

# STUDY 2: HOW TO AVOID LIFE'S PITFALLS

---

## HOW THIS STUDY FITS YOUR'S DISCIPLESHIP PLAN

---

+ + +

### **Obey God and Deny Self**

When we rely on God and not ourselves, He will provide a way out of or through any challenges life throws at us. Through our obedience to Him, we can avoid some of life's pitfalls altogether.

---

## Writer Bio

---

### **Ben Mandrell**

is the president and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources. He and his wife, Lynley, live in the Nashville area with their four children: Ava, Max, Miles, and Jack.

### **Marshelle Jackson Wilburn**

adapted this study for the *YOU* audience. She is a trainer and urban church planting missionary for San Francisco Bay Area Baptist Associations. Since 2007, she has served in management at one of the San Francisco Bay's largest Christian homeless shelters. Marshelle has been a Lifeway writer since 2015.



## A BIBLE STUDY ABOUT THE PITFALLS IN JOSEPH'S LIFE

+ + +

Let's be real. Life in this post-Christian world in which we live, but are not of, is filled with disappointments. Things don't always turn out the way we think they will or should. In the Old Testament, Joseph was one of those rare people who learned the art of making the best of his circumstances, good or bad, and of refusing the temptation to be bitter. No matter what happened to him, he kept his eyes on the Lord and on the future which God revealed He had already planned.

How well are you managing to keep the past in the past? Are you stuck on things that happened way back when? Are you in a prison of unforgiveness or hating on those you feel have wronged you? Are you in a season of doubt because life hasn't cut you a break and seems lonely and unfair? Does it feel like you are always fighting an uphill battle and just can't ever seem to win? Know this, you are not alone. Many of us experience these kinds of feelings

because life can be hard. For followers of Jesus Christ the struggle is real!

Check out the story of Joseph in this study and learn priceless principles for moving forward in your walk with God and avoiding the pitfalls of life. Our circumstances are not always set up in our favor, but God always favors those that follow Him and His ways. Remember, if you believe God is in control and all things work for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes (Rom. 8:28), then you can be assured that even though it may not look like it, as things appear to be out of control in your life, God is always in control.

We can learn a lot from Joseph's attitude and actions during opposition and difficulty, even when he was wrongly accused. He never lost sight of what God had promised and neither should we. Joseph's life shows us how we can avoid life's pitfalls.

SESSION 1

# THE PITFALL OF BETRAYAL

**THE POINT:**  
GOD IS AT WORK,  
EVEN WHEN IT'S NOT  
OBSVIOUS.

Leader pages on pp. 134-137

## GENESIS 37:1-5,19-24,26-27

<sup>1</sup> Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup> These are the family records of Jacob. At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended sheep with his brothers. The young man was working with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought a bad report about them to their father. <sup>3</sup> Now Israel loved Joseph more than his other sons because Joseph was a son born to him in his old age, and he made a long-sleeved robe for him. <sup>4</sup> When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not bring themselves to speak peaceably to him. <sup>5</sup> Then Joseph had a dream. When he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more.

.....  
<sup>19</sup> They said to one another, "Oh, look, here comes that dream expert! <sup>20</sup> So now, come on, let's kill him and throw him into one of the pits. We can say that a vicious animal ate him. Then we'll see what becomes of his dreams!" <sup>21</sup> When Reuben heard this, he tried to save him from them. He said, "Let's not take his life." <sup>22</sup> Reuben also said to them, "Don't shed blood. Throw him into this pit in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him"—intending to rescue him from them and return him to his father. <sup>23</sup> When Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped off Joseph's robe, the robe of many colors that he had on. <sup>24</sup> Then they took him and threw him into the pit. The pit was empty, without water.

.....  
<sup>26</sup> Judah said to his brothers, "What do we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come on, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay a hand on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh," and his brothers agree.

+  
+  
+

MEMORY VERSE

**Philippians 1:6**—I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

KEYWORDS

**Long-sleeved robe (v. 3)**—In Old Testament days, a long-sleeved robe made of brightly colored cloth signified the distinguished status of the person privileged to wear it.

