

Hard Times



Topic

Trust in God

Theme

God wants us to put our trust in Him regardless of our circumstances.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will determine to trust God during the good times and bad.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 14

Scripture Focus

Genesis 37; 39–41

Summary

Jacob's oldest sons envied his beloved son, Joseph. At the first opportunity to get rid of him, they sold him into slavery. His masters in turn sold him to a high-ranking military officer in Egypt, where Joseph fared well until the officer's wife falsely accused him of attempted rape. Consigned to prison, Joseph became a trusted overseer. Through the Lord's sovereign intervention, Joseph was released from prison and elevated by Pharaoh to the second highest position in Egypt.

Outline

I. God's Plan Involved Rejection (37)

- A. Joseph is hated (37:1–11)
- B. Joseph is sold (37:12–36)

II. God's Plan Involved Disappointment (39; 40)

- A. Joseph serves well (39:1–18)
- B. Joseph is imprisoned (39:19–40:23)

III. God's Plan Involved Promotion (41)

- A. Pharaoh dreams (41:1–36)
- B. Joseph is promoted (41:37–57)

Memory Verses

"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3:5, 6).

Kid's Choice

Put the following categories on the board:

- Bedtime
- Meals
- Activities

ASK: If you had the chance as a child to control your life in each of these categories, what would you have chosen to do?

ASK: What would have been some repercussions from being able to call the shots in your life as a child?

ASK: As a child, what circumstances did your parents put you through that, though they were for your own good, made you question their love for you?
Taking you to the doctor's office for a shot; making you eat vegetables; making you go to bed on time; making you brush your teeth.

As children we didn't have the maturity to decide what was best for ourselves. We needed parents to guide and direct us. As we matured, we learned to trust our parents and follow their directives.

Joseph had lots of reasons to question how God was directing his life. We know what God was doing because we can read ahead and find out, but Joseph didn't have that luxury. Sometimes we, too, don't understand what is going on in our lives. But God wants us to put our trust in Him regardless of our circumstances.

Life Coach

A life coach is someone who comes alongside a person to coach him through the problems and decisions he is facing. Make a list of potential life coaches. Include celebrities, notorious persons, and people who have been in the news recently. Search the web to secure pictures of these people if you desire.

Explain to your class what a life coach is. Then read the names and display the pictures of the people on your list of potential life coaches. Pause between them to give your learners an opportunity to indicate whether they would want that person for a life coach. Ask them to give reasons for their answers.

ASK: Why is God the ultimate life coach? (Q2) *His plans are always good because He orders them according to His character and for the accomplishment of His will.*

God is not interested in simply making us healthy, happy, and wealthy. He doesn't help us carry out *our* plans; He graciously gives us an opportunity to be involved in *His* plan.

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what God was doing because we could read ahead and find out, but Joseph didn't have that luxury. Sometimes we, too, don't understand what is going on in our lives. But God wants us to put our trust in Him regardless of our circumstances.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. God's Plan Involved Rejection (37)

A. Joseph is hated (37:1–11)

At age seventeen Joseph was tending the flocks with his half-brothers, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. He observed his brothers' misconduct and promptly reported it to their father. Perhaps this misconduct report boosted Joseph's stock in Jacob's thinking, while it lowered the brothers' stock. At any rate, Jacob loved Joseph and showed his love by giving Joseph a richly ornamental tunic. Joseph was the firstborn son of Rachel, the wife Jacob loved more than Leah and obviously more than the handmaids Zilpah and Bilhah. Joseph would be the obvious son for Jacob to love the most. But giving Joseph a tunic as a symbol of his special love was not doing Joseph any favors with his brothers. The brothers hated Joseph and refused to talk peaceably to him (37:1–4). Jacob's favoritism was both a blessing and a curse to Joseph.

As bad as the relationship had become between Joseph and his brothers, it got even worse when Joseph told his brothers and father about his dreams (37:5–7). His brothers therefore *hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words* (37:8). Even his father rebuked him for his second dream, which included the sun (Jacob) bowing down to Joseph. In fact, Jacob's rebuke was an angry protest. Jacob was not happy with Joseph's second dream, but he did think about it later, wondering what the dream might mean. Those dreams would sustain Joseph in all the difficult experiences he would pass through until they were fulfilled.

ASK: How would you characterize how Joseph's family treated him? (Q3) *The brothers were mean, and his father was unduly harsh.*

ASK: From Joseph's perspective, how much of that treatment did he deserve? (Q4) *Perhaps none of it. He couldn't help that he was born to Rachel and that he was his father's favorite. He couldn't help that God had given him dreams that indicated his future greatness.*

B. Joseph is sold (37:12–36)

Evidently neither Jacob (Israel) nor Joseph realized that Joseph's brothers would take their hostility toward Joseph to another level. Israel did not hesitate to send Joseph to see how his sons fared as they tended his flocks, nor did Joseph hesitate to go. Traveling more than fifty miles from Hebron to Shechem, Joseph discovered that his brothers had moved the flock twenty-four miles north to Dothan (37:12–17). So he traveled further to Dothan, unaware of the intensity of his brothers' hatred and never imagining that his brothers might seek to get rid of him.

