

# The End of the Beginning



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Gen. 41:41–50:26.*

**Memory Text:** “God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance” (*Genesis 45:7*).

What is involved here is that in world history something else results from the actions of men than what they intend and achieve, something else than what they know or want. They accomplish their interest; but something else is accomplished which was implied in it, but which was not in the consciousness and the intention of the actors.”—G. W. F. Hegel, “The Philosophy of History”; in *The Philosophy of Hegel* (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), pp. 16, 17.

This week, as we come to the end of the beginning, we can see something of the principle stated above unfold. Despite the best, or the worst, of human intentions; despite what seems to be deceit, disappointment, sin, and disaster, “something else results from the actions of men than what they intend and achieve.” That “something,” of course, is the Lord working out His divine plan in human history.

Because most of us know the story and how it ends, the providence revealed in the pages of Genesis doesn't take us by surprise. For those involved in the story itself, however, it took an incredible amount of faith to believe that God would work it all out as promised, especially in some dire circumstances. No wonder Hebrews 11 says “by faith Abraham,” “by faith Isaac,” “by faith Sarah,” “by faith Jacob.” This was a faith that trusted in what was not fully seen or completely understood, a faith that had to lean only on the promise of God and nothing else.

Sound familiar?

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 30.*

## Providence Unfolds *(Gen. 41:41–42:23)*

Overnight Joseph went from being a slave in prison to the second-highest leader in Egypt. Now, though, a whole new set of challenges would await him.

**Read** Genesis 41:45. What great new potential challenge did this pose to Joseph’s faith and fidelity to God? See also 1 Kings 11:1.

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Genesis 41:50-52 reveal Joseph settling into his new existence. The names Joseph gave his two sons reflect his own experience. The name *Manasseh* is related to the Hebrew verb “make to forget” and reflects the thought that his firstborn boy helped his father to forget the cruel past. *Ephraim*, the second son’s name, seems to mean “twice fruitful” and represented Joseph’s joyous feelings and the opening of a new chapter in his life.

As we read the rest of Genesis 41 and the first 17 verses of Genesis 42, we can see the providence of God unfolding. We see the steps leading to the fulfillment of Jacob’s dreams way back in Genesis 37. The dreamer’s dreams (*Gen. 37:19*) were soon coming to fruition in a manner that only the sovereign Lord could have arranged. This story is an amazing testimony to the power of God to fulfill what He says He will do in ways that far transcend our human understanding. The famine driving his brothers into his hands was, clearly, the Lord working out His will.

**What** words do the brothers speak among themselves that show the guilt they harbored even after all these years? *Gen. 42:21-23*.

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The great suffering of their father over the loss of Joseph constantly brought before these brothers the gravity of their sin. Even worse was the fact that they couldn’t tell their father the truth, that Joseph wasn’t even dead. Little did they realize the grief that they would bring upon themselves and their family by their actions.

**If you are making any major decisions soon, take the time to weigh all the possible consequences. Why is it so important to make sure any decision you make doesn’t violate any principles that God has revealed in His Word?**

**Key Text:** *Genesis 41:56, 57; 42:5*

### Teachers Aims:

1. To assess Joseph's new position as a ruler in Egypt.
2. To compare Joseph's dreams to their fulfillment in the testing of his brothers.
3. To grasp the magnitude of Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers and of his reunion with his father.

### Lesson Outline:

#### **I. A New Beginning** (*Gen. 41:37-40, 50-54, 57*)

- A. Pharaoh gives Joseph an Egyptian bride, Asenath, and they have two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.
- B. Joseph builds storehouses in Egypt and gathers grain during the seven plentiful years.
- C. Just as in Pharaoh's dream, a famine spreads over all lands.

#### **II. A Dream Fulfilled** (*Gen. 42:5-9*)

- A. When Jacob's sons go to Egypt to buy food, Joseph recognizes them, but they do not know him.
- B. His brothers bow to Joseph, unwittingly fulfilling the prophetic dreams God gave him long ago.
- C. Joseph appears to deal harshly with his brothers, testing them to see if their hearts have changed.

#### **III. A Family Reunited** (*Gen. 45:1-11*)

- A. Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, who react in sorrow and fear for their betrayal.
- B. Joseph is overcome with compassion for his brothers and hastens to reassure them.
- C. Jacob and his sons move their families and all of their possessions to the land of Egypt.

