

Who was Joseph in the Old Testament?

Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob, his first son through his favored wife, Rachel. Joseph's story is found in Genesis 37–50. After the announcement of his birth, we see Joseph next as a seventeen-year-old returning from shepherding the flock with his half-brothers to give Jacob a bad report of them. We are also told that Jacob "loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him" (Genesis 37:3). Joseph's brothers knew their father loved Joseph more than them, which caused them to hate him (Genesis 37:4). To make matters worse, Joseph began relating his dreams to the family—prophetic visions showing Joseph one day ruling over his family (Genesis 37:5–11).

The animosity toward Joseph peaked when his brothers plotted to kill him in the wilderness. Reuben, the eldest, objected to outright murder and suggested they throw Joseph into a cistern, as he planned to come back and rescue the boy. But, in Reuben's absence, some merchants passed by, and Judah suggested selling Joseph into slavery; the brothers accomplished the task before Reuben could rescue him. The boys took Joseph's robe and, after dipping the robe in goat's blood, deceived their father into thinking his favorite son had been slain by wild beasts (Genesis 37:18–35).

Joseph was sold by the merchants to a high-ranking Egyptian named Potiphar and eventually became the supervisor of Potiphar's household. In Genesis 39 we read of how Joseph excelled at his duties, became one of Potiphar's most trusted servants, and was put in charge of his household. Potiphar could see that, whatever Joseph did, God looked favorably on him and he prospered in all that he did. Unfortunately, Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph. Joseph consistently refused her advances, showing honor for the master who had entrusted him with so much and saying that it would be "a wicked

thing and a sin against God" for him to go to bed with Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:9). One day Potiphar's wife caught Joseph by the cloak and again made sexual advances. Joseph fled, leaving his cloak in her hand. In anger, she falsely accused Joseph of attempted rape, and Potiphar put him in prison (Genesis 39:7-20).

In jail, Joseph was again blessed by God (Genesis 39:21-23). Joseph interpreted the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners. Both interpretations proved to be true, and one of the men was later released from jail and restored to his position as the king's cupbearer (Genesis 40:1-23). But the cupbearer forgot about Joseph and failed to speak to Pharaoh about him. Two years later, the king himself had some troubling dreams, and the cupbearer remembered Joseph's gift of interpretation. The king summoned Joseph and related his dreams. Based on Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph predicted seven years of bountiful harvests followed by seven years of severe famine in Egypt and advised the king to begin storing grain in preparation for the coming dearth (Genesis 41:1-37). For his wisdom, Joseph was made a ruler in Egypt, second only to the king. Joseph was in charge of storing up food during the years of plenty and selling it to Egyptians and foreigners during the years of famine (Genesis 41:38-57). During these years of plenty Joseph had two sons—Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis 41:50-52).

When the famine struck, even Canaan was affected. Jacob sent ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain (Genesis 42:1-3). He kept Benjamin, his youngest and the only other son of Rachel, behind (Genesis 42:4). While in Egypt, the men met their long-lost brother, whom they did not recognize. Joseph, however, did recognize his brothers. He tested them by accusing them of being spies. He confined them for three days then released all but one, sending with them grain for their households and requiring them to come back with their youngest brother (Genesis 42:6-20). Still unaware of Joseph's identity, the brothers

were afflicted with guilt for having sold their brother years before (Genesis 42:21-22). Joseph overheard their discussion and turned aside to weep (Genesis 42:23-24). He retained Simeon and sent the others on their way, secretly returning their money to their grain sacks (Genesis 42:25). When the brothers later realized the money had been returned, they feared even more (Genesis 42:26-28, 35). Once home, they told Jacob all that had transpired. Jacob mourned again the loss of Joseph and the added loss of Simeon. He refused to send Benjamin, despite Reuben's promise that, if he did not return with Benjamin, Jacob could kill Reuben's two sons (Genesis 42:35-38).

