

God's Purposes in Suffering

LIFE OF JOSEPH

- ♦ Time line
- ♦ Events
- ♦ Map
- ♦ Family tree

ROSE
PUBLISHING

■ GOD IN THE LIFE OF JOSEPH

The story of Joseph (Genesis 30–50) teaches about faith and trust, and God's power in times of suffering. It's also a thrilling story of a 17-year-old boy who was ...

- Favored by his father
- Resented by his ten older brothers
- Thrown into a pit in the wilderness
- Sold into slavery and never returned home

Later — just when it appeared his life was improving — he was...

- Stalked by someone powerful and vengeful
- Falsely accused and imprisoned
- Abandoned in jail without friends or supporters to defend him
- Forgotten by people who owed him a favor

But throughout the misery, God was there with Joseph.

Joseph's story gives hope on four levels:

1. **Personal:** God has a purpose in our suffering. God grew Joseph from immaturity to strength and mercy.
2. **Family:** God used bad circumstances to save Joseph's family and change attitudes.
3. **Nationally:** God used Joseph's misfortunes to save many lives and set up the rest of the biblical story that leads to the saving of the world through Christ.
4. **Beyond:** God used this event to bring blessing to the world long past biblical days. We, too, are part of God's larger plan that calls for patience and trust during times of suffering, and will have results on this and the next generation.

Life of Joseph

Abraham c. 2166–1991 BC

Some scholars place Abraham's birth at 1952 BC. In this case, biblical events through Joseph would slide to the right 214 years.

Jacob flees to Haran c. 1929

Joseph is born c. 1914

Abrahamic Covenant

Jacob (Israel) c. 2005–1859

Isaac c. 2066–1886

Joseph's dreams (Gen. 37:1–11)

Ishmael c. 2080–1943

■ BEGINNING OF THE PROMISE (Read Gen. 12:1–3)

This story begins long before Joseph's birth. It begins with his great-grandfather, Abraham, a nomadic sheep and goat herder who lived in the dry, hot region of the Middle East known then as Canaan and today as Israel.

Although Joseph is the main character, the story is really about God's promise to Abraham's descendants.

God appeared to Abraham and made two promises:

- *I will make you a great nation.*
- *All the nations of the earth will be blessed by you. (Gen. 12:1–2)*

God's promise to Abraham changed the direction of humanity. Human disobedience and rebellion turned God's creation upside down. Instead of being a good and blessed creation, human rebellion resulted in a cursed creation and a cursed history (see Gen. 1–3).

God promised Abraham to start a new history of blessing with him and his family.

God's promise lies with a family; it is not an ideal family—it resembles many families today, with struggles, deep problems, sadness, and grief.

Question: God gave Abraham some specific promises. What are some promises in the Bible that God gives to everyone who believes in him?



Abraham's Departure by József Molnár

Joseph sold into slavery c. 1897

Joseph in Potiphar's home (Gen. 39)

Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38—unsure of date)

Joseph in Prison (Gen. 40)

Joseph becomes an official in Egypt c. 1884

Seven years of plenty

c. 1884–1877

▣ A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

The story of Joseph begins in Gen. 37:1, with his father Jacob “in the land of Canaan.” This simple statement is a reminder that God is implementing his promise to Abraham. Then the biblical story introduces Joseph and his brothers. It is immediately clear that their relationships are broken and that the potential for conflict is great.

▣ PLAYING FAVORITES (Read Gen. 37:1–4)

Joseph is Jacob’s youngest and favorite son. This favoritism is evident in a few short lines in the story.

Two main clues of this favoritism:

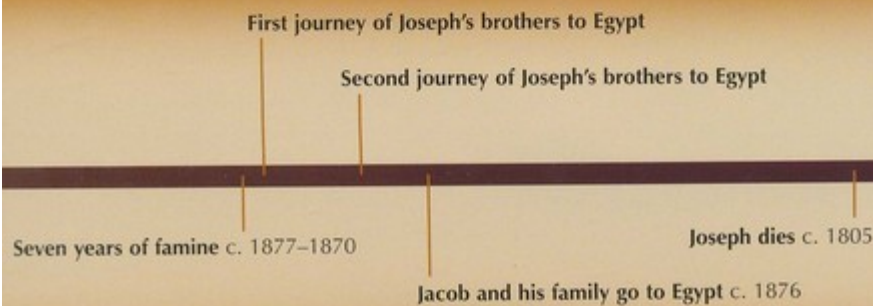
1. The “coat of many colors,” or “richly ornamented robe,” was a gift from Jacob to Joseph. Whatever the robe was, it was a special and precious garment indicating that Joseph was not meant for a life of fieldwork like the other sons.
2. The other telling comment is of “a bad report” (see box) Joseph brings about his brothers. Jacob foolishly sends the favored son to check on his brothers. By this time, Joseph’s actions and attitudes have hurt his relationship and angered his brothers.

▣ JOSEPH’S DREAM (Read Gen. 37:5–11)

Joseph’s ten older brothers resent their father’s favoritism as much as Joseph’s attitude. Young Joseph fails to understand the depth of his brothers’ loathing toward him. With little tact and wisdom, Joseph shares his dreams with his family. One night, Joseph dreams that his brothers and parents bow before him. The Bible does not say that Joseph’s dreams come from God. In fact, we do not know that is the case until the end of the story, when the dreams become reality. It is also the straw that breaks the camel’s back for his brothers.

