

Group Study Guide

SUCCESS AND FAILURE:

Timely Wisdom from the Life of Joseph
by Mark D. Roberts



LIFE FOR LEADERS

INTRODUCTION TO LIFE FOR LEADERS STUDY GUIDE SERIES

The Life for Leaders Study Guide Series helps leaders connect their faith to their work. Whether you exercise leadership in business, education, arts, government, media, volunteer work, church, or family, Life for Leaders will guide you into deeper biblical understanding and more faithful living. It will help you integrate your faith with all you do.

The Study Guide Series is based on the Life for Leaders daily devotions (lifeforleaders.depree.org/devotionals/) produced by Fuller's Max De Pree Center for Leadership (depree.org). These online devotions are meant for individual reflection and prayer. The Study Guide Series offers a thorough rewrite of the daily devotions for use in small groups, classes, and other conversational settings. (If you're looking for thematic guides for personal devotions, check out the Life for Leaders Personal Devotions Series at churchandmarketplace.org/store/).

Life for Leaders is a crucial facet of Church & Marketplace, a network of marketplace leaders committed to helping their churches become

vital incubators of faith and work integration (churchandmarketplace.org). The Study Guide Series can be a valuable resource for churches that are seeking to encourage and equip their members for living their faith in the marketplace.

Life for Leaders, in all of its forms, assumes that God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture. It also assumes that God's Word addresses the real, pressing issues of our lives, including our work as leaders. The team that has written and produced this study guide and the rest of the Life for Leaders materials hopes we can help you grow in your relationship with God, so that you might know God more deeply and live out your faith in him more significantly.

May God bless you in your faith, work, leadership, and growth in Christ.

Mark D. Roberts

Main Writer and Executive Editor of Life for Leaders



HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

This study guide has been written for use in a small group, perhaps at church or during lunch with some colleagues at work. If you're using this guide for personal study or for a larger class setting, you can adapt it as you see fit.

The study has eleven sessions, each one meant to take a little less than an hour to complete. Of course, conversation about the theme of a session could take longer if you have the time.

If you are using this study guide in a group, I recommend that you develop the practice of reading the assigned Scripture passage out loud in the group, even if you have read and studied it in advance. When we hear the Bible read aloud, we discover things we would otherwise have missed.

The guide does not build in time for personal sharing and prayer, though these could surely be added to the end of the session. But I would strongly encourage you to spend some time in prayer responding specifically to the biblical text and theme for the session. Model

prayers at the end of each guide will help you do this.

The agenda and questions for each session are suggestions, not requirements. If a group session goes in other fruitful directions, I encourage you to move with the wind of the Spirit.



INTRODUCTION TO SUCCESS AND FAILURE: TIMELY WISDOM FROM THE LIFE OF JOSEPH

One of the most intriguing and moving stories in the Bible appears in Genesis 30-50. It's the story of Joseph, whose life took some unexpected and often unappreciated turns. Yet, through all of these, God was active in Joseph's life, helping him to grow and using him for God's sovereign purposes.

Joseph started life as a favored son and obnoxious younger brother. Sold into slavery by his resentful older brothers, Joseph was taken from his homeland to Egypt, where he served under an official named Potiphar. But when Joseph became the victim of sexual harassment and slander by Potiphar's wife, he ended up in prison.

What happened after that is a familiar story for many of us, and we'll touch upon it later. But, for now, we begin our study of success and failure by focusing on Genesis 39, when Joseph was bought by Potiphar. What we see in this chapter will challenge and encourage us as we think about what success and failure mean in our lives.



SESSION 1: CHALLENGING OUR IDEA OF SUCCESS

BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE



After opening with prayer, dedicating the time to the Lord, read Genesis 39:1-23.

QUESTIONS TO GET STARTED



- *What stands out to you in this chapter?*
- *What questions do you have about what you have just read?*
- *What do you see here that is relevant to the issue of success?*

REFLECTIONS



As a culture, we are obsessed with success. You can find evidence of this if you search Amazon.com with the

words “success books.” You’ll find bestselling volumes such as *The Success Principles*, *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, and *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Thousands of books focus on success in specialized fields, such as *Gardening Success with Difficult Soils*, *Success in Marriage*, and *Big Success with Soup Recipes*. A recent search on “success books” turned up 273,380 hits on Amazon; if you were to scan this list and devote only 5 seconds to each book, it would take you three full days—without sleeping—to scroll through the entire list. Like I said, we’re obsessed with success.

Though this cultural obsession has its own particular character, interest in success is nothing new. In fact, you can find it in Scripture. In Genesis 39, for example, we join the story of Joseph midstream. At the end of chapter 37, he had been sold by his brothers to some Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt and then sold him as a slave to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials (37:28, 36). On the surface, this sounds like bad news for Joseph. But, as it turns out, “*The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered*” (39:2, NIV). Or, as other



translations put it, “he became a successful man” (ESV, NRSV).

Why was Joseph successful? Genesis reveals later on that he had unusual management and leadership capabilities. But our passage does not point to Joseph’s skills as the root of his success. Rather, as it says in 39:2, “The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered.” Verse 3 makes it even clearer that God is the ultimate reason for Joseph’s accomplishments: “[T]he LORD gave him success in everything he did.” The Hebrew word translated here as “success” is the same word translated as “prospered” in v. 2. The Lord made sure that everything Joseph did in service to Potiphar was successful.

Genesis 39 reminds us that God is the ultimate source of all goodness, including success in the workplace. This does not mean that human effort makes no difference. But the example of Joseph shows us that success is not a matter of simply having the right principles, laws, or mindset. Our success depends on God, on God’s grace, wisdom, provision, and sovereignty. If we want to be successful in our work—not to mention other aspects of life—we begin by relying on God in all things, seeking his ways and his glory.



QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- *When you think of success, what thoughts or images come to mind? Who, in your mind, is a paradigm of success? Why?*
- *Long ago, God caused Joseph to be successful in his work. Do you think God still helps people to be successful in their work today? Why or why not?*
- *As you consider your own accomplishments, can you see God’s hand of blessing in them? What shows you that God has been blessing you?*
- *How might you rely more consistently on God in your daily life, work, and leadership?*





TAKEAWAYS: SOMETHING TO THINK, SOMETHING TO DO

- *What is one idea you will take away from today's study? It could be a new thought or an action step*
- *A possibility: Think about your successes in the next week as gifts from God and not only the result of your own effort.*



WRAPPING UP WITH PRAYER

As you conclude today's study, take a few moments to pray. I would encourage you to pray in two segments. First, pray specifically in response to your encounter with God's Word. Second, after you have done this, group members can share concerns and pray for each other.

Let the following prayer be a model for the first segment of prayer:



SOMETHING EXTRA

For a fascinating conversation on "music and achievement" by Constantine Campbell, an excellent biblical scholar and saxophonist(!), see his blog posts at Sapientia (<http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/sapientia/>; "Music and Achievement"; "What Music Has Taught Me About Achievement," and "Love is More Powerful Than Discipline").

Gracious God, thank you for the example of Joseph and for the reminder that success comes ultimately from your hand. As we seek to be successful in our work and in every other part of life, may we rely on you. May we seek you and your ways in all we do. May we be guided by your truth. May our success be a demonstration of your blessing. May we receive it as a gift from you, something to steward well for your purposes. Amen.

