

GENESIS 37-41

Introduction

This portion of the *Witnessing Christ from the Old Testament* study covers Genesis chapters 37–41, highlighting the start of the account of Joseph with a quick detour to include Judah and Tamar.

[You can find the LDS outline of study and resources here.](#)

LDS Study Focus

The LDS study guide focuses on the theme: “The Lord Was with Joseph.”

Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Life teaches us that lesson clearly, and so does the life of Joseph, the son of Jacob. He was heir to the covenant God had made with his fathers, but he was hated by his brothers and sold into slavery. He refused to compromise his integrity when approached by Potiphar’s wife and so was cast into prison. It seemed that the more faithful he was, the more hardship he faced. But all this adversity was not a sign of God’s disapproval. In fact, through it all, “the Lord was with him” ([Genesis 39:3](#)). Joseph’s life was a manifestation of this important truth: God will not forsake us. “Following the Savior will not remove all of your trials,” President Dieter F. Uchtdorf taught. “However, it will remove the barriers between you and the help your Heavenly Father wants to give you. God will be with you” ([“A Yearning for Home,”](#) Ensign or Liahona, Nov. 2017, 22).

LDS resources also emphasize sexual purity, emergency preparedness, and receiving and understanding revelation from the Lord.

Biblical Focus

In the Bible, God permits suffering, sorrow, and uncertainty to be a part of a believer’s life. As we track the life of Joseph, we meet a believer who outwardly shows his faith in God through words and actions. Yet, Joseph was betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused, and imprisoned. God is hidden and works behind the scenes. Throughout, God’s favor and Joseph’s faithfulness are emphasized. Joseph’s story teaches us that God can and does work everything out for the good of his people.

Mixed in with Joseph’s narrative is the scandalous story of Judah and Tamar, which once again shows God working his ways even amid sin, sorrow, and scandal.

GENESIS 37

Joseph, the favorite, shares his dreams and ends up in a pit

As discussed in previous stories, favoritism caused great pain and turmoil in the patriarchal families. Abraham loved Isaac more than Ishmael. Rebekah preferred Jacob, while Isaac preferred Esau. Jacob's favorite wife was Rachel, and now his favorite son is Joseph. Favoritism fostered an atmosphere of jealousy and hatred in this family.

As Joseph tattled on his brothers and shared the prophecies from his dreams, he did nothing to improve his relationships with his brothers but instead fanned the flames of hatred. Was teenage Joseph being arrogant? Was it really a good idea to tell his brothers about his dreams?

Joseph took gifts from God—his dreams—and turned them into self-promotion tools! Aren't we also prone to take the good gifts of God—our positions, possessions, intelligence, and experience—and fail to use them for the benefit of others and the glory of God? Unfortunately, all too often, we use these gifts only for our own gain.

Joseph's brothers seized the opportunity to give him what they thought he deserved. However, their plan for revenge was far more despicable than was his conceit. After the brothers dumped Joseph into a pit and thought about killing him, they sat down and enjoyed a meal! Their hearts were calloused.

Do you remember *who* Joseph's brothers are? They are the future leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel with whom God will build his chosen nation. The Bible does not hide their sin and shame. Did God make a poor choice, or did he want to show how great *his* faithfulness, *his* mercy, and *his* love were?

Joseph's hardships began. If we did not know the outcome of this story, we would probably be asking questions like: "*Why God?*" "*How could you allow this, God?*" "*Do you care, God?*" Maybe Joseph asked similar questions.

Conversation Starters:

- **How can favoritism lead to sins of coveting or hatred?**
- **Why do you think God picked *these* men to build his chosen nation and preserve the line of the Savior? Do you find it comforting or disturbing?**
- **Is it okay to question God during hard times? Why or why not?**
- **Can you think of biblical examples of believers who questioned God and then grew in their faith? Conversely, can you think of people who questioned God and fell away?**
- **What do we learn about humans and specifically family dynamics from this account that we can use to help understand ourselves and our situation? What do we learn about God from this account that helps us understand more about him and his faithfulness?**

Sharing Personally:

When I read about Joseph's troubles in Genesis 37–40, I remember that Joseph did not know that his suffering would eventually be used for good. I long to be assured that my suffering is for a reason. Sometimes I can see how God uses pain to produce blessings, but sometimes suffering leads me to long for the day when I will dwell eternally with God, where he will wipe away every tear.

Additional Resources:

For a deeper dive into suffering, check out [Witnessing from the Liahona: Growth in Adversity](#).

