

The Book of Genesis, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 23: Joseph Interprets Dreams and Rises to Power

Genesis 40:1–41:57

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

These chapters carry Joseph from the prison to the second-highest position in Egypt, and they are saturated with the theme of God's providence. Doctrinally, the lesson teaches humility that gives God the glory for our gifts, trust in God's sovereign timing through long delays, faithfulness in hidden and difficult places, the stewardship of gifts and position to bless others, and the patient, purposeful providence of God who works through every circumstance, even forgotten promises and unjust imprisonment, to accomplish His saving purposes. Joseph's exaltation after suffering also continues his foreshadowing of Christ, humbled and then exalted to save many.

Keep God's providence and timing central. Joseph waited thirteen years from the pit to the palace, including two additional years after the cupbearer forgot him. The text invites us to see that none of this delay was wasted or random; God was sovereignly orchestrating events, gifts, and timing to place Joseph exactly where He needed him, exactly when many lives would need saving. Teach students to trust God's timing even when it seems slow, and to believe that God is purposefully at work in their delays and disappointments, just as He was in Joseph's. The naming of Manasseh and Ephraim shows God redeeming suffering, turning affliction into fruitfulness.

Formationally, this passage calls students to humility that credits God, to patient trust in His timing, to faithfulness in obscure and hard places, and to the stewardship of their gifts and positions for the good of others. Lead them to the God whose providence is never early and never late, who does not forget His own, and who works even our long, hard waits into His good and saving purposes.

Question 1

Student Question:

When asked to interpret dreams, Joseph repeatedly pointed away from himself to God: "Do not interpretations belong to God?" and "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer" (40:8; 41:16). What does this teach us about humility and about giving God the glory for our gifts and abilities?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In both the prison and the palace, Joseph consistently points away from himself to God. To the troubled officials he says, 'Do not interpretations belong to God?' (40:8). To Pharaoh himself, with his freedom hanging in the balance, he says, 'It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer' (41:16). Joseph refuses to take credit that belongs to God.

Draw out the humility this reveals. The seventeen-year-old who once flaunted his dreams has become a man who deflects glory to God. Years of suffering have refined his pride into humility. He knows his gift is not his own achievement but God's gift, and he says so, even when claiming it would serve his interests.

Teach the principle: we are to give God the glory for our gifts and abilities. 'What do you have that you did not receive?' (1 Corinthians 4:7). Every talent, every success, every good outcome is ultimately from God. To take the credit is both untrue and a kind of theft from the One who gave it.

Help students see that this humility is also a witness. By giving God the glory before Pharaoh, Joseph testified to the true God in a pagan court. When we credit God for what He has done in and through us, we point others to Him. Humility that glorifies God is both honest and evangelistic.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Humility that gives God the glory for our gifts (Genesis 40:8; 41:16).
- Suffering refining pride into humility.
- Every gift and good outcome as received from God (1 Corinthians 4:7).
- Crediting God as both honest and a witness to others.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Joseph consistently point away from himself to God?
- How had Joseph changed from the proud teenager of chapter 37?
- Why is giving God the glory both honest and a witness?

Question 2

Student Question:

When you do something well or experience success, do you tend to take the credit or give it to God? What would it look like to genuinely acknowledge God as the source of your abilities and your good outcomes?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the matter of glory to the student's life. When we succeed or do something well, the instinct is often to take the credit, to enjoy the praise, to see our achievements as our own. Joseph's example calls us to a different reflex.

Help students examine their hearts. Do we secretly believe our gifts and successes are self-made? Do we crave the recognition? The temptation is subtle, for we may give God lip service while inwardly hoarding the glory. Genuine humility actually believes and gladly says that God is the source.

Offer the freedom this brings. Giving God the glory frees us from the exhausting need to prove ourselves and from the fear of losing the praise we crave. When we know our gifts are God's and our successes are His doing, we can serve and succeed without the burden of self-glory.

Invite a concrete practice: a recent success or ability the student has quietly taken credit for, and a way to deliberately give God the glory for it, in their own heart and, where fitting, before others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Examining whether we take credit or give God glory.
- The subtle temptation to hoard glory while giving God lip service.
- The freedom of crediting God: release from self-justification and craving praise.
- Deliberately giving God the glory in heart and before others.

Discussion Prompts

- When you succeed, do you tend to take credit or give it to God?
- What makes it hard to genuinely credit God?
- How could you give God the glory for a recent ability or success?

