

Expecting to see God at work in our lives (A study on the life of Joseph)

Notes for Leaders

It may be helpful for Leaders to read the whole of the story of Joseph (Genesis Chapters 37-50)

Please ask your group members to read certain chapters in advance of each Session:

Genesis Chapter 37 before Session 1 - Living with God's promises

Genesis Chapter 39 before Session 2 - Remembering God whatever the circumstances

Genesis Chapter 40 before Session 3 - Honouring God, even if it makes us unpopular

Genesis Chapter 41 before Session 4 - Giving the glory to God

Genesis Chapters 42 & 43 before Session 5 - Allowing God to change us

Genesis Chapters 44 & 45 before Session 6 - Showing forgiveness and sharing God's grace

Please hand out the Introduction sheet and read it aloud at the start of Session 1 – it gives a brief outline of the series.

Paragraphs in bold are there to be shared (please read them aloud)

Questions in plain bold are the main questions (recommended ones)

Questions in bold italics are additional questions (there if you want to use them)

The bullet points under the questions are not necessarily answers but points to bring out and help the discussion. If the group does not cover these points in their discussion of the question, you may wish to share them.

Interesting Snippets (for leaders to share if appropriate), are things **I** found interesting when I did my research. You may wish to share some of these with your group.

Please hand out the Conclusion sheet and read it aloud at the end of Session 6 – it briefly sums up the series.

When I lead a Sunday School series, I find it helpful at the end of each session to summarize what we have learned (especially what we have learned about God) and then at the beginning of the next session I recap, briefly, on what we have covered in the previous weeks. As this series is a journey through Joseph's life, where Joseph is learning many things, it maybe good to do this. The recap at the beginning would also help anyone who misses a session.

I am not very good at thinking up VAK moments. I have tried and I have made a suggestion for each session but I feel sure that some of you will be able to think of better ones to use.

Expecting to see God at work in our lives (A study on the life of Joseph)

Introduction

In the book of Genesis, the Bible tells us about Joseph – a young man who experienced the ups and down of life: he was kidnapped, sold and imprisoned, but went on to gain influence and power. It was at the age of 17 that Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery; at the age of 30 he became Prime Minister of Egypt; and 9 years later he was reunited with his family.

The teenage Joseph believed that through his dreams God had revealed to him a future of leadership and yet the following 12 years brought him much suffering. God was not the author of that suffering, but He used it for His glory. We will see God working through the twists and turns of Joseph's life, bringing good out of evil, and fulfilling His promises.

The story of Joseph relates back to the covenant promise God made to Abraham (Genesis Chapter 15 verses 13-16). Joseph knew the Lord was the God of his fathers: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And he knew of God's covenant promise to Abraham to preserve his descendants. We, as inheritors of God's promises, are therefore connected to the family of Jacob.

Most of us do not receive God's guidance through prophetic dreams but we can ask the Holy Spirit to show us how God's promises in the Bible apply to our lives.

For God has a plan for each one of us and if we trust Him and follow Him, He will bring this plan to fruition. And, just as in the story of Joseph, that plan will have an affect on others.

The way Joseph remained faithful to God, especially during the tough times and many years in prison, can be a great encouragement to us all. So, let's see what we can learn from Joseph as to how to live with God's promises and how to have a real hope in God, expecting Him to work in our lives, even in the midst of our troubles.

Session 1 – Living with God’s Promises

VAK MOMENT - Share light-hearted experiences of sibling rivalry

Read Genesis Chapter 37

The Joseph story begins: “This is the account of Jacob.” Jacob, who was also known as Israel, was Joseph’s father. The early part of Joseph’s life is a sad story of broken family relationships - favouritism, envy, hate, division and grief. And yet, underlying all this, is the hope of the fulfilment of God’s promises.

Question 1: Why was Joseph Jacob’s favourite son?

- Many years ago, when Jacob ran away from his brother Esau he went to work for his Uncle Laban (his mother’s brother). Jacob fell in love with Laban’s younger daughter Rachel. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah (his elder daughter) first, and then told Jacob he could only marry Rachel if he worked for him for another 7 years. (Gen Ch 29 v14b-30).
- Joseph was Jacob’s favourite son because he was the first son of his beloved wife Rachel, who died giving birth to her second son Benjamin.

Question 2: Favouritism often happens in families, but where else can it appear and when does it cause trouble?

- Schools, workplaces, churches, etc. It is when favouritism becomes known and seen in action that it causes resentment and trouble.
- It would appear that Jacob had learned nothing from his own experience of his father, Isaac, favouring his brother Esau.
- Jacob gave to Joseph a richly ornamented robe as a visual symbol of his special love for Joseph. It was a garment that an overseer would wear, not one that a worker would wear.

Question 3: By telling his brothers his dreams, was Joseph being bold in character, or naïve and insensitive?

