

The Pentateuch

LESSON
TEN

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS



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The Pentateuch

Lesson Ten

Joseph and His Brothers

INTRODUCTION

Siblings in families with large estates often struggle with each other over who will receive the largest inheritance. When it comes time for the estate to be passed from one generation to the next, even brothers and sisters who once loved each other dearly can become so divided that only God can re-establish the bonds of love. The book of Genesis teaches us that this is how it was for the family of Israel's patriarchs, Joseph and his brothers. Their rivalry over the inheritance of their father, Jacob, became so bitter that it seemed impossible to resolve. But as we'll see in this lesson, God reconciled Joseph and his brothers and re-established their bonds of love. This resolution charted a course for the relationships amongst the twelve tribes of Israel throughout the Old Testament. And it still directs relationships among Christ's followers today.

This lesson on *the Pentateuch* is devoted to the portion of the book of Genesis that deals with "Joseph and His Brothers." We'll look in some detail at Genesis 37:2–50:26, the story of Joseph's troubled relationship with his siblings.

Before we turn to our main topic, it will help to review the basic content of the book of Genesis. In other lessons, we've seen that Genesis divides into three main parts. Each part was designed to address Moses' original Israelite audience in particular ways. The first part deals with the primeval history, found in Genesis 1:1–11:9. In this section, Moses showed the Israelites that their call to the land of Canaan was established in what God had done in the earliest periods of world history. The second part records the earlier patriarchal history in Genesis 11:10–37:1. Here, Moses addressed how the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob spoke to issues faced by the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. And the third part, the later patriarchal history, in Genesis 37:2–50:26, tells the story of Joseph and his brothers. Our lesson will focus on this last section of Genesis.

As we'll see, Moses' purpose in this part of Genesis involved a number of lessons for his original audience. But in general:

The story of Joseph and his brothers taught the tribes of Israel how to live together in harmony as they faced the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land.

Our lesson on Joseph and his brothers will divide into two main parts. First, we'll examine the structure and content of these chapters, how their literary design and subject matter go hand in hand. Second, we'll look at a number of major themes Moses emphasized for the tribes of Israel and how these themes apply to modern Christians. Let's begin by looking at the structure and content of this part of Genesis.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Everyone familiar with the story of Joseph and his brothers knows that it involves many characters, different cultural settings and a number of intricate subplots. These features are so complex that it's easy to become preoccupied with the details and lose sight of the overarching literary structure that holds it all together. But paying attention to how the structure and content of these chapters work together is especially important because the account of Joseph and his brothers is a highly unified drama.

Moses' presentation of Genesis 37:2–50:26 forms a highly integrated, five-step drama:

- The initial problem of the story, in Genesis 37:2-36, depicts patriarchal disharmony over the prospect of Joseph's rule.
- The second step, or rising action, in 38:1–41:57 focuses on Joseph's threatening rule — his rise to power in Egypt.
- The third step, in 42:1–47:12, is the turning point of the drama. It deals with the patriarchs' reconciliation and reunion in Egypt.
- The fourth step, or falling action, in 47:13-27 reports Joseph's benevolent rule in Egypt.
- And the final resolution of the drama, in 47:28–50:26, describes patriarchal harmony under Joseph's rule.

In recent decades, a number of interpreters have attempted to show that these chapters in Genesis form an extensive concentric chiasm. A chiasm is:

A literary structure in which sections before and after a centerpiece parallel or balance each other.

Most of these attempts press this outlook too far. But they do point toward a large-scale dramatic symmetry that brings coherence to the entire record of Joseph and his brothers.

It isn't difficult to see that, in general, the account begins with patriarchal disharmony, and ends with patriarchal harmony in the final resolution of the drama. The rising action of Joseph's threatening rule in Egypt balances with the falling action of Joseph's benevolent rule in Egypt. And the turning point, or hinge — the transition from disharmony and threat to benevolence and harmony — is the reconciliation and reunion that takes place in Egypt. We'll look at these episodes in the order Moses presented them. But understanding this basic dramatic symmetry will help us as we examine a number of details in the story of Joseph and his brothers.

The content of the story of Joseph and his brothers displays more literary complexity than any other portion of Genesis. It has a long roster of characters and portrays many of them as three-dimensional, changing characters. Scenes are depicted vividly. Irony, humor, and tragedy appear throughout. The narrative contains many unexpected turns of events that recollect and anticipate other events. As such, this part of Genesis would have called the original Israelite audience to consider far more than we can possibly explore in this lesson. So, for the sake of time, we'll limit ourselves to just a few comments on the content of each chapter.

PATRIARCHAL DISHARMONY (GENESIS 37:2-36)

Moses began his narrative in Genesis 37:2-36 with the initial dramatic problem of patriarchal disharmony over Joseph's future rule. This opening chapter consists of two parts that together show how disharmony in Joseph's family worsened over time. The first part, in 37:2-11, illustrates how Joseph increasingly agitated his brothers. And the second part, in verses 12-36, tells of how the brothers sold Joseph into slavery. Let's look at the way Joseph agitated his brothers.

Joseph Agitated Brothers

Moses first portrayed Joseph as a naïve young man who was favored by his father. For example, in verse 3, Jacob gave Joseph an ornate robe that drove his brothers to jealousy. Verse 4 tells us "they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him." Then, to make matters worse, in two additional vignettes, Joseph boasted about his dreams of future exaltation over his family. Because of this, in both verse 5 and verse 8, Moses wrote that Joseph's brothers "hated him all the more." And verse 11 tells us, "His brothers were jealous of him."