Question 3

Student Question:

After Joseph interpreted the cupbearer's dream, the cupbearer forgot him for two more years, yet Joseph's exaltation came at exactly the right moment (40:23–41:14). What does this long delay, and its sudden end, teach us about God's providence and His timing (compare 1 Peter 5:6)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The text underlines a painful delay: after Joseph interpreted his dream, the cupbearer 'did not remember Joseph, but forgot him' (40:23), and Joseph languished in prison two more years (41:1). Then, suddenly, in a single day, he is brought from the dungeon to stand before Pharaoh and is exalted. The delay was long; the deliverance was sudden, and perfectly timed.

Draw out God's sovereign timing. Joseph's exaltation came not a day too early or too late, but at the exact moment Pharaoh's dreams created the need for an interpreter and the famine loomed. Had the cupbearer remembered Joseph two years earlier, the timing would have been wrong. God's seeming delays are often His precise timing at work.

Teach the doctrine of God's timing. 'For everything there is a season' (Ecclesiastes 3:1); God 'has made everything beautiful in its time' (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Peter applies it directly: 'Humble yourselves... under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you' (1 Peter 5:6). God's timing is part of His providence, and it is always right.

Help students reframe delay. What feels like God forgetting us, or like wasted, pointless waiting, is often God working out a timing we cannot yet see. The two forgotten years were not empty; they were part of God's perfect arrangement. We can trust the timing of a God who is never early and never late.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereign, perfect timing through long delay (Genesis 40:23–41:14).
- The delay as precise timing, not divine forgetfulness.
- God making everything beautiful in its time (Ecclesiastes 3:11).
- God exalting at the proper time (1 Peter 5:6).

Discussion Prompts

- Why was the timing of Joseph's exaltation exactly right?
- How does this reframe seasons of delay in our lives?
- What does 1 Peter 5:6 teach about God's timing?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where are you tempted to grow discouraged or to take matters into your own hands because God's timing seems too slow? How can you wait on God's timing with trust rather than frustration?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies God's timing to the student's impatience. We live in a hurry, and God's pace often feels frustratingly slow. The delay tempts us either to discouragement ('God has forgotten me') or to taking matters into our own hands ('I'll make it happen myself').

Help students recognize their temptation. When God's timing is slow, do they grow bitter and give up, or grow restless and grasp control, as Abraham and Sarah did with Hagar? Both responses spring from distrust of God's timing.

Offer the path of trusting patience. Waiting on God is not passive resignation but active trust: continuing to do right, to pray, to be faithful, while leaving the timing to God. 'Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord' (Psalm 27:14).

Invite reflection: where the student is tempted to discouragement or to forcing God's hand because His timing seems slow, and what trusting, faithful waiting would look like in that situation, leaving the timing to the God who is never late.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to discouragement or seizing control when God seems slow.
- Both responses springing from distrust of God's timing.
- Waiting as active trust, not passive resignation.
- Continuing to do right and pray while leaving timing to God (Psalm 27:14).

Discussion Prompts

- Where does God's timing feel frustratingly slow to you?
- Are you tempted toward discouragement or toward forcing things?
- What would trusting, faithful waiting look like there?

Question 5

Student Question:

Long before the palace, Joseph served faithfully and attentively even in prison, caring about two troubled officials when he had troubles of his own (40:6–7). What does this teach us about being faithful and trustworthy in small, hidden, or hard places?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Before his exaltation, Joseph was faithful in a hidden and hard place. In the prison, he noticed the two officials were troubled and cared enough to ask, 'Why are your faces downcast today?' (40:7). A man with every reason to be consumed by his own troubles was attentive to others, faithful and trustworthy even in the dungeon.

Draw out the principle of faithfulness in small and hidden places. Joseph did not wait for the palace to start serving God and others; he served faithfully in slavery and in prison. His character was proven in obscurity long before it was rewarded in public. 'One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much' (Luke 16:10).

Note that God develops and proves us in hidden places. The years in Potiphar's house and the prison were not detours from Joseph's calling but preparation for it. God was forming the character that could be trusted with power. Hidden faithfulness is never wasted.

Help students value the unseen places. Most of life is lived in obscurity, in unnoticed, unrewarded faithfulness. This is not a holding pattern until 'real' service begins; it is the very arena where God forms us and where genuine faithfulness is proved. The God who sees in secret will reward (Matthew 6:4).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithfulness in small, hidden, and hard places (Genesis 40:6–7).
- Character proven in obscurity before being rewarded in public.
- Faithful in little, faithful in much (Luke 16:10).
- Hidden faithfulness as preparation, never wasted (Matthew 6:4).