- A spoiled teenager, not knowing when to keep his mouth shut.
- Making mischief in a dysfunctional family.
- Bad enough telling them after the first dream – he was asking for trouble to relate the second dream!
- Joseph believed his dreams were from God and the double dream confirmed this. The dreams carried the same prophetic message that was not lost on the brothers. Jacob warned Joseph but also made a mental note (verse 11).

Question 4: One or more of the following:

Is it always wise to “brag” about what God has shown you of the future?

Why and in what circumstances would it be better to “treasure these things in our hearts”?

Can you think of an occasion when God has spoken to you about your future? Did you tell anyone and was that the “right” thing to do?

Question 5: Why do you think God gave Joseph these dreams?

- So that God could be glorified as no-one could say it was by chance these things happened.
- Remembering these dreams would help Joseph in the future when times were tough.

Question 6: Like children in a playground the brothers are egging each other on, verses 19-20. Have you ever been in a group and ended up behaving in a way that you have come to regret?

- Bullying and gossiping behind others' backs happens in all walks of life – the playground, parents at the school gates, work colleagues, church congregations.
- Verse 21 – It can be difficult to step out of the group to try to stop the situation. It takes courage, because you may lose friends and become the next target.
- Verse 29 – for poor Reuben it is too late. There is as much guilt in failing to stand up for what is right as there is in doing wrong.
- Verse 26 – It is Judah who saves Joseph from death.

Question 7: Where can we see the callousness of the brothers' hearts?

- Verse 25 – Shows hardness of heart that they can sit and eat while Joseph is in the cistern, probably crying out for help (Chapter 42, verse 21)
- No-one likes a tell-tale, verse 2, but the brothers' action is rather extreme.
- After 17 years of being treated as second best the brothers have had enough.
- Kidnapping was a capital offence, just like murder. Irony is that the brothers conspired to destroy the person God had ordained to save them.

Question 8: What is your opinion of Jacob's reaction?

- Would you have found it hard to just accept Joseph's death? Would you have had to try to find him? Jacob's announcement that he would mourn until his own death (verse 35) would mean the brothers would not be able to forget their crime.
- In his distress Jacob seems to have forgotten to look for God at work. In verse 11 we are told Jacob kept in mind Joseph's dreams – has he forgotten them already?
- Has Jacob forgotten God's promises to him? Genesis Ch 28 v13-15 & Ch 35 v11-12

LEADERS - Summarize the Main Points that have emerged.

Interesting Snippets (for leaders to share if appropriate):

Verse 2 - all I can find on this is Belinda Pollard "It seems that the lives of Jacob's children show us who Jacob was. Our relationships are perhaps even more defining than our achievements."

Verse 9 - Double dream is confirmation from God (Chapter 41 verse 32)

Verses 31-33 – the robe, which is both the symbol of Jacob's love for Joseph and the symbol of the brothers' hatred of Joseph, is used to deceive Jacob. Jacob is deceived by a garment, in the same way as he deceived his father Isaac and cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance.

Session 2 - Remembering God whatever the circumstances

VAK MOMENT – Kim’s Game (now and later)

Bring into the room a tray of 12 everyday objects. After 1 minute remove the tray and then hand out pen and paper and ask the members to write their names on the paper and then as many objects as they can remember. After a further minute collect in the papers and put them to one side.

Recap summary from Session 1

Read Genesis Chapter 39, Verses 1-20.

If it can, the world will strip a person of their dreams. It will attack them with sorrow, suffering and temptation; loneliness, hatred, envy and disappointment, and then wait to see what will come of the dreams. Often, nothing comes of the dreams because under the stress of the world’s attack and temptation, the dream is abandoned, forsaken, betrayed and sold. ⁽¹⁾

Question 1: Taken away from the father who loved him, how do you think Joseph felt?

- Joseph was probably wondering how being a servant to an Egyptian official could possibly relate to his dreams of his family bowing down to him?
- Not only had his brothers abandoned him but God had too.
- Verse 2 - All that Joseph had, had been taken from him and yet God was with him.
- Even though the Lord did not bless Joseph in the way he might have expected, eg being released from slavery back to his family, the Lord did bless the work Joseph did for Potiphar. (Verses 3-6)

Question 2: What is our security? When our security is taken from us, how do we cope?

Question 3: What do you understand by the word prosper?

- Dictionary: to be successful, to thrive
- So does it mean everything went smoothly for Joseph? NO, things still went “wrong”
- To prosper, in a spiritual sense, is to walk with God, whether it be an easy or hard road. With God beside us, we will prosper, ie He will take care of us.
- Notice how God did not take Joseph out of the difficult situation; He enabled him to triumph in spite of the difficult situation. Sometimes this can be hard. When things go wrong we have a choice to either turn to God and trust in Him, or turn away from Him. (God is always near it is we who become distant).
- God has not promised us an easy ride, but He has promised never to leave us. Hebrews Ch 13 v5b “God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

Question 4: Potiphar became aware that Joseph’s God was with him, verse 3. Do non-believers see that God is with us?

