

Issues of Love

Bible Background • GENESIS 37

Printed Text • GENESIS 37:2-11, 23-24, 28 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 105:1-6, 16-22

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXAMINE the circumstances of familial love and hatred between Jacob/Israel's sons, REPENT of times we allowed jealousy and hatred to override a commitment to love, and DEVELOP strategies to allow a commitment to love to override feelings of jealousy and hatred.

In Focus

Kathy always felt her church could provide greater assistance to locals facing occupational struggles from a lack of education. Her deep passion for this issue led her to approach the church board to ask to start a literacy project for teen moms. Kathy didn't know all of the Board members before she made her presentation, but she went in confident that God had given her a plan that would be of benefit to the church and the community. When the Board members started asking questions, Kathy answered as honestly and humbly as she could. She noticed, however, that one board member seemed to take issue with every point. Something about the woman seemed familiar but Kathy couldn't remember it. Suddenly it dawned on her. This was Sonya's mother. Kathy and Sonya had been good friends in the early years of grade school, but just before high school, the girls lost touch. Kathy knew that Sonya had some hard times after she had her first child and dropped out of school. That was fifteen years ago and it didn't seem like Sonya's life had gotten easier. She thought her presentation went well, but Sonya's mother's questions made her wonder if she would get their support. "How did you become an expert in the educational needs of single moms?" This type of questioning was obviously driven by jealousy, but would the other board members recognize that? All Kathy could do was wait and pray.

In today's lesson, we will examine what happens when relationships are not rooted in love, as they should be. What consequences have you seen when you let jealousy and bitterness disturb your relationships?

Keep in Mind

"But while his brothers were jealous of Joseph, his father wondered what the dreams meant" (Genesis 37:11, NLT).

Words You Should Know

- A. **Dream** (v. 5) *chalom* (Heb.)—A prophetic or ordinary dream
- B. **Pit** (v. 20) *bor* (Heb.)—A hole used to hold water, a cistern

Say It Correctly

- Midianite.** MID-ee-ann-ite.
- Ishmaelite.** ISH-mee-ul-ite.
- Bilhah.** BILL-ha.
- Zilpah.** ZILL-pah.

KJV

Genesis 37:2 These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad was with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report.

3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours.

4 And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.

5 And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren: and they hated him yet the more.

6 And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed:

7 For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf.

8 And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words.

9 And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me.

10 And he told it to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?

11 And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.

23 And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stripped Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him;

24 And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it.

28 Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt.

NLT

Genesis 37:2 This is the account of Jacob and his family. When Joseph was seventeen years old, he often tended his father's flocks. He worked for his half brothers, the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. But Joseph reported to his father some of the bad things his brothers were doing.

3 Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children because Joseph had been born to him in his old age. So one day Jacob had a special gift made for Joseph—a beautiful robe.

4 But his brothers hated Joseph because their father loved him more than the rest of them. They couldn't say a kind word to him.

5 One night Joseph had a dream, and when he told his brothers about it, they hated him more than ever.

6 "Listen to this dream," he said.

7 "We were out in the field, tying up bundles of grain. Suddenly my bundle stood up, and your bundles all gathered around and bowed low before mine!"

8 His brothers responded, "So you think you will be our king, do you? Do you actually think you will reign over us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dreams and the way he talked about them.

9 Soon Joseph had another dream, and again he told his brothers about it. "Listen, I have had another dream," he said. "The sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed low before me!"

10 This time he told the dream to his father as well as to his brothers, but his father scolded him. "What kind of dream is that?" he asked. "Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow to the ground before you?"

11 But while his brothers were jealous of Joseph, his father wondered what the dreams meant.

23 So when Joseph arrived, his brothers ripped off the beautiful robe he was wearing.

24 Then they grabbed him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

28 So when the Ishmaelites, who were Midianite traders, came by, Joseph's brothers pulled him out of the cistern and sold him to them for twenty pieces of silver. And the traders took him to Egypt.

