



## 6 Joseph the Ruler

### Scripture

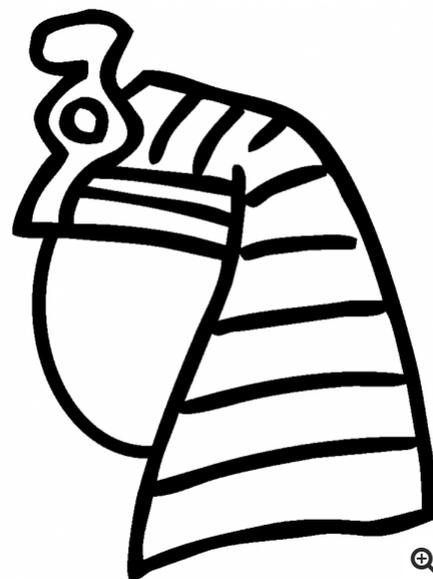
[Genesis 41:46-46:34](#)

### Focus

God used Joseph to save Jacob's family and to feed a troubled part of the world.

### Faith Nurture Goals

- Delight in the way God brought Joseph and his family back together.
- Tell what the complete story of Joseph shows us about God.
- Express trust in God's constant care for us.



## Leader Reflection

### Preparing to Tell God's Story

This is a long Bible passage, but a great one. Of necessity, you will be following only the main contours of the story with your class.

Notice that there are two levels in this story about Joseph and his family. On the human level, we see the trajectory of results from actions they have taken in the past. On the divine level, we see how God provides for his covenant people during an upcoming famine. The one sentence that brings both levels together is found at the very end of the story, after old Jacob has died, and Joseph's brothers are still not sure they trust Joseph: "You intended to harm me [the human level], but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives [the divine level]" (Gen. 50:20).

As this part of the story opens, Joseph is thirty years old (remember he was seventeen when he was sold into slavery). He's endured thirteen years of imprisonment on false charges, but by God's grace and the gift of interpreting he is now second in command of all Egypt, administering the all-important ministry of agriculture and managing the economy.

Meanwhile Joseph's family is experiencing a famine that has struck the whole area. Knowing that the Egyptians have a plan and resources, Jacob sends the brothers for food. In Egypt they have to deal with

Joseph. Not recognizing this great dignitary, they bow low before him. But Joseph recognizes them. As the text pointedly says, he remembered the dream he had told them years before about bowing down before him.

Joseph isn't ready to reveal himself to them and perhaps isn't able to emotionally. Harshly he accuses them of spying. In the process they mention their younger brother, still at home. Of course, Joseph wants to see him. He schemes to get them to bring their younger brother, Benjamin. At this point Reuben upbraids the brothers, saying that God is punishing them for selling their brother into slavery. Overhearing them, Joseph turns away and weeps as all the pain and memories flow over him. He also secretly returns the money they paid for the grain in their sacks. Now they are really afraid, but they go on home. Old Jacob refuses to ransom Simeon, who stayed behind, by sending his youngest son back with them.

Joseph continues to torment his brothers with what seem to be cruel psychological games. Jockeying for more information he plants stolen goods in their sacks, accuses them of robbery, and demands again their little brother. When Joseph sees Benjamin, the son of his own mother, Rachel, his heart softens. After one more frightening ploy of planting his own silver cup in Benjamin's sack and having the brothers arrested, they tell him the whole story, still not knowing who he is.

Finally, Joseph can stand it no longer. He sends everyone but the brothers out of the room, then reveals who he is. "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt. And now, 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" (45:5). Then the brothers all embrace and Joseph sends them back, laden with goods, to tell their father. Humorously, Joseph's last words to them as they leave are "Don't quarrel on the way!"

What a story---it's almost unbelievable! And yet it reveals something that goes on all the time. Our lives, too, operate at two levels: the human and the divine. Trusting that, believing that, knowing that, makes all the difference in our fragile human existence. There's a sign over us: "God at Work."

## Steps

### Step 1 Breathe

*Use this time to focus your attention on God.*

**Do this with me: calm your head, heart, and hands as you slowly breathe in . . . and out.** *(Demonstrate a few deep "in and out breaths" with eyes closed.)*

### Step 2 Tell and Wonder

**Let's enter God's story together. Here's the story symbol for the part of God's story that we'll be spending time in today. I wonder what clues it gives us about the story we're about to hear?** *(Show the story symbol. Accept any answers without giving away whether or not the kids have guessed correctly.)*

#### Re★formed

While the story focuses on earthly events, God is in every minute of this story, taking care of Joseph, taking care of Jacob's family, guiding the decisions of Potiphar and Pharaoh. Just as God is in every minute of Joseph's story, God is also in every minute of our life stories too! ". . . all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by [God's] fatherly hand" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 27).