Question 5: Temptation often strikes when things are going well. What temptations do we face?

- Gossip, negativity, one upmanship, power, money, sexual immorality, etc.

Question 6: One or more of the following:

Can you recall situations where people have deliberately put temptation in your way?

What do you do if your boss wants you to lie, or do something that you know would not please God?

- For many, choosing what to do for the best becomes confused by concerns about their position. As Christians, we honour those who walk away but we often ignore or forget that the consequences of refusing our employers may be devastating. We try to walk the fine line without making that final compromise.

Have you any experience of doing the right thing and yet being treated unfairly?

- At work, with friends, family
- Refusing to lie or cheat or steal (if not as an adult what about when you were a child)?

Question 7: What did Joseph do when faced with temptation?

- Verse 8 - First refusal helped him to say no on subsequent occasions. (Joseph was a slave and slaves were not supposed to have morals, so his refusal would have been surprising and unexpected). If we give in to temptation, it makes it easier to give in the next time.
- Verse 9 – Joseph recognized that the temptation to sin was not only against his boss but also against God. Joseph considered it more important to please God and retain his integrity, whatever the cost, than to indulge in the momentary pleasures of sin.
- Verse 10 - Joseph kept away from the temptation, as much as he could, but it wasn't always possible, eg verse 11. Potiphar's wife probably sent the servants away deliberately.

Temptation doesn't come from God, it comes from Satan. Matthew Ch 4 v1 "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." Satan's aim is to draw people away from God and one of the ways he does this is through temptation. The more we try to please God the more Satan will try to attack us with temptation, in an attempt to move us further away from God. It is a spiritual battle. Ephesians 6 v 12 "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Question 8: What are we up against - what do we know about Satan?

- Jesus calls Satan the father of lies. (John Ch 8 v44)
- Paul warns that Satan schemes against us. (Ephesians Ch 6 v11)
- Paul talks about Satan outwitting us. (2 Corinthians Ch 2v11)
- Satan looks for our areas of weakness or insecurity, and then frequently attacks us there. We can be more ready to fight temptation if we are aware of our area of weakness or insecurity, because we will know in what circumstances we should expect temptation to strike. ***(Leaders, it maybe helpful to share your area of weakness, as an example).***
- Satan will use temptation at important points in our lives. For example, in Joseph's life it came just when someone had put him in a position of trust and responsibility. ***Has anyone any experience of this to share?***

Question 9: Jesus was tempted in the Wilderness at the beginning of his ministry (Matthew Ch4). What were the two weapons that Jesus used against temptation?

- Scripture & Prayer
- We can also use these weapons, for in our own strength Satan is too strong for us but with God's help, through prayer and the knowledge of scripture, we can overcome temptation.

God does not bring temptation upon us but He does allow Satan to tempt us, partly to test us and partly to strengthen our faith. When we are tempted we should turn to God. 1 Corinthians Ch 10 v13 "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." James 4 v7-8 "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

We need to recognize temptation for what it is, then we can begin to resist it.

Question 10: So Joseph is now in prison. What do you think might have been going through Joseph's mind at this point in his life?

- Why had God allowed him to be treated unjustly yet again when he had sought to do what was right?
- Joseph may have looked back to when he was in the cistern and thought that if God could change his situation then He could do it again.
- God moulds our characters through experiences and persecution. Sometimes, rather than change our circumstances, God chooses to bless us and purify us through difficult situations.
- God is preparing Joseph for the fulfilment of his dreams, by strengthening his character and humbling his spirit.

LEADERS - Summarize the Main Points that have emerged.

CONTINUATION OF VAK MOMENT – Kim's Game

Hand out to everyone another sheet of paper and ask them to write down as many of the items that they can still remember. After 2 minutes hand back the original sheets and then bring in the tray for them to see how many items they remembered correctly. It will be interesting to note the difference in the number scored between the first list and the second list. The point to make is that it is easy to forget things over a period of time. Because we cannot see God, it is easy for us to forget Him and His promises to us. We need to keep reminding ourselves that God is at work in our lives.

Interesting Snippets (for leaders to share if appropriate):

Verse 14 – Potiphar's wife appealed to her servants' jealousy of a foreigner, to get them on her side.

Verse 20 – It is surprising that Joseph was not immediately executed for such a crime. This may suggest that Potiphar did not totally believe his wife's version of the events but felt he had to take some action. His anger maybe partly with his wife.

Verse 16 - This is the second time an article of Joseph's clothing was used as testimony against him – the first time his robe was used to imply he was dead; this time his cloak is used in support of a call for execution.