The causes of disharmony between Joseph and his brothers... I can pick two. One is that his father made him the most beautiful robe, and that robe, the other brothers looked at it and said, "My, I think I need to have that. It needs to be mine." And when we look at ourselves, we have disharmony even in this society because some people are living better lives and we see disharmony in others asking themselves, "Why am I not like this other person?" Even in *church* we have it. We look at somebody that is sickly and others are healthy, and we ask ourselves, "Why are we not healthy?" So, the giving of the best to Joseph when these others didn't have, caused some disharmony. Number two: the brokenness of human nature. The brothers were envious, and because his brother had a better, you know, gown than them, was more beautiful than theirs, they became envious. And we find the seed of envy in all of us. It was not only those brothers, but it's all in us. But as Christians we are called to identify it first and know that's it's a sin of envy and we can put a stop to it.

— Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

After presenting the patriarchal disharmony that resulted when Joseph agitated his brothers, Moses turned to the second part of 37:12-36. These verses contain a short narrative explaining how the brothers sold Joseph into slavery.

Brothers Sold Joseph

Here we see that the brothers captured Joseph, stripped him of his ornate robe, and planned to kill him. The eldest brother, Reuben, tried in vain to help Joseph escape. But in the end, it was Judah who convinced the others that they should sell Joseph into slavery rather than kill him. This episode ends with the brothers' tragic, deceitful report to Jacob that Joseph had been devoured by a wild animal. The brothers presented Jacob with Joseph's blood-stained robe, and Jacob fell into severe mourning.

Together, these two episodes introduce the dramatic problem that sets the course for the entire story of Joseph and his brothers. This was the beginning of the tragic disharmony among Israel's tribal patriarchs.

After the initiating problem of patriarchal disharmony over Joseph's future rule, Moses moved to the second step. In 38:1–41:57, Moses told of the rise of Joseph's threatening rule.

JOSEPH'S THREATENING RULE (GENESIS 38:1–41:57)

In this step, Moses employed dramatic irony by giving his audience insights that characters in the story didn't have. First, Joseph's brothers — represented here by Judah — lived in Canaan, apparently confident that they had stopped Joseph from gaining superiority over them. But, unknown to the other characters, Joseph's rule far away in Egypt was increasing. God had turned Joseph's slavery into a path toward exaltation over his family.

The focus on Joseph's threatening rule divides into two main sections. In the first place, 38:1-30 describes Judah's sin against Tamar in Canaan. Then, in 39:1–41:57, we learn of Joseph's success in Egypt. Let's look at Judah's sin in Canaan.

Judah's Sin in Canaan (Genesis 38:1-30)

Judah moved to center stage in this chapter because he, rather than Reuben, kept his brothers from killing Joseph in the preceding episode. So, this section represents the actions of Jacob's son who had the highest standing among his brothers. The episode of Judah's sin in Canaan begins in 38:1-5 with birth reports of Judah's sons. The moral tone is set in verse 2 when we learn that Judah married a Canaanite woman.

In verses 6-11 we find an account of Judah's sons and Tamar. First, Judah gave Tamar to his eldest son, Er. When Er died, Judah gave Tamar to his second son, Onan. The practice of levirate marriage, or marriage by the brother-in-law of a childless widow, was commanded in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. This practice insured an heir for the brother who had died, and protected his widow. But in verse 9, Onan refused to give Tamar a child. So, in verse 10, God took Onan's life as well. Judah feared that his third son, young Shelah, might face the same fate. So, he refused to allow him to marry Tamar. Instead, he sent Tamar back to her father in shame.

In verses 12-26 we find the account of Tamar's seduction of Judah. When Tamar realized that she was not going to be married to Shelah, she disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced Judah. She cleverly tricked Judah by keeping his seal and its cord and a staff he had given her in lieu of payment. Three months later, in verses 24-26, Judah heard that Tamar was pregnant and indignantly ordered her execution. But Tamar produced the seal, cord and staff that Judah had given her. And when Judah realized what he had done, he admitted his guilt. Listen to Genesis 38:26 where Judah said:

She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah (Genesis 38:26).

As this verse indicates, the patriarch Judah admitted that his sin was much worse than anything Tamar had done. And he was exemplary in his humble confession and repentance. As a result of this change of heart, the story of Judah's sin against Tamar has a positive ending. In contrast with the opening segment about Judah's sons by a Canaanite woman, Moses closed this section, in verses 27-30, with a birth report of Judah's sons by Tamar. Both Perez and Zerah became prominent names in the tribe of Judah.

With the events of Judah's sin in Canaan in mind, let's turn to the second section associated with Joseph's threatening rule. This section, found in Genesis 39:1-41:57, is a lengthy account of Joseph's success in Egypt.

Joseph's Success in Egypt (Genesis 39:1-41:57)

This section divides into three main segments. The first segment reports Joseph's move from Potiphar's house to prison in 39:1-23. After Joseph arrived in Egypt, he quickly received favor from Potiphar and ruled over his household. But Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph. When she failed, she accused Joseph of misconduct. Although Joseph resisted her advances, Potiphar believed his wife's false accusations. He sent Joseph to Pharaoh's prison, where Joseph quickly won the confidence of the jailor. Because this episode follows the narrative of Judah's sin with Tamar, it clearly contrasts Judah's earlier immorality with Joseph's moral purity.

When I read the story about Judah and Tamar, I almost feel like I should do a little bit of cutting and pasting, taking the story and placing it somewhere else. And yet, when you actually read the context, you realize exactly why God would have put that story after he'd already started the Joseph story. I think he does that because he wants to show the contrast between an unrighteous man and a righteous man. Joseph is willing to resist the sexual temptation of Potiphar's wife. Judah actually willingly engages in prostitution, perhaps even religious shrine prostitution. And so you see that contrast, and the fact is that God is going to bless Joseph with the

double portion of the firstborn, although he is not the firstborn, but he's the one who leads his family in a righteous way.

— Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

Second, in 40:1–41:45, Joseph moved from prison to Pharaoh's court. In this segment, Moses explained how Joseph rose to power by interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh's officials. Then later, he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams concerning seven years of plenty and seven years of famine.

