

Journey INTO THE Bible

Leader's Guide

Genesis, Part Two: Lesson Five

Genesis 38—41

Suggestion: When you are about to begin the Bible study, it is recommended you open with a prayer. You may use the one provided or another that connects with some aspect of the lesson, for instance, God's hidden but real presence in Genesis 41.

Opening Prayer

Gracious and loving God, you are indeed our God of surprises. You seem at times to be completely absent from the events in our lives, one who is aloof and not interested in our problems. Yet in Genesis 41 we learn that you are very much on the scene, enabling Joseph to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. However, you do so in a hidden way. We ask you to manifest such a presence in our concerns and worries. When you are present, grace truly abounds. We pledge ourselves to reflect your presence by providing hope and courage for everything that oppresses and depresses our sisters and brothers. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Suggestion: Welcome new and returning participants and make announcements. Afterwards, read aloud "Setting the Stage."

Setting the Stage

In Genesis 38, we have a bizarre passage that does not seem to fit within the contours of the Joseph story. As we look a bit more closely, we can see how it not only fits the Joseph story, but actually advances its plot. Given the death of his first two sons, Judah is not anxious to give his third son to Tamar according to the terms of the levirate marriage. Anxious to continue his family, Judah eventually has sex with Tamar disguised as a prostitute. When Judah learns by means of his pledges that he is the father, he solemnly announces that Tamar is righteous, not he. She has carried out God's plan for propagating his line. Judah has failed to do God's will by not giving his son, Shelah, to Tamar. God has changed something evil (in-

cest) into something good (the continuation of his line). Judah seems to be changing here. Will he be able to see that God can convert the collective sin of the brothers concerning Joseph and change it into something good (the survival and future of Jacob's family)?

In Genesis 39—41, we have the account of Joseph's meteoric rise to fame and fortune. It forms a key component in the Joseph story, explaining how Joseph gained such power and prestige in Egypt and thus was in a position to help his family survive. In the first episode (39:1-23), Joseph is successful as the Egyptian's overseer until his wife attempts to seduce him. Her accusation lands him in prison, where he again builds his career as assistant to the head jailer. In the second episode (40:1-23), he successfully interprets the dreams of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. Unfortunately, the chief cupbearer, once restored to his former position, forgets about Joseph. In the third episode (41:1-57), Pharaoh has life-threatening dreams that demand expert interpretation. The head cupbearer remembers Joseph, who subsequently interprets both dreams for Pharaoh. Throughout this chapter, it is God, not Joseph or Pharaoh, who commands center stage. God directs and controls the dreams. Satisfied with Joseph's efficiency, Pharaoh installs Joseph in the new position of overseeing the plan for the years of plenty and famine. Joseph also bears a new name and gains a wife from the family of Potiphera, priest of On. He begins to exercise his new authority. We learn that he has two sons whose names, while they suggest weal and not woe, also raise the question of Joseph's attitude towards his brothers. Is reconciliation really possible?

Text (Genesis 38:1-30)

Suggestion: Because of length, you may wish to use only verses 15-26, dividing them among five readers: (1) narrator: (2) Judah (38:16a, 17a, 18a, 23, 24b, 26); (3) Tamar (38:16b, 17b, 18b, 25b); (4) Hirah the Adullamite (38:21a, 22); (5) townspeople (38:21b, 24a).

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Think and Talk Questions

1. What are some of the links between Genesis 38 and the Joseph story?
2. Do you think that Judah's admission of Tamar's righteousness is the beginning of his change of attitude? What do you think of Tamar's bold initiative?

Additional Questions

1. Do you think that recognition plays a significant role in the Joseph story? Refer to three key non-recognition/recognition passages. In the first set of passages, Judah does not recognize his daughter-in-law who is disguised as a prostitute (38:15); Joseph recognizes his brothers but they do not recognize him (42:7-8). In the second set of passages, Jacob recognizes Joseph's robe (37:33); Judah recognizes his signet ring, cord, and staff (38:26). In the third set of passages, Jacob initially recognized his brothers (42:7); later he discloses his identity to the unsuspecting brothers (45:3-4).
2. Are you convinced that Judah is beginning to change his attitude because of Tamar's righteousness and thus beginning to hope that somehow God can turn around the brothers' collective sin? Since Genesis 38:26 marks a turning point in Judah's attitude, you may point to the following passages: 43:8-9—Judah's willingness to hold himself accountable if anything should happen to Benjamin on the return to Egypt; 44:18-34—Judah appears quite transformed as compared to his earlier part in the collective sin. Judah is even willing to become Joseph's slave in place of Benjamin.

Break

Text (Genesis 39:1-41:57)

Suggestion: Because of length, you may wish to limit the readings to Genesis 41:37-45, dividing it among three readers: (1) narrator; (2) Pharaoh (41:38-41, 44); (3) people (41:43b).

Think and Talk Questions

1. How does Genesis 39—41 fit into the overall plan of the Joseph story? What kind of a divine presence

does "The Lord was with Joseph" (39:2, 3, 21, 23) suggest?

2. How does the divine interpretation of dreams in Genesis 41 control the entire flow of events?

Additional Questions

1. How does God's hidden presence in Genesis 39—41 contrast with earlier divine appearances? Note divine appearances such as the Lord God's speech to the couple and the talking snake in Genesis 3; the Lord's comments about the builders at Babel in Genesis 11:6-7; the Lord's dialogue with Abraham in Genesis 15:1-5; the Lord's conversation with Abraham about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:17-32.
2. What do you think of dreams as a form of divine communication? Refer to the dreams of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker in Genesis 40:1-8 and Pharaoh's dreams in Genesis 41:1-8; also refer to Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:10-22.

Wrapping Up

When there are about twenty minutes left, bring the discussion to a close. Participants may wish to briefly share something they have learned.

Closing Prayer

A passage from Wisdom of Solomon might be appropriate. Lady Wisdom assists God at creation according to Proverbs 8:22-31. However, the author of Wisdom 10:13-14 sees her in a salvific role—Wisdom saves! Wisdom is a divine gift that dispenses life and is capable of directing history. The New Revised Standard Version reads:

"When a righteous man (Joseph) was sold, wisdom did not desert him, but delivered him from sin. She descended with him into the dungeon, and when he was in prison she did not leave him, until she brought him the scepter of a kingdom and authority over his masters. Those who accused him she showed to be false, and she gave him everlasting honor."

Suggestion: Remind everyone about the next meeting; encourage them to read and work through Lesson Six for the next Bible study session.