Chapter 38 is critically placed here to establish a contrast between Joseph and Judah. Judah engaged in sexual immorality, victimized a powerless woman and incurred the judgement of God; Joseph resisted sexual immorality and was victimized by a woman of influence with the result that God preserved his life.

⁽¹⁾ Clarence E Macartney

Session 3 - Honouring God, even if it makes us unpopular

VAK MOMENT – Truth or Lie?

The Leader prepares 3 statements about himself/herself; one is true, the other two are lies. (Try to think of things that members of your group will not know about you). Each member of the group can ask the Leader one question to help them determine which statement is true. When everyone has asked one question, a vote is taken on which statement the group members think is true. The leader then reveals the answer.

Recap summary from Sessions 1 and 2

Read Genesis Chapter 39, Verses 21-23 and Chapter 40, Verses 1-23

Question 1: How do you think Joseph made sense of his dreams and God's promises to him, now that he was in prison?

- Verse 15 says it all – it must seem all so unfair, but Joseph does not appear to wallow in self-pity. He keeps his focus on God.
- The answer to turning bad situations to good is to trust the Lord.
- Joseph had no new dreams/revelations about his future, he had to rely on the memory of his earlier youthful dreams and trust God.
- Joseph could have chosen to reject his past and his dreams but through all his ordeals and disappointments he lived by faith in God's promises.

Question 2: How did Joseph get to be in charge of the other prisoners?

- Once again we see that the Lord was with Joseph, (chapter 39 verses 21-23). It was this that made Joseph successful.
- God wanted Joseph to be in a position to serve and honour Him, eg responsible for other prisoners.
- Joseph had proved himself to be a model prisoner who could be trusted to look after these high-ranking officials.

Question 3: Can you find three ways in which Joseph honoured God in prison?

- Verses 6-7 – caring for the other prisoners. Joseph is more concerned about his fellow prisoners than himself, he notices their mood. Joseph took his responsibility seriously; he was both a servant and a friend to the other prisoners. (Maybe this is the first time in his life that he has helped anyone other than his father).
- Verse 8 – telling people about God. Joseph did not boast of his own skills in interpreting dreams; he witnessed to God's ability.
- Verses 18-19 – telling the truth, even though it could make him unpopular. Joseph was courageous and faithful in reporting an unpleasant message. True prophets of the Lord are faithful in preaching both judgement and salvation. We must not be afraid of proclaiming both sides: the wages of sin is death and the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus.

Question 4: Can you think of an occasion when you told someone about Jesus, even though you thought it might have lost you their friendship? What happened?

Question 5: Would Joseph have been ready to interpret people's dreams if he had spent all his time in prison grumbling and being concerned for himself alone?

- If we spend time with God, whatever situation we are going through, God will prepare us for the future. Prayer is what brings us closer to God and strengthens us.
- We must always conduct ourselves in a godly manner so that we do not squander opportunities to serve God. We have to be open to the Holy Spirit.
- By behaving in a godly manner, we can be a blessing wherever we are.

Question 6: What encouragement would Joseph have drawn from what happened on Pharaoh's birthday?

- The fact that both the dreams came true in the time-scale specified by Joseph shows that the interpretations were from God. This must have encouraged Joseph to believe that his own dreams would also come true, in God's perfect timing.

Question 7: Joseph receives another setback – the cupbearer forgot him. Have you ever entrusted yourself to someone who could have helped you, only to be let down?

Question 8: When things go wrong, are we ever tempted to blame God?

- There is the danger of saying "God, unless you help me out here, by doing exactly what I want you to do, I don't think I can believe in you anymore."
- Although God is powerful and can intervene in our lives, He does so on His terms. He is merciful and feels for us desperately when we are suffering but, because He is all-knowing, He knows what is truly right and best for us and therefore we should trust Him to show us His way.
- Sometimes God chooses to bless us and make us people of integrity in the midst of terrible circumstances, rather than change our circumstances. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour." Isaiah 43 v2-3.
- God allows us to go through tough experiences to strengthen us – we often pray for God to take us out of a situation, when we should be praying for God to help us through the situation and for Him to show us what He wants to teach us.

Question 9: What do you think Joseph might have learned from this setback, verse 23?

- It would have taught him not to rely *purely* on human help but *totally* on the Lord.
- Joseph was not wrong to ask the cupbearer to remember him. It is not a denial of trust to use human opportunities to further God's kingdom, but we must remember that God may not choose to work in this way.
- We must learn to wait patiently for God; the Lord does not forget His people, at the right moment He acts to save them.

Question 10: Consider how different the story of Joseph might have been if the cupbearer had remembered Joseph at this point in the story?

