

# Joseph, Master of Dreams



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Genesis 37; Matt. 20:26, 27; Acts 7:9; Genesis 38; Genesis 39; Gen. 40:1–41:36.*

**Memory Text:** “Then they said to one another, ‘Look, this dreamer is coming!’ ” (*Genesis 37:19, NKJV*).

The story of Joseph (*Genesis 37–50*) covers the last section of the book of Genesis, from his first dreams in Canaan (*Gen. 37:1–11*) to his death in Egypt (*Gen. 50:26*). In fact, Joseph occupies more space in the book of Genesis than does any other patriarch. Although Joseph is just one of Jacob's sons, he is presented in Genesis as a great patriarch, like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

As we will see, too, the life of Joseph highlights two important theological truths: first, God fulfills His promises; second, God can turn evil into good.

In this week's study, we will focus on the early life of Joseph. He is Jacob's favorite son, who is ironically nicknamed *ba'al hakhalomot*, the “dreamer” (*Gen. 37:19*), which means literally “master of dreams,” implying that he is an expert of dreams. This title fits him very well, because he not only receives, understands, and interprets prophetic dreams, but he also fulfills them in his life, as well.

In these chapters, we will see, again, that God's providence is affirmed, despite the evil and wickedness of the human heart.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 11.

## Family Troubles

Jacob has, at last, settled in the land. While Isaac was only “a stranger,” the text also says that Jacob “dwelt in the land” (*Gen. 37:1*). Yet, it was then, as he was settling into the land, that the troubles began, this time from inside the family. The controversy does not concern the possession of the land or the use of a well; it is, mainly, spiritual.

**Read Genesis 37:1–11. What family dynamic predisposed Joseph’s brothers to hate him so much?**

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From the very beginning, we understand that Joseph, the son of Jacob’s old age (*Gen. 37:3*), enjoyed a special relationship with his father, who “loved him more than all his brothers” (*Gen. 37:4, NKJV*). Jacob even went so far as to make Joseph “a tunic of many colors” (*Gen. 37:3, NKJV*), a prince’s garment (*2 Sam. 13:18*), an indication of Jacob’s secret intention to elevate Joseph, Rachel’s first son, to the status of firstborn.

The future will, indeed, confirm Jacob’s wishes because Joseph eventually will receive the rights of the firstborn (*1 Chron. 5:2*). No wonder, then, that Joseph’s brothers hated him so much and could not even engage in peaceful conversations with him (*Gen. 37:4*).

Furthermore, Joseph would bring bad reports to his father about any reprehensible behavior from his brothers (*Gen. 37:2*). No one likes a snitch.

So, when Joseph shared his dreams, suggesting that God would put him in a higher position and that they, his brothers, would bow before him, they hated him even more. The genuine prophetic character of the dreams was even ratified by the fact that they are repeated (*see Gen. 41:32*). Although Jacob openly rebuked his son (*Gen. 37:10*), he kept this incident in his mind, meditating on its meaning and waiting for its fulfillment (*Gen. 37:11*). The implication is that, perhaps, deep down he thought there might be something to these dreams after all. He was right, however much he couldn’t know it at the time.

**Read Matthew 20:26, 27. What crucial principle is revealed here, and how can we learn to manifest in our own lives what it teaches?**

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## The Attack on Joseph

However horrible the events that were to follow, they're not hard to comprehend. To be in that close proximity to, and even to be related to, someone whom you hated would inevitably lead, sooner or later, only to trouble.

And it did.

**Read** Genesis 37:12–36. What does this teach us about how dangerous and evil unregenerate hearts can be and what they can lead any one of us to do?

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The brothers hate Joseph because they are jealous of God's favor (*Acts* 7:9), a favor that will be confirmed at each step in the next course of events. When Joseph has lost his way, a man finds him and guides him (*Gen.* 37:15). When Joseph's brothers plot to kill him, Reuben intervenes and suggests that he be thrown into a pit instead (*Gen.* 37:20–22).

It's hard to imagine the kind of hatred expressed here, especially for someone of their own household. How could these young men have done something so cruel? Did they not think, even for a few moments, about how this would impact their own father? Whatever resentment they might have had toward their father because he favored Joseph, to do this to one of his children was, truly, despicable. What a powerful manifestation of just how evil human beings can be.

