

The Book of Genesis, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 21: Joseph's Dreams and Betrayal

Genesis 37:1-36

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This chapter begins the long Joseph narrative, which will carry Genesis to its close and which is dominated by the theme of God's providence. Here the foundations are laid: the destructive favoritism of Jacob, the deadly envy of the brothers, God-given dreams of future exaltation, and the betrayal and sale of Joseph into slavery. Doctrinally, the lesson teaches the ruinous fruit of favoritism and envy, the reality of God's sovereign purpose even when hidden, the suffering of the righteous, and, crucially, the hidden hand of providence at work in apparent disaster. Joseph also stands as one of the clearest Old Testament types of Christ: the beloved son, rejected and sold by his own, who suffers before he is exalted.

Keep the providence theme central, even though in this chapter it is almost entirely hidden. To everyone in the story, Joseph's betrayal looks like unmitigated catastrophe and the death of the dreams. Only later, at Genesis 50:20, will it be revealed that 'God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive.' Teach students to read this chapter the way faith reads its own dark days: trusting that God is at work even when His purpose is completely hidden, and that He can weave even the sinful acts of others into His saving plan, without in any way endorsing their sin. The brothers were fully guilty; God was fully sovereign.

Formationally, the chapter calls students to guard against the favoritism and envy that poison families and churches, to handle God's gifts and callings with humility, to respond to betrayal and unjust suffering as Christ did rather than with bitterness or revenge, and above all to trust God's hidden providence when their own lives seem to be falling apart. Lead them to the God who is most at work, often, when we can least see Him.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons and showed it openly with the special coat, and his brothers "hated him" for it (37:3-4). What does this teach us, once again, about the destructive fruit of favoritism and partiality in a family?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Joseph story opens by repeating the family's besetting sin: favoritism. 'Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors' (37:3). Jacob, who suffered under his own parents' favoritism and reaped the bitter harvest of it, now does the same to his children.

Draw out the tragic irony and the warning. Jacob should have known better than anyone the damage favoritism does; he had lived it. Yet he repeats it, and the special coat becomes a daily, visible provocation. Sinful patterns, unaddressed, pass from generation to generation.

Note the immediate fruit: 'they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him' (37:4). Favoritism does not bless the favored and harm only the overlooked; it poisons the whole family, breeding hatred, division, and the resentment that will soon erupt in violence.

Help students see the seriousness. What might look like a father's harmless affection set in motion a chain of envy, betrayal, and decades of pain. Partiality is never harmless; it wounds, divides, and sows seeds of deep and lasting damage.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The destructive fruit of favoritism, repeated across generations (Genesis 37:3-4).
- The tragic irony of Jacob repeating the sin that wounded him.
- Favoritism poisoning the whole family, not only the overlooked.
- Partiality as never harmless, sowing division and resentment.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it striking that Jacob, of all people, played favorites?
- What was the immediate effect of his favoritism on the family?
- Why is partiality never as harmless as it seems?

Question 2

Student Question:

Where might favoritism, partiality, or comparison be at work in your own family or relationships? How does being treated as a favorite, or as the overlooked one, shape a person, and how can we guard against this?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies favoritism to the student's own relationships. Partiality operates not only in parenting but in all our relationships: we favor some people over others, and comparison, being treated as the favorite or the overlooked, shapes us deeply.

Help students examine both sides. Some carry wounds from being the overlooked child, the less-favored sibling, the one who never measured up; others may carry the subtler distortions of having been favored. Both shape us, and both call for honesty before God.

Address how to guard against favoritism. In our own homes and relationships, we resist partiality by deliberate, impartial love, by valuing each person for who they are rather than

ranking them, and by remembering the God who shows no partiality (Acts 10:34). Where we have been wounded by favoritism, we find healing in God's unfailing, equal love for His children.

Invite reflection: where favoritism or comparison is at work in the student's family or relationships, how it has shaped them, and how they might guard against it and find their worth in God's impartial love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Partiality and comparison in all our relationships.
- The wounds of being overlooked and the distortions of being favored.
- Guarding against favoritism through deliberate, impartial love (Acts 10:34).
- Finding worth in God's equal, unfailing love.

Discussion Prompts

- Where is favoritism or comparison at work in your relationships?
- How has being favored or overlooked shaped you?
- How can you guard against partiality and rest in God's impartial love?

