

A Bible Study by
Melissa Spoelstra

JOSEPH

*The Journey
to Forgiveness*

Leader Guide

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Melissa Spoelstra

Abingdon Women
Nashville

JOSEPH: THE JOURNEY TO FORGIVENESS, LEADER GUIDE

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About the Author

Melissa Spoelstra is a popular women's conference speaker, Bible teacher, and author who is madly in love with Jesus and passionate about studying God's Word and helping women of all ages seek Christ and know Him more intimately through serious Bible study. Having a degree in Bible theology, she enjoys teaching God's Word to the body of Christ and traveling to diverse groups and churches across the nation, even to Nairobi, Kenya, for a women's prayer conference. Melissa is the author of *Jeremiah: Daring to Hope in an Unstable World*. She has published articles in *ParentLife*, *Women's Spectrum*, and *Just Between Us*, and writes a regular blog in which she shares her musings about what God is teaching her on any given day. She lives in Dublin, Ohio, with her pastor husband, Sean, and their four kids: Zach, Abby, Sara, and Rachel.

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Introduction

Joseph's journey to forgiveness included many twists and turns. One day he wore a beautiful coat and enjoyed his father's favor, and the next he traveled a road to slavery in Egypt. We all can relate to circumstances changing and people turning on us when we least expect it. As we journey through our own forgiveness stories, we'll find practical truths and real-life application in the Genesis narrative. The question I asked myself when approaching Joseph's story was this: "How did he do it?"

We can talk a good forgiveness game, but when we feel the sting of pain and betrayal, how do we apply forgiveness practically? As we delve into the pages of God's Word, I trust the Holy Spirit will lead the way as we process both the dark corners of our past and our present wounds. We want to keep the focus on Bible study while going much deeper than dates and facts as we delve into heart issues.

Joseph endured betrayal and unfair treatment, but he stayed the course to forgiveness and reconciliation as he looked to God for guidance and strength. We can't go it alone either. We will need God's help to embrace His supernatural forgiveness for us so that we can extend His grace to others—especially those who have hurt us personally. I don't know where you are at as you approach this study. Maybe you struggle against bitterness and resentment, or maybe you feel freedom and peace in all your relationships right now. No matter what is presently happening in your world, I know God has something for you in the truth of His Scripture. I pray that God will show up in huge ways in your life and your group as you journey to forgiveness. I pray that by the end of our study you will be able to say along with Joseph that what others may have intended for harm in your life, "God intended it all for good" (Genesis 50:20).

Using This Leader Guide

This leader guide is provided to help you lead your group on this journey to grow in forgiveness alongside Joseph. Whether you choose to follow this guide step by step, modify its contents to meet your group's needs and preferences, or simply peruse it to find a few helpful tips, questions, and ideas, you will find in

these pages some valuable tools for creating a successful group experience. Here is a quick overview of what is included:

Getting Started: This is a list of strategies, options, and introductory information that will help you ensure good organization and communication. You will want to review this material and communicate relevant information to group members prior to your group session for Week 1, either via e-mail or in an introductory session (see more about this in Getting Started). Or you might consider adding fifteen to thirty minutes to your first session for reviewing some of these important housekeeping details. Whichever option you choose, be sure that group members have the opportunity to purchase books and complete Week 1 before your session for Week 1.

Tips for Tackling Five Common Challenges: This section includes ideas for addressing recurring issues that come up when leading a group. Every leader knows that some group dynamics can be difficult to tackle. What will you do when one person dominates the discussion or cuts off another person who is speaking? All eyes will be on you to see how you will intervene or ignore these situations. Be sure to check out these five common challenges and ideas to help when you encounter them.

Basic Leader Helps: This list of basic leader tips will help you to prepare for and lead each group session.

Session Outlines: Six adaptable outlines are provided to help guide your group time each week. Each begins with a “Leader Prep” section to assist with preparation.