The People, Places, and Times

Blended Families. Joseph and his eleven brothers were the sons of Jacob (Israel) but had four different mothers (Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah). While God does not favor polygamy, it was often practiced and resulted in ancient cultures and resulted in complicated family structures. Firstborn sons had prominence because they would inherit the most. However, the father would often adjust the inheritance based on his preference for his sons or their mothers. Reuben was the eldest of all the sons, but Jacob did not favor Reuben's mother, Leah. Joseph was the first born of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, but he was the eleventh born of the twelve sons. Sons often jockeyed for position with their father and among themselves.

Cistern. The Hebrew word translated to "a deep hole" (v. 20) describes the place where Joseph was cast by his brothers. It is commonly believed by historians that the "pit" into which Joseph was cast was most probably a cistern. A cistern was a pear-shaped hole in the ground, so the opening at the top was small, but the bottom was significantly larger. Although the cistern was mainly used to store water, when it was not being used for its primary purpose, it served as a dungeon. The shape of these pits made it nearly impossible for a captive to escape without help.

Background

Genesis 29–30 tells the story of Jacob's marriage to both Leah and Rachel. Jacob always declared that he loved Rachel. The competition of the two sisters for the love of this man created a rivalry that was always evident in the home and was passed down to their children. When Rachel was unable to bear sons for Jacob and when Leah thought that her time of childbearing was over, they each gave Jacob a maidservant to bear children for Jacob in their stead. These maidservants were Zilpah and Bilhah. This practice was common and is reminiscent of Sarah giving Hagar to bear a son to Abraham (Genesis 16). That union similarly produced rivalry between the women, between their children, and between the nations that sprang from them for generations to come. Joseph and his brothers inherited their mothers' rivalry. Israel (Jacob) clearly favored Joseph above the rest, and this provoked the brothers, egged on by Joseph's tattling and bragging about his divinely inspired dreams. Therefore, the brothers seize an opportunity to do away with their younger brother. When Joseph comes to them while they are far from their father's land, they plot to kill him. Reuben convinces them to change their minds and throw him in a cistern instead, thinking he can come back later to save Joseph and win favor with Jacob. While Reuben is gone, however, the brothers change their minds again and sell Joseph into slavery; they are pleased to get rid of the object of their jealousy in any way possible

At-A-Glance

1. The Provocation (Genesis 37:2–4)
2. Joseph Tells His Dreams (vv. 5–11)
3. Joseph's Brothers Act (vv. 23–24, 28)

In Depth

1. The Provocation (Genesis 37:2–4)

Joseph is seventeen and tending his father's flock with his brothers; however, when they return home, Joseph tells on his brothers for bad behavior. To make it worse, Jacob loves Joseph more than his other children. Our text does not say that Jacob did not love his other children, simply that he loved Joseph more. Jacob was an old man and Joseph the son by Jacob's favorite wife. No doubt these sentiments were behind his partiality. Jacob also makes Joseph a coat. The coat was an ornate garment, likely with long sleeves, which meant the one

wearing it was not expected to labor. It was a symbol of Jacob's favoritism and may have indicated Jacob's desire to turn the family birthright over to Joseph.

The brothers, angered by this, do not realize that each person does not always receive the same treatment in relationships. This partiality results in sibling rivalry, provoking the jealousy of Joseph's brothers. Their hatred was so intense they "could not speak peaceably unto him." Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph brings about family conflicts.

How is favoritism shown in modern families?

2. Joseph Tells His Dreams (vv. 5–11)

Joseph shares two dreams with his brothers. The first centers on a farming metaphor. In it, Joseph and his brothers are gathering and bundling the harvest. Suddenly the bundles take on human qualities. Joseph's sheaf rises to a place and position of authority, while the sheaves that represent the brothers bow before Joseph's sheaf. In another dream, Joseph sees the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bow before him. As Jacob states (v. 9), the sun and moon represent Joseph's parents, and the eleven stars are his eleven brothers. For Joseph to even hint that he would receive honor from his brothers and parents is not according to tradition and intensifies their animosity. Joseph's dream is from the Lord. It is prophetic regarding the future of his family; however, because Joseph is already seen as different, his brothers do not see his dreams as signs of providence and blessings. Jacob, however, ponders the dream. Jacob himself was a dreamer (Genesis 28:10-16; 31:8-13). He likely recognized that God was the author of Joseph's dreams.