Question 3

Student Question:

God gave Joseph dreams that truly revealed his future exaltation, though Joseph seems to have shared them without much wisdom (37:5–11). What does this teach us about God's sovereign purposes, and about handling God's gifts, callings, or revelations with humility?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God gave Joseph two dreams that genuinely revealed his future: his brothers' sheaves bowing to his, and the sun, moon, and stars bowing down. These were not the inventions of a proud boy; they were God's revelation of a real future in which Joseph would be exalted and his family would depend on him. God was already at work, showing His purpose, however dimly.

Draw out the sovereignty of God. Before any of the events unfold, God reveals the end from the beginning. The dreams are a thread of divine purpose running beneath the whole story; no matter how dark the road becomes, God's declared intention will stand. 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose' (Isaiah 46:10).

Address Joseph's handling of the dreams. While the dreams were true and God-given, the seventeen-year-old seems to have shared them without much wisdom or humility, deepening his brothers' resentment. There is a lesson here about how we carry God's gifts and revelations: even a true calling can be handled in a way that provokes rather than blesses.

Help students hold both truths. God's purpose for Joseph was real and would be fulfilled; and Joseph still had much to learn about humility, which the coming years of suffering would teach him. God's gifts and callings are to be received with confidence in God but carried with humility toward others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereign purpose revealed in the dreams (Isaiah 46:10).
- God declaring the end from the beginning, His purpose standing through the dark road.
- Handling God's gifts and revelations with wisdom and humility.
- A true calling still requiring growth in humility.

Discussion Prompts

- What did the dreams reveal about God's purpose for Joseph?
- How does this show God's sovereignty over the whole story?
- What can we learn from how Joseph shared the dreams?

Question 4

Student Question:

When God gives you a gift, an ability, a calling, or a sense of His purpose for your life, how do you carry it? What is the difference between confidence in God's purpose and prideful self-importance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the matter of carrying God's gifts to the student. God gives each believer gifts, abilities, and a sense of calling, and how we carry them matters greatly. Joseph's example raises the question of humility.

Help students distinguish godly confidence from prideful self-importance. Confidence in God's purpose rests on God: it is humble, secure, and willing to wait and serve. Prideful self-importance rests on self: it parades, compares, and demands recognition. The same gift can be carried either way.

Point toward the path of humility. God often refines us, as He did Joseph, so that our gifts are eventually used in a spirit of humble service rather than self-promotion. The years between the dream and its fulfillment were years of humbling, and they made Joseph fit to be trusted with the exaltation the dreams foretold.

Invite reflection: how the student carries the gifts and callings God has given them, whether with humble confidence in God or with self-importance, and how they might steward God's gifts in a spirit of humility and service.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Carrying God's gifts and callings with humility.
- Distinguishing godly confidence (resting on God) from self-importance (resting on self).
- God refining us so our gifts serve rather than self-promote.
- Humbling as preparation for being trusted with God's purposes.

Discussion Prompts

- How do you carry the gifts and callings God has given you?
- What is the difference between confidence in God and self-importance?
- How can you steward your gifts with humility?

Question 5

Student Question:

The brothers' envy escalated until they said, "Come now, let us kill him" (37:20). What does this reveal about how serious envy and jealousy are, and how they can lead to terrible sins (compare James 3:16; 4:1-2)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter traces the terrible escalation of envy. It begins as resentment of the favored brother, hardens into hatred so deep they 'could not speak peacefully to him,' and finally erupts in a murderous plot: 'Come now, let us kill him' (37:20). Envy, left unchecked, becomes hatred, and hatred becomes violence.

Draw out how serious envy is. We tend to treat jealousy as a minor, almost understandable failing, but Scripture treats it as deadly. 'Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice' (James 3:16). 'What causes quarrels and fights among you? ...You desire and do not have, so you murder' (James 4:1-2). Envy is a root of much evil.

Trace the progression so students can recognize it. Envy rarely announces itself as murder; it begins small, a resentment of another's blessing, a comparison that breeds bitterness, and it grows in the dark until it produces fruit we never intended. The brothers did not start out planning to sell Joseph; envy carried them there step by step.

Help students see the urgency of dealing with envy early. Like the sin 'crouching at the door' that Cain failed to master, envy must be confronted while it is small. Confessed and surrendered, it can be uprooted; nursed and fed, it can lead to terrible places.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The escalation of envy: resentment, hatred, violence (Genesis 37:4, 18-20).
- The deadly seriousness of jealousy and envy (James 3:16; 4:1-2).

- Envy beginning small and growing in the dark.
- The urgency of confronting envy while it is still small.