Digging Deeper Article Highlights: These are highlights from the full-length Digging Deeper articles found online at AbingdonPress.com/Joseph, in which you will find second-level, concise information your group members do not have in their participant books, such as cultural insights, background information, commentary, and so forth. (Be sure to read the full articles online prior to your group session.) As you dialogue with God about leading each session, ask Him what parts of the corresponding Digging Deeper article He might want you to share with the group. This will give participants an opportunity to continue to learn new insights in your time together each week. Feel free to point your group members to the online articles in class or via e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, or other social media.

This study is designed for six weeks, with the option of adding an introductory session. (Note: If you choose to have an introductory session, Getting Started

provides a helpful outline of topics you may cover. Add time for fellowship, get-acquainted activities, and prayer to round out your introductory session.) Or, if desired, you may choose to extend the study to eight or twelve weeks; see the options included in Getting Started. Again, whichever option you choose, be sure that group members have the opportunity to purchase participant books and complete Week 1 before your session for Week 1.

Each of the session outlines in this book may be used for a 60-minute, 90-minute, or 120-minute session. The following formats are offered as templates that you may modify for your group:

60-Minute Format

- Welcome/Fellowship (2 minutes)
- All Play (3 minutes)
- Digging Deeper Insights (4 minutes)
- Prayer (1 minute)
- Video (25 minutes)
- Group Discussion (20 minutes)
- Prayer Requests (5 minutes)

90-Minute Format

- Welcome/Fellowship (5–10 minutes)
- All Play (5 minutes)
- Digging Deeper Insights (4 minutes)
- Prayer (1 minute)
- Video (25 minutes)
- Group Discussion (25 minutes)
- Optional Group Activity (5–10 minutes)
- Prayer Requests (10 minutes)

120-Minute Format

- Welcome/Fellowship (15–20 minutes)
- All Play (5–10 minutes)
- Digging Deeper Insights (4 minutes)
- Prayer (1 minute)
- Video (25 minutes)
- Group Discussion (30 minutes)
- Optional Group Activity (5–10 minutes)
- Prayer Requests (15–20 minutes)

As you can see, the basic elements remain the same in each format: a welcome/fellowship time, an “All Play” icebreaker question that everyone can answer, an opportunity to share insights with the group from the week’s Digging Deeper article, a video segment, group discussion, and prayer time. The 90-minute and

120-minute options offer longer times for fellowship, discussion, and prayer plus an optional group activity. If you choose not to do the group activity, you may add that time to another element of the session, such as group discussion or prayer. (See Getting Started for notes about including food, planning for childcare, and other important organizational details.)

If you are new to leading Bible studies and/or would like to have a framework to follow, the session outlines will guide you. Note that more discussion questions have been provided than you may have time to include. Before the session, choose the questions you want to cover and put a check mark beside them. Page references are provided for those questions that relate to specific questions or activities in the participant book. For these questions, invite group members to turn in their participant books to the pages indicated.

If you are a seasoned group leader looking only for a few good questions or ideas, I encourage you to take what you want and leave the rest. After all, you know your group better than I do! Ask God to show you what areas to focus on from the week's homework and use my discussion outline as a template that you can revise.

Of course, the Holy Spirit knows the content of this study (His Word) and the women in your group better than anyone, so above all I encourage you to lead this study under the Holy Spirit's direction, allowing yourself the freedom to make any changes or adaptations that are helpful or desirable.

I'm so excited that God has called you to lead a group of ladies through a study of Joseph's life. Know that I am praying for you and believing God for the work He will do through your leadership. Now, let's get started!

Melissa

Week 1

ACKNOWLEDGING THE PAIN

Genesis 37 & 39

Leader Prep

Memory Verse

*²I pour out my complaints before him
and tell him all my troubles.*

*³When I am overwhelmed,
you alone know the way I should turn.*

Psalm 142:2-3

Digging Deeper

If you did not have an introductory session, read the Digging Deeper Introductory Article, “Does God Have Favorites?” Also read Digging Deeper Week 1, “A Story within the Story,” for context about Genesis 38, which diverges from the Joseph story to focus on Judah’s encounter with his daughter-in-law Tamar. Note any interesting facts or insights that you would like to share with the group. (See pages 24–26 for highlights; read the full articles online at AbingdonPress.com/Joseph.)

