are you alone? What could be more lonely than being sold into slavery in a foreign country, far from all you know? Reflect on Joseph's estrangement from his brothers, the loss of his beloved father, the hopeless isolation of slavery...then recall the many times it is recorded, "the Lord was with Joseph." Meditate on the Psalms (the 23rd is a good place to start) and ask the great Shepherd of our souls to be with you as He promises.



Catholic Scripture Study



Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder

Back in our study of Abraham we saw that faith is a way of life, not a single act. It is exhibited not in a correct set of beliefs about God but in an organic process by which men grow forward through circumstances and testing toward perfection, toward “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:14).”

Of Abraham, we had to ask how it was possible to reconcile the times he appeared to waver in faith with the fact that St. Paul said he did not weaken in faith and he is now known as “the father of all who believe. The answer was that these were occasions for growth in faith, not times when Abraham reversed direction. He shows us the way God uses testing to draw out faith from His children.

Jacob, too, seemed inconsistent for one who would become the father of God’s nation Israel, but in him we saw the struggles that everyone on the road of faith encounters, and the training in righteousness those struggles provide.

After seeing Jacob and his sons we are left asking, what might the life of faith look like, lived perfectly? We want to believe that God is working to restore order to the world and to draw man back to himself, but so far the people in his new family don’t look a whole lot different from their neighbors. Will God do anything to enable men to be different?

Right at this point, the story shifts focus to one of Jacob’s sons who acts the way we think a man of God should act. No doubt Joseph sinned and struggled along with the best of us, but the author focuses on details that paint him as an example of the triumph of faith, with the kind of character that is possible when one is filled with the spirit of God. Joseph’s years in Egypt are notably lacking in evidence of the self-pity, doubt, bitterness and despair we might expect of one going through the kind of rejection, seduction, separation and undeserved slavery that Joseph endures. Rather, those years are filled with examples of Joseph’s industry, competence, and his uncomplaining loyalty and attentiveness to others’ needs.

Even when raised to power he will not take advantage of his position to take revenge or even to force a fulfillment of his dreams by making others bow to him. Instead he pours himself out for others. Joseph is a model of servant leadership. He humbles himself, pays attention to the tasks put before him, and waits for God to exalt him in due time.

What gave Joseph this strength of character? Several factors are worth noting. First, God was with Joseph in and through his trials, sustaining him by His grace and presence. Then, God used “the school of tribulation”, the very things that were hardest in Joseph’s life, to mold his character, to lead him to power, and to prepare him to be Pharaoh’s chief administrator. Finally, Joseph remained focused on God and not on his troubles. In a future chapter, Pharaoh will recognize that in him is the spirit of God. In that respect his life gives us a foretaste, at the close of the first chapter of salvation history, of what would be one day possible after God sends His Spirit to dwell in the hearts of all believers.



Catholic Scripture Study



Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)

Catechism Connection

Excerpted from The Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Gen. 37:22-28: “We firmly believe that God is master of the world and of its history. But the ways of his providence are often unknown to us. Only at the end, when our partial knowledge ceases, when we see God “face to face” will we fully know the ways by which—even through the dramas of evil and sin—God has guided his creation to that definitive Sabbath rest for which he created heaven and earth.” (314)

Gen. 38:9 (On “onanism,” or contraception): “... ‘every action which, whether in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible’ is intrinsically evil: ‘Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality.’ ” (2370, quoting from *Humanae Vitae* 14, and *Familiaris Consortio* 32)

Gen. 39:7-12 (on temptation): “The Holy Spirit makes us discern between trials, which are necessary for the growth of the inner man, and temptation, which leads to sin and death. We must also discern between being tempted and consenting to temptation. Finally, discernment unmasks the lie of temptation, whose object appears to be good, a ‘delight to the eyes’ and desirable, when in reality its fruit is death.” (2847)



Catholic Scripture Study



Summary

In this lesson, we observed that:

1. Jacob's preference for Joseph aroused envy in his other sons, which turned to hatred when they heard of Joseph's dreams that they would bow to him one day.
2. Unwilling to see those dreams come to pass, Joseph's brothers first plotted to kill the boy and then sold him into slavery.
3. While Joseph was taken off to Egypt, Judah went off to Canaan and married a Canaanite woman. God killed his first two sons for their wickedness. Judah's attempt to save his third son may have cost him future generation but for Tamar's resourcefulness. It was their son who fathered the line from which Christ eventually came.
4. God was with Joseph in his trouble and blessed him through it, prospering him and giving him success with the result that Potiphar gave Joseph complete charge over all his household.
5. In contrast to Judah, Joseph resisted temptation and kept his eyes on God. He is a true model of strength in the face of temptation; of humble acceptance of God's will; and of faith in the face of opposing circumstances.
6. Thrown from his high position in Potiphar's household into prison on unjust charges, Joseph soon rose to responsibility there as well. God then used the occasion to bring two of Pharaoh's officers under Joseph and give them dreams—then gave Joseph their interpretation.
7. Any hopes Joseph had for a quick release for interpreting the dreams dissolved as the chief butler forgot to speak on his behalf.
8. God was with Joseph and blessed him both in and through his trials, not removing him from the bad situations but using them to effect good and to further His purposes.

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