The famine became so severe that Jacob acquiesced. Judah persuaded Jacob to send Benjamin with him, giving his own life as a pledge (Genesis 43:1-10). Jacob agreed, sending also choice fruits and double the money for the grain (Genesis 43:11-14). When Joseph saw the men, he instructed his servants to slaughter an animal and prepare a meal for the brothers to dine with him (Genesis 43:15-17). Afraid at the invitation to Joseph's house, the brothers made apologies to Joseph's steward for the money that had been replaced the first time. Joseph's steward reassured them and brought Simeon out (Genesis 43:18-25). When Joseph returned, the brothers bowed to him, fulfilling his earlier prophecy (Genesis 43:26). He asked about their family's welfare and again wept, this time removing himself to his chamber (Genesis 43:27-30). When the men sat down for the meal, at a separate table from Joseph, they were amazed to be arranged by birth order. Benjamin was given five times the portion the other brothers received (Genesis 43:31-34). Before sending them back to their father, Joseph again tested his brothers by returning their money to their grain sacks and placing his silver cup in Benjamin's sack. He let the brothers start on their journey and then sent his steward after them to feign anger and threaten to kill Benjamin. Back in Joseph's presence, Judah pleaded for Benjamin's life, saying that, if Benjamin were to die, so would Jacob. Judah told of

Jacob's grief over the loss of Joseph and his belief that he could not bear to lose Joseph's brother. Judah also spoke of his pledge to Jacob and offered his life for Benjamin's (Genesis 44).

Upon seeing this proof of his brothers' change of heart, Joseph sent all his servants away and wept openly and loudly enough to be heard by Pharaoh's household. He then revealed himself to his brothers (Genesis 45:1-3). Joseph immediately reassured them, telling them not to be angry with themselves for what they'd done to him and saying that God had sent him to Egypt in order to preserve them (Genesis 45:4-8). Joseph reaffirmed his forgiveness years later, after the death of his father, saying that, although his brothers intended evil to him, God had intended it for good (Genesis 50:15-21). Joseph sent his brothers back to Jacob to retrieve the remainder of his household to come live in Goshen, where they would be near to Joseph and he could provide for them (Genesis 45:9-47:12).

Jacob did come to live in Egypt with all of his family. Before he died, Jacob blessed Joseph's two sons and gave thanks to God for His goodness: "I never expected to see your face again, and now God has allowed me to see your children too" (Genesis 48:11). Jacob gave the greater blessing to the younger of the two sons (verses 12-20). Later in the history of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh, the tribes of Joseph, were often considered two distinct tribes. Jacob's descendants lived in Egypt for 400 years, until the time of Moses. When Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt, he took the remains of Joseph with him, as Joseph had requested (Genesis 50:24-25; cf. Exodus 13:19). In asking that he be buried in Canaan, Joseph showed great faith that God would bring His people back to the Promised Land (Hebrews 11:22).

There is much to learn from Joseph's story. As parents, we have warnings concerning Jacob's favoritism and the effects that can have on other children as seen in Joseph's youthful pride and his brothers' envy and hatred. We have a good example of how to handle sexual temptation—run (Genesis 39:12; cf. 2 Timothy 2:22), and we have a clear picture of God's faithfulness. He does not forsake His children, even in the midst of suffering: "The Lord was with Joseph" (Genesis 39:3, 5, 21, 23).

There may be many distressing circumstances we find ourselves in, and some of them may even be unjust, as were those in Joseph's life. However, as we learn from the account of Joseph's life, by remaining faithful and accepting that God is ultimately in charge, we can be confident that God will reward our faithfulness in the fullness of time. Who would blame Joseph if he had turned his brothers away in their need? Yet Joseph showed them mercy, and God desires that we exercise mercy above all other sacrifices (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13).

Joseph's story also presents amazing insight into how God sovereignly works to overcome evil and bring about His plan. After all his ordeals, Joseph was able to see God's hand at work. As he revealed his identity to his brothers, Joseph spoke of their sin this way: "Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. . . . It was not you who sent me here, but God" (Genesis 45:5, 8). Later, Joseph again reassured his brothers, offering forgiveness and saying, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Man's most wicked intentions can never thwart the perfect plan of God.