**Listen closely as we read the story together to see which story our symbol represents.**

*Read "Joseph the Ruler" aloud, pausing throughout to allow children to answer the wondering questions.*

*NOTE: It's always a good idea to read through the story beforehand so you'll be able to tell it well.*

*You can also read the story from a children's Bible or a simplified translation of Scripture like the New International Reader's Version (NIRV). Remember to pause throughout to allow time to wonder.*

## **Story: Joseph the Ruler** Genesis 41:46-46:34

*Open the Bible to Genesis 41:46. Show the kids the name of the book and the chapter number. Tell them that you will read how today's part of God's great story about Joseph begins. Read verse 46.*

*The story follows:*

Pharaoh had a dream that Joseph had interpreted: Egypt would have seven good years when its land would produce an abundance of food, and then there would be seven bad years, when it would be hard to grow crops and food would be scarce.

Pharaoh gave Joseph the job of creating a plan for collecting grain during the seven good years. Joseph had a lot to learn because he went from being a prisoner to being a mighty ruler in charge of putting together a grain-saving program. But God was with him. God was helping Joseph rule the very large land of Egypt.

And just as Pharaoh dreamt, Egypt had seven years when the crops were bigger than ever. During those years the fields were full of grain. Joseph built giant barns and collected food from all over the country of Egypt and stored it.

**Close your eyes and create a picture of what the inside of those barns might have looked like.** *(Pause for them to do that.) Now, describe what you see. (Pause for responses.)*

The eighth year was terrible! And for seven long years in a row, the ground was dry. Crops tried to grow, but withered! That's when Joseph opened up those big barns filled with grain and distributed it to the people of Egypt.

Joseph's father, Jacob, and his family were in trouble too. Even though they didn't live in Egypt, they lived in a country nearby and their crops fizzled too. Their grapes shriveled on the vines. Eventually they had nothing left to eat.

But Jacob heard that there was a ruler in Egypt who had been saving food and now had giant barns filled with grain. He decided to send his sons there to buy some. "Take empty sacks and a lot of money," he told his sons. "Maybe this Egyptian ruler will sell us some of his grain. It's our only chance. If we don't get food soon, we'll die!"

**Imagine that you are Joseph's brothers. You start out on the trip, but you don't know if the ruler will sell grain to people who don't live in Egypt. You don't know how much it will cost, since food is so**

### Tip

This is a longer story. If you have a younger group, considering keeping them engaged by having them act it out parts of the story as you read it. For example, you could walk together from one area to another as the brothers travel between Egypt and home.

**scarce. What's on your mind as you travel?** *(Pause for responses.)*

Jacob sent all of his sons except his youngest boy, Benjamin. Jacob remembered what had happened to his other precious son, Joseph. He knew that he couldn't bear to lose Benjamin too.

When the dusty, tired brothers arrived in Egypt, Joseph knew who they were right away. But they didn't know him. They hadn't seen him since he was seventeen, and now he was a grown man dressed in Egypt's finest robes. He looked like a mighty king—not like their brother Joseph. They bowed down before him with their faces to the ground.

**Did you hear that? They bowed down before Joseph. What do you suppose Joseph thought about when that happened?** *(Pause for responses.)*

Yes, Joseph thought about the dreams he'd had when he was just a boy. In a loud, harsh voice Joseph asked the ten brothers, "Where do you come from, and why are you here?"

"We come from the land of Canaan to buy food," the brothers answered.

"No," said Joseph, "I think you are really spies. You've come here to spy on our land, haven't you?"

The brothers were terrified of this tough-sounding ruler. They cried out, "No! We're not spies at all. We are all sons of one man, Jacob. And our youngest brother is home with our father."

Joseph acted like he didn't believe his brothers. "Throw them in prison," he ordered the guards.

After three days, Joseph had the guards bring the brothers before him. "I'm going to give you another chance," he told them. "I'll keep one of you here in prison while the rest of you travel home with the food you bought. When you come back for more food, bring your youngest brother with you. Then I will know you are not lying."

The brothers obeyed Joseph. They didn't really have a choice. But they were very worried. They knew how angry Jacob would be when he heard they were supposed to bring Benjamin back to the ruler. And they felt sad about leaving their brother Simeon locked up in Egypt.

What they didn't know is that Joseph had secretly ordered his servants to put his brothers' money back in their sacks of food. On the way home, the nine brothers stopped to rest for a while. Reuben opened his sack to get a handful of food for his donkey. "Look!" he shouted to the others. "This bag of silver was on the top of my food sack!" The other brothers opened their bags. Sure enough—there were silver coins in every one of them! "This is terrible," they said to each other. "What if the ruler thinks we stole it?"

**Imagine that you are the brothers. You're tired from walking and riding the camels. Before you start out again, you do a few bends and stretches. Let's stand and do that.** *(Pause to bend and stretch together.)* **How would your face look when you find the money in your sack and realize the ruler might think you stole it?** *(Pause for responses.)*

The brothers went home and told their father all that had happened. Jacob was very upset. "Everything is against me," he said. "First I lost my dear son Joseph, and now Simeon is gone too. I'll never let you take Benjamin to Egypt! Never!"

