



Bible Study

GENESIS 41



Canadian Lutheran
World Relief

CLWR BIBLE STUDIES

CLWR's Bible Studies have been designed to help congregations delve deeper into the challenges leading to injustices around the world, to explore related Bible stories, to discuss how these connect and how God calls us to act together.

These studies are meant to be adapted for your congregation's needs and are free to use. Each study includes discussion questions for children to adults, as well as suggestions to connect this discussion to action.

As CLWR continues to grow our resource collection, we would love to hear suggestions and insight from you. Please feel free to contact Heidi Van Schaik, our Church Relations Manager at heidi@clwr.org with ideas and feedback.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- In the Jewish tradition, the book we know as *Genesis* is called *Bereshit* which translates to “in the beginning” or “when first.”
- It is common for ancient literature to be titled after its first words.
- The Jewish tradition focuses on this book as an authoritative part of the scriptures as it is part of the Jewish Pentateuch/Torah (first 5 books of the Hebrew Scriptures) and is central to the Jewish Tanakh (the Jewish scriptures that include the law, the prophets and collected writings).
- In the Christian tradition, the title *Genesis* comes from the Greek tradition with “Genesis” translating as “origin” or “birth.”
- It is understood as the expanded genealogy of the “children of Israel.”
- Christians pay attention to *Genesis* because of its focus on God’s work with humanity before the law of Moses.
- Islam also holds a prominent focus on traditions taken from *Genesis* (Adam and Eve, Abraham and Ishmael and Joseph).
- This literature is derived from an oral tradition.
- Over 250 years of scholarship suggests that *Genesis* was comprised over centuries using both oral and written traditions.
- During the Greco-Roman period, authorship became important, and the scribes attributed the writings to Moses, however there are some discrepancies with this line of thought as much of the important content appears to have been written after the 586 BCE exile in Babylon.
- To have no claim of authorship in ancient writings is not an unusual event.
- *Genesis* is divided into 2 main parts, part 2 then subdivided again.
- Part 1 – Primeval History (chapters 1-11)
 - The Sovereign Call of God (1 – 11:29)
- Part 2 – Ancestral History (chapters 12-50)
 - The Embraced Call of God
 - The Abraham Narrative (11:30 – 25:18)
 - The Conflicted Call of God
 - The Jacob Narrative (25:19 – 36:43)
 - The Hidden Call of God
 - The Joseph Narrative (37:1 – 50:26)

CULTURAL CONTEXT

- Ancient Israel was a monotheistic society (they had one God) while ancient Egypt was a polytheistic society (multiple gods).
- The relationship between Israel and Egypt is depicted as somewhat strained (think about the Exodus and depictions of Pharaoh as oppressor) but as neighbours, they had a relationship of interdependence with economic trade between the two (this is how Joseph's brothers were able to sell him into slavery).

SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

- The story of Joseph is a substantial one in our scriptures spanning from chapter 37-50 in *Genesis*.
- Familiarize yourself with the entire story, if possible, but we will only look at one chapter (41) in this study.
- Synopsis: Joseph is the second youngest son of Jacob. Joseph was the son of Jacob's favourite wife, Rachael. Joseph was a source of jealousy for his brothers, who ultimately captured him and sold him into slavery in Egypt. While serving the Pharaoh, he finds himself wrongly imprisoned, but continues to rely on God and becomes known for interpreting dreams.

Genesis 41

After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, and there came up out of the Nile seven sleek and fat cows, and they grazed in the reed grass. Then seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. The ugly and thin cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. And Pharaoh awoke. Then he fell asleep and dreamed a second time; seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. Then seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them. The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Pharaoh awoke, and it was a dream. In the morning his spirit was troubled; so, he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh.

Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “I remember my faults today. Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard. We dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own meaning. A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each according to his dream. As he interpreted to us, so it turned out; I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged.”

Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer." Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile; and seven cows, fat and sleek, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. Then seven other cows came up after them, poor, very ugly, and thin. Never had I seen such ugly ones in all the land of Egypt. The thin and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows, but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had done so, for they were still as ugly as before. Then I awoke. I fell asleep a second time and I saw in my dream seven ears of grain, full and good, growing on one stalk, and seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouting after them; and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. But when I told it to the magicians, there was no one who could explain it to me."

Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are seven years of famine. It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land. The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous. And the doubling of Pharaoh’s dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities and let them keep it. That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.”

The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?” So, Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.” And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph’s hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, “Bow the knee!” Thus, he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.” Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife. Thus, Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt.

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. During the seven plenteous years the earth produced abundantly. He gathered up all the food of the seven years when there was plenty in the land of Egypt and stored up food in the cities; he stored up in every city the food from the fields around it. So, Joseph stored up grain in such abundance—like the sand of the sea—that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure.

Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him. Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, “For”, he said, “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.” The second he named Ephraim, “For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes.”

The seven years of plenty that prevailed in the land of Egypt came to an end; and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every country, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph; what he says to you, do.” And since the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.

Read Genesis 41:1-8

Pharaoh has a disturbing dream. Who does he call to interpret it first?

