

Week One

Living in the Shelter of a Sovereign God . . .

When the Bottom Falls Out

“He is at peace whose God is sovereign.” These words by the great British preacher Graham Scroggie express one of the most profound realities of the Christian experience. No matter where we find ourselves or how messed up our lives might seem, no matter what storms loom on the horizon or what dreams have shattered beneath our feet, no matter how long we’ve lingered in the valley of deep darkness or how fierce the temptations that battle our souls, no matter how broken our hearts or how bleak the path that lies before us – the perfect peace that surpasses all understanding *can* and *will* be ours as we choose to rest our weary souls in the impenetrable shelter of God’s complete and total control of all things.

It’s hard to think of a story that captures this profound reality more beautifully than the story of Joseph - the grandson of Isaac, the great-grandson of Abraham, and the final leading character in the book of Genesis. Interestingly, more space is devoted to him than any other character. As you study I think you’ll see why.

If you aren’t experiencing God’s peace it’s probably because you don’t fully grasp His providence. But don’t worry, by the end of this study you will. My prayer is that you will not only be able to gasp it, but *personalize* it as well. Because here’s the thing: The God who worked all the crazy and often tragic events of Joseph’s life for good is doing the same for you!

Maybe you thought you were in line for *It’s a Small World* but somehow ended up on the *Tower of Terror*. You planned to float, but you’re about to fall . . . hard . . . and there’s nothing you can do about it. Here’s what you need to know: So-and-so didn’t put you there - **God did**. Some random, clueless guy isn’t operating the ride - **God is**. While you may not have a clue how or why you got there – **God does**. Even though you can’t see a future beyond the terrifying 13 feet drop – **God can**. And when you need your Dad to hold your hand and remind you that He has everything under control – **God will**. Not quite convinced? Turn to Genesis 37 and see for yourself.

Day 1

Before we break the life of Joseph into smaller chunks that we can really “marinate” in and apply to our daily lives, it’s important that we get the big picture in our minds. Stories are meant to be read from beginning to end and that’s exactly what we are going to start out doing. The life of Joseph begins in Genesis 37 and goes all the way to the end of the book – Chapter 50. If you have 40-45 minutes, try to read through the whole story in one sitting. If you don’t have that much time don’t worry – you get two days for this. Just read as far as you can today and pick up where you left off tomorrow.

Don’t get caught up in the details – we’ll do plenty of that in the weeks to come. Your goal is to capture that *wide-angle view*. When you are done reading you should be able to summarize the *main events* of Joseph’s life in a paragraph or two.

Turn to Genesis 37 and read as much as you can. This exercise may not feel super “spiritual” or personally edifying at the moment, but I promise it help you a lot in the weeks to come.

Make a note a where you end up here: _____

Day 2

If you still have reading left to do your assignment for today is to get all the way through Chapter 50. It may require an extra cup of coffee and/or piece of chocolate, but *you can do it!*

If you got all of the reading done in Day 1, take a few minutes and list some of the *most significant* events of Joseph’s life such as “sold into slavery by brothers”, “interprets Pharaoh’s dreams”, “reveals identity to brothers”, etc. See how many you can list from memory, then flip through your Bible and fill in any gaps.

Day 3

- 1) Now that you have that wide-angle view, what about Joseph's life stands out the most to you?

- 2) Having read Joseph's story from beginning to end, how would you describe him? (Just a sentence or two.)

Read **Genesis 37:1-11** paying close attention to the details.

- 3) Where did Jacob and his family live? (v. 1)

- 4) Read **Genesis 13:12-17** (where God speaks to Abraham) and **Genesis 28:13-16** (where God speaks to Jacob). What is the significance of this land?

