

Norwood's Notes: Brief Summaries of Bible Stories

These "notes" are intended to provide a general overview of the basic stories of the Bible in the hope of building greater biblical knowledge and encouraging Bible reading and study.

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3. Highlights from Genesis 29 – 45, "Jacob to Joseph"

Jacob sought refuge with his uncle Laban from the fury of his brother Esau. While in Laban's service, Jacob married his uncle's two daughters, Leah and Rachel (Gen 29). Jacob, the trickster, learned what it was like to be tricked as he agreed to work seven years for Laban, so his uncle would allow him take Rachel as his wife, only to have Laban give him Leah in marriage instead. Laban did allow Jacob to marry Rachel also, but Jacob then also had to work another seven years for the sly Laban. The rivalry between the sisters increased into a competition to produce offspring for Jacob. Rachel and Leah even summoned the services of their servants, Bilhah and Zilpah, to be surrogate mothers. Between the four women, Jacob fathered 12 sons and a daughter.

Because of God's favor, and in spite of Laban's unethical dealings, Jacob would eventually leave Laban, departing as a wealthy man (Gen 31). He even reconciled with his brother Esau (Gen 33). However, on the night before meeting his estranged brother for the first time in years, as he was filled with anxiety over how Esau would receive him, God appeared to Jacob in the form of a man. Jacob wrestled with Him all night long, holding on until the dawn, asking for God's blessing. God blessed him by changing his name from Jacob to "Israel" (Gen 32). The night of wrestling left Jacob with a limp as a humbling reminder. God reaffirmed his promise to Abraham and Isaac through Jacob, who had matured in faith and devotion to God (Gen 35).

Of the 12 sons of Jacob, his eleventh son was a dreamer named Joseph. Jacob fawned over Joseph and his younger brother Benjamin, as they were born to his beloved wife, Rachel, who had died in childbirth. Between Joseph being a favored son and how he spoke of his dreams that all seemed to be about him becoming great and his brothers bowing down to him, his older brothers had enough of him. One day when he approached them tending Jacob's flocks, his brothers seized him and threw him into a pit. The oldest of the brothers, Reuben, planned to release Joseph after a while, but without Reuben knowing it, the other nine sold Joseph into slavery. Having stained Joseph's robe of many colors with goat's blood, they presented it to their father, Jacob, leading him to believe that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal (Gen 37).

While Jacob was in deep mourning, thinking his son was dead, Joseph had been sold as a slave to an Egyptian named "Potiphar," who was the captain of the guard of the king of Egypt (Gen 39). Even with all that had happened to him, God was with Joseph and was working his plan over his life. Potiphar trusted Joseph and gave him charge over all his household and all that he had. God blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake.

Potiphar's wife desired Joseph, and tried to seduce him. Joseph resisted, telling her he could not betray Potiphar's trust and commit such a sin against God. She, however, became even more aggressive toward Joseph, grabbing him so that as he fled from her, his garment was left in her hand. Enraged by Joseph's rejection of her advances, she lied about him to her husband, falsely accusing Joseph of molesting her. Potiphar then had Joseph thrown into prison.

Even wrongfully accused and in prison, God was with Joseph and was working his plan. Joseph was placed among the king of Egypt's prisoners and God gave him favor in the eyes of the keeper of the prison, who put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners. One day the king's cupbearer and baker were both thrown into the prison with Joseph (Gen 40). Each of them had a dream that Joseph was blessed by God to be able to interpret to mean that the baker would be executed and the cupbearer restored to his place. As it came to pass, just as Joseph had foreseen, Joseph asked the cupbearer to tell Pharaoh, the king, of his plight. It was not until two years later, when Pharaoh had two disturbing dreams that no one could interpret, that the cupbearer remembered Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams (Gen 41).

Joseph told Pharaoh that his two dreams meant the same thing, a terrible famine was coming and he had to prepare for it. Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph, that he made him his chief official in command over all Egypt. As Joseph prepared Egypt for the coming famine, he also married an Egyptian woman and had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. God blessed Joseph so that all he did succeeded. And, Pharaoh was blessed because of Joseph.

When the famine was devastating the land, Jacob sent his ten older sons to buy grain in Egypt, the only place that was prepared for the famine (Gen 42). In fulfillment of the dreams of his youth, Joseph's brothers bowed before the governor of Egypt, not recognizing that the governor was the brother they had sold into slavery so many years earlier. Joseph chose not to reveal himself until his brothers had to return for more grain, bringing Benjamin with them, as had been his request (Gen 43). The brothers feared the powerful governor of Egypt, and were terrified when Joseph revealed himself to them (Gen 45). But, full of God's grace, Joseph spoke kindly to his brothers telling them that it was all part of God's plan to save them all from the famine. He sent them to gather Jacob and the family and bring them into Egypt, where there was food and they could all be reunited.