

GENESIS

Lesson 53

Genesis 37: Joseph's Dreams

Joseph's Dreams

¹ *Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.*

² *This is the account of Jacob's family line.*

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

³ *Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. ⁴ When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.*

⁵ *Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. ⁶ He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: ⁷ We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."*

⁸ *His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.*

⁹ *Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."*

¹⁰ *When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" ¹¹ His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.*

Joseph Sold by His Brothers

¹² *Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, ¹³ and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them."*

"Very well," he replied.

¹⁴ *So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron.*

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, ¹⁵ a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

¹⁶ *He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?"*

¹⁷ *"They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'"*

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. ¹⁸ But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

¹⁹ *"Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. ²⁰ "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."*

²¹ *When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. ²² "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.*

²³ *So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing— ²⁴ and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it.*

²⁵ *As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels*

were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

²⁶ Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? ²⁷ Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

²⁸ So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

²⁹ When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. ³⁰ He went back to his brothers and said, "The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?"

³¹ Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. ³² They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."

³³ He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."

³⁴ Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave." So his father wept for him.

³⁶ Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard."

Genesis 37:1-36 [NIV]

In this lesson, we begin our study of the life of Joseph, Israel's favorite son. Early in our scriptural text for this lesson, we discover two important points: (1) Joseph was loved more than any of Israel's other sons because he was born in Israel's old age, and (2) Joseph could interpret dreams. These two points will run throughout the narrative in the remaining chapters of Genesis.

Joseph Dreams

Genesis Chapter 37 opens by informing the reader of Israel's great love for his son Joseph, and how that love actually caused the other brothers to hate Joseph. Furthermore, Joseph's two dreams (which he recounted to his brothers) greatly increased the hatred of his brothers towards him.

Review the embedded scriptural text above and respond to the following questions.

1. How old was Joseph during the time of the events discussed in this chapter (Gen. 34:2)?
2. From the fields where they are shepherding, Joseph brings a "bad report" back to his father Israel. What was it?

Joseph's father loved him so much that he made an ornate robe for him—something very special that he had not done for, or given to, any of his other sons. We can readily observe from these two examples why the brothers "hated him and could not speak a kind word to him."

Joseph Has Two Dreams

Sometime later, Joseph has a dream that really angers his brothers and, later, also upsets his father. Note that when Joseph told his brothers about the dream, i.e., that their sheaves would bow down to his, it really angered them. When he

had a second dream, showing the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him, and told the dream to them in their father's presence, it made them even angrier, and even troubled his father.

We could ask the question, was Joseph bragging about his family, the sun, moon, and eleven stars having to bow down to him, or was he simply conveying as accurately as he could the dreams he had? I believe his family viewed him as a brash young man, the youngest of the sons, telling everyone he had a dream that had them bowing down to him, along with the celestial beings.

I think it even runs deeper than that. Dreams had special meanings then. This is not like a dream that we might have today, full of odd images and seemingly disconnected from reality. Joseph's dreams were seen as prophetic in nature. Israel, his father Jacob, didn't completely understand what it would mean in the years ahead, and his sons took great exception to the youngest brother telling them that they would eventually bow down to him. You can sense from this narrative that there was a visceral hatred by them toward Joseph. This hatred forms the backdrop for what happens next.

Before we move on, however, I am certain that these brothers are not the only ones who have ever been jealous of their siblings. In fact, I'm sure that each of us has experienced or been aware of similar tensions within our own families or within the families of others. There seems to be a natural rivalry among brothers and sisters—Cain and Able come to mind as the first—and it continues today.

Read Psalm 133:1 and 1 Peter 3:8, and respond to the following question.

3. What do the above verses indicate regarding God's will for our relationships with our siblings and family, and even regarding our relationships with fellow believers?

Joseph's Brothers' Hatred Blinds Their Judgment

Israel sends Joseph out to check on the brothers and the flocks and to report back to him. (Gen. 37:12-17) The brothers, now off in Dothan tending to their father's flocks, do not know this and when they see Joseph coming from a distance, they begin to plot his murder. Their hatred is so strong that it completely blinds them to the reality that he is just coming to get a report he can carry back to his father. All they can focus on is their lust to kill their youngest brother. (Gen 37:18-20)

Jealous of him and his dreams, they plan on killing him and throwing him in a pit for wild animals to eat. The concept of wild animals in the land of Canaan is something that we do not completely understand in modern times. It is hard for us to conceive of wild animals, like lions, tigers, and leopards, roaming in Israel. (See Song of Songs 4:8 and Daniel 6:7 for example.) However, in Joseph's day, they roamed all over the land of Canaan and were a constant threat to shepherds and their flocks.

Joseph's brothers continued to plot how they would kill Joseph. However, Reuben, realizing that they were serious, interceded on Joseph's behalf and eventually convinced them to simply take his fancy robe and throw him in the cistern. Reuben reasoned that if they took that approach, Joseph would not die, and he could return later and rescue Joseph. (Gen. 37:21-22)

Joseph arrives at their camp, completely unaware of their plot. They subsequently grab him, take his nice robe, and throw him into the pit, i.e., the cistern. You can imagine that it must have been chaotic, and that when they threw him in it, was probably with some amount of force. Imagine what Joseph is now trying to mentally process: having come in peace to do his father's will, but instead, getting accosted as his brothers turn on him. He is like Jesus in many respects; God is sending him to Egypt to prepare to save Jacob, his family, and his descendants from the coming famine and certain death—but they are rejecting him and even plotting to kill him.

We should also note that the scripture does not tell us that the brothers threw Joseph in the cistern and then sat down to eat, but rather it indicates that sometime later, "as they sat down to eat their meal..." (Gen. 37:25) We see a picture of shepherds taking a meal break when the caravan approaches.

However, where is Reuben? Recall that Reuben intended "to rescue him from them and take him back to his father." However, in verses 29 and 30 of Genesis 37, we read that when Reuben "returned," he found the cistern empty. Where was he returning from? Most Biblical scholars believe that it was probably Reuben's turn to tend the flocks while everyone else ate. If so, he probably imagined returning to camp that evening, and when the opportunity presented itself later in the evening/night, he would rescue Joseph. However, as we see in the narrative, that plan was preempted when the other brothers sold Joseph to that Ishmaelite caravan headed to Egypt.

Taking their lie back to Israel/Jacob, they show him the bloodied robe, indicating to him that Joseph was eaten by a wild animal(s). The news is devastating to Israel who deeply loved Joseph. The narrative ends with (a) Israel mourning for his son, (2) the deceiving brothers believing they had gotten away with their lies in exacting their revenge on Joseph, and (3) Joseph being sold into slavery and headed to Egypt in a Midianite caravan. But as we know, this is not the end of the story...not even close.

In the next lesson, we will vicariously travel along in a caravan to Egypt. We will explore what that would have been like in those days and what Joseph would have experienced as the caravan made its way south to Egypt.

In the end, God's will be accomplished, even though from a human point-of-view this seemed impossible. As believers, we know that God's will *always* be accomplished. Like Joseph, we should remain focused on what God's intended purpose is for our life, in spite of our circumstances. We need to strive to have faith that Jesus will move mountains for us when we are weak, knowing that he is always with us. He promises that he will never leave us.

Correspondingly, please focus on the following scriptures in the days ahead:

- **Joshua 1:9** - "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."
- **Isaiah 41:10** - "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."
- **Deuteronomy 31:6** - "Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you."

Thanks again for studying with us.

In Christ,

Wes