Discussion Prompts

- How does envy escalate in this chapter?
- Why does Scripture treat jealousy so seriously?
- Why is it important to deal with envy early?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where is envy, jealousy, or resentment taking root in your heart right now? What is it you resent that someone else has, and how can you root it out before it grows?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the matter of envy into the student's own heart. Envy is one of the most common and most hidden sins; we rarely confess it, yet it quietly poisons our joy and our relationships. The first step is to name it.

Help students locate their envy. It usually attaches to something specific: someone else's success, possessions, appearance, family, recognition, opportunities, or gifts. Envy whispers that another's blessing is a kind of theft from us, and it breeds resentment toward both the person and toward God.

Offer the path to rooting it out. Envy is starved by gratitude (counting our own blessings as gifts from God), by love (genuinely rejoicing with those who rejoice, Romans 12:15), and by trust (believing God's distribution of gifts is wise and good). Confessing envy to God and choosing to bless rather than resent breaks its grip.

Invite a concrete step: the specific thing the student resents that someone else has, and one way to root out the envy this week, through confession, gratitude, or deliberately rejoicing in the other's good.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming our specific, hidden envy.
- Envy whispering that another's blessing steals from us.
- Starving envy with gratitude, love, and trust (Romans 12:15).
- Confessing envy and choosing to bless rather than resent.

Discussion Prompts

- What do you most resent that someone else has?

- How does envy poison your joy and relationships?
- What would help you root it out this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Joseph was betrayed while obediently doing his father's will, suffering wrongfully at the hands of his own family, a foreshadowing of Christ, the beloved Son rejected and sold by His own (37:12–28; compare Acts 7:9). What does this teach us about the suffering of the righteous, and about following Christ's example when we suffer unjustly (1 Peter 2:19–23)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Joseph suffered while doing exactly the right thing. He obediently went at his father's command to check on his brothers, searched diligently for them, and was met with betrayal, stripped, thrown in a pit, and sold into slavery. He suffered not for any wrong of his own but at the hands of those who should have loved him.

Draw out the theme of the suffering of the righteous. The Bible is honest that doing right does not guarantee fair treatment; the faithful often suffer unjustly. Joseph's experience is a vivid case, and it prepares us for the greatest case of all: Christ, the truly righteous One, rejected and betrayed by His own.

Make the connection to Christ explicit, for Joseph is one of Scripture's clearest types of the Messiah. He is the beloved son of the father, sent to his brothers, rejected and hated, sold for pieces of silver, handed over to Gentiles, suffering before glory. Stephen points to Joseph in his sermon (Acts 7:9). What Joseph foreshadowed, Jesus fulfilled, betrayed by Judas for silver, rejected by His own, suffering unjustly to save the very ones who wronged Him.

Then point to the example for our suffering. Peter holds up Christ precisely as our model in unjust suffering: 'When he was reviled, he did not revile in return... but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly' (1 Peter 2:23). When we suffer wrongfully, we are called not to revenge or bitterness but to entrust ourselves to God, as Joseph did and Christ supremely did.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The suffering of the righteous, who often suffer unjustly.
- Joseph as a type of Christ: beloved son, rejected, sold, suffering before glory (Acts 7:9).
- Christ fulfilling the pattern, betrayed and suffering to save His own.
- Entrusting ourselves to God in unjust suffering, following Christ (1 Peter 2:23).

Discussion Prompts

- How did Joseph suffer while doing right?
- In what ways does Joseph foreshadow Christ?

- How does Christ model the way we should respond to unjust suffering?

Question 8

Student Question:

How do you tend to respond when you are wronged or betrayed, especially by those close to you? What would it look like to entrust yourself to God, as Joseph and ultimately Christ did, rather than to bitterness or revenge?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the experience of betrayal to the student's life. Almost everyone has been wronged or betrayed by someone close, a family member, a friend, a fellow believer, and such wounds cut deepest because they come from those who should have protected us.

Help students notice their default responses. Betrayal tempts us to bitterness, to plotting revenge, to cynicism and walls that keep everyone out. These responses feel justified, but they imprison us in the wrong done to us and keep the wound open.

Point to the better way modeled by Joseph and Christ. Joseph did not become a bitter man; through years of suffering he entrusted himself to God, and we will see him eventually forgive. Christ, betrayed, entrusted Himself to the Father and prayed for His enemies. The path through betrayal is to entrust ourselves and our offenders to the God who judges justly, releasing the desire for revenge.