- If the cupbearer had remembered Joseph there and then, Pharaoh may have released Joseph and sent him back to Canaan and then Joseph's dreams would not have been fulfilled and he would not have been a blessing to Israel.
- We don't always understand the way God works – why He intervenes in our lives at some points, but not at other times – but He is always good and we need to learn to trust Him. Romans 8 v28

Question 11: Can you think of a time in your life when you thought that God was certain to act in a particular way, only to find that He did not? How did you cope?

LEADERS - Summarize the Main Points that have emerged.

Interesting Snippets (for leaders to share if appropriate):

Verse 1 - The cupbearer was a person who held a responsible political position. The chief baker was another close advisor to the king.

Verse 8 – In ancient times interpreting dreams was a special science involving superstitious beliefs and occult practices. Joseph was claiming that dream interpretation belonged to God alone.

Session 4 - Giving the glory to God

VAK MOMENT – Either Pass the Parcel or Pass the Bomb

Pass the Parcel illustrates how we like to keep something for ourselves instead of passing it onto the correct person, ie we sometimes like to keep the glory ourselves rather than pass it onto God.

Pass the Bomb illustrates how we should behave, ie we should not want to keep hold of the glory but pass it on quickly to God, as if it were a bomb! (I have a Pass the Bomb game if anyone wishes to borrow it).

Recap summary from Sessions 1, 2 and 3

Read Genesis Chapter 41, Verses 1a, 8-40, 46-49, 53-55.

Question 1: The two extra years in prison for Joseph must have seemed like forever. Did Joseph know that God was with him?

- Maybe in the beginning it was a childish faith.
- As time goes on he recognizes God more and more.
- There would probably be moments of doubt, especially when he was put in prison for refusing to commit adultery.
- He continues to honour and trust God.
- Joseph learns patience and also that God's timing is perfect.

Question 2: Where in this passage, can we see Joseph giving the glory to God?

- Verse 16 - Joseph gives the credit (praise) to God. He does not claim it for his own.

Question 3: What might have stopped Joseph from doing this?

- Pharaoh assumes that it is Joseph who can interpret the dreams. Joseph could have just gone along with Pharaoh's assumption either to take the glory himself, or because he didn't want to look silly to a pagan saying it was God, or just so that he did not have to contradict Pharaoh.
- Joseph took the risk to speak out boldly in a threatening environment.
- If he got it wrong he would probably be executed.
- Joseph realized that God had made these things known for a purpose. He was being used by God as a spokesman.

Question 4: Can you draw any parallels between Pharaoh asking Joseph to interpret his dreams and a non Christian asking you to pray for their healing?

- There is the danger of trying to do it in our own strength, rather than relying on God. This may make us feel inadequate.
- We worry about the effect it will have on the person's faith if they do not get well.
- Could Joseph have been worrying about Pharaoh's view of God, if his interpretation of the future did not happen?
- Jesus tells us not to worry as the Holy Spirit will speak through us - Mark Ch 13 v11

Question 5: How had God prepared Joseph for high office in Egypt?

- God entrusts Joseph with much, ie the provision of food during the famine, because he had been found faithful with a little, ie Potiphar's household, chapter 39 verse 5. The Parable of the Talents (Matt 25 v21-23) shows that if we can be trusted with a little then God will give us more.
- Joseph had shown himself to be faithful to God and dependent on God for wisdom; therefore he was given authority over all the land.

Question 6: Do you have an example of being entrusted with much because God (or someone else) found you faithful with a little?

Question 7: What attributes did Pharaoh and his men recognize in Joseph?

- Pharaoh considered himself to be a divine figure and was worshipped by the Egyptians and yet, through Joseph, he saw the supremacy of Joseph's God.
- Courtiers recognized Joseph as a man of ability and integrity.

Question 8: Where do we have to be careful about giving the glory to God and not claiming it for ourselves?

- We need to remember that our gifts are from God and we should be quick to publicly acknowledge this.
- We must remember that God is not here to serve us – we are here to serve God and give Him the glory.

Question 9: At what points in the story so far can we see God at work?

- Gift of dream interpretation given to Joseph.
- Opportunity for Joseph to practice/exercise his gift.
- Being in the right place at the right time.
- Joseph's rise to a position of power and influence comes out of the dungeon. If the brothers had not sold him into slavery he would not have been in the presence of Pharaoh at the time of Pharaoh's dreams.
- On a human level Joseph has wasted a large part of his life in prison. But God does not make mistakes, so the life of Joseph reminds us to look at things from God's viewpoint. Joseph did not understand the purpose of what was happening in his life but he trusted that God knew what He was doing and would use it all to fulfil the promises made to him.

Question 10: Why did Egypt have food when other countries did not?

- Because God had shown Joseph the future (that 7 years of famine would follow 7 years of plenty).
- Joseph listened to God, trusted Him and was obedient.
- Joseph had shown Pharaoh God's power and Pharaoh believed Joseph.

