

Joseph, Part 1 of 2: From Canaan to Egypt

by Joelee Chamberlain

At other times I've told you lots of Bible stories, haven't I? Some of them have been about Abraham and his son Isaac and about Isaac's son Jacob. We read about them in the book of Genesis, don't we? Well, today I thought I'd tell you more about Jacob's son Joseph. Would you like that?

But the Bible tells us so much about Joseph that it would take too long to tell you all of it at one time, so I'm going to have to make it into two stories. I'll tell you part of it now and then I'll finish it up at another time. Will that be all right? I hope so.

Okay, another time when I told you about Joseph's father Jacob, I told you that Jacob had loved his cousin Rachel very much and had wanted to marry her. But Rachel's father, Laban, had tricked Jacob and given him Rachel's older sister Leah to marry instead. Then later Laban let Jacob marry Rachel, too. In those days sometimes men had more than one wife, though that wasn't the way that God had it when He made Adam and Eve, was it?

Anyway, Jacob ended up with four wives, because Leah and Rachel had told him to marry their handmaids, too, so that they could have more children for them. So eventually Jacob had 12 sons and 1 daughter. But of those 12 sons, only 2 of them were Rachel's sons. That's all sort of confusing, isn't it?! But the important thing to remember today in our story from all of that is that Jacob loved Rachel and her sons the most, more than his other wives and their sons. And this was going to lead to trouble.

Yes, since Jacob loved Rachel so much, he loved Rachel's two sons, especially her first son Joseph even more than he loved his other ten sons. (Parents should love all of their children the same, shouldn't they?) Rachel's first son was Joseph, and then several years later she had her second son, Benjamin. And then Joseph's mother Rachel died, which was very sad.

But now let's talk about Joseph. When Joseph was born, his father Jacob had been living near Rachel and Leah's father Laban. Then when Joseph was growing up, Jacob left Rachel's father Laban and took his family down to live in the land of Canaan near Jacob's father Isaac. So Isaac got to know his 12 grandsons, didn't he?

Well, one day when Joseph was 17 years old, he was helping his brothers take care of the sheep, and two of his brothers did something they shouldn't have done. The Bible doesn't tell us what they did, but Joseph told his father Jacob about it.

Now, as I said before, Jacob loved Joseph more than all of his other children. And Jacob gave Joseph a special coat. Some people think that this coat meant that Joseph was to be the leader of all of his brothers someday, but I'm not sure. At any rate, it was something special for Joseph, and this made his brothers jealous of him. (Benjamin, Rachel's other son, was a lot

younger, so I don't think that includes Benjamin.) The other brothers began to hate Joseph, because they saw that their father loved Joseph more than he loved them. And the brothers didn't talk nicely to Joseph.

Well, one night Joseph had a dream, and he told his brothers the dream. Joseph said, "Please listen to the dream I had."

He said, "I dreamed that we were out in the field tying up the cut grain into sheaves. Then the sheaf of grain that I had tied up stood straight up, and then, look, the sheaves you had tied up all stood around and bowed to my sheaf."

Well, his brothers just said to Joseph, "Huh! Are you going to rule over us?!" And they hated him more than ever because of the dream and because he had told them about it.

Then another night Joseph had another dream, and this time he told both his brothers and his father about it. Joseph said to them, "Look, I had another dream. And in it the sun and the moon and the eleven stars all bowed to me."

Then his father Jacob sort of scolded Joseph. Jacob said to him, "What kind of a dream did you have!?! Are I and your mother and your brothers really going to come and bow ourselves down to the earth to you?!" (Joseph's own mother was dead by then, but Leah was Joseph's stepmother, remember.)

And Joseph's brothers were even more jealous of Joseph, but his father Jacob remembered the dream. Now, what they didn't realize was that the Lord had given these special dreams to Joseph as prophecies, to tell about things that would really happen someday. But we'll talk more about that later.

Well, Jacob had lots of sheep and goats, and since animals eat the food around them, they have to be moved from place to place, to different pastures. And one day Joseph's brothers were feeding Jacob's flocks of animals. And they took the flocks quite a ways away to find fresh pastures. And the place where they were taking the flocks this time was a place where some years before they had had some trouble.