**Summary:** God blesses Joseph in the land of Egypt, and many people are saved from the famine, including the house of his father, Jacob. Joseph is reunited with his father and brothers, knowing that it was God's will, not his brothers' treachery, that sent him to Egypt (*vs. 8*).

## COMMENTARY

Scripture presents Jacob's family as an extremely dysfunctional one. His sons need to acknowledge their guilt by accepting responsibility for what they have done to Joseph and to their father before they can see any need for forgiveness. True, Jacob's preferential treatment of Joseph provokes them. But the brothers still freely choose how they will react. Obviously, God could not build a shattered family into a nation that represented Him without first restoring its devastated relationships. But to be healed we first must

## Joseph and His Brothers *(Genesis 42, 43)*

Joseph's ploy with his brothers showed that he was trying to teach them a lesson, as well as learn more about his own family.

**Notice** the reaction of the brothers at finding the money in their sacks *(Gen. 42:24-28)*. What does it signify about their faith and understanding of God?

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**Read** verses 36-38. What does this tell us about the character of Reuben?

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“During the years since Joseph had been separated from his brothers, these sons of Jacob had changed in character. Envious, turbulent, deceptive, cruel, and revengeful they had been; but now, when tested by adversity, they were shown to be unselfish, true to one another, devoted to their father, and, themselves middle-aged men, subject to his authority.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 225.

Jacob's response to Reuben's offer helped reveal the pain he had suffered at the loss of Joseph. Only when the famine got so severe that he had no choice *(Gen. 43:8)* did he agree to let his youngest son go back with them.

**What** was Joseph's purpose in making the feast in Genesis 43:31-34?

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Much to their astonishment, Joseph sat his brothers down in the order of their birth, giving the youngest, Benjamin, the most food. He did this in order to “ascertain if the youngest brother was regarded with the envy and hatred that had been manifested toward him.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 228. The fact that they ate and drank and were merry with him *(Gen. 43:34)* showed Joseph that they, indeed, had changed.

**No doubt a great deal of suffering changed those brothers from what they once were to what they had become. How has suffering worked in your own life? What changes has it wrought in you? How can God use suffering to bring about something positive in someone?**

recognize that we are diseased. God uses famine as a catalyst and Egypt as the setting to stage a miracle of restoration, comforting us with the hope that He can bring healing out of our hardships, no matter where life leads us.

### **Forgiving and Being Forgiven**

Jacob's sons first go down to Egypt to find food to survive the widespread famine. As they travel back and forth between the land of the Nile and Canaan, the Holy Spirit works on their hearts to accept the reality of what they have done to the brother they now believe to be long dead.

When they appear before Joseph, he puts them through a series of tests to see whether they are still the same men who almost killed him before selling him into slavery. First, he accuses them of being spies (*Gen. 42:9*). The people of the surrounding nations constantly tried to infiltrate the fertile Nile delta and river valley. The Egyptians ringed the edge of the desert with fortresses, but that could not prevent spies from entering the land. Such a charge, if believed, holds dire consequences and alarms the brothers.

Protesting their innocence, they reply that they are honest men, belonging to a family of 12 brothers, one still at home and one dead (*vs. 13*). Why would they mention such a detail of no concern to a foreign official? Do we see in their words the whispering of the Holy Spirit in the heart? Are their consciences being stirred? Although we may come to feel and recognize our guilt, as fallen human beings we cannot accept responsibility for our sinful actions and thoughts without God's help. Only He can transform us, just as He enables the brothers to admit to one another, " 'Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother' " (*vs. 21, NRSV*). They admit this in their own language, not knowing that Joseph hears and understands every word. At last they feel Joseph's bitter " 'anguish when he pleaded with us.' "

As Joseph listens to them struggle to make sense of their frightening situation, he desperately must want to believe what he witnesses. But have his brothers truly changed? Or is their remorse a temporary thing, brought on only by their present calamity?

Joseph, too, needs healing and assurance. God needs to remove from his heart the pain of betrayal and abandonment. Surely part of Joseph must have longed to reveal his identity long before he does so. He must have fought the urge to rush to his aged father. Perhaps the fear that he would never see Jacob alive after all sweeps through him like panic. And the agony must have increased when the brothers bring Benjamin back with them. But another part of him needs to be absolutely sure that the changes he marks in his brothers truly are real. He even may be afraid that it is all a hoax. So, he keeps testing them until he is convinced that their hearts are changed.