In the third segment, 41:46-57, Moses summarized Joseph's rule in Pharaoh's court. In this segment, Moses reported several ways Joseph exercised authority in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. In each segment of Joseph's success, Moses made it clear that Joseph rose to power, not by his own ingenuity, but by the hand of God.

Now that we've explored the patriarchal disharmony over Joseph's future rule, and Joseph's threatening rule in Egypt, we should move to the central turning point of the story: the patriarchs' reconciliation and reunion in Egypt, recorded in Genesis 42:1–47:12.

RECONCILIATION AND REUNION (GENESIS 42:1–47:12)

This central narrative of reconciliation and reunion consists of three closely connected journeys taken by Joseph's family from Canaan to Egypt. The first journey is in Genesis 42:1-38. The second journey is found in 43:1–45:28. And the third journey can be seen in 46:1–47:12. Let's take a look at the first journey.

First Journey (Genesis 42:1-38)

The first journey is the simplest of the three accounts and can be divided into three sections. First, in 42:1-5, the brothers traveled from Canaan to Egypt because of the great famine. In this section, Jacob sent all of Joseph's brothers, except Benjamin, to purchase food in Egypt.

The second section, in 42:6-28, deals with events in Egypt when Joseph first recognized his brothers. Joseph didn't reveal his identity, but tested the character of his brothers by sending them back to Canaan to retrieve Benjamin. At first, Joseph threatened to hold all but one of them in prison until Benjamin arrived in Egypt. As a result, the brothers began to realize that their time of reckoning had come. In 42:21 they said to each other: "Surely we are being punished because of our brother." Three days later, Joseph sent all but Simeon back to retrieve Benjamin. He ordered that their bags be filled with grain *and* with the silver they had brought to purchase the grain. As the brothers traveled back, one of them discovered the silver in his bag. The brothers were afraid and exclaimed in verse 28, "What is this that God has done to us?"

The third section, in verses 29-38, reports what happened when the brothers returned to Canaan. They tried to persuade their father to send Benjamin back with them to Egypt, but Jacob refused. So, the brothers remained in Canaan.

Second Journey (Genesis 43:1–45:28)

Having looked briefly at the first journey, let's turn to the events of the second journey in Genesis 43:1–45:28. Although somewhat more complex than the first journey, the second journey also divides into three main segments. The first segment, in 43:1-14, precedes the brothers' travel to Egypt. After their supply of food was gone, Jacob finally agreed to send Benjamin along with his brothers back to Egypt.

The second segment, in 43:15–45:24, consists of lengthy depictions of events in Egypt. First, in 43:15-34, Joseph welcomed his brothers to a great feast at his house. But, he continued to keep his identity a secret. According to 43:30, Joseph was *so* moved at the sight of Benjamin that he left the room to weep in private.

In 44:1-13, Joseph further tested his brothers. He ordered his steward to fill their sacks with grain and silver and to place a silver cup in Benjamin's sack. Then Joseph sent his brothers back to Canaan. But at Joseph's behest, the steward caught up with the brothers. He "found" the silver cup in Benjamin's sack, and brought the brothers back to Joseph's house.

In verses 14-34, Judah pled for mercy from Joseph and admitted in verse 16: "God has uncovered your servants' guilt." Judah then selflessly offered to stay in Egypt himself in the place of Benjamin. Joseph was moved by Judah's humble plea. And in 45:1-15, Joseph finally revealed his identity to his brothers. Chapter 45:2 tells us, "[Joseph] wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it." Joseph explained in verse 7 that God had sent him to Egypt "to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance." He then ordered his brothers to bring their father, Jacob, to Egypt. This scene closes in verses 14-15 with a touching scene of Joseph and Benjamin weeping as they embraced each other and with Joseph kissing and talking with all of his brothers.

The middle section of the story of Joseph is about the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. He's already gone to Egypt, struggles have come up, Joseph's brothers come seeking food and relief from the famine, but in the middle of that, in chapter 45 especially, we have this magnificent image — it's magnificent, actually — it's one of the most dramatic and emotional sections of the whole book of Genesis, and that is when Joseph and his brothers finally reconcile. And what you find is that they're hugging each other and they're weeping and weeping and weeping. They weep so much in that chapter and the one just slightly before that, that even the Egyptians are wondering why all the crying is going on. And so, it's a lovely picture because there has been such disharmony among the brothers, but at that moment they are completely unified. And that unification

comes from the fact, first, that Joseph had tested his brothers and found out that they were changed people. They were not like they were in the beginning when they sought his life, when they deceived their father and those kinds of things. They were changed people, and certain ones of them, like Judah, stand out in particular as *changed* people... The reconciliation comes from the fact that these brothers have been changed and that Joseph has been changed. He's changed from this brash young man who was very prideful about his dreams and those sorts of things to one who now has mercy from a position of power. And as you see those changes taking place in those chapters, or recognize in those chapters, this scene of them crying and holding onto each other is very precious and would have obviously stuck in the minds of Israelites in the days of Moses.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Then, in 45:16-24, Pharaoh ordered Joseph to send his brothers to retrieve Jacob. And Pharaoh promised Joseph in verse 20: “the best of all Egypt will be yours.” Joseph complied and directed his brothers to continue in their newly found harmony. In verse 24 Joseph instructed them, “don’t quarrel on the way!”

In the final segment of the second journey, in 45:25-28, the brothers returned to Canaan. They told Jacob what had happened in Egypt, and Jacob agreed to return to Egypt with them.

After looking at the patriarchs’ reconciliation and reunion in the first journey and the second journey, we come to the third journey in Genesis 46:1–47:12.