- The Magicians

Why do you think Pharaoh was so disturbed by his dreams?

- Believes they mean something
- They are not good news
- Kings are typically shielded from bad news/things

Why do you think Pharaoh was angry with the magicians?

- The wisest in the kingdom were unable to decipher
- He and his kingdom seem helpless

What do you think is the most troubling aspect of this dream for Pharaoh?

Read Genesis 9-32

In verse 16 Joseph says, “It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer.”

Why do you think Joseph says this?

What do you think Pharaoh, a polytheistic Egyptian ruler, thought of Joseph’s answer?

What do you think Joseph was trying to convey in his statement?

- The God of Israel is the one who gives life and brings death, the one who will cause the Nile to produce or bring famine.

It is important here to remember that we are pre-Jesus, and, in this time, it was widely believed that God was a loving AND punishing deity.

The reference to the Nile is challenging. The Nile is not simply a geographical location for ancient Egypt, it is also a sign of imperial power and fertility. The Nile's failure and its systems indicate that the imperial powers no longer have the power of life.

Read Genesis 1:33

This is the turning point for this chapter. Joseph is not promoting himself but is opening up the opportunity for Pharaoh to partner with God. It is still the Pharaoh's choice whether to engage with the God of Israel or not.

Read Genesis 34-45

Why do you think Pharaoh gave Joseph his signet ring, garments of fine linen, a gold chain, a new name and Asenath as his wife?

- To signify his authority
- To help him fit in Egyptian culture

Read Genesis 4-57

Now that Joseph represents the new power of life for the empire and the world, and believing that he remains faithful to the God of Israel, how might we understand God's actions in this part of the Joseph story?

Have you ever experienced times of plenty and famine in your faith life? How did you navigate those times?

Have you ever experienced times of plenty and famine in your life? How did you navigate those more difficult times?

Did You Know:

- The Nile throughout history has experienced various levels of flooding causing healthy crops some years, and very lean ones the next.
- “Farmers in the Nile Valley have always grown many of their crops close to the river. The Nile used to flood between June and September/October, depositing new fertile soils each year which the farmers grew their crops on.” [i]
- The Nile River spoken of in Genesis runs through many countries today, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Ethiopia.
- The Nile has “been a vital source of water for irrigation, allowing farmers to cultivate crops in arid regions and supporting the growth of Ethiopia’s agricultural sector.” [ii]
- “In Ethiopia, drought has put farmers at risk of losing their livelihoods, with many forced to leave their homes.” [iii]

WONDERINGS

Consider your local community; how does famine impact your community?

Consider Canada; how does famine impact this country?

Consider the world; how does famine impact our siblings in Christ around the globe?

ACTION BRAINSTORM

How can you/your parish help to offer plenty to those in need locally?

How can you/your parish help to offer plenty to those in need nationally?

How can you/your parish help to offer plenty to those in need globally?

ACTION SUGGESTIONS

Read and learn more. One suggestion is *The End of Hunger: Renewed Hope for Feeding the World* by Jenny Eaton Dyer, Cathleen Falsani – available on Amazon.ca.

Learn more about Ethiopia and the Nile Region. Check out these links:

- <https://awibethiopia.org/focus/the-nile-river-and-ethiopia/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aEjUoN2GjEs>
- <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/nile-river/>
- <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/farming-in-the-nile-valley-the-british-museum/kAWxk-YaOyfgJw?hl=en>

Host a food drive to supply a local school's food program with necessities – be sure to be in relationship with the school to determine what they need.

Partner with a local food bank by volunteering.

Partner with a local food distribution program by volunteering.

Host a fundraiser to support CLWR partners in supporting small-scale farmers feed their communities:

- clwr.org/gift-of-food

If you have a movie licence, host a fundraising movie night and show a version of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dream Coat*.

Use one of the musical pieces from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dream Coat* with either the church choir performing or a video as part of an announcement for a promotion of a fundraising initiative. Be sure you have the appropriate licensing. Here are a few video links to help:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZDqg2pvg_c&list=PLdxb_7GR9-h1l2SY7kYcNJ1ZLYiqT592M&index=11
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2YiiE9vchk>

Ask children, 'What do we need to grow good healthy food?'

- Soil, seeds, sunshine, water

Ask, 'What happens if we don't have one of those things?'

- Things don't grow

Ask, 'Did you know that there are places in the world where crops can't grow because they don't have enough water?'

Ask, 'Do you know what happens if we can't grow enough food?'

Explain what famine is.

Talk to them about how some people are hungry because where they live, they can't grow food, or can't afford food.

Talk to them about how we need good, healthy food to be the best we can be to help spread God's message of love around the world.

Remind the children that with Jesus helping us, we can all share what we have. We can have enough for everyone so that all can have the best chance to be who God created them to be.

PRAYER

Life-giving God,

We thank you for providing us with all we need.
We are sorry that sometimes we are not good at sharing
what we have with those who have less than us.

We sometimes make poor decisions
about wasting or polluting water,
we build on fertile soil,
and we create skyscrapers to block out the sun.

We ask you to help us
to take better care of your creation
so that all people can benefit from its gifts.

Amen.