**Pits (v. 20)**—Shepherds dug deep pits in the wilderness that served as buckets in the ground to catch rainwater they then would draw out for their flocks.

# HOW DOES GOD WORK DURING THE BETRAYALS IN OUR LIVES?

Trust is a priceless treasure, and it really hits hard when trust is deceived. Have you ever had a close friend turn on you? A brother or sister file a lawsuit against you? A parent disown you? The pain of betrayal can be soul crushing.

Kevin was a church planter. At age 25, he felt called to start a new church. He gathered a launch team and hosted meetings to determine interest. Knowing he wasn't strong in organizational skills, Kevin wisely surrounded himself with a solid team of strategists. The church took off like a rocket.

But then the unthinkable happened. Behind the scenes, Kevin's launch team he put in place held a series of secret meetings. They chose to search for a fresh leader with stronger administrative skills, and they fired Kevin from the church he was led to start.

Maybe you have a story like Kevin's. Betrayal can be devastating and bitterness can consume us. We don't have to face betrayal alone. God still works as we'll see in the life of Joseph.

## Even God's Favor Can Cause Betrayal // Genesis 37:1-5

We've all had family problems that have impacted our families with much suffering for generations. Joseph's father Jacob made huge mistakes impacting his kids and deeply affecting the whole family. Jacob's two most obvious flaws were accepting a cultural view of marriage over God's and favoritism. Let's take a look at those.

- **The widespread acceptance of polygamy.** Jacob's acceptance of cultural polygamy was the root of his family dysfunction. From the beginning, God intended for marriage to be between one man and one woman for life. "This is why a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Nowhere in Scripture did God approve of multiple marriages. Unfortunately, many in the Old Testament ignored God's plan established in the garden of Eden, causing rivalries and



## THE POINT: GOD IS AT WORK, EVEN WHEN IT'S NOT OBVIOUS.

tension. Jacob's life is evidence of this with multiple wives and jealousy throughout his family.

- **Obvious favoritism.** Joseph was born into this dysfunctional mess, placing a target on his back from birth. Because he was the son of his father's favorite wife, Rachel, born in Jacob's older years, he was a more favored child.

Jacob's gift to Joseph of "a long-sleeved robe," a custom-made coat, pushed his brothers over the edge with jealousy. In ancient culture, to reject a gift was to reject the giver, so Joseph was expected to wear the coat.

While Joseph's difficulty was mostly his father's fault, it's also important to notice God's supreme will in the story. While God cannot be blamed for evil (Jas. 1:13), He does allow His children to walk through difficulty purposefully (2 Cor. 1:3-7).

### WHAT ROLE DID JOSEPH PLAY IN DIGGING HIS OWN PITFALL?

How do we know this? Joseph had a dream where he caught a glimpse of what God was going to do. God sent the dream, and Joseph shared with his brothers that they eventually would bow down to him. By revealing this dream, Joseph set the course of his life and deepened his brother's hatred.

Joseph's story reveals how we can all trust the Lord to help us through our everyday family problems. We all have brokenness in our family histories. As you read Joseph's story, be aware of your unique family story, and how it's shaped you. God wants to use it ALL for His grand purpose.

## God Works Despite Betrayal

// Genesis 37:19-24

The brothers may not have been looking for payback, but when opportunity came, they plotted to toss Joseph into a pit and leave him for dead.

The root of bitterness harvested the fruit of bitterness. Jesus said: "A good person produces good out of the good stored up in his heart. An evil person produces evil out of the evil stored up in his heart, for his mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart" (Luke 6:45). Our speech reveals what's inside.



## DIGGING DEEPER JOSEPH'S DREAMS

Symbolic dreams in the story of Joseph are the means by which God's will for the future is unveiled. The dreams of Joseph and those he interprets are potentially ambiguous, since they do not possess a revelation of God, whereas the four previous dreams in chapters 12–36 are direct revelations (20:3; 28:12-13; 31:11; 31:24). When understood in the larger framework of the story, Joseph's dreams must be taken as coming from God, although in chapter 37 by itself it is not so certain. It is left later to Joseph's speech, which declares that dreams are from God (40:8; 41:16, 25, 28). Thus the reader should interpret 37:5-11 as of divine source. The divine origin is confirmed by the fulfillment of the dreams when the brothers bow before Joseph the Egyptian ruler (e.g., 42:6; 43:26, 28).