“But some of them [the brothers] were ill at ease; they did not feel the satisfaction they had anticipated from their revenge. Soon a company of travelers was seen approaching. It was a caravan of Ishmaelites from beyond Jordan, on their way to Egypt with spices and other merchandise. Judah now proposed to sell their brother to these heathen traders instead of leaving him to die. While he would be effectually put out of their way, they would remain clear of his blood.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 211.

After they cast him into the pit, planning to kill him later, a caravan passes, and Judah proposes to his brothers to sell Joseph to them (*Gen.* 37:26, 27). After Joseph is sold to the Midianites (*Gen.* 37:28), the Midianites sell him to someone in Egypt (*Gen.* 37:36), thus anticipating his future glory.

**Why is it so important to seek God's power in order to change bad traits of character before they can manifest themselves in acts that, at one point in your life, you would never have imagined yourself doing?**

## Judah and Tamar

The story of Tamar is not out of place here. This incident follows chronologically the sale of Joseph in Egypt (*Gen. 38:1*), and it is consistent with the fact that Judah has just left his brothers, which points to his disagreement with them. In addition, the text shares a number of common words and motifs with the preceding chapter, and it carries the same theological lesson: an evil act will be turned into a positive event linked to salvation.

**Read Genesis 38. Compare Judah’s behavior with that of the Canaanite Tamar. Who of the two is more righteous, and why?**

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Judah finds a Canaanite wife (*Gen. 38:2*) with whom he has three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah gives the Canaanite Tamar as wife to Er, his firstborn, in order to ensure proper genealogy. When Er and Onan are killed by God because of their wickedness, Judah promises his last son, Shelah, to Tamar.

When, after some time, Judah seems to have forgotten his promise, as he goes to comfort himself after the death of his wife, Tamar decides to play the prostitute in order to force him to fulfill his promise. Because Judah has no cash to pay the prostitute, whom he does not recognize, he promises to send her, later, a goat from his flock.

Tamar requires that, in the meantime, he give her his signet and cord and his staff as an immediate guarantee of payment. Tamar will get pregnant from this unique encounter. When, later, accused of playing the harlot, she will show to the accuser, Judah, his signet and cord and his staff. Judah understands and apologizes.

The conclusion of this sordid story is the birth of Perez, meaning “breaking through,” who, like Jacob, is born second, and becomes first, and is named in salvation history as the ancestor of David (*Ruth 4:18–22*), and ultimately of Jesus Christ (*Matt. 1:3*). As for Tamar, she is the first of the four women—followed by Rahab (*Matt. 1:5*), Ruth (*Matt. 1:5, 6*), and the wife of Uriah (*Matt. 1:6*)—who genealogically preceded Mary, the mother of Jesus (*Matt. 1:16*).

One lesson we can take from this story: just as God saved Tamar through His grace, transforming evil into good, so will He save His people through the cross of Jesus. And in the case of Joseph, He will turn his troubles into the salvation of Jacob and his sons.

## Joseph, a Slave in Egypt

We now pick up the flow of Joseph's stories, which have been "interrupted" by the Tamar incident. Joseph is now working as a slave for the "captain of the guard," who is in charge of the prison for royal officials (*Gen. 40:3, 4; Gen. 41:10–12*).

**Read Genesis 39.** In light of the example of Joseph's working as a manager under Potiphar, what are the factors that led to such success?

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Almost immediately, Joseph was characterized as a man of success (*Gen. 39:2, 3*). He was so good, and his master so trusted him that "all that he had he put into his hand," and Potiphar even made him "overseer over his house" (*Gen 39:4*).

Joseph's success, however, does not corrupt him. When Potiphar's wife notices him and wants to sleep with him, Joseph unambiguously refuses and prefers to lose his job and his security rather than "do this great wickedness, and sin against God" (*Gen. 39:9*). The woman, humiliated by Joseph's refusal, reports falsely to her servants and to her husband that Joseph wanted to rape her. As a result, Joseph is cast into prison.