Forgiveness is the key to all their healing. But forgiveness may

## **Family Reunion** (*Genesis 44–47*)

Joseph still wasn't done. The final test came (*Genesis 44*). Judah's confession and willingness to give himself instead of his brother, all for the good of his father, proved to him that his brothers were new men. It was only then that Joseph revealed his identity.

**Read** the words of Joseph to his brothers (*Gen. 45:1-13*). **What does he say to show that his faith had, even after all these years, remained intact?**

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Joseph's faith in God during the dark years was now especially rewarded. What he couldn't see before suddenly became clear to him. God had worked it out in ways that he couldn't have imagined. There's a good lesson here for all of us. If we seek to stay faithful, regardless of our circumstances, God will work things out in the end, even if it's at the very end (*Rev. 21:1*).

The rest of Genesis 45 deals with the preparations to get the whole family together once again; in Genesis 46, Jacob, on hearing about Joseph, begins the long journey to Egypt. On the way he stops at Beersheba, where his grandfather Abraham had worshiped and his father had erected an altar subsequent to a divine repetition of the covenant blessings (*Gen. 21:33, 26:23-25*). As Jacob sacrifices and renews his covenant commitment to the God of his father, Isaac, the Lord reassures him of the covenant promises made at Bethel, with the added detail that Jacob's family would grow into nationhood in Egypt (*Gen. 46:1-4*).

**After Jacob and his family reached Egypt, a glad reunion took place** (*vss. 29, 30*). **Why did Joseph want his family to tell the Egyptians that they were shepherds, an occupation loathsome to Egyptians?** (*vss. 31–34*).

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Though the text doesn't say explicitly, Joseph must have known the corrupting influence of Egypt. This way, by keeping them separated from the Egyptians, he sought to protect the spiritual integrity of his extended family. Obviously, Joseph knew something of their special calling. No doubt, the incredible unfolding of events that brought him and his family together again only affirmed for him the reality of that calling.

take time both to receive and to give. Joseph spends months making sure that the transformation he sees in his brothers, indeed, is real. Then, when Judah not only pleads for the release of Benjamin but shows compassion for Jacob their father (*Gen. 44:18-34*), Joseph is convinced. He now tells his brothers, to their utter amazement and fear, that he is the brother they thought dead but who is alive.

His brothers have gone through much. The Holy Spirit worked

## Inductive Bible Study

**Texts for Discovery:** *Genesis 41:46-57, 44:32, 45:3, 50:24, Romans 12:2*

**1** At this stage in human history, we have the benefit of hindsight in looking at the events of Genesis. To the participants, however, their path must have been very unclear, at times, especially when they were thrown into unexpected circumstances or asked to do something that went against human reason. Imagine any one of the events of Genesis—for example, God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Do you think your faith in God’s goodness would have been sufficient for you to make the right decisions—decisions that might have seemed wrong or perverse at the time? Most important, how may we obtain the kind of faith that Abraham had?

**2** In a short time, Joseph goes from being at the bottom of Egyptian society to very near the top. What challenges do you think Joseph faced in becoming a leader of a society that adhered to values very different from his own? How do you think he met them? Since we, as Christians, are in some sense alien to this world, is there any lesson for us here? Explain.

**3** Joseph’s brothers, like many biblical figures, do things much worse, by human standards, than anything most of us ever have done or probably will do. This very easily could have cut them off from God’s grace; yet, it didn’t. How does God work in their lives after the incident with Joseph?

**4** Why does Joseph not reveal his identity to his brothers at first? What emotions might his brothers most likely have experienced when Joseph finally reveals his true identity? What are Joseph’s motives for making things so difficult for them?

**5** On his deathbed, Jacob makes predictions about the destinies of his descendants. Examine them in the light of what comes later. Are these predictions fulfilled? If so, how? What does this tell us about God, His plans for our lives, and our roles in making His plans ours?

## The Patriarchal Blessings *(Gen. 47:28–49:28)*

After spending 17 happy years in Egypt surrounded by those dearest to him, Jacob felt death approaching. He called his sons to him for a last farewell.

**Go** back over the promises given to Jacob by God over the years (*Gen. 28:12-15, 35:9-15, 46:2-4*). Given the conditions and circumstances that surrounded him now, why should it have been easy for him to believe that the Lord would fulfill His promises? See also *Gen. 46:26, 47:27*.