Third Journey (Genesis 46:1–47:12)

The third journey divides into two main segments. First, 46:1-27 reports the brothers’ travel to Egypt again, but this time with Jacob. In verses 1-7, we learn the travel itinerary and God’s reassurance that Jacob would be blessed in Egypt. The travel sequence then closes, in 46:8-27, with a list of Jacob’s sons and grandsons who went to Egypt.

Second, just as in the first and second journeys, 46:28–47:12 provides a segment on events in Egypt. Chapter 46:28-30 deals with Jacob’s reunion with Joseph in which Judah played a leading role. And following this, in 46:31–47:12, Pharaoh welcomed Joseph’s family and ordered them to live in Goshen under Joseph’s care.

After writing of the patriarchs’ reconciliation and reunion, Moses then turned to the fourth step, or falling action, in his story. In Genesis 47:13-27, Moses told of Joseph’s benevolent rule in Egypt.

JOSEPH'S BENEVOLENT RULE (GENESIS 47:13-27)

In 47:13-26, we learn that the famine worsened over time. Joseph made food available throughout Egypt and Canaan. And he consolidated Pharaoh's power by purchasing the livestock and land of the people of Egypt and Canaan in order to feed them. In the process, he saved countless lives.

At the end of this account, in Genesis 47:27, Moses commented on how Joseph's rule benefitted Jacob and his sons. Moses wrote:

Now the Israelites settled in Egypt in the region of Goshen. They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in number (Genesis 47:27).

Following the initial patriarchal disharmony, the rise of Joseph's threatening rule, the reconciliation and reunion of the brothers, and Joseph's benevolent rule in Egypt, we come to the last step of Moses' record of Joseph and his brothers. In Genesis 47:28–50:26, Joseph's family experienced patriarchal harmony under Joseph's rule.

PATRIARCHAL HARMONY (GENESIS 47:28–50:26)

This last step resolves the opening problem of disharmony among the patriarchs. And by focusing on the harmony of Joseph's family, it establishes blessings to Israel that were particularly important to Moses' first audience.

The chapters on patriarchal harmony divide into two main sections. In the first place, in Genesis 47:28–50:14, Moses drew attention to Jacob's enduring familial arrangements established in his last days. Then, in Genesis 50:15-26, we see Joseph's enduring familial arrangements. Let's look first at Jacob's familial arrangements.

Jacob's Familial Arrangements (Genesis 47:28–50:14)

This section begins with Jacob near the time of his death. In 47:28-31, Moses explained that Jacob required Joseph's oath to bury him in Canaan. Then, in 48:1–49:28, we read of two separate meetings involving Jacob's blessings.

In the first meeting, in 48:1-22, Jacob privately blessed Joseph and his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Here, Joseph received the honor of a double inheritance, normally given to the firstborn, because Jacob determined to treat Ephraim and Manasseh as equal to their uncles. But unexpectedly, Jacob gave Ephraim, Joseph's second son, prominence over Manasseh, the firstborn.

Then in 49:1-28, after exalting Joseph and his sons privately, all of Jacob's sons received his final blessings. Jacob gathered all of his sons together, and one by one the patriarch blessed them in ways that were appropriate for how they had lived. As Jacob's final blessings, these arrangements were intended to endure for generations to come.

This section closes in Genesis 49:29–50:14, where we learn of Jacob’s death and burial. In these verses, Joseph fulfilled his father’s wishes to be buried in Canaan. Then he returned to Egypt.

The patriarchal harmony under Joseph’s rule not only includes a section on Jacob’s familial arrangements; it also incorporates Joseph’s familial arrangements in Genesis 50:15-26.

Joseph’s Familial Arrangements (Genesis 50:15-26)

This brief section divides into two short reports. In 50:15-21, Joseph reassured his brothers of his kindness toward them. Joseph’s brothers appealed to him for forgiveness, and Joseph graciously forgave.

One of the things that we see in the story of Joseph and his brothers is the power of forgiveness, the power of trusting in God's good purposes for us even when circumstances are extremely difficult for us, and we can see those who aren't in the same difficult circumstance. We might even be able accurately to say, "They put me in this circumstance." But Joseph's response to his brothers, essentially selling him into slavery, we discover, is trust and obedience toward the Lord and a fulfillment of a unique and important purpose that God had destined him for.

— Rev. Dr. Michael Walker

In Genesis 50:19-21 Joseph told his brothers:

Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children (Genesis 50:19-21).

The entire story of Joseph and his brothers closes in Genesis 50:22-26 with an oath Joseph required from his brothers. Listen to Genesis 50:25:

Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place" (Genesis 50:25).

In the record of Genesis, this oath was Joseph’s last interaction with his brothers before he died. Joseph’s brothers promised on behalf of their descendants that when God delivered Israel from Egypt, they would continue to honor Joseph by taking his bones with them for burial in the Promised Land.

Joseph’s last words are these: “God will surely take care of you” — speaking to his brothers and his family basically — “and you shall carry my bones up from here.” As an Egyptian ruler, it’s very likely that once Joseph died he was embalmed, placed in a sarcophagus... Each time they would see this sarcophagus, they would think of the promise that was given by Joseph and by the promise that was given to the patriarchs that you will return to the land. Joseph said “Carry my bones with you; put them in the Promised Land with you.” That’s part of him accepting the promise of God... And so, when the Jews left Egypt, Moses took with them the bones of Joseph. Again, in those forty years it became a symbol, a visual aid, of the great promise that was given by God for the people of Israel to be in a promised land. So the bones then were finally buried at Shechem, and the principle here, I think, is very simple: the promises of God must be more real than anything else in life. God keeps his promises.

— Dr. Larry J. Waters

Up to this point in our lesson on Joseph and his brothers, we’ve looked at the structure and content of Moses’ account. Now, we should turn to the second main topic of our lesson, the major themes of these chapters.