The Bible describes a similar robe in only one other place, 2 Sam. 13:18. There Tamar, King David’s daughter, wears a similar robe and we read, “for this was the kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore” (2 Sam. 13:18).

The expression “*bad report*” is also used in Ps. 31:13, Jer. 20:10, and Ezek. 36:3, where it is used for the whispering of hostile people.



The Wages of Deceit

Jacob's relationship with his sons reflects a lifetime of deceit. Jacob deceived Isaac, his father, for his blessing—cheating his brother Esau out of a blessing that was rightfully Esau's. Jacob fled his brother's anger and traveled to Haran to live with his uncle Laban (Gen. 27). There, Jacob fell in love with Laban's youngest daughter, Rachel. However, Laban tricked Jacob into working seven years for his daughter, but he gave his oldest daughter, Leah, to Jacob in marriage. Jacob had to work another seven years for Rachel.

Jacob's love for Rachel was always greater than his love for Leah. However, God granted Leah many sons from Jacob, whereas Rachel was not able to give birth. Rachel finally bore a son to Jacob, Joseph (Gen. 29:31–30:24). Jacob's love for Joseph became an extension of his love for Rachel.

■ DECEIVING THE DECEIVER

(Read Gen. 37:12–36)

The strained relationships among family members anticipate a potentially tragic ending. Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers who are herding sheep far away—an unwise decision considering the previous “bad report” from Joseph and the already weak relationships among his children. Joseph's brothers find a perfect opportunity to be rid of their youngest brother. The brothers throw Joseph in a pit and want to kill him. Reuben hopes to rescue Joseph, but Judah, one of two eldest brothers, argues that it is better to make some money from the deal. Instead of killing him, they sell Joseph to a trading caravan going to Egypt. Joseph, although alive, ends up as a slave in Egypt. Jacob is cruelly deceived by his sons, who return with a bloodied coat/robe and a terrible lie: Joseph is dead.

Question: Perhaps Joseph's brothers felt they had gotten away with a clever deception. But the Bible tells us that God is the LORD of Justice. Can you think of another story from the Bible that illustrates God's eventual triumph over wicked actions?

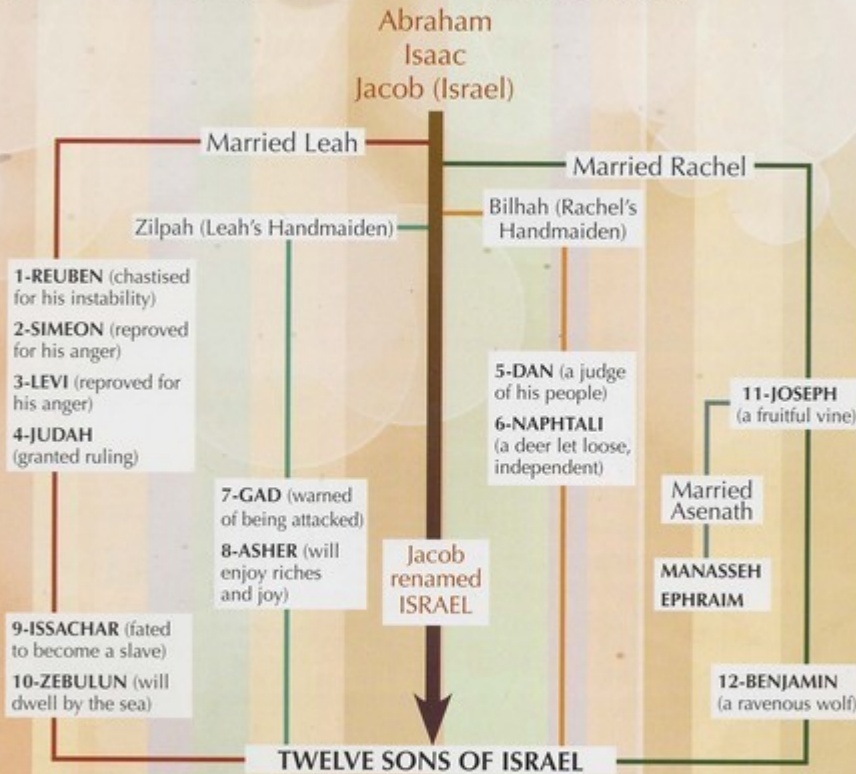
The Promise in Danger

Can God's promise to Abraham (or any other promise) ever be in danger? Absolutely not. God is always faithful to his promises. However, in times of trouble, it is difficult to remember this truth and easy to assume the worst.

No, the promise is not in danger; though Joseph might find it difficult to believe while being dragged away from his family and into slavery. As readers, we can do nothing but weep along with Jacob: weep for Jacob's pain, for Joseph's fate, and for the brothers' hardness.

Joseph's Family Tree

The story of Joseph is part of the larger story of how God fulfilled his promise to Joseph's great-grandfather, Abraham. Just like his father had done, Jacob blessed his children before dying (the brief sentence below summarizes Jacob's blessings to each of his children in Gen. 49:1-27). The traditional list of Israel's twelve tribes includes Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, but not Joseph. Jacob adopted Joseph's sons as his own children (Gen. 48:5-20). By doing this, Jacob exalted Joseph to his own level as a patriarch of the Tribes of Israel, and granted his children a sharing in the promises God made to Abraham. (Because Levi's descendants became the priestly tribe, they did not partake in the distribution of the promised land. Thus, they are not counted in the twelve tribes of Israel.)



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