Joseph experiences here what we all have experienced: the sense of abandonment by God, though, even in this difficult time, "the LORD was with Joseph" (*Gen. 39:21*).

Eventually, the Lord acts, and it has an impact on Joseph's relationship with the officer of the prison. Here, too, as in his master's house, the Lord blesses Joseph. He obviously is a gifted man, and despite even worse circumstances now (after all, before, he was still a slave!), he seeks to make the best of it. Whatever his gifts, however, the text makes it clear that, in the end, it was only God who brought him success. "The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper" (*Gen. 39:23, NKJV*). How important that all who are gifted, all who are "successful," remember where it all comes from!

**Read Genesis 39:7–12.** How did Joseph resist the advances of Potiphar's wife? Why did Joseph specifically say that to do what she asked would be a sin against God? What understanding does he show of the nature of sin and what it is?

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## The Dreams of Pharaoh

**Read** Genesis 40:1–41:36. How are the dreams of Pharaoh related to the dreams of the officers? What is the significance of this parallel?

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The providential character of the events continues. Over time, Joseph is put in charge of the prisoners, two of whom happen to be former officers of Pharaoh, a butler and a baker (*Gen. 41:9–11*). They are both troubled by dreams that they cannot understand, because “there is no interpreter” (*Gen. 40:8*). Joseph, then, interprets their respective dreams.

In a parallel to the two officers’ dreams, Pharaoh also has two dreams, which no one can interpret (*Gen. 41:1–8*). At that moment the butler providentially remembers Joseph and recommends him to Pharaoh (*Gen. 41:9–13*).

In a parallel to the other dreams, Pharaoh, like the officers, is troubled, and, like them, reveals his dreams (*Gen. 41:14–24*), and Joseph interprets them. Like the officers’ dreams, Pharaoh’s dreams display parallels of symbols: the two series of seven cows (fat and gaunt) just as the two series of heads of grain (plump and thin) represent two series of years, one good and one bad. The seven cows parallel the seven heads of grain, repeating the same message, an evidence of their divine origin, just like Joseph’s dreams (*Gen. 41:32; compare with Gen. 37:9*).

Though Joseph is the one who interpreted the dream for Pharaoh, Joseph makes certain that Pharaoh knows that it was God, *Elohim*, who showed the king the things that He, God, was going to do (*Gen. 41:25, 28*). It seems, too, that Pharaoh got the message because, when he decided to appoint someone to be over the land, his argument was as follows:

“ ‘Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word’ ” (*Gen. 41:39, 40, NKJV*).

How fascinating: thanks to God, Joseph goes from ruler over Potiphar’s house to ruler over the prison to ruler over all of Egypt. What a powerful story about how, even amid what look like terrible circumstances, God’s providences are revealed.

**How can we learn to trust God and cling to His promises when events don’t appear providential at all, and indeed, God seems silent?**

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**Further Thought:** Ellen G. White, “Joseph in Egypt,” pp. 213–223, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“In early life, just as they were passing from youth to manhood, Joseph and Daniel were separated from their homes and carried as captives to heathen lands. Especially was Joseph subject to the temptations that attend great changes of fortune. In his father’s home a tenderly cherished child; in the house of Potiphar a slave, then a confidant and companion; a man of affairs, educated by study, observation, contact with men; in Pharaoh’s dungeon a prisoner of state, condemned unjustly, without hope of vindication or prospect of release; called at a great crisis to the leadership of the nation—what enabled him to preserve his integrity? . . .

“In his childhood, Joseph had been taught the love and fear of God. Often in his father’s tent, under the Syrian stars, he had been told the story of the night vision at Bethel, of the ladder from heaven to earth, and the descending and ascending angels, and of Him who from the throne above revealed Himself to Jacob. He had been told the story of the conflict beside the Jabbok, when, renouncing cherished sins, Jacob stood conqueror, and received the title of a prince with God.

“A shepherd boy, tending his father’s flocks, Joseph’s pure and simple life had favored the development of both physical and mental power. By communion with God through nature and the study of the great truths handed down as a sacred trust from father to son, he had gained strength of mind and firmness of principle.