Now, Jacob had kept Joseph home. (And Benjamin would have been home, too, as he was younger.) Then Jacob called Joseph to him and said, "Your brothers have gone quite a ways away to feed the flocks. I'm going to send you to them."

Joseph said, "I'm here." Joseph meant that he was listening and ready to do what his father said.

Jacob said, "Please go and see if all is going well with your brothers and with the flocks. Then come back and tell me."

So off Joseph went. He was wearing his special coat. And it was a long ways away. It probably took him 2 or so days to get there. But when he got there, he couldn't find his brothers nor the flocks, and he was wandering around looking for them when a man found him and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

Joseph said, "I'm looking for my brothers. Please tell me where they are feeding the flocks."

The man said, "Oh, they've left here. I heard them saying they were going to another place." And he told Joseph the name of the place. This place was several hour's walk away, so Joseph started off.

Well, Joseph was getting near the place the man had told him about, and he saw his brothers with the flocks. But his brothers had seen him coming, and, remember, they were jealous of Joseph and hated him. And they remembered the dreams he had told them, so they said to each other, "Huh! Here comes that dreamer! Let's kill him and throw his body into some pit. We'll just say that some evil beast had eaten him. Then we'll see about those dreams of his!"

But Reuben, his very oldest brother, heard what they were saying, so he said to the others, "Oh, let's not shed his blood. Let's just throw him into this pit here but not actually hurt him ourselves." You see, Reuben was saying this to keep them from hurting Joseph, and then he was planning to come back later and get Joseph and take him back to their father Jacob. But the others didn't know what Reuben had planned. They just figured that Joseph would eventually die if left in that pit with no food or water.

Well, when Joseph got to where his brothers were, they grabbed him and took off his special coat that he was wearing. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty and had no water in it. And then they sat down to eat.

Well, Reuben went off somewhere else for a while. And while he was gone and as the others were eating, the other brothers looked up and saw a caravan, a line of camels. These camels belonged to some merchants who were taking expensive spices down to sell in Egypt.

Then Judah, one of the brothers said to the others, "What will we get out of it if we just kill our brother and don't let anyone know it?"

Judah said, "Let's sell him as a slave to these merchants who are coming by. That way we won't have killed him. After all, he is our brother!"

The other brothers agreed with Judah, so as the merchants and their camels were coming along, the brothers pulled Joseph up out of the pit and sold him to the merchants to be taken to Egypt for them to sell as a slave! Can you imagine that?! How terrible!! And Joseph begged them to be good to him, but they didn't pay any attention to him. And the brothers got 20 pieces of silver for Joseph. That would be 2 pieces of silver for each of them.

Well, as I said, Reuben wasn't there when this was going on. But Reuben came back to the pit -- and he found that Joseph was gone! He was very upset. He tore his clothes, which was a way that people had then of showing how unhappy they were. And he went to the other 9 brothers and said, "He's not there! What will I do!!"

Now, the brothers knew that they would have to tell their father something. So since they still had Joseph's special coat, they took a little goat and killed it. Then they took Joseph's special coat, and they dipped the coat in the goat's blood, getting it all bloody. And then they sent the bloody coat back to their father Jacob and said, "We found this. Is this Joseph's coat?"

Well, their father Jacob saw Joseph's special coat all covered with blood, and he said, "Oh!! This is my son's coat! Some bad wild animal has eaten him! Joseph is dead!"

And Jacob tore his clothes to show how very unhappy he was, and he put just old clothes on and he cried and he mourned, was very, very unhappy about Joseph, for a long time, for many days.

Then all of the brothers and their wives all tried to comfort their father Jacob, but he wouldn't feel better. He just cried some more and said, "I'll mourn and be very unhappy about Joseph all of my life until I die!" I wonder how the bad brothers felt then!