MAJOR THEMES

The story of Joseph and his brothers had many implications for the original audience of Genesis, far more than we can mention here. And the same is true for modern application. Still, if we look at these chapters within the setting of the original audience, certain themes move to the foreground. These major themes don’t cover all the ways Joseph’s story was designed to impact its original audience. Nor do they represent all of the ways we should apply them today. But these major themes give us an orientation toward some of the most crucial features of this part of Genesis.

We’ll look at some of the major themes of these chapters in two ways. First, we’ll make a few comments on how we may approach some shared emphases that appear in both Joseph’s story and in the records of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And second, we’ll look more carefully at two special emphases that are highlighted in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Let’s look first at a number of shared emphases.

SHARED EMPHASES

As we’ve seen in other lessons on Genesis, four main themes appear in the narratives concerning the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These topics appear in the story of Joseph and his brothers as well: an emphasis on God’s grace to Israel, the

requirement of Israel's loyalty to God, God's blessings to Israel, and God's blessings through Israel to others. Let's reflect for a moment on how to approach the theme of God's grace to Israel in this part of the Bible.

God's Grace to Israel

Scripture uses specific terms for divine grace, mercy, and kindness, but we rarely see these terms in Joseph's story. Nevertheless, we find the *theme* of God's grace throughout these chapters. In what we'll call "that world" of Joseph's day, God occasionally reminded Joseph and his family of his past grace, grace he had shown before their time. God also displayed his ongoing grace to Joseph and his family at every turn. And when God pointed to events in the future, he often indicated how Joseph and his family would one day receive his future grace, especially the grace of returning to the Promised Land.

But these three types of grace didn't shape just Joseph's story. Moses' wrote of God's grace in Joseph's world so his original audience could reflect on the many ways God had shown them grace in "their world."

In much the same way, as followers of Christ, we can apply the grace God showed Joseph and his family to our world as well. There are many ways to do this, but it's often helpful to think in terms of the three stages of Christ's kingdom. From our New Testament perspective, God's past grace shown to Joseph and his brothers applies to us as it was displayed in Christ's first advent, in the inauguration of his kingdom. Every time we see God's ongoing grace in the story of Joseph, we're reminded of his ongoing grace in our daily lives throughout the continuation of Christ's kingdom. And just like Joseph and his family expected God's future grace, we may hope in God's mercies at the consummation of Christ's kingdom in the new heavens and new earth.

Along with the shared emphasis of God's grace to Israel, let's look at the requirement of Israel's loyalty to God.

Israel's Loyalty to God

One of the most unusual features of Moses' narrative of that world of Joseph and his brothers is that Moses never cited verbal instructions or commands from God. Instead, Moses expected the Israelites to evaluate Joseph's loyalty to God in that world in light of the law they'd received in their world.

Now, of course, Moses knew that the patriarchs couldn't earn their salvation through loyalty to God's law. That's always been impossible. But their obedience and disobedience displayed the true condition of their hearts in each step of the story. And Moses called his audience to examine their own hearts in light of Joseph's story.

For instance, on the negative side, Moses didn't have to speak directly of God's disapproval of the brothers' plan to kill Joseph. His audience already knew that this broke the sixth commandment against murder in Exodus 20:13. Selling Joseph into slavery violated laws like Deuteronomy 24:7. The brothers broke the commandment in Exodus

20:12 to honor father and mother when they deceived Jacob. When Judah slept with Tamar, thinking she was a prostitute, he violated commandments against sexual immorality in Exodus 20:14 and other laws like Leviticus 19:29.

But on the more positive side, Moses also relied on his audience's knowledge of God's law to identify when Joseph and his brothers were loyal to God. For instance, Joseph conformed to the seventh and tenth commandments in Exodus 20:14 and 17 when he exhibited sexual morality by resisting the seduction of Potiphar's wife. Later on, in passages like Genesis 46:29-34, Joseph and his brothers honored their father in accordance with the fifth commandment in Exodus 20:12. The brothers' repentance and humility before Joseph reflected laws like Leviticus 5:5. Joseph's kindness and mercy toward his brothers was true to passages like Leviticus 19:18. So, we can see that, as Moses described disloyalty and loyalty in that world, he called attention to the disloyalty and loyalty of his original Israelite audience in their world.

As modern Christians, there are at least three main ways we should deal with loyalty and disloyalty to God in the story of Joseph. First, we should compare and contrast these examples with Jesus' perfect obedience to God, especially in the inauguration of his kingdom. Second, we should be ready to apply the moral principles of the story of Joseph to our daily lives during the continuation of Christ's kingdom. And finally, the requirement of loyalty in the story of Joseph should draw our attention to what will happen at the return of Christ in the consummation of his kingdom. At that time, all who've exercised saving faith in Christ will be fully vindicated and transformed into perfectly obedient servants of God in the new heavens and new earth.

We've looked at the shared emphases of God's grace to Israel and Israel's loyalty to God. The third emphasis shared by both Joseph's story and the earlier patriarchal history is the theme of God's blessings to Israel.

God's Blessings to Israel

In terms of "that world" of Joseph and his brothers, we should mention that God poured out his blessings sometimes in spite of the disloyalty of the patriarchs and at other times in response to their loyalty. Moses designed the theme of God's blessings to his people in that world to make his original audience aware of the countless ways God had blessed them in their world — both in spite of their disloyalty and also in response to their loyalty.

In much the same way, God's blessings in the story of Joseph and his brothers apply to our world today. Sometimes this is in spite of our disloyalty and at other times in response to our loyalty. We find connections between Joseph's story and our lives by acknowledging the blessings God poured out on his people in the inauguration of Christ's kingdom. We also recognize how he blesses us now in the continuation of Christ's kingdom. And we look forward to how God will bless us at the consummation of Christ's kingdom.