Materials Needed

- *Joseph* DVD and DVD player
- Stick-on nametags and markers (optional)
- Copy of family tree handout (see AbingdonPress.com/Joseph), pens or pencils (Optional Group Activity)
- Index cards (optional—Prayer Requests)

Session Outline

Note: Refer to the format templates on page 7 for suggested time allotments.

Welcome

Offer a word of welcome to the group. If time allows and you choose to provide food, invite the women to enjoy refreshments and fellowship. (Groups meeting for 60 minutes may want to have a time for food and fellowship before the official start time.) Be sure to watch the clock and move to the All Play icebreaker at the appropriate time.

All Play

Ask each group member to respond briefly to these questions: *Where were you born? If you have siblings, where do you fall in the birth order?*

Read aloud or paraphrase:

Joseph joined a family of many brothers even though he was the first child born to his mother. The dynamics of birth order can influence our tendencies and roles within a family. Joseph gained his father's favor simply by being born in Jacob's old age to his favorite wife. However, this same favor from his father caused him the disdain of his brothers. How did your birth order impact your place in the family? (Pause briefly for responses.) Some of us may have felt like our parents' favorite, while others of us can relate to Joseph's brothers. Let's see how God views each one of us and consider His view of favoritism.

Digging Deeper Insights

Share with the group the insights you gained from the Digging Deeper articles (highlights on pages 24–26; full articles at AbingdonPress.com/Joseph). If you did not have an introductory session, you might consider looking up together some of the verses from the article on favoritism and God's love for each person, "Does God Have Favorites?" Next, point the women to Genesis 38, which wasn't included in our

study this week, with the article “*The Story within the Story.*” As you mention Judah and Tamar’s incident, remind the women that God uses broken, dysfunctional families to show His glory. No matter where we have come from, God wants to redeem even our worst family secrets and transform us from the inside out. If you choose, encourage group members to read the full articles online.

Prayer

Before playing the video segment, ask God to prepare the group to receive His Word and to hear His voice.

Video

Play the video for Week 1. Invite participants to complete the Video Viewer Guide for Week 1 in the participant book as they watch (page 37).

Group Discussion

Video Discussion Questions

- Do you tend to stuff, spew, or leak your emotions? Why is it so important for us to acknowledge our feelings when we are hurt?
- What is the difference between acknowledging emotions and letting them lead? Why should emotions not be placed in charge? What insight does 1 John 3:20 give us?
- What are some ways that we add fuel to the fire of our pain? How can God help us extinguish the fire?
- Read Proverbs 15:1. What enables us to give a gentle answer?
- According to Romans 12:19, why must we surrender our right to revenge? What does Romans 12:20 tell us to do instead?
- What can we do to keep the little things from becoming big things—and to become less easily offended by the little things?

Participant Book Discussion Questions

Note: Page references are provided for those questions that relate to specific questions or activities in the participant book.

Before you begin, invite volunteers to look up the following Scriptures and be prepared to read them aloud when called upon. You might want to write each of the Scripture references on a separate note card or sticky note that you can hand out.

Scriptures: Genesis 37; Proverbs 10:12; Matthew 5:21-22; 1 John 2:9; Genesis 39:1-6; Hebrews 11:32-40; Genesis 39:10

Day 1: A Dysfunctional Family

- As we reflect on the details of the family Joseph was born into, how did the relationships between Jacob and his wives and concubines affect the relationships between Joseph and his brothers? (Review Genesis 27–30 to be able to answer any questions or add insights.)
- Ask someone to read aloud Genesis 37:1-4. According to verse 4, how did Jacob’s favoritism affect the brothers’ relationship with Joseph? (page 14)
- How have you seen favoritism have negative effects in your family or in other families you have observed?
- What are some practical ways to guard against favoritism in your family, job, or church relationships?