Discussion Prompts

- How was Joseph faithful even in prison?
- Why does God prove and form us in hidden places?
- Why is faithfulness in obscurity never wasted?

Question 6

Student Question:

How faithfully do you serve God and others in your present situation, even when it is unnoticed, unrewarded, or far from where you hoped to be? Where might God be calling you to greater faithfulness right where you are?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies hidden faithfulness to the student's present situation. Many feel stuck in a place far from where they hoped to be, doing unnoticed, unrewarded work, and are tempted to give less than their best until 'real life' or 'real ministry' begins.

Help students see their present place as Joseph saw his: an arena for faithful service, not a waiting room. Whatever our circumstances, ordinary jobs, hidden responsibilities, hard seasons, we are called to serve God and others well right there. Faithfulness is not reserved for the platform; it is proved in the prison.

Address the temptation to coast. We may tell ourselves our current situation does not matter, that we will get serious when things improve. But it is precisely in the unnoticed present that God forms our character and that our faithfulness is genuine. How we serve when no one is watching reveals who we really are.

Invite a concrete step: where the student is tempted to give less than their best because they are unnoticed or far from where they hoped to be, and one way to serve God and others more faithfully right where they are.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Seeing our present place as an arena for service, not a waiting room.
- Serving God and others well in ordinary and hard circumstances.
- Resisting the temptation to coast until things improve.
- Faithfulness when unnoticed revealing our true character.

Discussion Prompts

- How faithfully do you serve where you are, even when unnoticed?
- Where are you tempted to coast until your situation improves?
- How could you serve God and others better right where you are?

Question 7

Student Question:

Through Joseph's God-given wisdom, Egypt stored up grain and was prepared to preserve many lives through the coming famine (41:33–57). What does this teach us about how God uses people's gifts, wisdom, and positions to provide for and bless others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Joseph's God-given wisdom did not stop at interpreting the dreams; he counseled Pharaoh to act, appointing a wise administrator and storing up grain during the years of plenty (41:33–36). Through his wisdom and stewardship, Egypt was prepared, and many lives, Egyptian and beyond, would be preserved through the famine.

Draw out how God uses people's gifts, wisdom, and positions to bless others. God could have provided for the famine in any number of ways; He chose to work through Joseph's wisdom and Joseph's position. God regularly accomplishes His purposes of provision and blessing through the faithful stewardship of His people.

Note the practical wisdom involved. Joseph's plan was not merely spiritual; it was shrewd, prudent administration, storing in plenty against famine. God's people are called to wisdom and good stewardship in the practical realms of life, not only in the explicitly religious. Diligence, foresight, and good management can be acts of service to God and others.

Help students see the purpose behind position. Joseph's exaltation was not for his own comfort but for the saving of many lives. God gives gifts, resources, and positions not merely for our own benefit but so that we may bless others. Our influence is a stewardship to be used for good.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God using people's gifts, wisdom, and positions to provide for others (Genesis 41:33–57).
- God accomplishing His purposes through faithful stewardship.
- Practical wisdom and good management as service to God and others.
- Position and influence as a stewardship for blessing others, not just ourselves.

Discussion Prompts

- How did God use Joseph's wisdom and position to bless many?
- How does God work through practical wisdom and good stewardship?
- What is the purpose behind the positions God gives us?

Question 8

Student Question:

How are you using the position, resources, abilities, and influence God has given you to serve and bless others, rather than only yourself? Where could you be a better steward of what God has entrusted to you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the matter of stewardship into the student's life. Each of us has been given some combination of position, resources, abilities, and influence, and the question is whether we use them only for ourselves or to serve and bless others.

Help students take inventory. What has God entrusted to them, a job, a skill, money, a platform, relationships, authority in a family or workplace? These are not merely personal possessions but stewardships, given by God and to be used for His purposes and others' good.

Challenge the default of self-interest. Our natural tendency is to use what we have primarily for our own comfort and advancement. Joseph's example, and the whole biblical ethic of stewardship, calls us to a larger purpose: to leverage what God has given us for the blessing of others. 'As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another' (1 Peter 4:10).

Invite a concrete step: one specific way the student could use a position, resource, ability, or influence God has given them to serve and bless others, becoming a better steward of what has been entrusted to them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing what God has entrusted to us as stewardship.
- Using position, resources, abilities, and influence to bless others.
- Resisting the default of self-interest.
- Using our gifts to serve one another (1 Peter 4:10).