Along with the shared emphases of God's grace to Israel, Israel's loyalty to God, and God's blessings to Israel, the story of Joseph also shares an emphasis on God's blessings *through* Israel to others.

God's Blessings through Israel

Passages like Genesis 12:3, 22:18, and 26:4 tell us that God blessed Israel and ordained Abraham and his descendants to spread his kingdom and its blessings to all nations. This theme appears in that world of Joseph primarily in the ways Joseph's rule in Egypt led to blessings for others. For example, Joseph was a blessing to Potiphar in Genesis 39:5. He was a blessing to the jailor in Pharaoh's prison in 39:22. And Joseph blessed Pharaoh when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream in 41:25. But the greatest blessings to others came at the height of Joseph's power when he blessed the Egyptians and many nations. As Genesis 41:56-57 reports:

When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians ... And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world (Genesis 41:56-57).

It's easy to see how the theme of Israel's blessings to others applied to "their world" of Moses' original audience. First, in hearing Joseph's story, the Israelites would have been encouraged to know that their patriarchs had blessed others already. They also would have realized that God had called them to bring God's blessings to others in their own day. And they would have looked forward to the future when their descendants would spread God's blessings to the entire world.

As you might expect, this theme also applies to us in our world. Christ granted blessings to the world in the inauguration of his kingdom. He blesses the world through the church during the continuation of his kingdom. And one day, he will bless every tribe and nation of the world at the consummation of his kingdom in the new creation.

SPECIAL EMPHASES

As we've explored the major themes in the story of Joseph, we've mentioned some of the shared emphases between Joseph's story and the rest of the patriarchal history in Genesis. Now we should focus on two special emphases found distinctly in Joseph's story. Earlier in this lesson we proposed that:

The story of Joseph and his brothers taught the tribes of Israel how to live together in harmony as they faced the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land.

As we've seen, much of this part of Genesis has to do with the disharmony and harmony between Joseph and his brothers. And Joseph and his brothers were the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. So, these interactions were connected directly with the interactions among the tribes of Israel in Moses' day. Listen to Joseph's last words in Genesis 50:24-25 where this connection moves to the foreground:

Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, “God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place” (Genesis 50:24-25).

It would be difficult to overemphasize the connection that this passage made between that world, of Joseph’s day, and their world, of Moses’ original audience. Moses closed the story of Joseph and his brothers with Joseph’s explicit anticipation of what was happening in the lives of the original audience of Genesis — their entry into the Promised Land.

There are many ways to sum up the implications of this connection between Joseph’s last words and the experiences of the original audience. But for our purposes, we’ll look at just two special emphases. First, we’ll see how the story of Joseph and his brothers was designed to promote national unity among the tribes of Israel in Moses’ day. And second, we’ll see how his words acknowledged the national diversity God had ordained among the tribes of Israel. Let’s look first at the theme of national unity.

National Unity

To see the importance of the theme of national unity, we need to point out that the story of Joseph and his family departs from a pattern that appears time and again in Genesis. We may call this pattern “exclusive succession.” By exclusive succession we mean the passing of God’s special favor over time through one main figure or patriarch.

Think about it this way: In the primeval history of Genesis 1:1–11:9, God first ordained that Adam and his descendants would fill and rule over the whole world. They were to spread God’s glorious kingdom throughout the earth. But with the introduction of sin, this promise passed exclusively to Seth and not to Cain. God’s special favor then passed through the line of Seth’s descendants until God confirmed his covenant exclusively with Noah. Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. But God’s promises were passed down exclusively through Shem’s lineage. And at the end of the primeval history, Shem’s descendant, Abraham, was the exclusive heir of God’s promises.

The earlier patriarchal history in Genesis 11:10–37:1 continues this pattern of exclusive succession. Abraham’s promises were passed only to Isaac instead of Ishmael and Abraham’s other sons. And God’s promises to Isaac were passed down exclusively to Jacob instead of Esau.

Now, as vital as this pattern of exclusive succession was in the first 36 chapters of Genesis, it comes to an abrupt end with the story of Joseph and his brothers. In this part of Genesis, Moses stressed “inclusive succession.” He believed that the special favor of God passed from Jacob to all twelve of his sons, not to just one. When Jacob died, all twelve of his sons and their descendants, the twelve tribes of Israel, shared jointly in

Jacob's inheritance of the Promised Land. And this inclusive distribution of Jacob's inheritance to all of his sons called Moses' Israelite audience to national unity.

As we read through the story of Jacob and then Joseph and his brother Judah, we realize there's a lot of turmoil in this family, a lot of conflict, jealousy, strife, and God does not want his covenant community to be living this way. And so the story becomes a paradigm, I think, for how God is working in the covenant community to bring about unity, as Joseph and Judah end up unified, not in conflict anymore. This is a good example for the people later. Joseph and Judah are two of the major tribes in Israel. It becomes a great example for them of the kind of unity that God wants to see in the covenant community and is trying to produce.

— Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

As we saw earlier, the story of Joseph and his brothers began with disharmony caused by the brothers' sins against each other. But it ended with harmony among the brothers. In this way, Moses' narrative made it clear to everyone following him that God had called the tribes of Israel to seek national unity. As Joseph's story illustrated, all Israel shared together in the inheritance of the Promised Land that God had given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

It's no wonder, then, that Moses addressed unity among the tribes of Israel in other places. For instance, in Exodus 19:8, he stressed that all of the Israelites agreed unanimously to enter into covenant with God at Mount Sinai. In Numbers 32 and Joshua 1:12-18, both Moses and Joshua insisted that the tribes should fight together in the land of Canaan before any of them separated from each other. Moses also gathered all of the tribes together for covenant renewal in Deuteronomy 29:2.