Day 2: Fuel to the Fire

- Read Genesis 37:5-11. What were some observations you made about Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers in the chart on page 18?
- Read Genesis 37:12-37. Do you think Joseph’s brothers were responsible for their actions even though Joseph could have contributed to their jealousy? Why or why not? (page 19)
- On this day we discussed whether Joseph added fuel to the fire of relational conflict with his bad report, dreams, and special favor. What questions do you have about how you might be contributing to the friction related to a strained situation in your own life? (page 18)

Day 3: Taming the Wild Horses

- What were some of the emotions Joseph’s brothers felt toward him? (page 24)
- Describe some wild horse emotions you have struggled to tame when you have felt betrayed or wounded. (page 23)
- Have someone read aloud Proverbs 10:12; Matthew 5:21-22; and 1 John 2:9. Which one of these verses especially strikes you and why?

Day 4: The Before and the After

- Has an event or situation ever divided your life into the categories of before and after?
- Have someone read aloud Genesis 39:1-6. How did the Lord show up in Joseph’s life even during his time of captivity? (page 28)
- In what ways have you seen God draw nearer to you and grant you favor even when things weren’t turning out the way you hoped they would?

- Have someone read Hebrews 11:32-40 aloud. How do these verses help us better understand the different outcomes of equally faithful people?
- Sometimes it feels like bad circumstances mean we are being punished and good events mean we are being rewarded. Have you ever felt that way? How does this passage in Hebrews fly in the face of that thinking?

Day 5: Run for Your Life

- According to Genesis 39:10, what was one specific thing Joseph did to avoid temptation? (page 34)
- What are some temptations that you face regularly and what are some practical things you have learned to help you avoid temptation?
- What are one or two key statements or concepts that stuck out to you in your time of study this week? (page 36)

Optional Group Activity (for a session longer than 60 minutes)

Provide each member with a copy of a family tree worksheet (see AbingdonPress.com/Joseph). Say something like this: *This week we looked at Joseph's family tree and some of the pain and emotions expressed by various family members. We saw conflict in one generation trickle down into the next. Take a moment to draw and label your family tree on the paper provided. You can be as simple or detailed as you like (include at least your siblings, parents, and grandparents). Then, as you look at your family members, write under each name one or two emotions you have seen (or saw) displayed regularly in his or her life.*

Next, instruct the women to break into pairs and share their family trees with each other. Ask them to identify any emotions of other family members that have impacted their own lives. If time allows, come back together as a group and have a few women share any “Aha!” moments they had—moments of acknowledging or coming to better understand some of the wild horses they need to tame in their own lives.

Prayer Requests

End by inviting the group members to share prayer requests and pray for one another. Use index cards, popcorn prayer, or another prayer technique included in *Tips for Tackling Five Common Challenges* (pages 12–17) to lead this time with intentionality and sensitivity.

DIGGING DEEPER INTRODUCTORY ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS

Does God Have Favorites?

See AbingdonPress.com/Joseph for the full article.

Have you ever read Bible stories like those of Joseph and wondered if God has favorites? Jacob favored his son Joseph; does God have favorite children too?

God tells us plainly in His Word that He doesn't play favorites. Romans 2:11 sums it up very succinctly: "For God does not show favoritism." We see this truth reiterated throughout the Scriptures.

- In the Old Testament we see God's love for those outside the people of Israel, such as Ruth the Moabite and Rahab the Canaanite. While He chose and loved the people of Israel, He also loved the world and anyone willing to believe and trust in Him.
- God takes no pleasure in the death of even wicked people. "Do you think that I like to see wicked people die? says the Sovereign LORD. Of course not! I want them to turn from their wicked ways and live" (Ezekiel 18:23).
- Peter had a vision of unclean food coming down on a sheet, and he came to understand how the Gentiles are included in God's redemptive plan. He says in Acts 10:34, "I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism."
- John 3:16 tells us that God sent His Son for the whole world: "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."
- God tells us that He wants all people to be saved: "The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent" (2 Peter 3:9).

God truly doesn't play favorites in the sense of preferring some over others, but He does have a closer or deeper relationship with those who seek and believe Him with hearts that are fully committed to Him. Just as a parent loves a child

even when that child makes bad decisions or even runs away as a prodigal, God loves all of His children. When a child disobeys a parent, the love isn't lost; but the relationship is greatly affected. God loves every person on this planet. However, when we don't live according to His instructions and pursue sin instead of right living, it puts distance in our relationship with Him. Sin separates us from God because He is holy and perfect.