GENESIS 38

Tamar, the righteous prostitute

If you have never heard of Tamar before, you're not alone. Tucked away in Genesis 38, rudely interrupting the Joseph saga, is the tragic tale of Tamar. Not for the faint of heart, her story makes one squirm uncomfortably. Tamar's story, one of the most scandalous in the Bible, is hard to sanitize but well worth the struggle to study.

Although Judah *eventually* declares his daughter-in-law (turned one-time sexual partner) Tamar to be "more righteous" than he, no one looks good in this story. It reeks of selfishness, dishonesty, manipulation, prostitution, and lust. Whatever good you can say about Judah, and it's not much, you cannot use his sins to make Tamar look innocent by any vast stretch of the imagination. She's *only* less evil than her *father-in-law*. What Tamar did was awful and immoral. Even if she wasn't one by trade, she acted like a prostitute. The end she gained didn't justify her *sinful* means.

Tamar's encounter with Judah is a story about the sinfulness of human flesh. Yet, both were included in the Messianic line (see Matthew 1:3). This inclusion sends a strong message about God's pure, precious, and powerful grace.

Do you find it shocking and offensive that people guilty of such grievous moral lapses pollute the line of *the Savior*? This kind of information should make us uncomfortable because it reminds us of our sin and unworthiness. But, at the same time, the inclusion of such scandalous sinners can comfort us. It can reassure us that Jesus, who was not ashamed to reveal the sins of his human ancestors, who came to seek and to save the lost, who shed his blood for the sins of the whole world, includes you and me among those for whom he died.

Conversation Starters:

- **What parts of the story of Judah and Tamar make you the most uncomfortable? Why?**
- **Why did God include the story of Judah and Tamar in the Bible?**

Sharing Personally:

The story of Tamar's tragic tale in Genesis 38 paints a beautiful picture of the Savior's unmerited love for me and you. Jesus didn't hesitate to include scandalous sinners like Judah and Tamar in his family tree, and he won't hesitate to welcome you and me. Just as nobody should boast of his own righteousness, so no one needs to despair because of his sin. There's room for me and you in God's family no matter what we have done or what our family history may be.

Additional Resources:

For a deeper dive, check out more commentary and devotional thoughts in [Tamar's Story](#) (a shareable article found on BeYePerfect.org).

GENESIS 39–40

The faithfulness of God and Joseph

These chapters beautifully explore the contrast and the connection between the faithfulness of God and the faithfulness of Joseph. But which came first? Was it that the faithfulness of Joseph resulted in the faithfulness of God? Or was it that the commitment of God gave rise to the commitment of Joseph? Very clearly, God's faithfulness came first. His loyal love prompted Joseph's loyalty.

Back in chapter 37, Joseph was a boastful teenage boy, and the very next thing we read about him is, "The Lord was with Joseph" (39:2). God's initial favor towards Joseph was not a result of goodness in Joseph, for he had shown none, but of the grace of God! It is only after we read, "The Lord was with Joseph," that we begin to see Joseph act as though he was with the Lord.

Joseph's faithfulness was a flower that bloomed only after much plowing, planting, and watering on the Lord's part. And this is the way it works with all of us. None of us is faithful to God on our own. It is only once we have been shown God's favor—once we have been united to Jesus—that we are able to respond with faithfulness.

Kurt Strassner, *Opening up Genesis*, 155–156

As the Apostle Paul explained in Ephesians 2:10, God's favor leads to our faithfulness, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Now, whenever we find ourselves doing right, we would all do well to take up the mantra of Joseph, saying, "I cannot do it, but God will..." (Genesis 41:16). **Note how this contrasts the LDS idea that "If I am faithful, the Lord will guide and inspire me."**

As a faithful servant in Potiphar's home, in the face of temptation, Joseph, in faith, was able to resist sin. But, after trying so hard for so long to say no to sin and temptation, Joseph got smacked with horrible consequences anyway and was sent to prison.

As Joseph began his life in prison, the author *again* reminds the readers, "God was with Joseph" (Genesis 39:21). Here, Joseph came to his lowest point. He already had lost his home, father, family, and reputation; now, he lost his freedom. When he interpreted the cupbearer's dream, he briefly had a thread of hope. But, as the week and months passed by, it would have become evident that the cupbearer did not speak up for Joseph. Hope died. Joseph's reality was as far from his prophetic dreams as it could get.

God does some of his best work when we are at our lowest points. When all hope is gone, he steps in and saves us. When Jesus died on the cross, and the tomb was sealed, hope evaporated. Then, in the quiet of despair, Jesus rose in power and glory, bringing salvation and causing us to look up from ourselves and only and always to him.