And beyond this, Israel's national unity continued to be emphasized by later Old Testament authors. Despite the failures of David and Solomon, the period of the united monarchy was considered Israel's golden age. The division of the nation into the northern and southern kingdoms fell far short of God's ideal for his people. Later on, Israel's prophets promised that the tribes would be reunited after the exile. And books like Chronicles insisted that representatives of every tribe must settle in the Promised Land after the exile.

Moses' emphasis on unity among the twelve tribal patriarchs in that world of Joseph and his brothers promoted national unity among the tribes of Israel in their world. This emphasis also points toward one of the main ways the story of Joseph and his brothers should be applied to our modern world. Just as the tribes of Israel shared a common inheritance, all followers of Christ everywhere in the world share a common inheritance in Christ. Jesus established this unity in the inauguration of his kingdom. We must pursue this unity throughout the continuation of Christ's kingdom. And we will one day delight in the perfect unity and harmony among God's people at the consummation of Christ's kingdom. Listen to Ephesians 4:3-6, where Paul said:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:3-6).

Notice the logic of this passage. Paul called followers of Christ to “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.” Like the shared inheritance among Israel’s tribes, we have so much in common: one body, one Holy Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father.

The story of Joseph and his brothers gives followers of Christ today many opportunities to reflect on the disharmony that often comes between us. And it provides a great deal of practical guidance as we devote ourselves to the unity of God’s people throughout the world.

Joseph’s story encouraged national unity among the Israelites because Joseph was a person that was full of forgiveness. And forgiveness is the only uniting factor that we have, not only for Israelites, for us as Christians, for families, for the life that we live in this world. Joseph was mistreated so much by his brothers, but when they were in trouble, he saved them... And when we look at Joseph’s story and how he forgave, he forgave something that was so huge. They wanted him dead. They did not want him alive. They did not want to meet him any other time. But Joseph did not want to do harm to them. He had the power, he had the leverage to do that, but he became godly and became maturer in faith than them and included them. And that can be repeated, and it can be replicated in Israel among the twelve tribes, it can be replicated in us, in our own families, in our churches, and it can be replicated in society.

— Rev. Dr. Cyprian K. Guchienda

Now, as valuable as it is to realize that Moses’ special emphases promoted Israel’s national unity, it’s also important to realize why Moses needed to do this. In brief, Moses stressed the need for unity because God had also ordained national diversity for his people.

National Diversity

Put simply, all of the tribal patriarchs were Jacob’s heirs, but this didn’t mean that they were all treated in precisely the same. On the contrary, the rest of the Old Testament makes it clear that God gave the tribes of Israel different privileges and responsibilities. And Moses stressed the need for harmony among the tribes of Israel for one primary

reason: the unity of Israel could be maintained only as the Israelites acknowledged that God *himself* had ordained their diverse tribal privileges and responsibilities.

Like the theme of unity, the theme of diversity weaves its way through every step of the story of Joseph and his brothers. But it's particularly prominent in Genesis 47:28–49:33. In these chapters, Jacob distributed his inheritance to all twelve of his sons, but he also established enduring differences among them and their descendants.

In these chapters, Moses promoted the national diversity of Israel by differentiating all of Jacob's sons. However, for our purposes, we'll look at just two: Judah and his descendants and, of course, Joseph and his descendants. Let's consider first the honor given to Judah and his descendants.

Judah and Descendants. Moses moved the patriarch Judah to center stage several times in these chapters to confirm the prominence God had ordained for Judah and his tribe. Judah first appears in Genesis 37:12-36 when the brothers attempted to kill Joseph. In verses 26-27 Judah stood out from among his brothers and successfully intervened on Joseph's behalf. Judah affirmed the harmony that should have characterized the brothers by reminding them in verse 27 that “[Joseph] is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” And we see here that Judah's leadership was acknowledged when his brothers agreed to his plan.

Judah appears again in 38:1-30 when Moses recounted the story of Judah's sin in Canaan. This episode contrasts Judah's immorality with Joseph's integrity in Potiphar's house. But, in 38:26, Moses revealed Judah's humble confession when Judah admitted, “[Tamar] is more righteous than I.” It's clear that God accepted Judah's repentance because God then blessed Judah with twin sons, Perez and Zerah.

Moses drew attention to Judah's leadership again during the patriarchs' second journey to Egypt in 44:14-34. When Benjamin was accused of having stolen a silver cup, Judah stepped forward in Joseph's presence and pled for mercy. He spoke with humility, calling himself and his brothers Joseph's “servants.” He expressed repentance over what he and his brothers had done by confessing that “God has uncovered your servants' guilt.” He honored his father by noting “the misery that would come upon [his] father” if Benjamin did not return to Canaan. And he courageously offered to remain in Egypt “in place of the boy.”

And finally, in 49:1-28, Judah moved to the foreground during Jacob's final blessings. In verses 8-12, Jacob declared that Judah and his tribe would be exalted to an unrivaled position of leadership. And the tribe of Judah would one day become the royal tribe of Israel. Listen to Jacob's words in Genesis 49:8-10:

Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you... The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his (Genesis 49:8-10).

Notice here that Judah's “brothers will praise [him].” He will place his hand “on the neck of [his] enemies,” meaning that he will overcome everyone who opposes him. And Judah's “father's sons” — his brothers — “will bow down to [him].” True to his

earlier characterizations, Moses indicated that the tribe of Judah would have authority over the other tribes of Israel.

It's important to note that "the scepter" and "the ruler's staff," symbols of royalty, will be held by a descendant of Judah. Judah's royal family will continue to rule "until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."

Genesis 49:10 gives us the first explicit reference in Scripture to the fact that a descendant of Judah will become the king over the whole world. This is a clear reference to the Messiah of David's house. And this future king will fulfill the promise of Genesis 12:3 where God told Abraham, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Through this king, God's kingdom will reach the entire globe. And "the obedience of the nations" will be given to this great king from Judah.