5) How old is Joseph when the biblical account of his story begins? (v. 2)

6) Using **Genesis 35:23-26** as your guide, list the 12 sons of Jacob:

The sons of Leah:

The sons of Rachel:

The sons of Bilhah:

The sons of Zilpah:

7) Using the references I have supplied below, describe the behavior and/or character of the following brothers:

Reuben (Gen. 35:22; Gen. 49:3-4):

Simeon and Levi (skim Gen. 34:1-31 paying close attention to vv. 24, 25, and 30; Gen. 49:5-7):

Judah (Genesis 38:1, 2; 15-18):

A closer look: Commentators come to very different conclusions about Joseph based on the reference about his “bad report” of his brothers in verse 2. Some infer that it was a false report, indicating that Joseph was a tattletail selfishly seeking his father’s preferential treatment out of pride. Joseph was no doubt a sinner just like the rest of us, so this could very well be the case. Others conclude that the bad report was most likely necessary and reflects Joseph’s sensitive moral conscience and passion for what is right (which is a bit more consistent with the narrative as a whole). The fact is we can’t draw any conclusions about Joseph’s character from his bad report because the text doesn’t tell us anything about what Joseph said (other than it

wasn't positive) or about his motive in sharing it. The reason the bad report is mentioned is to set the stage for the intense hatred of the brothers toward Joseph.

- 8) Verse 3 reveals one of the main factors contributing to the horrific events of chapter 37. What is it?
- 9) Why did Jacob favor Joseph? (also see Gen. 29:30 and 30:22-24)
- 10) How did Jacob tangibly show his favoritism? (v. 3)

A closer look: The phrase translated “varicolored tunic” is hard for scholars to define. “Likely the term describes a sleeved coat that reached to the wrists and ankles.”¹ The emphasis seems to be more on the complexity of the garment, not the color. In that day, most coats were short sleeved and short waisted – made for working. But Joseph definitely wasn't doing any hard labor in a garment like this! It was a tangible expression of Joseph's higher status and the fact that he would receive a much greater portion of his father's inheritance – something customarily reserved for the firstborn son.

Here's another interesting insight regarding the robe: “This garment introduces the important literary idea of clothing in the Joseph narrative. The bestowal and removal of Joseph's attire signified change in his social standing. The stripping of his garment by his brothers (v. 23) and the seizure of his cloak by Potiphar's wife (39:12–13) represented his descending status—from favored son to slave, from slave overseer to prisoner. The snatched garments were used in both cases to bolster false claims against Joseph. The clothing and accessories he received from Pharaoh, on the other hand, announced his superior role as courtier (41:42). The final reference to clothing is the reversal of chap. 37, when Joseph presents clothing to his brothers, especially favoring Benjamin (45:22).”² Maybe it's the nerd in me, but I find that incredibly fascinating!

- 11) Verses 5-10 detail the other main factor contributing to the murder plot and eventually selling of Joseph into slavery. What is it?

- 12) What are some possible reasons why Joseph might have told his dreams to his family?
- 13) While it's not mentioned in the text, who obviously gave Joseph this clear vision for his family's future?
- 14) Did God know how much Joseph would suffer as a result of his father's favoritism and these dreams? (see Psalm 139:1-4, 16)
- 15) It's pretty obvious that God was the great "choreographer" behind Joseph's painful rejection. What was God's ultimate purpose in allowing these events to unfold? (see Genesis 50:20)
- 16) Take a look at the references to the brothers' hatred of Joseph in verses 4, 5, and 8. Why do you think the narrator keeps on repeating this?

What does it reveal about the nature of hate?

Day 4

Read **Genesis 37:12-36** and answer the following questions.

- 1) What was Joseph asked to do? (v. 14)

- 2) The journey to Shechem was about 50 miles. The journey to Dothan was about 13 miles further. What does Joseph's determination to find his brothers possibly reveal about his character?
- 3) What glimpse of God's providence do we see in verses 15-17?
- 4) How do you think the brothers were able to recognize Joseph from such a great distance (v. 18)?
- 5) What was their "Plan A"? (v. 20)
- 6) What was "Plan B"? (vv. 21-24)
- 7) Why do you think Reuben suggested a "Plan B"? (vv. 21, 22; also see 35:22)
- 8) What did the stripping away of Joseph's tunic (v. 23) signify for the brothers?

A closer look: The verbs of verses 23 and 24 describe a brutal assault. "They stripped him" is a phrase used to describe the skinning of animals. Kent Hughes describes the scene: "Like a pack of dogs, his nine brothers were upon him, scratching and pulling the hated coat from him and likely his remaining clothing, finally dumping him like a dead body into a pit so deep and vertical that he could not climb out. Joseph lay bruised and bleeding and naked on the rocky floor of an empty water cistern."³

- 9) What did the brothers do after throwing Joseph into the pit? (v. 25)

What does Genesis 42:21 reveal about what they heard as they were eating?