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As with Joseph, Jacob probably for the first time was able to see, from a human perspective, how God had been able to work out all that He promised. No doubt this reality gave the old man solace in his old age.

Before his death Jacob, through divine inspiration, revealed the future of his descendants (*Genesis 49*). The power of God constrained him to declare the truth, however painful to himself. Jacob withdrew the rights of the firstborn from Reuben and uttered a curse for the crime of Levi and Simeon. The later history of Levi's family illustrates how a curse can be turned into a blessing.

God's Word ever reveals both the virtues and vices, the failures and successes, of humans. The pages of Scripture are realistic and conceal neither the faults of its most revered and admired heroes nor their victories attained through the power of God. God's men and women are depicted as "subject to like passions as we are" (*James 5:17; see also Acts 14:15*).

Jacob revealed the corporate destiny of each tribal line. Yet, each line was composed of individuals with free will and free choice, especially in regard to their relationship with God, just as each of us experiences free will, as well. Whatever predictions God makes about nations and their future aren't the same as predestinating individuals to either salvation or damnation. God's foreknowledge of our choice isn't the same as predetermining those choices.

**"Character," it has been said, "is destiny." How do you understand that idea? How does your own character influence decisions you make? What character changes would you like to see in your own life?**



mightily in them. But the story of Joseph reminds us that the damage caused by sin does not vanish instantly. Joseph forgives his brothers. But even forgiveness is hard for them to accept and believe. After their father dies, doubts begin to trouble them. Would Joseph now seek a long-delayed vengeance (*Gen. 50:15*)? Apparently, before his death, Jacob also worries about what would happen to his sons after he is gone. He instructs his older sons to ask Joseph for forgiveness for what they had done (*vs. 17*). Interestingly, the father calls the brothers servants of his God (*vs. 17*). One could not imagine him describing them that way in years past. The transformation is genuine, but the crime left such deep scars on their souls that even after 17 years of peacefully sojourning with Joseph in Egypt they still need reassurance of his intentions toward them.

## Witnessing

*Family reunion.* To some, the phrase ignites the best of memories, those filled with the happiest of times. To others, the very thought of a family reunion ignites passions best left buried—family arguments, painful face-to-face confrontations, stress-filled moments. Yet, in the end, almost everyone would agree that these times of family togetherness, good or bad, reveal the foundation, the core, of the family. If the heart of the family is basically sound, gathering together strengthens and knits tighter the unit. If, however, the core is weak and decayed, this is also painfully revealed.

Throughout our lessons this quarter we have focused on God’s earliest families. We have been far-removed observers at their family reunions. We have carefully followed their lifestyles in order to avoid their same mistakes. Likewise, we have committed to following in their footsteps when their acts show godly behavior. We have cringed when they openly rejected God and invited Satan into their hearts. And we have rejoiced with them when they have triumphed over adversity. Their journeys through time could so easily be our own!

The very fact there is a family history to trace at all is a miracle in itself. Only a miracle, direct from the mouth and hand of God, makes it possible.

The book of “Genesis began with a miracle, the miracle of Creation. And just as it took a miracle to create this world, it will take a miracle to save it . . . [it will take] the miracle of Jesus crucified, resurrected, and coming again.”—Arthur Ferch, “Beginnings and Belongings,” *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, Fourth Quarter, 2006, p. 109.

Now is the time to believe with all your heart in miracles! Now is the time to act on your beliefs and witness to others in every possible way, at every possible opportunity, so that they may have the same opportunity to believe and to join the family of God!

## The End of the Beginning *(Gen. 49:29–50:26)*

Genesis 50 is, in a sense, the end of the beginning. The book went from Creation to the Fall to the Flood to the covenant promises made to Abraham and to his seed. However difficult it was, at times, to see how these promises ever could be fulfilled, by the time the book ends we can see the groundwork set for everything that God had promised: the children of Abraham as a great nation living as “a stranger in a land that is not theirs” (*Gen. 15:13*), a people who will one day be called out of Egypt in order that “all the nations of the earth [shall] be blessed” in them (*Gen. 22:18*).

**Read** Genesis 50. What very human reaction do we see in Joseph’s brothers?

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Their plea for forgiveness was, of course, unnecessary. Joseph had, obviously, forgiven them a long time ago. Now, finally, they could see just how genuine that forgiveness was. We see here, again, another example of the character and integrity of Joseph. In this way he functions as a “type” of Christ, forgiving them for what many would deem unforgivable.