“In the crisis of his life, when making that terrible journey from his childhood home in Canaan to the bondage which awaited him in Egypt, looking for the last time on the hills that hid the tents of his kindred, Joseph remembered his father’s God. He remembered the lessons of his childhood, and his soul thrilled with the resolve to prove himself true—ever to act as became a subject of the King of heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, pp. 51, 52.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Compare Joseph with Daniel and Jesus. What are their common points? How do Joseph and Daniel, in their own ways, reveal aspects of what Jesus would be like?
- 2 In class, talk about the question at the end of Thursday’s study. How do we learn to trust God when things don’t turn out as well for us as they did, eventually, for Joseph?

## An Eternal Gift

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Tragedy struck young Vishalini's life when her parents divorced over a misunderstanding in the extended family. Vishalini sadly said goodbye to Mother after Father gained custody of her. Before long, Father remarried, and Vishalini had a stepmother. Vishalini felt so alone.

Her new stepmother did not like Mother at all.

Vishalini deeply loved Mother, and she looked forward to her occasional visits. The girl would smile and give Mother a big hug. Mother also smiled and gave Vishalini a big hug. Mother often had something else for the girl as well. She brought gifts. "Here is something for you," Mother would say, pressing tasty treats into her little hand.

Vishalini smiled happily. She liked gifts and she liked tasty treats. But before she could eat them, her stepmother often snatched them away. "You are not allowed to accept any of her gifts," her stepmother said sharply.

Vishalini felt so alone. She grew up into a teenager, and Father sent her away to study at a boarding school in another part of Tamil Nadu state. It was scary to leave home for the first time, but Vishalini was glad to be away from family tensions and to be among friendly children and teachers. As the weeks passed, she became especially interested in hearing about Someone whom the children called "the real God." She wanted to know more, and she began to learn about Jesus.

Today, Vishalini calls Jesus her Friend and says she will never feel alone again. Why? Because Jesus has promised, " 'And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age' " (*Matthew 28:20, NKJV*). Vishalini has one Gift that no one can ever take away.

Thank you for your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering that helped construct a new girls' dormitory at Vishalini's school, James Memorial Higher Secondary School, in Tamil Nadu state in southeastern India. The new dormitory allowed Vishalini and the other girls to move out of a dilapidated building that no longer was a healthy place to live.



*This mission story illustrates the following components of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's "I Will Go" strategic plan: Mission Objective No. 2, "To strengthen and diversify Adventist outreach in large cities, across the 10/40 Window, among unreached and under-reached people groups, and to non-Christian religions"; Mission Objective No. 3, "To make developing resources for mission to non-Christian religions and belief systems a high priority"; and Spiritual Growth Objective No. 7, "To help youth and young adults place God first and exemplify a biblical worldview." Read more: [IWillGo2020.org](http://IWillGo2020.org).*



**Key Text:** *Genesis 37:19*

**Study Focus:** *Gen. 37:1–41:36.*

## ***Part I: Overview***

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**Introduction:** Although Joseph is one of the sons of Jacob, he stands out as a great patriarchal figure, similar to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fact, Joseph occupies more space in the book of Genesis than any of these three patriarchs. The stories of Joseph contrast with the preceding stories of rape, murder, and prostitution. Unlike the other patriarchs, who often stumble and misbehave, Joseph remains pure and compassionate. Like the prophet Daniel, Joseph is a wise man and a prophet. He is a wise man who behaves intelligently and finds the right solutions to problems of politics and economics; but he also is a prophet who receives God’s revelations to communicate to His people. Joseph not only receives dreams from God, but he also is able to interpret the dreams of other people, from the prison to the court of Pharaoh. Joseph represents the righteous person par excellence. He survives crime, deception, and violence. God defeats the acts of evil and the traps directed at Joseph and uses them to fulfill His designs. In fact, God turns all the wicked acts into opportunities to advance Joseph. Each time, Joseph comes out greater, whether it is from the pit, from slavery, from prison, or in the court of Pharaoh. God’s blessing of Joseph is not just for his happiness. It is through Joseph that God’s blessing of Abraham is fulfilled (*compare Gen. 12:3, Gen. 22:18*). Through Joseph, not only the family of Israel but all the nations will be blessed and saved.