The *mother* in verse 10 is probably a reference to Leah, since Rachel had already died by this point. Leah would have stepped into the mother role for Joseph and Benjamin after Rachel's death.

The brothers saw Joseph while he was still a great distance from them. They didn't hesitate to begin plotting to kill him.

READ: Genesis 37:18–20. **ASK:** What were the brothers essentially saying about their power over Joseph's life? (Q5) *They believed they had the power to control Joseph's destiny and to thwart any plans of greatness God might have for him. Their confidence was misplaced, for no one can frustrate God's program and power.*

Reuben, the oldest of the brothers, intervened to save Joseph's life. Intending to rescue Joseph later, Reuben suggested that the brothers simply cast Joseph into a pit, or cistern, in that lonely place and let him die without any violent action on their part. His brothers agreed. They ripped off Joseph's tunic and threw him into the cistern. Hard of heart, they sat down to eat while Joseph was trapped in the cistern (37:21–25).

Judah at least had second thoughts about allowing Joseph to die, pointing out that *he is our brother and our flesh*. He recommended that they sell Joseph to some Ishmaelite traders who were on their way from Gilead to Egypt. While Reuben was absent, the brothers sold Joseph into slavery for twenty pieces of silver. When Reuben discovered what had happened, he tore his inner garment as a symbol of grief and cried, Where shall I go? (37:25–30).

ASK: As a reader, it is understandable to be disappointed that Reuben's plan was frustrated by the other brothers. But why would it have been bad for Reuben to rescue Joseph? (Q6) *It would have derailed God's plan to save His people from the coming famine.*

Sometimes God frustrates our good plans because they don't fit into His plan. That is hard for us to accept sometimes.

ASK: When have you had a good plan fall through only to give way to God's better plan? (Q7)

Reuben's brothers took Joseph's elegant robe (which they hated because it symbolized Israel's preference for Joseph), dipped it in ram's blood, and took it home to display to their father, asking in seeming innocence if the long coat belonged to Joseph (37:31, 32). They did not tell Jacob that a wild animal had killed Joseph; they knew he would draw that conclusion for himself, and it saved them from telling an outright lie. How strange that people try to ease their consciences by acting out lies rather than telling them. They are no less guilty, however.

Israel grieved for days. The efforts of his children to comfort him were of no avail. One can only imagine the feelings of those hypocritical sons as they tried to console the father they had wounded so deeply. Did they experience any remorse as they saw the flowing tears of their brokenhearted father?

As for Joseph, he was taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and chief of the executioners.

II. God's Plan Involved Disappointment (39; 40)

As a young man in a strange land, Joseph had to adjust to new customs, learn a new language, and maintain his faith while living in a community of unbelievers.

And he had no one to stand with him or encourage him. Did Joseph's circumstances seem like the triumph of wickedness or the operation of blind fate? If so, appearances are deceiving. Everything that had happened to Joseph was providential. Three times in Genesis 39 we learn that the Lord was with Joseph (39:3, 21, 23).

A. Joseph serves well (39:1–18)

God prospered Joseph and caused Potiphar to put Joseph in charge of his entire estate. In turn, Potiphar was made to prosper. Finally he put everything under Joseph's care and had to concern himself only with eating (39:1–6). Joseph responded by working hard and developing his administrative skills.

Joseph was *beautiful of form and beautiful in appearance* (as the Hebrew text puts it). He was well built and handsome. His looks did not escape the notice of Potiphar's wife. Like many of her people, she had few scruples about morality. She decided she wanted Joseph. She tried to seduce him. However, Joseph refused to sin against Potiphar or God. Potiphar trusted him, and he would not betray that trust. Nor would he betray his God by committing *this great wickedness* (39:9).

Day after day the temptation continued, but Joseph avoided Potiphar's wife until one day his work took him into the house when none of the men were there. Potiphar's wife grabbed his coat and said, *Lie with me*. He did the only thing a chaste, God-fearing young man could do: he ran, leaving his coat in her grasp (39:10–13).

Enraged, the wicked woman resorted to vengeance. She accused Joseph of the very sin that she had wanted to commit and Joseph would not agree to. Potiphar was understandably angry. He surely had to take his wife's word against that of a foreign-born slave. But it is entirely possible that he had second thoughts about his wife's story, because he imprisoned Joseph rather than carrying out the usual penalty for adultery, which was death.