Had this been a story of the secular world, it would have ended with Joseph becoming Prime Minister; at the pinnacle of his career. But this is a story about God and His promises, especially His promises to the Israelites. In many respects the greatest chapter of Joseph's life is when he is reconciled with his family. ⁽¹⁾

In the next session we will see how God uses this famine to bring Joseph's family together again.

LEADERS - Summarize the Main Points that have emerged.

Interesting Snippets (for leaders to share if appropriate):

Verses 18-19 – To the Egyptians, cows were a symbol of fertility. The word ugly can also be translated as evil.

Verse 31 – Illustrates the severity of the famine

Verse 33 - Did Joseph want to be Prime Minister?

⁽¹⁾ Clarence E Macartney

Session 5 – Allowing God to Change Us

VAK MOMENT – Who Am I?

Write on a label or post-it note the name of a famous (or Biblical) person whom God has changed. Think of enough different names so that there is one for each member of the group (suggestions at the bottom of this session). Stick one label on each person's back so that they do not know what it says. When everyone has a label the group members can start asking each other questions to find out who they are (they can only ask questions for which the answer is yes or no). At the start, explain that all the people have been notably changed by God and it would help if they first find out what type of person they are, eg Biblical, Sports person, Politician, Author, Historical figure, Contemporary figure, etc. Leader can help those who struggle, as some names will be more difficult than others.

Recap summary from Sessions 1, 2, 3, and 4

Read Genesis Chapter 41, Verses 56-57, Chapter 42, Verses 1-26; Chapter 43, Verses 1-2, 15-34; Chapter 44, Verses 1-13.

Question 1: Should Joseph have given the Egyptians and other nations the grain for nothing?

- Later on (Chapter 47, verses 13-25) when the Egyptians run out of money, Joseph sells them the seed in return for their livestock, etc.
- Consequence of how Joseph handled the famine was that all the people and the land were enslaved to Pharaoh. But the people were grateful to Joseph for saving their lives (Chapter 47 verse 25).
- Famine could have been devastating if Joseph had not been in charge.
- Highlights Joseph's wise management of Egypt.
- Joseph did not use his position of power and influence for his own personal ends but for the good of others, ie he saved lives and did not profit personally from the famine but gave the proceeds to Pharaoh.

Question 2: What does Joseph's handling of the famine teach us about being good stewards?

- If we live in a time of plenty – food, gifts, people to convert, whatever – we should not squander the benefits but use them wisely.
- Saving for a rainy day.
- Paradox – God is the provider so we should trust Him but we must still be sensible with finances, resources, etc.

Question 3: Why do you think Joseph did not instantly reveal to his brothers who he was?

- It was not to deceive or have revenge but to test whether the brothers had changed.
- Joseph had changed both in his appearance and in his character. His brothers looked the same – Joseph needs to know if they were still the same inside?
- By asking them questions Joseph is trying to discover whether they are sorry for selling their brother as a slave.
- We can see how emotionally difficult it was for Joseph to keep his identity hidden (Ch 42 v 24 & Ch 43 v 30).
- By accusing them of being spies (Chapter 42, verse 9) Joseph may have been reminding them of what they called him (Chapter 37, verse 2)

Question 4: How is Joseph's dream fulfilled at this point in his life and why is it ironic?

- The brothers bow down before Joseph. (Ch 42 v6b and Ch 43 v26 & 28).
- They do not realize that they are fulfilling Joseph's dream.

Question 5: By retaining one of the brothers, what is Joseph testing?

- Joseph needs to test to see if they will abandon Simeon like they abandoned him. (Ch 42, v19)

Question 6: Why do you think Joseph ensured that Benjamin got the largest portion?

- To test them for jealousy. (Chapter 43, verse 34)

Question 7: What is the next test that Joseph sets his brothers?

- Joseph gives his brothers the opportunity to let Benjamin take the blame (Chapter 44 v2 and v12). Would the brothers forsake Benjamin?

Question 8: Do the brothers regret their past behaviour, or are they just superstitious?

- What they did to Joseph has obviously been on their minds. (Chapter 42, verse 21).
- Jacob's reluctance to let Benjamin go "because he was afraid that harm might come to him" (verse 4) shows that the family is still living with the lie; Jacob still thinks Joseph is dead, verse 38.
- Their father's daily grief and their own guilt have made them defensive.

Question 9: The saying goes "a leopard cannot change its spots." How do we stop our past behaviour dictating our future?

- God can change us if we let Him.
- Ask God for a teachable heart.
- Non Christians need to accept Jesus into their life.
- New creation - 2 Corinthians Chapter 5 Verse 17: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Question 10: Tradition has led to a portrayal of Joseph as if he was whiter than white - a great hero trusting God through many trials; always wronged against; never doing anyone any harm. From your understanding of Joseph do you think this is a fair portrayal? Give reasons for your answers.