## ***Part II: Commentary***

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### **The Dreams of Joseph**

The fact that Joseph receives dreams from God is humiliating for his brothers; the dreams are a divine sign of Joseph’s “spiritual” superiority. When Joseph tells his dreams to his brothers out of his naive desire to share the puzzling revelation with them, they are irritated and hate him even more. The reason for their increased anger is that they have understood the meaning of the first dream all too clearly (*Gen. 37:8*). As shepherds and people living off the land, they understand the significance of the sheaves, which evoke the production of basic food. The fact that their sheaves bow before their brother’s sheaf (*Gen. 37:7*) suggests that they will someday be economically dependent on him and even behave as

servants to him for that purpose. The repetition of dreams with the same message confirms the truth of the message and is a sign that these dreams come from God (*Gen. 41:32*). Jacob interprets the symbols of the sun, the moon, and the 11 stars as referring, respectively, to the father (himself), the mother (his wife), and his 11 sons (*Gen. 37:10*). Jacob, therefore, understands that the dreams apply to his family and that one day they will all bow before Joseph. Although Jacob rebukes Joseph (*Gen. 37:10*), or pretends to rebuke him (because he is in the presence of the rest of his family), Jacob is puzzled by the dream. He secretly ponders over it and is anxious to see its fulfillment (*Gen. 37:11*).

However, the brothers are jealous and worried (*Gen. 37:11*) because they sense that the dream is threatening to them. Joseph's brothers take, therefore, the first opportunity to eliminate the dreamer. The occasion presents itself when Jacob sends Joseph to visit his brothers in the fields. When the brothers see Joseph, they are excited even before he reaches them, because they realize this is their opportunity to kill him (*Gen. 37:18*). The plural exhortations of the brothers (*Gen. 37:20*) recall the plural exhortations of the men of Babel (*Gen. 11:3, 4*), suggesting a similar mentality and attitude. Like the men of Babel, the brothers take God's place and intend to determine their own destiny and that of their brother. Joseph's brothers want to kill him, not because he reports to his father or because they are jealous of him, but because of his dreams. The Hebrew expression they use to qualify him is ironic: *ba'al hakhalomot*, which is translated "dreamer" (*Gen. 37:19, NKJV*), literally means "master of dreams."

And yet, what they intended as a mockery will become prophetic, because Joseph will, indeed, become an expert in the interpretation of dreams. Although Joseph is alone and facing danger at each step of his troubles, someone unexpectedly intervenes on his behalf. When the brothers plot to kill him, Reuben persuades his brothers to cast him into a pit instead. When he is cast into the pit waiting to be killed, Judah convinces his brothers to sell him to a passing caravan instead. The brothers want to kill Joseph because they feel threatened by his dreams (*Gen. 37:20*). Their plan is to kill him and then cast his corpse into a pit (*Gen. 37:20*). The scene of the brothers sitting down to enjoy their meal while Joseph lies in an empty pit, without water (*Gen. 37:24*), anticipates, ironically, the reverse situation in which Joseph is well-fed while his brothers are hungry and threatened by starvation (*Gen. 42:2, 33; Gen. 43:1, 2; Gen. 44:1; Gen. 45:17, 18*). The technical expression "they lifted their eyes and looked, and there" (*Gen. 37:25, NKJV*) marks the anticipation of God's intervention to save (*see Gen. 18:2 and Gen. 22:13*). The vision of the caravan anticipates the salvation of Joseph. That the caravan appears at that precise moment is indeed providential.

Judah is the only one who acts successfully on behalf of Joseph against his brothers. Whereas Reuben can only “hear” his brothers plotting to kill Joseph, Judah is “heard” by his brothers, who are then convinced by his arguments. Whereas Reuben can only delay the killing, Judah is able to save Joseph for good from his brothers’ hands and trigger the process that will lead not only to the present rescue of Joseph but also to the future salvation of Jacob’s family and Egypt.

