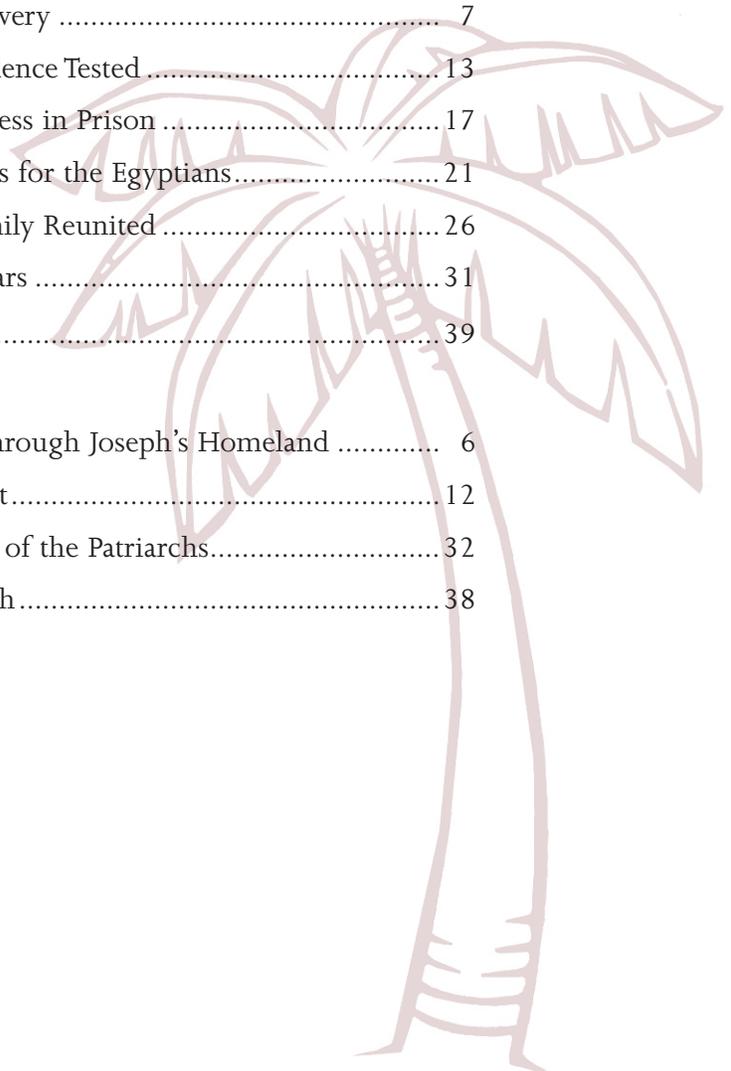


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FOREWORD

They have been referred to as the saints, the Hebrews, the Israelites, a remnant, and the church. They are God's people—his chosen people. They belong to him; so precious that he would go to impossible lengths to overcome the gulf that separates them from himself. You and I are among them.

The books in this series are a recital of the life and times of some of them—Noah, Jacob, Ruth, David, Jonah, Paul, and others. Their stories involve conflict and resolution, pain and tragedy, despondency and renewal. They present disturbing images from the underbelly of human depravity, and visions of untold glory that transport us to the soaring heights of ultimate conquest. The plots and settings are drawn from the living record of the Bible. Series authors and editors were careful to remain faithful to that record. But in an effort to make the text come alive, these narratives speculate occasionally to provide additional background to the story.

In these stories we see God's people wrestling with their humanity and struggling to find respite for their souls. Each story is unique in its own right. Yet two common threads run through the fabric of their stories and ours. The first is the thread of the bitter curse of sin. The second is the golden thread of salvation in Christ Jesus. We can readily identify with both, for we share these same two themes with all of God's people. Their stories, like ours, rest forever in God's abiding grace.

Kenneth Kremer, Series Editor

GRACIOUS BROTHER

When your family is expecting guests for holiday dinner, things can get rather hectic around the house. The planning, cleaning, and food preparation may go on for days before the guests arrive. It is nice having guests, but it is also a lot of hard work. Your family wants to put its best foot forward so that your guests see your graciousness and generosity.

Consider the tremendous task that awaits God every day. The psalmist says that the eyes of all look to him, and he gives them their food at the proper time. He opens his hand and satisfies the desires of every living thing (Psalm 145:15,16). Not just 15-20 people for one meal, but all living things look to God for food every day of their lives. And God feeds them! God gives them their food when they need it. He does this as easily as you and I open our hands.