- Like his father, Joseph had ambition, but his upbringing made him selfish (due to the favouritism he was shown by his father).
- In his youth he may have flagrantly abused his father's favouritism.
- He did not have a peaceful relationship with his brothers.
- As a child, Joseph probably had everything he asked for, so he never had to wait for anything or go without anything. In prison, he had to learn patience. We do not know how hard he found that.
- His handling of the famine meant that the Egyptians and his own family became slaves of Pharaoh.
- Joseph allowed God to change him for the better; his brothers no longer recognized him.
- Through all his ordeals and disappointments Joseph lived by faith in God's promises. Joseph knew that he could trust God for his future, but that didn't mean that his life was going to be easy. What it meant was that he could trust God to be there with him in the difficult places.

Question 11: Why should the character of Joseph be a comfort to us?

- God can use our imperfections to further His purposes (but this should not excuse our sin).
- If God can change Joseph, God can change us.
- God can use us all.
- God is with us.
- God's timing is always right.

LEADERS - Summarize the Main Points that have emerged.

Interesting Snippets (for leaders to share if appropriate):

Chapter 42, verse 36 - Although Jacob had known God's presence during previous difficulties, here he considers all things are against him. He doesn't realize God is working for the good of his family.

Chapter 43, verse 23 – Joseph must have told the steward how to respond to the brothers, so that they would be reassured.

Chapter 43 verse 33 - Seating at banquet in age order – amazing coincidence?

Chapter 44 verse 5 – Divination by water was a widespread practice in ancient times when precious gems or oil were put into water and interpreted. It is very unlikely Joseph practised divination himself. The cup was a symbol of his authority; hence the gravity of it being stolen.

Suggested names for Who Am I :

Biblical – Paul, Peter, Jonah, Joseph (Jacob's son), Joseph of Arimathea
King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan Ch4 v35-37)

Politicians – Charles “Chuck” Colson (special counsel to Richard Nixon)

Sports People – George Foreman (boxer); Arthur White (power-lifter, used to live in Essex)

Authors – C S Lewis; Brother Andrew; John Newton (ex-slave trader who wrote Amazing Grace)

Historical – Francis of Assisi; Augustine of Hippo

Contemporary – Cliff Richard

Session 6 – Showing Forgiveness and Sharing God’s Grace

VAK MOMENT – Film clip about Forgiveness or Grace

Suggestions at the bottom of this session

Recap summary from Sessions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5

Read Genesis Chapter 44, Verses 14-34; Chapter 45, Verses 1-28; Chapter 50, Verses 15-21

Question 1: Joseph has been testing his brothers to establish whether he can trust them again. Should we test those who have hurt us, to find out if they have become more trustworthy?

- Joseph did not test them because he wanted revenge but to bring his brothers to a humble acknowledgement of their guilt. We all need to acknowledge our sin - unconfessed sin blocks God’s blessing.
- If Joseph had forgiven his brothers without them showing that they had changed, he was risking his heart being broken again. Joseph would rather risk losing the silver.

Question 2: Is rebuilding a relationship of trust with someone who has hurt us different from choosing to forgive them?

- Rebuilding trust takes time but it can be the practical expression of forgiveness.
- It helps if we see those who have hurt us as broken people who need reconciliation, rather than as our enemies.
- The risk in forgiving someone is that we can be taken advantage of. When we forgive we make ourselves vulnerable and there is not always a happy ending.
- God made himself vulnerable through Jesus.
- God forgives us even though He knows we will sin again.

Question 3: Do you think it would have been difficult for Joseph to forgive his brothers?

- The healing of painful memories comes by looking at life from God’s viewpoint and then a determination to move forward trusting the God who has our best interests at heart. Joseph could look beyond his own little life to see God’s hand working for the benefit of others.
- At the beginning of Chapter 45 Joseph mentions God’s hand on his life 4 times. (v5; v7; v8; v9). Joseph says that God had planned all this for His good purposes.
- By knowing that God is in control of his life, Joseph was able to forgive his brothers. But the fact that God used the brothers’ sin does not lessen the brothers’ guilt.
- Joseph sees punishment for sin as God’s responsibility (Ch 50 v19). This releases him from bitterness.
- Joseph knows that his mercy is the only way for true reconciliation to take place.
- Joseph shows us what opening our heart to forgiveness and reconciliation looks like.

Question 4: Do you agree with this statement? “No one who believes in the sovereignty of God in the affairs of life can bear a grudge or take revenge.”⁽¹⁾

- It is one thing to agree with this it is another to put it into practice.
- Just like Joseph, we need a little distance (ie time) before we can see things afresh. Joseph would not have forgiven his brothers instantly.
- Because of God’s grace to us, we should show grace to others.

Question 5: Why didn’t Joseph get in contact with his father soon after he became Prime Minister of Egypt?