Conversation Starters:

- Joseph's faith and his faithful service to God and Potiphar were tested by Potiphar's lustful wife (39:6–18). How did Joseph resist the temptation to lust, lie, covet, and commit adultery and thus keep what God would later give as the commandments (Exodus 20:14)?
- Share times when you or someone you know suffered for doing what was right.
- What similarities do you see between Joseph's life and Jesus' in this story?
- Why does Genesis keep reminding us that "God was with Joseph?" How does this comfort believers?
- In what ways have you suffered? Believers, share how you were reminded that God was with you during hard times. Offer to pray for your hurting LDS friends.
- Joseph patiently endured his thirteen years in slavery and in prison in a foreign country. What can we learn from God's faithfulness to Joseph as he endured afflictions and trials?

Sharing Personally:

In Genesis 40, Joseph's faithfulness was a flower that bloomed only after much plowing, planting, and watering on the Lord's part. And this is how it works with all of us. None of us is truly faithful to God on our own. It is only once we have been shown God's favor—once we have been united to Jesus—that we are able to respond with faithfulness.

As the Apostle Paul explained in Ephesians 2:10, God's favor leads to our faithfulness, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Now, whenever we find ourselves doing right, we would all do well to take up the mantra of Joseph, saying, "I cannot do it, but God will..." (Genesis 41:16).

or

Just as Joseph couldn't see what was coming in Genesis 40, neither can I comprehend all God has planned for me. Yet, no matter how I may feel on any given day, hope is never dead. It lives on because of Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, I am enabled, encouraged, and emboldened to look up and away from myself. I find my rescue in God. Because God is with me, I can endure to the end.

Additional Resources:

Psalms of lament that could have been Joseph's prayer may comfort the suffering.

- [Psalm 4:1-8](#)
- [Psalm 13:1-6](#)
- [Psalm 43:1-5](#)

GENESIS 41

God uses hardship and suffering in our lives for his good purposes. Those purposes play out in Joseph's life, the lives of Jacob's family, and in the nations around Egypt. Despite the sin that has saturated humanity and creation, God ultimately controls all.

As Joseph hopelessly remained in prison, the memory of his childhood dreams must have mocked him. What had been the purpose of his dreams and those of his fellow prisoners? Those dreams only brought him the hatred of his brothers and created a sense of false hope. But this wasn't the last dream that would be a part of Joseph's life.

Egyptians regarded pharaohs as deities. As Pharaoh's dreams remained a mystery, God created a situation to make Pharaoh feel powerless and in need of authority outside of himself. Enter Joseph and **the God who was with him.**

Upon arrival, Joseph immediately gives all credit to God. "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer." (Genesis 41:16) The Hebrew indicates that Joseph calls God *the* God. In a sense, Joseph proclaims that he is the "one true God." What a powerful testimony, coming from a man that has spent much of his life in prison.

Joseph's life circumstances began to reverse. First, he was set free and given power and authority. It would have been strange and controversial for Pharaoh to appoint a Hebrew slave and prisoner to such a high station. The signet ring, fine clothing, parade, Egyptian wife, and name change gave Joseph a new identity, solidifying his position.

Because the LDS church emphasizes receiving and understanding revelation from the Lord, the LDS resources provide lengthier commentary and questions on this section than most. LDS members might want to talk about Joseph's dreams and connect them to the revelations their leaders believe they receive from God. You can use this as an opportunity to express your confidence in the Bible.

Conversation Starters:

- **Reflect on Joseph's past: How had God prepared him to rule in Egypt and care for his family?**
- **Joseph certainly faced many temptations in his sufferings. What temptations do you think he faced as an Egyptian ruler married to the daughter of a priest?**
- **Who deserved the credit for Joseph's new situation?**

Sharing Personally:

The story of Joseph in Genesis 41 reminds me that suffering and pain in life teach us to rely on God. Genesis and the rest of the Bible uncover these powerful truths. Suffering is present in our lives to bless us. Suffering is present in our lives to keep us from becoming self-sufficient and proud. Suffering is present in our lives to remind us that although we are heirs of heaven, we are not in heaven, not yet. Suffering is present in our lives to point us away from ourselves to Christ. Although suffering is present in our lives, God's grace gives us strength, and his grace is sufficient today, tomorrow, and forever.

For a deeper dive into suffering, check out [Witnessing from the Liahona: Growth in Adversity](#).