Was Joseph bragging or just sharing his dream? How did his brothers' personal grievance keep them from recognizing the value in Joseph's words?

3. Joseph's Brothers Act (vv. 23–24, 28)

In verses 12–22, Joseph stays behind while his brothers tend the flock. His father sends him to check on the brothers, but they have gone to another spot. They see Joseph coming before he reaches them and decides to destroy his life and dreams. They originally planned to kill him, but his brother Reuben persuades them not to do that. They fall upon Joseph and remove the coat of many colors. In essence, they strip him of the authority and favor their father had placed in him. They are obviously not thinking of their father and the pain Jacob would suffer. Eventually, they throw Joseph into an empty, dry hole and leave him starving and open to the elements with no way of escape. After a time, Joseph was pulled from the pit, not because the brothers had a change of heart, but because they seized the opportunity to get rid of Joseph and make money from selling him into slavery. By these actions, we see that the hatred the brothers harbored was only tempered by the greed they possessed.

If Joseph and his brothers had been guided by love instead of hatred, greed, and pride, how do you think this time in their lives would have played out?

Search the Scriptures

1. Compare and contrast the lives of Joseph and his brothers in today's Scriptures.
2. Why did Jacob favor Joseph? (Genesis 37:3)
3. What evidence in the text shows a growing resentment among members of Joseph's family?
4. What is the difference in Jacob's reaction to Joseph's dreams and the reaction of the brothers? (vv. 10-11)

Discuss the Meaning

1. Are we justified when we allow ourselves to become jealous of another person whom God seems to be blessing abundantly? Explain.
2. Some say jealousy is the breeding ground for most violent crimes. Do you agree? Explain.

Liberating Lesson

Our society is fractured into distinct groups that do not trust each other, whether political parties, Christian sects, rival gangs, or just different departments at work. Even though one group may have good ideas to fix problems, other factions do not trust them because they are outside their group. Later Scripture reveals that Joseph's dreams were prophetic, and his ability to interpret dreams will be used in the future to fulfill God's plan to save many lives. However, jealousy between Joseph and his brothers blinds Joseph's family from supporting or even loving Joseph. They do not like what the dreams mean, and they do not like "the way he talked about them" (v. 8, NLT). No one is totally exempt from jealousy and rivalry. What are some messages you struggle to accept because you do not like the messenger or the way they present their message?

Application for Activation

Jealousy is usually the result of our wanting something that someone else has. When we look to the Creator as the supplier of all our needs, however, we realize we never have a reason to be jealous of anyone. The most precious gift God has given is Jesus Christ, a gift available to each of us. Therefore, jealousy has no place in the life of the believer.

There are still numerous reasons people are jealous of others. However, the end result of jealousy is always negative. It has destroyed families, marriages, relationships, and lives. Pledge to notice and rebuke any feelings of jealousy you have in the coming week.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Genesis 37:2–11, 23–24, 28

Joseph's story is the next biographical installment in the patriarchal trilogy of faith through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In this generational story of call, redemption, and God's grace, God demonstrates how when love is absent or distorted, evil will follow. Divine love is the only way to reconcile and restore a right relationship.

2 These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad was with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report.

The phrase "these are the generations," notes a move from Jacob (Israel) as the main character to his children being the focus. The next word tells us which son will be the stories' primary focus now: Joseph. Just as Abraham was an odd choice of the main character among any of Shem's other descendants and just as Israel (Jacob) was an odd choice of the main character as Isaac's younger son, Joseph is an odd choice of the main

character based on his age and his being Jacob's eleventh son. God often chooses an unexpected person to be the agent for His salvation plan.

