

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

The Story

Joseph was the second youngest of twelve brothers born to Jacob, who was also known as Israel. In Genesis 37:3–4 we read, “Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was the child of his old age. And he made him an elaborately embroidered coat. When his brothers realised that their father loved him more than them, they grew to hate him – they wouldn’t even speak to him.” The same passage also discusses two dreams Joseph had that angered his brothers; the dreams indicated his brothers would someday bow to him. Joseph’s brothers also despised him due to their father’s clear favouritism toward him.

One day, Joseph travelled to check on his brothers while they were watching their sheep. His brothers plotted against him, threw him in an empty well, and later sold him as a slave to some Ishmaelites. Applying animal blood to his special coat, they returned home and made Jacob believe his son had been killed by wild animals.

In the meantime, Joseph was taken to Egypt and sold to the captain of the guard, Potiphar, as a household slave. Joseph was later falsely accused of adoring Potiphar’s wife and thrown into prison. While in prison, Joseph accurately interpreted the dreams of two of Pharaoh’s servants, who were also imprisoned. Later, Pharaoh had a disturbing dream no one could interpret. One of the servants Joseph had previously helped then suggested to Pharaoh that Joseph could interpret the dream. Joseph was summoned from prison, and he interpreted Pharaoh’s dream in such a powerful way that he was put in charge of Egypt.

Pharaoh’s dream predicted seven years of famine. During the famine, Joseph’s older brothers came to Egypt to buy food. They did not recognise Joseph, now twenty years older, and he treated them harshly, pretending that he thought they were spies. Joseph kept one brother in prison until the others brought their youngest brother, Benjamin, back to Egypt to prove they were not spying. They brought Benjamin with them on a return trip, and, after a series of twists that included his brothers bowing before him – in fulfilment of Joseph’s dream of long ago – Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. They were shocked, yet soon glad to be reunited. Joseph sent word for the entire family to join them in Egypt until after the famine.

Later, when their father, Jacob, died, Joseph’s brothers feared that Joseph would take revenge against them for their prior treatment of him. They came to Joseph and begged for his forgiveness, appealing to a request their father had made before he died. Joseph wept when he heard their appeal. Revenge was the last thing on his mind. Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Do I act for God? Don’t you see, you planned evil against me but God used those same plans for my good, as you see all around you right now – life for many people. Easy now, you have nothing to fear; I’ll take care of you and your children”.

In the story of Joseph and his brothers, we see the themes of forgiveness, the father – son bond, sibling rivalry, brotherly love, God’s sovereignty, and God’s greater good in times of suffering. Just like Joseph, we are called to forgive those who have let us down see life’s experiences as part of God’s plan for us to serve others.