It isn't difficult to understand why Moses emphasized the exaltation of Judah in that world for his original audience in their world. Judah wasn't the first son of Jacob, and ordinarily he wouldn't have had such prominence. So, while Moses wrote about Joseph and his brothers to promote national unity, he also expected them to maintain this unity in light of the fact that God had exalted the tribe of Judah in this way.

There are also many implications of Judah's exaltation for modern followers of Christ in our world. But at the heart of it all is the fact that God promised a supreme king from Judah's tribe. And this promise is fulfilled in the perfectly righteous son of David, Jesus, the King of the universe. Jesus took his throne in heaven at the inauguration of his kingdom. He reigns throughout the continuation of his kingdom until all his enemies are put under his feet. And at the consummation of his kingdom, he will reign forever over the new creation.

Having seen how Moses emphasized national diversity within Israel by focusing on Judah and his descendants, let's turn to the obvious prominence of Joseph and his descendants in this part of Genesis.

Joseph and Descendants. As we've seen, Joseph is the main character of Genesis 37:2–50:26. But, unlike his brothers, Joseph is highly idealized in these chapters. In fact, the only time Moses hinted at a flaw in Joseph's character was in the opening episode. In 37:2-11 we learn that Joseph agitated his brothers. He brought his father bad reports about them and boasted to them about his dreams of the future. But even this one negative feature is subtle. And Moses minimized it in verse 2 by mentioning that Joseph was "only seventeen."

Apart from this hint of imperfection, the portrait of Joseph is entirely positive. Joseph served Potiphar faithfully. He resisted Potiphar's wife. He was without flaw in his service to Pharaoh. He wisely tested his brothers when they came to him. He was tenderhearted toward them even after the evil they had done to him. He showed love for his father and for Benjamin. He blessed many nations as the leader of Egypt. In these and many other ways, Moses painted Joseph just as Jacob described him in Genesis 49:26. Joseph was "the prince among his brothers."

Now realistically, we all know from common experience that Joseph must have sinned many times in his life. This has been true for every person in every age, except for Jesus. So, why did Moses idealize Joseph in this way? What was his purpose? The answer lies in the fact that God had given Joseph and his descendants special prominence among the tribes of Israel.

The prominence of Joseph and his descendants appears first in the special arrangements made for Joseph's sons in Genesis 48:1-22. In these verses, Jacob blessed Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh as if they were his own sons. According to 1 Chronicles 5:1, Reuben had lost his status as firstborn because he had committed incest. So, when Jacob adopted Ephraim and Manasseh as his own, it meant that Joseph received the double portion as Jacob's firstborn.

One of the most fascinating segments of this arrangement appears in 48:13-20 where Jacob blessed Ephraim over Manasseh. Joseph carefully set his sons before Jacob so that Jacob's right hand, the hand of greater blessing, would rest on Manasseh's head. Then Jacob's left hand, the hand of lesser blessing, would fall on Ephraim's head. This arrangement seemed appropriate because Manasseh was Joseph's firstborn son. But without explanation, Jacob crossed his hands as he reached out so that his left hand went to Manasseh and his right hand went to Ephraim. Joseph was displeased with this and tried to move Jacob's hands to favor Manasseh. But listen to what happened next in Genesis 48:19:

His father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. [Manasseh] too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother [Ephraim] will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations" (Genesis 48:19).

Or as it may be put, "a whole nation in themselves." Passages like Numbers 2:18-21 and Deuteronomy 33:17 indicate that Ephraim did become more numerous and prominent than Manasseh. In fact, Ephraim's dominance was so great that later, during the period of the divided monarchy, the entire nation of northern Israel was often called "Ephraim."

Now, all of this may seem irrelevant to modern followers of Christ. But the unexpected prominence given to Ephraim in that world of Joseph and his brothers pointed to a God-ordained arrangement that was particularly important to Moses' first audience in their world. As Moses wrote the book of Genesis, he was about to hand the leadership of the nation over to Joshua, his protégé. But Joshua was not from the tribe of Levi like Moses and Aaron. He was not from the royal tribe of Judah. No, Joshua was from the tribe of Ephraim, the tribe that God had blessed with prominence over all others. In effect, Moses highlighted Ephraim in this account to validate his choice of successor. It was only after Joshua's death that the tribe of Judah rose to distinction. Joshua, the Ephraimite, would lead the nation into the Promised Land.

As modern followers of Christ, this dimension of the story of Joseph and his brothers calls us to acknowledge the diverse blessings and roles that God has ordained in our world. In the inauguration of his kingdom, Jesus blessed his people with a variety of gifts. He gave some as apostles, prophets, teachers, and the like. He called different people to different sorts of duties and privileges. Christ established this diversity, not to fragment his people, but to bind them to each other. And throughout the continuation of Christ's kingdom, the Holy Spirit pours out his gifts as he wishes. And even at the consummation, we'll see diversity in the ways that God honors those who've followed Christ. As we apply the story of Joseph and his brothers to our world, we must acknowledge and value the variety God has ordained among his people in every age.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on Joseph and his brothers, we've looked at the structure and content of the last major division of Genesis. And we've seen how Moses used these chapters to promote major themes, including those that appear in earlier sections of Genesis, and Moses' special emphases in these chapters on the unity and diversity of the nation of Israel.

The story of Joseph and his brothers reveals how difficult it was for Israel's patriarchs to live at peace with each other. But in the end, God established enduring bonds of love among them. This story of disharmony, reconciliation, and harmony was originally written to call the twelve tribes of Israel to repentance and unity as the people of God in their day. And it calls us today to resist division and to promote the bonds of love that exist among us as followers of Christ. As the body of Christ, we are to share in Christ's inheritance. And the story of Joseph and his brothers offers indispensable guidance for how we are to devote ourselves to the unity of God's people today for the sake of his glorious kingdom throughout the world.

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