About 1,900 years before Christ, God took special steps to feed the people who inhabited the region of Egypt and Palestine. Knowing that a seven-year famine was coming, God opened his hand by sending Joseph from Palestine to Egypt and placing him in a position where he could arrange for the survival of the people of that region.

Among the people saved from starvation were the patriarch Jacob, his son Judah, and Judah's son Perez—all ancestors of the Savior. If just one of them had perished, if one generation had been lost, the Savior would not have been born 1,900 years later. In a chain every link must bear its burden. In a family tree every generation begets the next. Joseph was the man God sent to save the Savior's ancestors. Through Joseph, God saved not just the people of that time and place, he also saved you and me. Without Joseph, all would have perished for eternity.



Little Joseph's ears were ringing. The women in his father's household were quarreling again. They were always competing for his father's affections. And it wasn't just his mother Rachel and his Aunt Leah who couldn't get along. Joseph knew that their two maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah, also took turns sleeping with his father. The result was a contentious household: four hopelessly divided women, constantly at one another's throats.

But when Joseph listened more closely, he realized that this time it wasn't quarreling he heard. It was a very earnest and animated conversation among his father Jacob, his mother Rachel, and his Aunt Leah. They were making plans to leave their home in Paddan Aram; it was the only home Joseph had ever known! His father said to his mother and his Aunt Leah, "Your brothers, Laban's precious sons, have been spreading the accusation that I've stolen all your father's wealth. Even Laban's attitude toward me has been different lately. I'm afraid your father and your brothers may actually harm us. And not only that, but during the breeding season I had a dream. In it the angel of God told me to leave this place at once and go back to my native land."

To everyone's surprise, Rachel and Leah not only agreed with Jacob, they agreed with each other! They too wanted to leave Paddan Aram. They said, "We might as well leave. We'll never inherit anything from our father's estate. He has frittered away everything he ever had. And he treats us more like foreigners than daughters. Let's do what God has told you.

IN HIS FATHER'S HOUSE

And let's do it quickly before Father does harm us!"

It was three days before Laban found out they had left and another seven days before he and his armed men caught up with them in the hill country of Gilead. When he caught them, Laban accused Jacob of stealing his daughters and his grandchildren, not to mention his household gods. Everyone was trembling with fear, wondering what would happen. But in the end Laban did not lift his hand against them. He couldn't, he said, because the Lord had appeared to him, warning him not to. To everyone's relief, Laban let them go the next day, but only after he forced everyone to kiss him good-bye.

After that, Jacob's entourage turned south toward Canaan, where they encountered another tense situation. Jacob had made enemies in his homeland during his youth. His own brother, Esau, had vowed to kill him if he ever got the chance. Now word reached him that Esau was coming to meet them with four hundred armed men, intending to settle old scores. Only some very generous gifts from Jacob to Esau—hundreds of sheep and goats, camels, cows, and donkeys—and divine providence saved the family from certain destruction.

But if those in Jacob's family felt safe when they finally arrived in Canaan, their feelings of safety were premature. Soon after their arrival, Joseph's sister, Dinah, was raped by a young man named Shechem, who then wanted to marry her. Joseph's older brothers pretended to forgive Shechem. They promised to be Shechem's friends if he and the other men in his city would be circumcised. But as soon as Shechem and

the other men in his city were disabled by the pain of circumcision, Joseph's brothers, Simeon and Levi, killed them all. Then Simeon and Levi stole their possessions and took their women and children as slaves.

They should have realized that this treachery would arouse suspicion and anger among all who lived in that part of Canaan. Again Joseph's family was forced to move, this time to a place called Bethel. But they didn't stay there long either. They traveled from Bethel toward Ephrath and, on the way, Joseph's mother died giving birth to his brother Benjamin. Trials and tribulations were coming early and often in Joseph's young life.

As time went on, it became clear that Joseph's older brothers were a problem. Their father Jacob realized they would have to be watched or they would get the family into more and more trouble. If his sons could kill Shechem and his family and steal everything they had, perhaps his sons had also stolen animals from Laban's flocks. Perhaps Laban was right when he had charged the family with stealing!

As treacherous as Joseph's ten older brothers were, Joseph was trustworthy. As wild and rebellious as they were, Joseph was obedient. Jacob couldn't help but notice Joseph's exemplary behavior—Joseph was never in trouble. One day, as a reward for Joseph's obedience, Jacob gave him a richly ornamented robe. But this act of kindness caused Joseph nothing but grief. When Joseph's brothers saw that their father loved Joseph more than them, they were filled with envy and hatred. They were no longer kind to Joseph.