B. Joseph is imprisoned (39:19–40:23)

Joseph was alive, but he was hurting. For being pure and for being faithful to both Potiphar and God, he was suffering. But apparently Joseph did not complain. The Lord was with Joseph in prison. Shortly after entering jail as a prisoner, Joseph became the assistant jailer. God prospered Joseph in jail.

READ: Genesis 39:21–23. **ASK:** Why is God's presence with Joseph such an encouraging note? (Q8) *It shows that God was not moving Joseph around like an impersonal pawn. He had a personal relationship with Joseph and was showing kindness (mercy) to Joseph in the mist of difficult circumstances.*

While Joseph waited for the good ending to his bad situation, two important officers who had offended the king joined Joseph in prison. Providentially Potiphar, the chief of the executioners, committed them to Joseph's charge. The two men, the chief of the butlers and the chief of the bakers, dreamed dreams the same night. Those dreams were also providential. When Joseph went to the men in the morning, he found both gloomy because no dream interpreter was available to them. Joseph made it clear that the magicians and wise men of Egypt were not the true interpreters of dreams; only the true God (Elohim) could interpret dreams. Believing that God would reveal the meaning of the dreams to him, he asked the

two men to tell him their dreams (40:1–8).

The chief of butlers spoke first. Joseph told him he would be restored to Pharaoh's favor and service. Encouraged by Joseph's interpretation of the first dream, the chief of the bakers told his dream. His dream, however, signified that his head would be cut off and his body hung on a tree for the birds of prey to eat (40:9–13).

Joseph told the chief butler that he had been stolen from the land of the Hebrews, affirmed his innocence, and asked him to present his case to Pharaoh to secure his release (40:14, 15). Joseph must have thought this was his big break. Finally, he would get what was fair!

READ: Genesis 40:14, 15. **ASK:** What was fair about Joseph's situation? (Q9)
Nothing! He didn't deserve to be in prison.

ASK: Why is it wrong to expect God to always be fair to us? (Q10) *God is not governed by what we think is fair. He does not act according to our plans but according to His plan. Sometimes His plan involves disappointing, unfair circumstances.*

The dreams were fulfilled exactly as Joseph had interpreted them, but the chief of the butlers did not remember Joseph. He forgot. How could he forget, he who had so lately been in prison himself? He forgot because he was selfish. He had been greatly concerned about his own welfare when he was in jail, but he was indifferent to Joseph's plight after his release. But in the bigger picture, he forgot because God's plan was for Joseph to be in prison for two more years. God's plan was still moving forward, though from Joseph's perspective it looked like it had derailed. How disappointing it would have been for him after a few days and then a few weeks to come to grips with the butler's failure to talk to Pharaoh.

ASK: Who could Joseph have blamed during his two years of imprisonment? (Q11) *Potiphar and his wife; the butler; God.*

ASK: Why could a person in his situation be content? (Q12) *God is always in control, is always right, and is always on time.*

ASK: Why didn't God simply tell Joseph His plan so Joseph would know what was going on? (Q13) *God does not promise that His own people will always know His reasons, but they can learn all about His heart and His character. They can use the trying circumstances to grow in their faith in God.*

Joseph was not perfect, though the Scriptures seem to portray him in that way. We should not assume that he never had days of disappointment and discouragement. The two years of imprisonment with no word from the butler had to be one of the most disappointing periods of his life.

III. God's Plan Involved Promotion (41)

A. Pharaoh dreams (41:1–36)

The butler had forgotten Joseph, but God had not. He disturbed Pharaoh with

dreams about seven lean cows that devoured seven fat cows and seven thin ears of grain that swallowed up seven good ears of grain (41:1–7). Pharaoh called for the magicians and wise men of Egypt, but not one of them had an idea what the dreams meant. However, Pharaoh's dreams reminded the chief butler of his own dream when he was in prison. He confessed, *I do remember my faults this day* and related to Pharaoh how Joseph had interpreted his dream and that of the chief baker (41:8–13).

From then on things happened quickly. Pharaoh summoned Joseph from prison and urged him to interpret his dreams. Denying that he had any ability in himself to interpret dreams, Joseph assured Pharaoh that God would give him an answer of peace (41:14–16).

Pharaoh related his dreams to Joseph. Joseph then informed Pharaoh that Egypt would experience seven years of plentiful harvests followed by seven years of famine. He recommended that Pharaoh appoint an intelligent, wise man who would appoint officers to store the crops from a fifth part of the land during the years of bountiful harvests (41:17–36).

ASK: Suppose Pharaoh told Joseph thank you very much and then threw him back in prison. Would Joseph have had a right to complain then? Explain. (Q14) *No. Complaining about circumstances is an affront to God. It shows disapproval of His leading and doubt about His goodness.*

B. Joseph is promoted (41:37–57)

Pharaoh admitted to Joseph that *God taught you all this* (he referred to the God Joseph believed in because he used the word *Elohim* for God), and he recognized Joseph's intelligence and ability. Promptly he appointed Joseph to be next to him in authority and delegated to him the task of gathering and storing food for the seven years of famine that would follow the seven years of plenty (41:37–42).

