



## **Joseph: The Art of True Forgiveness**

**By Keith Greer**

Joseph was Jacob's eleventh son, and Rachel's first. Very early in Joseph's life, problems occurred because Jacob favored him over his brothers. Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife, and Joseph was his favorite son. Due to their father's preferential treatment of Joseph, a deep-seated resentment developed in his brothers. Joseph's own actions were part of the problem. "...Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brothers. And the lad was with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father." {Genesis 37:2} He dreamed that his father and his brothers would bow down to him, then related the dream to his brothers (Genesis 37:5-11). What did the brothers think? "And his brothers envied him, but his father kept the matter in mind." {Genesis 37:4}

One day, the brothers saw an opportunity to get even and to rid themselves of Joseph. "Now when they saw him afar off, even before he came near them, they conspired against him to kill him. Then they said to one another, "Look, this dreamer is coming! Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, 'Some wild beast has devoured him.' We shall see what will become of his dreams!" {Genesis 37:18-20} The oldest brother, Reuben, persuaded his brothers not to kill Joseph, but they did sell him into slavery (Genesis 37:26,27). Then they dipped Joseph's coat of many colors in goats' blood and allowed Jacob to believe his son had been killed by a wild beast (Genesis 37:32-34).

In slavery, Joseph is sold into the household of an Egyptian named Potiphar. "And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority." {Genesis 39:3,4} God was with Joseph, and things went well for him. But the story did not continue that

happily. Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph to commit adultery with her. He reacted to her advances. "There is no one greater in this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" {Genesis 39:9} But she didn't give up. Finally, one day while Potiphar was away, she tried to force the issue, and Joseph ran away. When her husband returned, she lied and claimed Joseph had forced himself on her (Genesis 39:17-19). Potiphar believed the lie and had Joseph cast into prison. Even in prison, Joseph prospered (Genesis 39:20-23).

Then came the dreams of the King's imprisoned butler and baker (Genesis 40:1-5). Joseph interpreted the dreams correctly-- in three days, the butler would be restored to his position; and the baker would be hung. Joseph asked the butler to remember him when he came before Pharaoh. But the butler forgot, and two years passed. Then Pharaoh had two dreams. The butler remembered Joseph, and told Pharaoh, who summoned him to explain the meaning of his dreams. Again, Joseph gave a correct interpretation; and Pharaoh was so impressed that he made Joseph second in command over all Egypt (Genesis 41:37-46).

The stage was set. The famine in Canaan was so severe that Joseph's brothers had to come to Egypt to buy grain. Who must they see for the grain? "Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he acted as a stranger to them and spoke roughly to them..." {Genesis 42:7} Joseph now has opportunity for revenge against his brothers for the evil they had committed against him! Instead, he brought them and their father to Egypt and acquired for them a land in which to live. Why did he not take revenge-- surely they deserved it? "...Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive." {Genesis 50:19,20}

Joseph's example teaches us a very powerful lesson about forgiveness. Revenge and retribution belong to God-- not to us (Romans 12:17-21; Hebrews 10:29-31). Joseph's actions demonstrate that it is possible to forgive those who wrong us. In his mind, he could have justified giving them the punishment they deserved. Yes, it's easy to reap revenge and hold grudges. But we must not forget-- if we die guilty of trying to stand in God's place, we will lose our souls.