**How can we know that some dreams are from God?**



Joseph's brothers were full of bitterness toward him, and those feelings produced murderous action. Scripture warns against this,

- “Jealousy is rottenness to the bones” (Prov. 14:30).
- “Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and defiling many” (Heb. 12:15).
- “For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice” (Jas. 3:16).

Jealousy poisoned Joseph's toxic brothers. We must check our hearts considering who we may be tempted to envy. Envy happens world-wide, even within Christ's Body.

Just as it's important to consider if envy is in our hearts, we must also check if we've caused envy in others. Maybe they compare themselves with you and feel God has given you more. Has God given you success in areas of your life? If the Lord has blessed you in obvious ways, a good chance exists others may be jealous.

**WHAT HARMFUL CONSEQUENCES HAVE YOU SEEN COME FROM JEALOUSY AND ANGER?**

The struggle with envy is real! We may give in to temptation and secretly resent God for giving others what we want for ourselves. Putting on the mind of Christ guards us,

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others. Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:3-5).

**God Can Bless Us Through Betrayal // Genesis 37:26-27**

Though Joseph's story seemed to dead end in a pit, God had other plans. The brothers changed their minds, making a last-minute decision to sell him into slavery instead of leaving him in the pit to die. Their decision impacted not only their family, but the entire nation of Israel. Years later, Joseph dropped one of the greatest lines in ancient literature. He looked his guilt-weary brothers in the eyes and said, “You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people” (Gen. 50:20).

**WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS PASSAGE ABOUT GOD'S PERFECT PLAN FOR OUR LIVES?**

While Joseph must have felt like God forgot him, God was actually planning to raise him up to a high seat of power. God is always up to something bigger than we see.

Joseph was betrayed by his own brothers and sold “for twenty pieces of silver” (v. 28) like Jesus was. Many scholars think Joseph's story is a prediction of the greatest story. Throughout the Old Testament, God points to what He would do through Jesus to save the lost.

Joseph experienced much suffering through life. Being sold as a slave was bad enough, but Joseph faced more setbacks. God was still

## THE POINT: GOD IS AT WORK, EVEN WHEN IT'S NOT OBVIOUS.

working for him as He does for us. And God will continue to work in our lives until we go to be with Him in glory.

Booker T. Washington was a leading African-American educator who founded the great academic institution, Tuskegee University in 1881. Amazingly, Washington was born into slavery, but God turned Washington's life around.

Rather than suffering the cruel fate of slavery, God set Washington on a path of freedom, school, and teaching. He was a former slave who impacted the education of thousands of African-Americans, and that influence continues to be felt today. Just like Joseph, Washington was raised up to help others.

Washington humbly said, "I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed."<sup>18</sup> In moments when life seems to dead end, remember Joseph's life. God's hand might not be obvious at first, but He is at work. Life will deal us disappointments, but the key is to keep moving forward and trusting Christ.

### DID YOU KNOW?

The coat Jacob gave Joseph was not only custom-made, but it was also a garment designated for the firstborn child. The robe was a sign of the privileges afforded to the oldest child. Not only was Joseph not Jacob's firstborn, but he was also given honor traditionally that should have been for his oldest brother, Reuben. Jacob broke the inheritance tradition for a few reasons which help us understand his actions beyond Joseph being the son of his beloved wife, Rachel. Jacob took the privilege of the oldest child when his mother Rebekah convinced him to steal his older brother Esau's birthright and blessing after God told her at their birth the oldest would serve the younger (Gen. 25:23;27). Jacob's father Isaac was also given the privilege of the oldest child because he was the chosen son God had promised to Abram and Sarai in their old age over his older brother Ishmael (Gen. 21).