But it didn't take long for the family to run out of food again. They had only enough grain left to bake bread for a few more weeks and then they would starve. The brothers knew that they had no choice. They said to Jacob, "We have to go back to Egypt. And we have to bring Benjamin with us. If we don't, we'll all die."

Jacob knew they were right. If they didn't go to Egypt, his sons and their wives and all of his grandchildren would starve. With tears running down his cheeks, Jacob waved goodbye to his sons—including his youngest son, Benjamin.

When the brothers finally stood in Joseph's courtyard again, they were nervous. "What will he say?" they wondered. They tried to tell Joseph's servant what had happened. "We didn't steal the silver," they said. "You must believe us!"

To the brothers' surprise, the servant smiled. "Don't worry," he said. "Your God must have put that money in your bags. It's yours to keep!" Then he brought Simeon to them and told them they would all be having dinner with the Egyptian ruler.

When Joseph saw his brother Benjamin, his eyes filled with tears. He had to run from the room; he cried for a long time before he came back to the table where his brothers were waiting.

But Joseph was still not ready to tell his brothers who he was. He wanted to make sure that they were no longer mean the way they had been when he was a boy. "Fill their bags with food and put the silver on top, just like the first time," he told his servants. Then he handed them his favorite cup. "And put this in Benjamin's bag," he said with a smile.

The brothers were only a few miles away from Joseph's palace when they heard the thunder of horses behind them. "Oh, no!" they said to each other with worried faces. "Who could that be?"

Out of a cloud of dust came Joseph's servants. They looked angrily at the brothers and shouted, "One of you has stolen our master's favorite cup!"

"No! No!" all the brothers cried. "We would never steal from your master."

"Then show us your bags," the servants ordered.

One by one the brothers opened their bags. In each one there was grain and silver, just like the last time. Finally it was Benjamin's turn. As he opened his sack, it looked just like his brothers—a pile of grain with silver on top. But wait a minute! What was that chunk of silver stuck farther down in the grain? An angry servant stuck his hand into Benjamin's bag and pulled out Joseph's cup!

When they were led before Joseph again, the brothers fell on their knees before him.

**Imagine that you are the brothers. Show how they bowed before Joseph.** *(Pause for the group to do that.)*

When they stood up, the brothers cried, "It's a terrible mistake!" They told him about their brother Joseph, and how sad their father had been when he disappeared. "Our father will die if he loses Benjamin too," they said through their tears.

Again Joseph's eyes filled with tears. He sent everyone but his brothers from the room and then proclaimed, "I'm your brother Joseph!"

His brothers were amazed. They could hardly believe that this was their brother and that he was alive!

Joseph kept smiling. Tears rolled down his cheeks. "Don't worry," he said. "I forgive you for what happened. This was all part of God's plan to save us. God has been taking care of me in Egypt—and God used me to take care of you too! We have a really great God!"

What a happy party the brothers had together that night! They were even happier a few months later when they brought their old father, Jacob, and their wives and children to Egypt to live. Jacob could hardly believe that this mighty ruler was Joseph—his lost son! Joseph had trust in God and God had kept him safe.

### Step 3 Pray

Close with silent prayer. Ask the kids to close their eyes and fold their hands and silently thank God for caring for Joseph.

See [5 Ways to Pray with Kids](#) for other ways to pray.

### Step 4 Respond

*Select and do one or more of the response activities from God's Big Story card #22 or check out [5 Ways to Retell a Bible Story with Kids](#) for some fun ways to retell this story. Include older kids in the retelling by having them read the story aloud while the younger children act it out.*

*\*God's Big Story cards can be ordered from [FaithAliveResources.org](http://FaithAliveResources.org).*

## Easy Extras

### 1. Story Problems

**Materials:** scraps of paper and pencils, optional

Read these story problems one at a time, stopping after each and giving the children time to figure out the answer before going on to the next one. Warn them that a couple of them are tricky. Listen carefully!

- Joseph had 12 sons. Benjamin didn't go with his brothers to visit Joseph in Egypt the first time. How many brothers went to Egypt to ask the leader for food? (10)
- If it took the brothers and their camels 1 hour to walk 2 miles (or 2 km), how many hours would it take them to go 10 miles (or 10 km)? (5 hours)
- If the 10 brothers each spent 10 pieces of silver for their grain, how many pieces of silver did they spend altogether? (100 pieces of silver)

#### Tip

If you have younger children that may struggle with the math in these problems, do the activity as a group, working through the math together. Consider bringing small erasers or buttons to use as counters to help the youngest children visualize each math problem.

- At the end of Pharaoh's dream, how many cows were there? (7)
- Jacob had 12 sons. If each one had a wife, how many adults moved to Egypt? (23—Jacob moved too and Joseph didn't have to move)

## 2. Age-Specific Activities

Click below to access the full age-specific *Dwell* session for this story:

- Kindergarten-1st Grade: [Joseph Trusts God](#)
  - 2nd-3rd Grade: [Joseph the Ruler](#)
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