- Did Joseph worry what Pharaoh would say? Shepherds were detestable to the Egyptians (Ch 46 v34)
- Did Joseph worry what his father might say – married to the daughter of an Egyptian priest?

- It was not neglect, it was deliberate. Joseph had learned to see that the discord within the family was due to him, ie the fact that his father favoured him. By remaining distant from the family, whilst the brothers were still jealous, Joseph could do the family no more harm.

Question 6: Would Joseph have seen his suffering as being in vain?

- Did Joseph keep asking himself “How did I end up here?”
- Joseph’s suffering began because he spoke out about what he believed God had shown him in a dream. He was put in prison because he refused to dishonour God by committing adultery. Jesus tells us that if we voice our belief in Him and try to please Him, the world will hate us. John Ch 15 v 18-19
- When we are in a Spiritual Battle and hold fast to the promises of God, just like Joseph did, God’s glory can be truly revealed. But the consequences may be that we suffer for our faith. Are we prepared to do that? Do we have sufficient trust that God is working in our lives?

Question 7: Joseph must have felt the door closing on his dreams several times throughout his life. Where has God opened up new opportunities for you, through the closure of one door?

Question 8: Do you think Joseph had any regrets now that he could see how God has been at work in his life?

- “Wasted” years in prison and slavery?
- God has protected him and made him a blessing to others.
- Through Joseph, God ensured the survival of his people during a terrible famine.
- Joseph looks back and can see how God has used the low points in his life to develop/strengthen his character, giving him patience and a quiet trust in the Lord, in preparation for him to run Egypt and oversee the famine.

Question 9: How has God used events and relationships in your life for good?

- God used Jacob’s dysfunctional family to save the world.
- If this family can sort out its differences, there is hope for all families/relationships.
- Jesus can and will use us, and our relationships, for remarkable things.

Question 10: Can you see a picture of the Church in the reconciled family of Jacob?

- Jesus called for his followers (the Church) to be united (John 17, v20-23). For unity to be maintained in God’s family (the Church), all envy and hatred must be confessed. Sometimes God uses unpleasant disciplining measures to get us to do this. Spiritual revivals often begin with the pain of confessing sins that have hindered blessing in congregations (Ephesians 4 v25, 31-32).
- Joseph’s brothers were not thoroughly convinced of Joseph’s forgiveness, as after Jacob died they feared Joseph would have his revenge (Ch 50 v20). Do we sometimes find it hard to accept forgiveness from others?
- We cannot earn forgiveness, nor our salvation – it is a gift from God, it’s God’s Grace to us. (God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense).

LEADERS - Summarize the Main Points that have emerged.

Interesting Snippets (for leaders to share if appropriate):

Acts Chapter 7, Verses 9-15: Stephen relates to the Jewish Council how God used Joseph and the brothers to save His people.

Some commentators see Joseph as a type of Christ (although NT does not say this). Brothers betray the one who God will use to save His people.

Film Clip Suggestions:

Pay it Forward – the scene where the Helen Hunt character goes to her estranged Mother to "pay it forward" with her. In a very powerful scene, Helen Hunt says "Mom, I forgive you."

The Mission - the scene where Robert de Niro has a huge weight of armour cut away by the natives he used to hunt. A powerful display of forgiveness.

Les Miserables – the scene where the Bishop forgives the man.

Angela's Ashes - Frankie's confession of his life and sins to Saint Francis. Priest: "God forgives you, and you must forgive yourself. God loves you, and you must love yourself. For only when you love God and yourself can you love all of God's creatures." (DVD ch 27)

The Green Mile - John Coffey forgives his executioners before his death.

The Fisher King - the reconciliation between Jack and Parry.

Fantasia 2000 - A story of love lost and refound with Donald and Daisy Duck is told as Donald is Noah's assistant to build the ark and survive the great flood.

Changing Lanes - themes of revenge, the evil inside each of us, the need for forgiveness & conversion.

⁽¹⁾ A P Ross

Expecting to see God at work in our lives (A study on the life of Joseph)

Conclusion

Joseph was called to play a significant role in the history of two nations. But before he reached a position of power, he had to pass through many dark valleys in which his character was shaped. It was Joseph's assurance of God's presence and promises that sustained him in those dark years, together with his belief that, whatever happened to him, God was still working for the good of His people. Joseph shows us how it is possible to serve God humbly and faithfully whether we are in the highest or lowest walks of life. For Joseph learned to look for God in all situations and, in doing so, he developed a total dependence upon the Lord.

Joseph recognized that his life had a special God given purpose – God had determined that purpose and would use every event in his life, good or bad, to help bring it about. The story of Joseph is a message of hope, for God knows and loves each one of us. He has a plan for each one of us. Like Joseph, we need to trust God for His purposes so that through our dark valleys we can keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and expect to see Him at work in our lives.

Jeremiah Ch 29 v11-14 "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the LORD."

Author: Helen Rogers