If God seems to have favorites, it may be because those who believe His promises receive the blessings of obedience. Second Chronicles 16:9 tells us, "The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him." God isn't looking for perfection from us, but He searches the earth looking for those who, like Joseph, have a tender heart toward Him and His ways.

Although the biblical heroes sometimes made terrible mistakes, they believed the promises of God. Abraham, Joseph, Mary the mother of Jesus, and many others throughout the pages of the Bible overcame difficult circumstances through their faith. Their lives were not easy. I'm sure Joseph didn't feel like one of God's favorites when he was crying out from the bottom of a pit or was thrown in prison after being falsely accused. Many others did not even receive God's promises of blessing within their lifetimes but instead looked forward to a future fulfillment.

If you want to be one of God's "favorites," know that you already are! He is the kind of God who collects all your tears in a bottle (Psalm 56:8), knows the number of hairs on your head (Luke 12:7), provides for you so that you don't have to worry about clothes and food (Matthew 6:25-30), and loves you so much that He sent His only Son to die for you (John 3:16).

We are already His favorites because He created us and is crazy about us. However, to be used of Him as Joseph was, we must cooperate with His plan. Although Joseph was human and underwent much mistreatment and injustice, it almost seems that he made superhuman heart choices to go God's way of forgiveness. Actually, he simply chose to believe in the dreams God gave him even when they seemed impossible. Talk about faith: Joseph believed he would rule over his brothers even while stuck in a prison on foreign soil.

If you are wondering if you can be used like Joseph, the answer is you can! God may not call you to organize a food program or be second in command of a country, but He has good plans for you. As you draw near to Him with undivided loyalty, you will be amazed at the things He might call you to initiate. And He will give you the words and the grace to see it through for His glory. After all, you are one of His favorites—we *all* are!

DIGGING DEEPER

WEEK 1 HIGHLIGHTS

The Story within the Story

See AbingdonPress.com/Joseph for the full article.

Joseph's story begins in Genesis 37 and continues in Chapters 39–50. So why does Chapter 38 veer away from Joseph to focus on Judah?

After Joseph was sold as a slave, Judah moved away from his family to Canaan, married a Canaanite woman, and had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. He arranged a marriage for his first son, Er, to a Canaanite woman named Tamar. Er was a wicked man, and God took Er's life. According to Israelite law, a widow was to be married to the next oldest brother to produce an heir in the dead husband's name. So Onan was given to Tamar. Although he had sex with Tamar, he took measures to prevent her from becoming pregnant. God considered it evil for Onan to deny a child to his dead brother, so God took Onan's life too.

Judah was afraid that if he gave his last son, Shelah, to marry Tamar, something bad might happen to him. So he sent Tamar back to her father's house to wait until Shelah was old enough to marry. However, Judah never intended to honor his promise. We learn that Judah's wife died and Shelah was grown yet Tamar was still at her father's home. Tamar heard that Judah would be traveling to Timnah to supervise the shearing of his sheep. She took off her mourning clothes, put on a veil to disguise herself, and sat beside the road. Judah then propositioned her as a prostitute, offering her a goat from his flock in exchange for sex. She asked for his identification cord and seal as an assurance that payment would come.

Tamar became pregnant from this encounter. When Judah sent the goat to retrieve his personal items, he was told there never had been a prostitute in that area. Three months later Tamar was found to be pregnant. Judah planned to have her stoned according to the law for committing adultery. Tamar had the seal and cord to identify Judah as the father. Judah's response showed a humble spirit as he admitted that he was in the wrong (Genesis 38:26).

Tamar gave birth to twins, Perez and Zerah. Perez was included in the genealogy of the Messiah. This tells us that Tamar's twin boys were given full rights as heirs in Judah's family. They were not treated as illegitimate.

At first this story seems like a puzzling incident of family dysfunction with characters who don't seem to have much impact on Joseph's story. Yet as we continue with Joseph's encounters in Egypt, it gives us additional insight into Joseph's brother Judah, who emerges as the leader among his brothers.