**How does this family show God's plan still comes to pass although people choose their own way?**

## LIVE IT

### What are godly ways we can prepare ourselves to deal with potential betrayal?

As we are learning through this study, the ones closest to us can hurt us the most. One reason this is true is because they have intimate, up-close access to us and know how to hurt us most deeply. While we should not fear betrayal or avoid close relationships, we should be prepared for people who are imperfect to fail us. Here are three ways to prepare for betrayal:

+ + +

- **Keep God's Word first.** God promises are truth that sustain us. Know He'll never leave or forsake us regardless of what others do. We can always depend on God (Deut. 31:6).
- **Trust God's Plan.** Even though we may not understand what's happening in our lives, understand God has allowed it for His divine purposes, which work out for our good (Rom. 8:28).
- **Think of a time when you betrayed.** Prayerfully you regretted hurting them. Use your experience and feelings along with wisdom from the Holy Spirit to extend forgiveness (Col. 3:12-13).

# DAILY READINGS

## 1. HATERS GONNA HATE // GENESIS 37:4

Have you ever been the “chosen” one and others hated you for it? Or maybe you found yourself hating on someone who had something you felt you deserved. Most of us have probably experienced one or the other. Both expose feelings of hate, whether we’re the giver or receiver. Neither situation feels good. We should remember that if we believe God controls all, He allows these circumstances for a reason. He may allow them to humble us or to increase our compassion for others. Either way, we need to check our hearts and attitudes for seeds of hate that produce harvests of hurt.

**Invite God to expose any root of hate within you and replace it with the fruit of His Spirit.**

## 2. HUMILITY BEFORE HONOR // PHILIPPIANS 2:3

Displaying humility can be challenging, especially when others take advantage or confuse it for weakness. The reality is that it takes more strength to humbly lift others over ourselves than it does to prop ourselves up over others. Even though Reuben was offended like his brothers as Joseph shared his dreams, he still wanted to protect Joseph’s life for the sake of honoring his father, and ultimately honoring Joseph. In times where we must choose humility over our own honor, we can trust God will honor us as we follow the model Jesus lived as a humble servant.

**Trust God to be the One who lifts you in honor. And follow His example so that others will choose to follow Him.**

## 3. BLESSINGS OVER CURSES // GENESIS 37:26-27

Sometimes things don’t go how we think they should, especially when we feel we have been mistreated or overlooked. Our initial response can be to curse, consumed with thoughts of payback in our attempts to get back at those who hurt or offend us. When we flip the script with God as Author,

He enables us to avoid being trapped in pitfalls of cursing and provides opportunities to bless. For those who know God and strive to live lives pleasing to Him, revenge is not ours to deal out. Instead, we believe God already knows our circumstances, good or bad, and will use them to bless us.

**Ask the Holy Spirit to give you godly wisdom so you can choose blessings over curses regardless of your circumstances.**

## 4. RESPONDING TO BETRAYAL’S KISS // MATTHEW 26:47-50; LUKE 22:47-48

Did you know even Jesus experienced betrayal from those closest to Him? He was handed over to His accusers by one who had spent intimate time with Him for three years. The beauty of our relationship with Jesus is He understands anything we experience and provides an example of how we should respond in ways pleasing to God. In the middle of betrayal, He still called Judas, the betrayer, “friend.” Mind-blowing, right? Yet Jesus showed us this godly response to help us understand how we can respond to others—choose love over hate.

**Focus on the example Christ set when He was betrayed so you can respond in a way that honors Him.**

## 5. BUT GOD // ACTS 7:9-10

There may be times in life when people fail us. Mostly these times will catch us off guard and cause confusion, disappointment, and hurt. “BUT God” is a truth we can stand on to get us through. Use this acronym to encourage you. **B**elieve God has everything in His control. **U**nderstand God has a good and perfect will which will come to pass as we walk with Him. **T**rust God with all your heart, mind, and spirit that His Word is true, He’s with you, and will rescue you in or out of your circumstances.

**Even though you may feel like you’re alone when you’re going through trials and hurt, draw close to God. He is sufficient to meet your every need.**