Invite honest reflection: a betrayal the student has suffered, how they have responded, and what it would look like to entrust that wound to God rather than nurse bitterness or plot revenge, trusting Him to bring good even out of evil.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The deep wounds of betrayal by those close to us.
- The temptation toward bitterness, revenge, and cynicism.
- Entrusting ourselves and our offenders to God who judges justly.
- Releasing the desire for revenge, following Joseph and Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- How have you responded when betrayed by someone close?
- What does bitterness or revenge do to us over time?
- What would entrusting the wound to God look like for you?

Question 9

Student Question:

To everyone in the story, the betrayal and slavery looked like nothing but disaster and the death of Joseph's dreams, yet it was secretly the first step in God's plan to save many lives (later revealed in Genesis 50:20). What does this teach us about the hidden hand of God's providence, and about trusting Him when we cannot see His purpose?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point, and it requires teaching students to read the chapter the way faith reads its own dark days. To everyone in the story, Joseph's betrayal and enslavement looked like nothing but catastrophe: the favored son gone, the dreams dead, an old man weeping over a bloody coat, a boy in chains headed for Egypt. There is no visible sign of God; He is not even mentioned in the betrayal scene. And yet, hidden beneath the disaster, God's saving plan is already in motion.

Make the providence explicit by looking ahead. At the end of the story, Joseph will say to the very brothers who sold him, 'As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive' (50:20). The betrayal that looked like the death of God's promise was in fact the first step in God's plan to save Jacob's family, and many nations, from famine. God was at work the whole time, unseen.

Teach the crucial balance. God's sovereignty did not cancel the brothers' guilt. They genuinely sinned, freely and wickedly; Joseph calls it evil, and Scripture never excuses it. And yet God, without authoring or approving their sin, sovereignly wove it into His good purpose. 'You meant evil... God meant it for good.' Both are fully true. We must never say the brothers' sin was not really sin because God used it, nor that God was helpless because they sinned.

Draw the application for the believer's dark days. Faith trusts that God is at work even when His purpose is completely hidden, even when there is no visible sign of Him, even when life looks like nothing but loss. 'We know that for those who love God all things work together for good' (Romans 8:28). This does not mean every evil is good, but that God is able to bring good even out of evil, weaving our worst days into a purpose we cannot yet see.

Land it in trust and hope. The lesson of Joseph's betrayal is that God is often most at work in the moments we can least see Him. When our own lives seem to be falling apart, the dreams dead, the situation hopeless, we are called to trust the hidden hand of providence, the same hand that turned the betrayal of Joseph, and supremely the cross of Christ (the greatest evil turned to the greatest good), into salvation for many. The God who was with Joseph in the pit and the slave-caravan (Acts 7:9, 'God was with him') is with us in ours.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reading dark days by faith: God at work even when His purpose is hidden.
- The betrayal as the first hidden step in God's plan to save many (Genesis 50:20).
- God's sovereignty without canceling human guilt: 'you meant evil, God meant good.'

- God bringing good out of evil without authoring or approving the evil.
- All things working together for good for those who love God (Romans 8:28).
- The cross as the supreme instance of the greatest evil turned to the greatest good.
- God present with His people even in the pit (Acts 7:9).

Discussion Prompts

- How did the betrayal look to everyone in the story, and what was really happening?
- How do we hold together the brothers' guilt and God's good purpose?
- How does this teach us to trust God when we cannot see His purpose?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole chapter. Name one specific way God is calling you to guard against envy and favoritism, to respond to betrayal in faith, and to trust His hidden providence even when life seems to be falling apart.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the chapter into one resolve. We have seen the poison of favoritism and envy, the humble carrying of God's gifts, the suffering of the righteous, and the hidden hand of providence. The question is what God is forming in this student.

Press for the specific. For one it is rooting out an envy; for another, guarding against favoritism; for another, responding to a betrayal in faith rather than bitterness; for another, trusting God's hidden providence in a season that feels like disaster.

Close with the God who was with Joseph in the pit. The same God who was secretly at work in Joseph's darkest day, and who turned the betrayal and the cross into salvation, is at work in our hidden providences too. To be formed by this passage is to guard our hearts from envy, to entrust our wounds to God, and to trust His unseen hand when life is falling apart, knowing that He is often most at work when we can least see Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Guarding against envy and favoritism.
- Responding to betrayal in faith rather than bitterness.
- Trusting God's hidden providence in seasons of disaster.
- The God who was with Joseph in the pit at work in our dark days.

Discussion Prompts

- Which call is God pressing on you: rooting out envy, guarding against favoritism, or trusting His hidden hand?

- Where does your life feel like it is falling apart, and how does Joseph's story speak to it?
- How does trusting God's hidden providence change how you face this week?