Before Joseph dreamed the dream central to this saga, his brothers hated him for his prior indiscretions as a tattletale (Genesis 37:2). As a young lad of seventeen having been his father's favorite son since he was born in Jacob's old age, Joseph misused his favor and did not use discretion or humility in fostering relationships with his brothers. Instead, as he worked with them, Joseph brought his father an "evil report" about them. The Hebrew word *dibbah* (dib-BAH), translated "report," is elsewhere translated "slander." It is usually understood to be bad news. Here, however, the narrator adds the adjective "evil" to make clear the nature of Joseph's summary of his brothers' actions.

3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours. 4 And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.

Not only is Jacob (renamed "Israel") guilty of parental preference, but he also demonstrates a lack of discretion when he fuels the feud between the brothers by lavishing a visual reminder of his preference toward Joseph—a special coat. There is confusion as to what exactly this coat looked like and what exactly it implied because the Hebrew words here are rare. A "coat" (Heb. *kuttonet*, koo-TOW-net) can refer to a specifically priestly garment and is often made of fine linen. The adjective "of many colors" (Heb. *pas*, POSS) is only used elsewhere in Scripture to describe a special robe worn by virgin princesses (2 Samuel 13:18), perhaps highlighting the garment's connection with royalty. If we look at the word's etymology to help define its meaning, there are still many possibilities. It could imply a garment that has long sleeves reaching to the hands, implying the wearer was not performing manual labor. It could use "hand" as a unit of measure, implying a garment made of many "hand" breadths of fabric. This idea is where the "many colors" interpretation originates, presuming each strip of fabric to be a different color. Any one of these understandings of the gift would be enough to stoke the brothers' jealousy. Israel might have been labeling Joseph as a priest or as royalty with the coat. If the coat was ornately beautiful with various colors of fine fabric or just long-sleeved, Joseph would not wear it and join his brothers in their hard work sustaining the family. To the brothers, the new coat has a simple, obvious meaning: Israel just loves Joseph "more than all his brethren."

5 And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren: and they hated him yet the more.

Seething with envy, the brothers hated Joseph greatly. Hostility between the brothers was high by the time Joseph had a "dream" (Heb. *chalom*, kha-LOME), which can refer to either prophetic or ordinary dreams. The phrasing "dreamed a dream," however, is only used of prophetic dreams. Since such dreams were regarded as a means of divine revelation and taken very seriously, it is not illogical that the brothers' anger increased, knowing that what Joseph dreamed would most likely happen. Whereas maturity and wisdom might have prevented Joseph from telling this particular dream to his brothers, Joseph told them that though they hated him now, they would eventually bow down to him. Note that although Joseph dreamed of his promotion, he had not sensed that he was headed into a series of serious demotions on the journey up. Joseph's brothers hated him "yet the more" (Heb. *yasaph*, yaw-SAF, "to add, increase, or do again"), setting the stage for the subsequent events to unfold. This use of *yasaph* is ironic since that is the root word in Joseph's name. He was named Joseph because his mother said, "The LORD shall add to me another son" as a blessing to Israel's family (Genesis 30:24). Here, however, the only thing he is "adding" is more hatred.

6 And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: 7 For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf. 8 And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words.

Joseph called his brothers to hear this dream. As the brothers were all binding their sheaves, the inanimate sheaves became animated and represented each brother. Joseph's sheaf "arose," implying a position of authority over the others. Furthermore, that his sheaf also "stood upright" (Heb. natsab, naw-TSAB, "to be set over or to be appointed") let the brothers know that Joseph would again find favor to be promoted into a position of authority over them. In response to Joseph's sheaf being promoted over the others, the brothers' sheaves came around Joseph's upright sheaf in "obeisance," meaning to bow down before a superior in homage. This position of superiority and subordination angered Joseph's brothers, causing them to make an incredulous, indignant interpretation of Joseph's dream.