But what was happening to poor Joseph? Well, the merchants kept travelling with their caravan of camels until they finally got to Egypt. And there in far away Egypt they sold Joseph to a man to be a slave. The man who bought Joseph was named Potiphar. Potiphar was an important man. He was some sort of officer of Pharaoh, the king.

But the Lord hadn't forgotten Joseph. In fact, the Lord had a plan for Joseph, and the Lord was with Joseph down there in Egypt, and whatever Joseph did as he worked as a slave went very well. Well, Potiphar realized that the Lord was with Joseph and saw that everything Joseph did as he worked went very well. So Potiphar liked Joseph and was kind to him, and Potiphar made Joseph to be overseer in his house. Joseph was the head slave. Joseph took care of everything that Potiphar had. And Potiphar knew that Joseph would take very good care of things, and that he wouldn't have to worry about household matters himself.

Now, we can tell from the ages given in the Bible that sometime during this time back in the land of Canaan, Joseph's grandfather Isaac died, though, of course, Joseph didn't know about it. But his father Jacob and Jacob's twin brother Esau buried their father Isaac there in Canaan in the cave of Machpelah where their grandfather Abraham and his wife Sarah and Isaac's wife Rebekah were all buried.

But let's get back to Joseph now. We'd just said that he was a trusted slave in Egypt, hadn't we?

But Joseph's master Potiphar had a wife who wasn't very nice. This wife wanted Joseph to do some bad things. She'd say, "Come on, Joseph. Do such and such."

Of course, Joseph didn't want to do bad things, so he said to her, "No. Why, my master has let me take care of everything he has. He trusts me. He has made me the most important slave in this house. I couldn't do bad things to him or sin against God that way."

But Potiphar's wife kept after him. (Shame on her!) But Joseph didn't pay any attention to her and tried not even to be with her. Finally, though, one day Potiphar's wife got mad at Joseph because he wouldn't do anything bad. So she started yelling and shouting and she said to some of the other slaves, "Oh, that Hebrew slave was trying to hurt me! He would have, too, except I shouted to you!" She was a liar, wasn't she?

And she waited until her husband Potiphar got home, and she told him the same lie, "That Hebrew slave Joseph that you brought home here tried to hurt me! But I started shouting, so he ran out of the house!"

Well, Potiphar got mad. And he had Joseph put in prison, the same prison where the king's prisoners were kept. But though no one knew it, the Lord was going to use this for Joseph's good. You see, the Lord was going to teach Joseph how to run all sorts of things and was going to make Joseph very important in Egypt! But I'm getting ahead of the story, aren't I?!

So Joseph was in the prison, but the Lord was still with him. And the man who ran the prison, the keeper of the prison, liked Joseph. And the keeper of the prison let Joseph run the whole prison! And everything Joseph did in the prison went very well.

Well, after a while something happened so that Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, got mad at his head butler and his head baker, and he had them put into the prison where Joseph was taking care of everything. And the head guard had Joseph take care of them, too.

After a while the head butler and the head baker each had a very disturbing dream, and when Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they both looked very sad. Joseph asked them, "Why do you look so sad today?"

They said to Joseph, "We each had a dream, but there is no one to tell us what it means."

Joseph said to them, "Only God can tell what dreams mean. Please tell me what your dreams were."

You see, some way Joseph knew that God would let him know what the dreams meant. Usually dreams are just dreams. But once in a while the Lord would give dreams to people that were prophecies.

So the head butler told his dream first. He said, "I dreamed that I saw a vine. The vine

had 3 branches. And it got buds on it and then flowers and then clusters of ripe grapes. I had Pharaoh's cup in my hand, and I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and then I gave the cup to Pharaoh."

Joseph said to the head butler, "This is what the dream means. The 3 branches are 3 days. In 3 days Pharaoh will put you back to being his head butler again, and you'll give him his cup again just as you used to do."

Then Joseph said to him, "When you have your job back, please be kind to me and remember me and tell Pharaoh about me so that I can get out of prison, too. You see, I was stolen away from my land and sold as a slave, and I've done nothing wrong that I should be in prison."