### **Judah, Joseph, and the Messiah**

After the sale of Joseph, Judah does not feel comfortable living with his brothers any longer and prefers to disassociate himself from them. Judah’s disagreement with his brothers must have begun earlier when he used the argument of kinship against his brothers, “‘he is our brother and our flesh,’” to prevent them from killing Joseph (*Gen. 37:27, NKJV*). Judah’s conscience is always strong and active, as evidenced later in his plea for Benjamin (*Gen. 44:18–34*). In addition, the phrase that describes Judah as one who “went down” (*Gen. 38:1, ESV, NIV*) echoes the description of Joseph as one who “went down” to Egypt (*see Gen. 37:25, 35; Gen. 39:1*).

This parallel suggests that Judah’s move “down” was somehow sympathetic to Joseph’s condition, as the latter is taken down to Egypt. This is why the story of Judah’s incident with his daughter-in-law Tamar, which follows immediately after the sale of Joseph and his arrival in the Egyptian house of Potiphar (*Gen. 38:1*), belongs in the sequence of events. Not only do the events reported in chapter 38 follow, chronologically, the events recorded in chapter 37, as clearly indicated in the introductory formula, “at that time” (*Gen. 38:1, NKJV*), but the two chapters also share linguistic and thematic parallels with each other: the same words, “know” (*Gen. 37:32*) and “determine” (*Gen. 38:25*), and the same reference to a young “goat” (*Gen. 37:31, Gen. 38:17*). More important, the two passages convey the same fundamental theological lesson: they testify to the same providential power that overrules wicked human acts for the good of His people. Judah’s evil act is turned into a positive event, leading to the salvation of Israel. The sordid sexual encounter between Judah and Tamar will not only end in the redemption of the childless Tamar, but it also will produce the ancestor of David and, hence, of the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world.

### **Dreams of Egyptians**

When Joseph is put in charge of prisoners, he meets with Pharaoh’s butler and baker, who are troubled by dreams they cannot understand (*Gen. 40:1–8*). Joseph interprets the dreams as predictions of what will happen to them in the future: the butler’s dream means that he will be restored to his former position (*Gen. 40:9–15*), whereas the baker’s dream means that

he will be hanged (*Gen. 40:16–19*). The chapter ends with the report of the fulfillment of these dreams (*Gen. 40:20–23*), thus confirming the truth of the dreams and Joseph’s correct interpretation.

Following the two dreams of the high officers, Pharaoh also has two dreams, which no one can interpret (*Gen. 41:1–7*). The butler, who suddenly remembers Joseph, recommends him to Pharaoh (*Gen. 41:8–13*). The same scenario as before takes place. As in the two preceding cases, Pharaoh recounts his dreams to Joseph (*Gen. 41:14–24*), who then interprets them as a divine message concerning the economic future of Egypt and counsels the king accordingly (*Gen. 41:25–36*). Impressed by Joseph’s wisdom, Pharaoh promotes Joseph and entrusts him with the administration of the country (*Gen. 41:37–46*). Joseph manages the gathered grain and organizes the economic survival of the world (*Gen. 41:47–57*).

### ***Part III: Life Application***

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**The Dreams of Joseph.** Read and discuss Jeremiah 28:8, 9. Why is the truth always threatening to people? What reactions do you have when you read a passage in Scripture and in Ellen White’s writings that disturbs you and challenges your choices or opinions? What criteria will you use to determine that the prophet speaks the truth? Find stories in your life in which a painful experience has led to an important discovery or to a new event of redemptive significance. Apply this observation to Jesus Christ: discuss how and why the cross was necessary for the salvation of humanity.

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**Judah, Joseph, and the Messiah.** Discuss with your class the connection between Judah’s rescue of Joseph and Judah’s encounter with Tamar, leading to the Messianic seed. What do the parallels between these two stories teach us about God’s way of working in history and in human existence? Reflect upon your own life: What are some of the failures and struggles from your past that God has used to His glory? What do these experiences teach you about God? How do these experiences help you with the struggles and doubts you currently face?

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**Dreams of Egyptians.** What missiological lessons can we learn from Joseph's example in prison? What method of communication does Joseph use in relation to his fellow prisoners and to Pharaoh? Why is it important to witness to the leaders of the world? What spiritual message can we convey through the quality of our work?

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