**Read** carefully Joseph’s response to his brothers (*vss. 19, 20*). How, in that response, do we see what is, in many ways, a key theme not only of Genesis but of the whole Bible? What great principle is expressed here? What hope should we draw from it?

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However difficult it often is for us to see it from our perspective (just as it was difficult for Abraham on Moriah or Joseph in the dungeon), God is working out His plans to bring out “good” and to “save much people alive” (*vs. 20*). Whoever we are, whatever our circumstances, we must remember that the same God revealed in Genesis is the same God revealed in Revelation, a book unfolding in our times and telling our story (*Rev. 12:17*) as Genesis did the patriarchs.

Finally, Genesis began with a miracle, the miracle of Creation. And just as it took a miracle to create this world, it will take a miracle to save it. We’ve seen that miracle alluded to, first in Genesis 3:15 then in Genesis 22—the miracle of Jesus crucified, resurrected, and coming again.

The story of Joseph begins with him as part of a broken and estranged family. He had been a young man with a sense of duty who needed to grow up in the grace of Christ. His older brothers had been violent and deceitful. But Genesis 50:17 and 18 tell us that the Spirit had healed them to the point that all the brothers could weep together. What hope this gives to all those who suffer from broken homes or marriages or who like Joseph and his brothers have been victimized by dysfunctional-family dynamics. In faith we may cling to the promise of the Lord that “unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings” (*Mal. 4:2*).

## Life-Application Approach

**Icebreaker:** Imagine the last family reunion you attended. Make a mental list of who was there and how they had changed since the previous time that you saw them. In the story of Joseph’s reunion with his brothers, we find him comparing what he knew of them before with what he saw before his eyes. How had repentance and God’s intervention in their lives affected them? In what ways has God changed your life to His glory and to others’ good?

### Thought Questions:

❶ In the Bible, we are able to read the narratives of many lives. Some honor God despite failure; others end depressingly. If you could hold your story in its entirety in a document, how do you think the ending would read? Imagine yourself with two marking pens, a yellow one to emphasize the good choices and a red one, the mistakes. How much of your biography would be yellow? When your story includes Jesus’ guidance, how is the balance between yellow and red affected? Spend some time with Jesus in prayer asking Him to help you to allow the Holy Spirit to guide your choices.

❷ At the last funeral you attended, whom were you grieving? What impact did his or her life have on yours? As Jacob approached his death, he gave a blessing to each of his sons as a living legacy. How were their life choices reflected in the blessing they received? What changes does God need to make in your life?

### Application Question:

Joseph was given an amazing ability; he was able to interpret Pharaoh’s prophetic dreams. If someone were granted this ability today, what would happen to him or her? Would the person become famous? How would we know that he or she should not be committed to a psychiatric unit instead? Read Genesis 41. What clues can we find on how God led Joseph to remain faithful to Him? As a group, pray that God will bless each one individually and your church corporately to be courageous disciples for the gospel.

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 224–240; *The SDA Bible Commentary*, comments on Genesis 41:41–50:26.

“Jacob had sinned, and had deeply suffered. Many years of toil, care, and sorrow had been his since the day when his great sin caused him to flee from his father’s tents. A homeless fugitive, separated from his mother, whom he never saw again; laboring seven years for her whom he loved, only to be basely cheated; toiling twenty years in the service of a covetous and grasping kinsman; seeing his wealth increasing, and sons rising around him, but finding little joy in the contentious and divided household; distressed by his daughter’s shame, by her brothers’ revenge, by the death of Rachel, by the unnatural crime of Reuben, by Judah’s sin, by the cruel deception and malice practiced toward Joseph—how long and dark is the catalogue of evils spread out to view! Again and again he had reaped the fruit of that first wrong deed. Over and over he saw repeated among his sons the sins of which he himself had been guilty. But bitter as had been the discipline, it had accomplished its work. The chastening, though grievous, had yielded ‘the peaceable fruit of righteousness.’ Hebrews 12:11.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 237.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, discuss this question: If there is one major theme that you could pull from the book of Genesis that can apply to our lives today, what would that be?
- ❷ Much of the suffering we’ve seen here was brought upon people by their own actions, just as much of the suffering we see today is, as well. Does that make any difference in regard to how we should treat those people and seek to help them? Justify your answer.
- ❸ Ask class members to choose a story from Genesis that meant the most to them in terms of giving them some practical truth that helped them deal with whatever personal situations they were facing.