What does this tell us about them?

- 10) What is “Plan C” for getting rid of Joseph? (vv. 25-28)

- 11) What was Judah motivated by and what does this reveal about his character? (vv. 26, 27)

A closer look: Make sure you keep Judah’s behavior here in mind as we continue on. It will later form the basis of Joseph’s tests of Judah and his brothers once Joseph is second in command over Egypt (42:19–38; 44:1–34).

- 12) Why do you think Reuben was so distraught when he discovered what had happened (vv. 29, 30) - was it his love for Joseph or his love for himself?

- 13) What do you think and/or feel when you picture verse 35 in your head?

A closer look: Don’t miss the irony in the brothers’ deception of their father. In Genesis 27 we read of how Jacob killed a goat and used it to trick *his* father into giving him the blessing. Jacob, whose name literally means “trickster” or “supplanter”, now finds himself on the painful receiving end of someone else’s evil scheme.

- 14) Where did Joseph end up? (v. 36)

- 15) Put yourself in Joseph’s place. What would you have been thinking? How would you have responded to the brothers? How would you have responded to God?

- 16) Why would God allow Joseph to suffer so greatly when he had done nothing to deserve it? (The fact that you’ve read the whole story should help you answer this one.)

What does this reveal to you about God's sovereign work in the lives of his people?

- 17) How have you personally seen God use tragedy to accomplish His own purposes?

- 18) What difficult situation(s) are you facing right now that seem unfair and/or totally out of your control?

While you don't have the luxury of seeing your own "big picture," how might God be using these situations for your good and His glory?

Day 5

Read all of **Genesis 38** and answer the following questions.

- 1) If we were to play a game of "which of these things just doesn't belong here," Chapter 38 would probably top the list. Read **Genesis 49:10**, **Matthew 1:1-3**, **Hebrews 7:14** and **Revelation 5:5** and briefly explain why an entire chapter would be devoted to Judah and Tamar.

- 2) Read the following verses and then identify where Judah first went wrong: **Genesis 24:2, 3; 28:1**; and **38:2**.

- 3) Describe Judah's sons. (see vv. 7-10)

A closer look: In order to follow what's happening here you need to understand the law of *levirate* (from the Latin meaning "husband's brother") marriage which was designed to prevent the extinction of a family name. According to this law, after Er's death it was Onan's duty to marry his widowed sister-in-law and produce an heir by proxy so that his brother's inheritance (and name) could be passed on. The children would be Onan's biologically but Er's legally. After Onan died, the legal responsibility to carry on Er's line fell to the next brother, Shelah. Levirate marriage sounds incredibly strange to us, but it was widely practiced at the time and was later included in the Mosaic Law (Deut. 25:5-10).

- 4) What was Onan's consequence for his selfishness? (v. 10)
- 5) Why did Judah plan to withhold Shelah from Tamar? (v. 11)

A closer look: Here's why this whole story is so significant: As Bible readers we know that Judah would become the leading tribe in Israel through which Israel's King (Jesus!) would ultimately come. But right here in Chapter 38 the line of Judah faces complete extinction! Er was dead, Onan was dead, and Judah had no intention of allowing Tamar to marry Shelah. Things aren't looking good at this point.

- 6) In a sentence or two describe Tamar's bold plan to secure an heir.
- 7) How does Judah respond when Tamar's sin is exposed? (v. 24)
- 8) How does Judah respond when his own sin is exposed (v. 26)?

What does this suggest about what's happening in his heart?

- 9) Consider the gross immorality surrounding God's chosen clan that this chapter brings to light. What does this reveal about why God would eventually move his people out of Canaan and into Egypt?

What might have happened if they remained in Canaan?

Has God ever moved you in order to preserve your relationship with Him?

- 10) What do you learn about God's grace from the account of Judah and Tamar (and the corresponding New Testament passages you read in Question 1)?

What do you learn about His sovereignty, even in the midst of sin and deceit?

- 11) How do you think Joseph developed such a heart of purity and integrity when he spent the first 17 years of his life amidst such gross immorality?

Is there a lesson here for someone who grew up in less-than-ideal circumstances? If so, what is it?

¹ Hughes, Kent. *Genesis* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 438.

² Matthews, Kenneth A. *Genesis 11:27–50:26*. The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers), 688.

³ Hughes, 445, 446.