Well, the head baker saw that the head butler's dream meant something good, so he told his dream to Joseph, too. He said, "I had a dream, too. In it I was carrying 3 white baskets on my head. In the top basket were all different kinds of baked things for Pharaoh. And the birds were eating the baked things."

Joseph said to the head baker, "This is what your dream means. The 3 baskets are 3 days. In 3 days Pharaoh is going to have you killed."

Do you think that these things that Joseph said the dreams meant would actually happen? Yes, they did! God had let Joseph know what the dreams meant. And three days later was Pharaoh's birthday, and he had a big feast to celebrate it. And Pharaoh took both the head butler and the head baker out of prison. He let the head butler be the head butler again to bring him things to drink. But he had the head baker killed. Just as Joseph had said.

But do you think the head butler told the king about Joseph right away? No. The head butler forgot about Joseph.

Well, after 2 whole years, one night Pharaoh had a dream. It was a very disturbing dream, and he woke up from it. Then he went back to sleep, and he had another disturbing dream. He woke up from that bad dream, too. In the morning, Pharaoh was all upset about his two dreams, and he called all of his wise men together and told them the dreams, but none of them could tell the king what his dreams had meant.

Then the head butler remembered Joseph, who had told him what his dream had meant, and he spoke up and said to the king, "Today I remember something I should have remembered before! Once you were angry with the head baker and myself, and you had us put in prison. While we were there, we each had a dream, and there was a Hebrew slave there that we told the dreams to, and he told each of us what the dreams meant, and what he said came true."

So Pharaoh sent word to the prison to have Joseph brought to him. They quickly took Joseph out of the prison, and Joseph quickly shaved and changed his clothes and went to the

king. Joseph was 30 years old by then.

Pharaoh the king said, "I've dreamed something, and no one can tell me what it means. But I've heard that you can understand a dream and tell what it means."

Well, Joseph knew that he himself couldn't do this, that it was only because God would let him know what they meant. So Joseph said to the king, "I can't do it myself, but God will give you a good answer."

So Pharaoh told Joseph his two dreams. He said, "In my dream, I stood upon the bank of the river." (That would be the big Nile River that brings water to Egypt.)

Pharaoh said, "And, look, seven cows came up out of the river. They were nice, fat cows, and they began eating in a meadow there. Then, look, here came 7 other cows after them. But these were ugly, skinny cows. I've never seen such ugly cows like these anywhere in Egypt. And the ugly, skinny cows ate up the first cows, the nice, fat cows. But when the skinny cows had eaten them, they were still just as skinny as before. And then I woke up."

The king then said, "And then I had another dream, and look, in this dream there were 7 nice fat heads of grain all growing on one stock. Then I saw 7 other heads of grain, all thin and withered, looking as if a hot east wind had been blasting on them. And the thin heads of grain ate up the 7 nice fat heads of grain."

Pharaoh said, "I've told this dream to my wise men, but none of them could tell me what it means."

The Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The two dreams both mean the same thing. God has shown you what He is going to do very soon."

Joseph said, "The seven fat cows mean seven years. And the seven good heads of grain mean seven years. They both mean the same thing. And then the seven ugly, skinny cows that came up after the good cows mean seven more years. And the seven thin, withered heads of grain mean seven more years, years of famine." (Famine means when no food grows.)

Joseph said to the king, "This is what God is going to do very soon, and he has told you about it. Now see, there will be seven years coming when lots and lots of food will grow all over the land of Egypt. After that, there will be seven years of famine, where no food will grow for seven years. The famine will be so bad that people will just forget all about the earlier seven years of more than plenty of food. It will be a terrible famine."

Joseph said, "You had the two dreams that meant the same thing, because God is really going to have this happen, and God will have it happen very soon."

Remember, God was letting Joseph know what the dreams meant. Joseph wouldn't have

know all of this by himself. And God had also given Joseph wisdom so that Joseph had some good advice for King Pharaoh. So Joseph said to the king, "Now, king, why don't you have some very wise man be set over the land of Egypt. And let this wise man pick out other men to be overseers over the land of Egypt. And then during the seven years of plenty of grain, when there is more grain than is needed, have these wise men collect a fifth of the grain that is grown and save this extra grain in the cities. Then when the seven years of famine come, there will still be food here in Egypt, and the people won't die from hunger."