READ: Genesis 41:37–45. **ASK:** What temptations would Joseph have faced with his new, highly powerful position? (Q15) *He would have been tempted to forget God, to focus on indulging himself as compensation for having been unfairly imprisoned, and to become egotistical. He also would have had the authority to hunt down his brothers and bring them to justice.*

Thirteen years had elapsed since Joseph had been sold into slavery. Abruptly he had exchanged his prison garments for royal robes. Everyone in Egypt had to bow to Joseph (41:42–44), and his dreams were in the process of coming true. In time all the members of his own family would bow to him.

EVALUATE: God's plans always lead to our happiness. (Q16) *Sometimes God's plans make us happy, but happiness is not God's goal for us. God wants us to grow in Him and to find contentment no matter how He leads in our lives. Sometimes our circumstances are disappointing.*

While Joseph was elevated in Egypt, he was not with his family. As far as he knew, his brothers still hated him and his father was still grieving over him. No

doubt the dreams he had of his family bowing down to him encouraged him that one day he would see them again.

READ: Philippians 4:10–12. **ASK:** What did the apostle Paul learn about responding to the various circumstances God led him through? (Q17) *He learned to be content no matter his circumstances.*

Joseph married and named his firstborn son Manasseh (41:51). He had good reason for doing that. The name means *forgetting*, and it was Joseph's way of thanking God for causing him to forget all his toil and the unhappy things he had endured as a lad at home.

He named his second son Ephraim, which means *fruitful*, for he said, *God hath caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction* (41:52). Affliction is no excuse for a barren life; God can make us fruitful anywhere. Fruitfulness depends simply on faith and obedience.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Where's Your Focus?

RESOURCE: Display resource 14. **ASK:** What might we conclude about God if we based our understanding of Him on just our circumstances? (Record or reveal answers.) (Q18) *That He doesn't care about us; that He can't hear us; that He doesn't know what is best for us; that He is unkind.*

We tend to focus on our circumstances and whether we find them agreeable as if being comfortable and happy are the chief goals of our lives. But trusting God regardless of our circumstances should be our focus. When we concentrate on our lot in life, we will be frustrated and discontent.

ASK: How do you view the circumstances in your life? Do they frustrate you? (Q19)

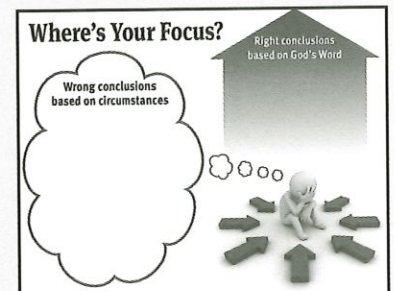
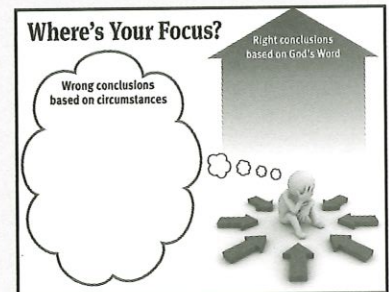
If we are discontent with our lot in life, then we need to confess our desire to control our lives. We need to surrender that control to the Lord, and learn to trust Him (Prov. 2:5, 6).

Reasons to Trust

RESOURCE: Display resource 14. **ASK:** What are some reasons you have to trust God to direct your life? Remember what you have learned so far in this study of Genesis. (Record or reveal answers.) (Q20) *God is the creator of all, He is all-powerful and ever-present, He provides redemption, and He is sovereign.*

Encourage your learners to confess any discontentment they have and to renew their focus on God. (Q 21)

Pray for them that they would keep their eyes on God both when their circumstances are difficult and when they are pleasant.



Responding to God & His Plan **8 Fear God.**

1. Understand and enjoy God's revelation of Himself through creation.
2. Recognize Christ as the only solution to sin.
3. Take sin seriously and share God's grace.
4. Submit to God's sovereign plan for your life.
5. Be faithful in response to God's faithfulness.
6. Focus your affections on God.
7. Trust God for He knows all and can do all.
9. Expect and accept tests of your faith.
10. Seek to know and do God's will.
11. Live in response to God's presence with you.
12. Trust God no matter your circumstances.
- 13.

Genesis
GOD'S PLAN BEGINS

Summary and Memory Verses

RESOURCE: Display resource 1. Add a summary statement for lesson 12 or use the following: Trust God no matter your circumstances.

Encourage learners to memorize Proverbs 3:5 and 6. Give them an opportunity to say the verse in class next week.