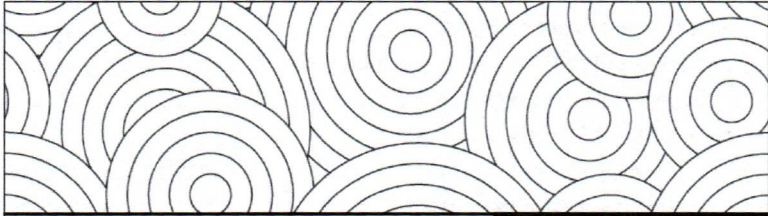


## LESSON 11

# JACOB IN EGYPT

GENESIS 47:1-12, 27-31



### OPEN IT UP

**E**gypt in the Bible has negative associations. Abram had gone to Egypt on his own initiative (without God's command), lied about his relationship to Sarai, and returned with Hagar (Genesis 12:10–20). This event, of course, had ramifications for his later family, for the Ishmaelites were the slavers who took Joseph to Egypt. Jacob now repeats the same act for the same reason (famine). And there is a similar result—Jacob's descendants would remain enslaved for many generations before finally breaking free in the exodus.

The trip to Egypt was intended to preserve life, but it actually worsened life for Jacob's descendants. Sometimes we cannot foresee the consequences of our actions. For example, it may seem inconsequential to skip worship when on vacation, but we are setting an example. Perhaps the next generation can reason, "If worship doesn't matter when we are away, why does it matter when we are at home?" The trip to Egypt seemed like a good idea, but it carried long-reaching consequences for God's people.

### **THE BROTHERS AND PHARAOH • GENESIS 47:1-6**

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Pharaoh takes a genuine interest in Joseph's family. This indicates the affection Pharaoh had for Joseph, but it also indicates his responsibility to inspect all foreigners settling in his land. Scripture first records the brothers' arrival (Genesis 47:1–2). Goshen was on the eastern border of northern Egypt and therefore was not considered Egypt proper. The brothers were justly cautious, not trusting the intentions of the Egyptians entirely, for we have already been told that “the Egyptians could not eat food with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians” (43:32).

Second, Scripture records the brothers' profession (Genesis 47:3). We have been informed that “every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians” (46:34). That means Pharaoh would not wish to invite the brothers into Egypt itself, but would prefer to keep them at a distance. Finally, Scripture records the brothers' settlement (47:5–6). Goshen was sufficiently distant from the native Egyptian population for shepherding and settlement. But Pharaoh goes one step beyond the request (verse 4), offering them “the best of the land” (verse 6).

Pharaoh's extraordinary treatment of Joseph's brothers demonstrates how just one person's behavior (Joseph's) can alter national prejudice and turn “abomination” into affection. The Egyptians refused to eat with Hebrews and abominated their work as shepherds. Yet Joseph's loyal service, capable management, and agreeable collegiality had turned prejudice into opportunity. Rebellion and resistance rarely bring about change, but extraordinary kindness does.

### **JACOB AND PHARAOH • GENESIS 47:7-12**

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Like Joseph's brothers, Jacob, too, gains an audience with Pharaoh (Genesis 47:7–10). The question about Jacob's age is strange and unparalleled in Scripture elsewhere. Perhaps it was provoked by Jacob's haggard appearance. Indeed, Jacob had been through much in life, from his sibling rivalry to his father's lack of affection, to his favorite wife's long-term childlessness, to his father-in-law's deceptions, to his favorite son's presumed death, and most recently, the proposition of death in a famine. Indeed, although he had lived 130 years, he laments, “Few and evil have been the days of the years of

my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage” (verse 9). Some people look years younger than they are, and others look much older. Jacob must have fallen into the latter category.

After leaving the grand king, Scripture tells us, “Jacob blessed Pharaoh” (Genesis 47:10). If we presume that the greater always blesses the lesser (cf. Hebrews 7:7), then the Bible is making a claim that, despite what the reader might imagine, Jacob—the famished, desperate, decrepit old patriarch—is actually greater than the all-powerful lord of Egypt! Indeed as Plato says, “It is right that the faithless man is required to follow and the prudent man to lead and rule” (*Laws* 690b, my translation).

After leaving Pharaoh, also like the brothers, Jacob appears before Joseph (Genesis 47:11–12). Joseph took on the task of settling his family in Goshen (verse 11) and of providing for them ample supplies of food (verse 12). Whereas the Egyptians were required to sell their possessions in exchange for rations, Joseph’s family was allowed to retain their livestock. Although foreigners to Egypt, they were actually treated better than many of the native Egyptians themselves. Was this fair? No. But fairness matters only to victims of injustice.

### **JOSEPH’S VOW TO JACOB • GENESIS 47:27–31**

After settling in Goshen, Jacob’s family began to prosper. It is striking, even if only coincidental, that Jacob lived for another seventeen years (130 to 147) in Egypt before he died (Genesis 47:28). This was exactly Joseph’s age when he was sold into slavery. Perhaps Scripture is informing us that Jacob’s last seventeen years were just as sweet as Joseph’s first seventeen years. Approaching the end of his life, he summoned Joseph and said, “Now if I have found favor in your sight, please put your hand under my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me. Please do not bury me in Egypt, but let me lie with my fathers; you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place” (verses 29–30). Reserved for situations when the man is about to die, the hand-under-the-thigh custom was considered a solemn oath binding an individual to his promise even after the death of the one who made the request (cf. 24:2–4). Jacob realized all along that he

had abandoned God's promised land and requested that his bones be returned to Canaan.

With Joseph's promise secured, Jacob has no more unfinished business and "bowed himself on the head of the bed" (Genesis 47:31). The Hebrew text can also be read, "Israel worshiped on top of his staff," a rendering more consistent with Hebrews 11:21. That verse also informs us that this event was Jacob's last, requiring that the testament of Genesis 49 occur prior to the events here recorded. How appropriate is it that worship was the final act of Jacob?

**WRAP IT UP**

**W**ith a solemn oath and an act of worship, Jacob's life comes to a close. While Abraham and Isaac are certainly important, Jacob's life receives far more of the Bible's attention. Abraham gets roughly thirteen chapters (Genesis 12–25). Isaac gets roughly four chapters (chapters 24–28). Yet almost half of Genesis is devoted to Jacob. Perhaps Abraham and Isaac were exceptional men of faith, whereas Jacob is like most of us. We struggle to satisfy God's will. We constantly sin, err in judgment, and fail to be the people we ought to be. Just like Jacob's, our lives are filled with turmoil and stress. Despite our predicaments, we can overcome and end our lives surrounded by our children, serving our Lord.



**THINK ON IT**

1. How is Egypt portrayed in the Bible? What are the reasons for the negative associations?
2. How can our actions positively impact the way others view our families, friends, churches, and communities? How does Joseph's life reveal the positive associations he was able to build for his family?
3. Why does Jacob bless Pharaoh? What does the Bible's report of this act imply?
4. Why do you think Jacob regarded his years as "few and evil"? What stresses in life did Jacob bring upon himself?
5. We sometimes imagine how we might like to die if we could have a choice in the matter. How would you choose to go?