Well, Pharaoh thought what Joseph told him was a good idea. And all of Pharaoh's officers thought it was a good idea, too. And Pharaoh said to all of his officers, "Can we find a better man than this man, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?" After all, Joseph had been able to tell the king what the dreams meant when no one else could, and he'd had good advice for him as well!

And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you these things, there is no one so understanding and wise as you are. So you are going to take charge of everything. All the people will do what you say. Only I, as king, will be greater than you."

And Pharaoh took off his own special ring and put it on Joseph's hand. This ring was something that could be used in signing orders, so that anything Joseph signed would be as if the king had signed it. And Pharaoh had Joseph dressed in fine clothes and put a gold chain around his neck. These were special clothes and a chain that only very important people wore. And Pharaoh had Joseph ride in the second chariot. The king would have the first chariot, and Joseph would have the second chariot. Now, the streets there were narrow, so when a man went out in his chariot, someone would run ahead of him and shout for the people on the street to get out of the way. But in Joseph's case, the people were not only to get out of the way, they were also to bow down to the ground!

And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I, Pharaoh, am the king. But no one can do anything in Egypt now unless you say so!"

So here was Joseph, the one who had been sold as a slave, had been a slave, and had been in prison! And he had learned how to take care of things while he was a slave and while he was in prison. And now he was the second most important man in the whole big land of Egypt!! God had a plan and was working things out for Joseph, wasn't He?!

And Pharaoh gave Joseph a wife whose father was important, too. And Joseph and his wife had two sons. And Joseph named his sons Manasseh and Ephraim.

Well, Joseph got busy and did what he was supposed to do. He went all over Egypt and checked things out. And the seven years of plenty came, and lots and lots and lots of grain grew, way more than could be used then. And Joseph gathered all of the extra grain together and stored it up in storehouses.

And then, just as God had shown Joseph and then Joseph had told Pharaoh, after the seven years of plenty, the seven years started when no grain at all grew. And after a while the people got hungry, and they cried out to Pharaoh. And Pharaoh told all of the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph and do what he tells you."

And then Joseph began opening the storehouses where he had saved all that extra grain, and the Egyptians bought grain from him. You see, the main food for people then was bread, and bread is made from grain, isn't it? Of course, Joseph didn't keep the money for himself; the money went to the king, to Pharaoh.

And this famine was so bad that grain didn't grow in the countries around Egypt, either. And they heard in these other countries that there was grain in Egypt, so people from all over went down to Egypt to buy grain.

And guess what was one of the countries that was having a famine at this time? It was the land of Canaan. And who do we know who lived in Canaan at that time? Yes. Joseph's father Jacob and Joseph's brothers and their families lived in Canaan! His brothers were all grown up too, just like Joseph was. And they were all married and had children of their own. Two of them even had grandchildren. And because of the famine, Jacob and his big family didn't have any grain, either.

So what are they going to do? Will they actually go down to Egypt to buy grain? If they do, will they see their brother Joseph whom they had sold as a slave into Egypt about 20 years before? Would they recognize the very important man as their brother? Will Joseph recognize his brothers? Will Jacob find out that Joseph is still alive? Also, what about the dreams that Joseph had had back in Canaan when he was younger, about his family bowing to him? Will that really happen? Well, the next time I'll finish up the story of Joseph, and I'll answer all of those questions! I think you will like the answers! I'm sorry we have to stop here, but you can see that the life of Joseph is a very long story!

I really enjoy all of these true stories from the Bible, don't you? But the best thing the Bible tells us is how we can someday be able to be with the Lord God forever, isn't it? And how can we do that? Yes, God loves us so much that Jesus came to earth and died for our sins and then rose from the dead, was alive again and is still alive in heaven. And all we have to do is to trust Jesus to save us, and He will, and then someday we can go be with God forever. He said He would, and God always keeps His promises, doesn't He?