Discussion Prompts

- What position, resources, or abilities has God entrusted to you?
- Are you using them mainly for yourself or to bless others?
- What is one way to be a better steward this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Looking at the whole sweep, God sovereignly used dreams, gifts, timing, and even a forgotten promise to bring Joseph from the pit to the palace at exactly the moment needed to save many lives, and Joseph named his sons for God turning his affliction into fruitfulness (41:51–52). What does this teach us about trusting God's providence and timing, even in delays and suffering we do not understand (compare Romans 8:28)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point, where the whole sweep of Joseph's rise displays the providence of God. Step back and see the orchestration: God gave the officials dreams; God gave Joseph the gift of interpretation; God allowed the cupbearer to forget, so that the timing would be right; God gave Pharaoh dreams that no one else could interpret; God prompted the cupbearer's memory at the crucial moment; God gave Joseph wisdom to counsel and Pharaoh favor to exalt him. Every thread, including the painful delays and the forgotten promise, was woven by a sovereign hand toward one end: placing Joseph where he could save many lives.

Make the providence explicit by looking ahead. Joseph himself will later declare the meaning of it all: 'God sent me before you to preserve life' (45:5), and 'God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive' (50:20). The thirteen hard years, the betrayal, the slavery, the false accusation, the prison, the delay, all of it was God's providence at work to save Jacob's family, and many nations, from famine, and to preserve the line of promise toward the Messiah.

Teach the comfort and the challenge of this for the believer. The comfort: God is sovereignly at work in our delays, disappointments, and sufferings, weaving them toward purposes we cannot yet see. 'We know that for those who love God all things work together for good' (Romans 8:28). The challenge: this calls us to trust God's providence and timing even when we do not understand, refusing both bitterness and panic, believing that the same God who guided Joseph guides us.

Draw out the redemption of suffering in the naming of Joseph's sons. He named the first Manasseh, 'for God has made me forget all my hardship,' and the second Ephraim, 'for God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction' (41:51-52). God did not merely rescue Joseph from his suffering; He redeemed it, turning the place of affliction into a place of fruitfulness. This is God's way: not always removing our hardships, but bringing fruit and even healing out of them.

Finally, lift their eyes to Christ, whom Joseph foreshadows. The pattern of humiliation before exaltation, of suffering that saves many, reaches its fulfillment in Jesus, who was humbled to death and then exalted to the highest place, and whose suffering, by God's providence, accomplished the salvation of the world (Philippians 2:8-11; Acts 2:23). The God who worked all things for good in Joseph's life worked the greatest good of all through the cross. We can trust the providence of such a God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereign orchestration of every detail to place Joseph where he could save many (Genesis 41).
- The meaning revealed: 'God sent me to preserve life' (45:5; 50:20).
- God's providence at work in our delays, disappointments, and sufferings (Romans 8:28).
- Trusting God's providence and timing without understanding, refusing bitterness and panic.

- God redeeming suffering, turning affliction into fruitfulness (Genesis 41:51–52).
- Joseph foreshadowing Christ: humiliation before exaltation, suffering that saves many (Philippians 2:8–11; Acts 2:23).

Discussion Prompts

- How do you see God's providence orchestrating every detail of Joseph's rise?
- How does Joseph's later explanation (45:5; 50:20) reveal the purpose of it all?
- How does Joseph's story, and ultimately Christ's, help you trust God's providence in your own delays and sufferings?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Name one specific way God is calling you to give Him the glory, to wait on His timing, to be faithful where you are, and to trust His providence over your life.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the lesson into one resolve. We have seen humility that gives God the glory, trust in God's timing, faithfulness in hidden places, stewardship for others' good, and the providence of God working through every delay and difficulty. The question is what God is forming in this student.

Press for the specific. For one it is giving God the glory rather than taking credit; for another, trusting God's timing in a long wait; for another, faithfulness in an obscure place; for another, stewarding their gifts for others; for another, trusting God's providence over a painful season.

Close with the God whose providence never fails. The same patient, sovereign hand that brought Joseph from the pit to the palace, never early, never late, is at work in our lives, and worked the greatest good through the cross of Christ. To be formed by this passage is to give God the glory, wait on His timing, serve faithfully where we are, and trust His providence, believing that He is weaving even our hardest days into His good and saving purposes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Giving God the glory rather than taking credit.
- Trusting God's timing and being faithful in hidden places.
- Stewarding our gifts and positions for others.
- Trusting God's providence over our whole lives.

Discussion Prompts

- Which call is God pressing on you: humility, patience, faithfulness, or stewardship?

- Where do you most need to trust God's providence and timing?
- How does Joseph's story, fulfilled in Christ, strengthen that trust?