9 And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me. 10 And he told it to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth? 11 And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.

The meaning of Joseph's second dream has as obvious an interpretation as his first had. Here, the sun, moon, and stars represent his parents and brothers as Israel interprets in the next verse. When Joseph tells this dream to his father in front of his brothers, his father rebukes him sharply. Israel could mean to encourage Joseph to be wise by not further inciting his brothers' obvious anger toward him. Joseph's father also seems mildly offended that his favored son would dream this dream. The posture of bowing down (the same Hebrew word as "obeisance" in vv. 7 and 9) to him in a prostrate position with their faces to the ground would mean total submission. This is not the position a doting father deserves. Perhaps Israel is riled also by the implied disrespect of Joseph's mother, who was his favorite wife.

The family's reaction to Joseph's second dream is mixed. Joseph's brothers "envied" (Heb. qana', kaw-NAW, meaning "to be jealous") him, but his father "observed" (Heb. shamar, shaw-MAR, "to give heed") it. The brothers continue with their hatred of their little brother, but Israel (despite his initial outburst against Joseph) paid attention or kept in mind what Joseph said. The Hebrew word shamar means not only to listen but also to act accordingly. Israel hears his son's dream and ponders his correct course of action based on it.

23 And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him; 24 And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it.

Some time after these dreams, Joseph is sent to track down his brothers, journeying several days away from home to find the flock. The brothers see him coming and plot to kill him. Reuben dissuades them from outright murder and they throw him into a pit (Heb. bor, BORE, "well, cistern") instead. Reuben was not on good terms with Israel, and he secretly planned to come back and rescue Joseph out of the cistern to get in Israel's good graces again (Genesis 37:21-22). When Joseph shows up where his brothers are herding their flocks, they strip Joseph out of his elaborate gift from his father: the coat of many colors. Taking Joseph's coat humiliates and humbles him from walking around so proudly as the favored son and dreamer. Also, the brothers will use the coat as validation of their story that a wild animal ate Joseph (vv. 31-33). The brothers then throw Joseph into an empty cistern and conspire to leave him there to die alone and helpless. Cisterns are designed to collect rainwater for use during the dry season. It is not uncommon for them to dry up before the rainy season started again, however. The narrator supplies the detail that the cistern was empty at this time, letting the audience know that Joseph was not in danger of drowning, and if left in there would die of dehydration.

28 Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt.

While the brothers sat down to eat, a band of Midianites merchants, bound for Egypt with a cargo of spices and balms, arrive on the horizon (v. 25). Jacob's third son, Judah suggests they take advantage of this opportunity to get rid of Joseph, avoid crime, and make a profit. The brothers sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites (KJV: Ishmeelites),

another name for the Midianites. The terms mark the traders as descendants of Abraham (and therefore the brothers' kin) through one of his concubines: Ishmael was Hagar's son (Genesis 16), while Midian was Keturah's son (Genesis 25:1-2). The names are also used interchangeably when the people group fights Gideon's army (Judges 8). Twenty pieces of silver was an amount typical for a slave and the value of about two years of wages. People bought by slave traders seldom saw their home or freedom again and were resold or traded in other areas. The traders eventually bring Joseph to Egypt.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Rachel, Mother of Joseph and Benjamin
(Genesis 30:22-24; 35:16-20)

TUESDAY

Joseph Checks on Brothers at Dothan
(Genesis 37:12-17)

WEDNESDAY

Jacob Convinced that Joseph Is Dead
(Genesis 37:29-36)

THURSDAY

From Slave to Ruler of Egypt
(Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22)

FRIDAY

Jacob Lives with Joseph in Egypt
(Acts 7:9-15)

SATURDAY

Caution, Disputes May Lead to Violence
(James 4:1-7)

SUNDAY

Jealously Divides Families
(Genesis 37:2-11, 23-24, 28)