

## Joseph and His Brothers

### Lesson Scope: Genesis 37

*References in brackets refer to Genesis 37 unless otherwise noted*

### Lesson Focus

In the seventeen years since Joseph was born, Jacob had responded to divine revelation in his encounters with God. By observing his father's love for God, Joseph yielded to his father's influence rather than to his brothers' influence. Their evil actions prior to this lesson set a course that made them calloused to right thinking. Reuben was involved in immoral conduct. The treachery of Simeon and Levi brought tragedy to the Shechemites. Others were involved in evil, of which Joseph informed his father.

Jacob's favoritism for Joseph, the "coat of many colours," and Joseph's dreams escalated the brothers' envy and hatred to a level of murderous intent. But, yielding to compromise, they sold him for money instead. Joseph, with a free conscience, faithfully bore the consequences of their hatred as a slave in Egypt, far from home. His brothers returned home but remained slaves to a guilty conscience.

The righteous shine in the midst of tests, but the wicked attempt to conceal their sin. Character developed in youth tends to set the course for life.

Joseph's dreams were direct revelations from God regarding future events. God used Joseph in these events to preserve His people. Both Joseph and his brothers were to discover what would become of his dreams (37:20). Years later, Joseph told his brothers, "Ye thought evil against me: but God meant it unto good" (50:20).

It may be of interest to note that the distinct name for Joseph's father in this chapter is Israel, "one who prevails as a prince with God" (32:28). The same distinction is made in Genesis 48 when Jacob blesses Joseph's sons and again in Genesis 49:2 where both names are arranged in distinction.

In Joseph's formative years, his father had a more meaningful connection with God than he had had during the formative years of his older brothers. Regardless of this difference, they all had the opportunity to choose for the right. Much profitable time could be spent discussing the results of child training, but keep moving along with the lesson aim: "to contrast the faithfulness of the upright with the sin of the degenerate." The fruit of Joseph's and his brothers' choices truly stand in sharp contrast.

**Lesson Aim:** To contrast the faithfulness of the upright with the sin of the degenerate.

**Theme Verse:** [Proverbs 15:9](#). The way of the wicked is an abomination unto the LORD: but he loveth him that followeth after righteousness.

## Lesson Text

### "Israel Loved Joseph"

[Genesis 37:2-4](#)

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

### "His Brethren Envied Him"

[Genesis 37:5-11](#)

And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told *it* his brethren: and they hated him yet the more.<sup>6</sup> And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed:<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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?<sup>11</sup> And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.

### "They ... Sold Joseph"

[Genesis 37:2-4](#)

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children, because he *was* the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of *many* colours. <sup>4</sup> 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.

### Genesis 37:23-34

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; <sup>24</sup> And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit *was* empty, *there was* no water in it. <sup>25</sup> And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmaelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry *it* down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup> And Judah said unto his brethren, What profit *is it* if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he *is* our brother *and* our flesh. And his brethren were content. <sup>28</sup> Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty *pieces* of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt. <sup>29</sup> And Reuben returned unto the pit; and, behold, Joseph *was* not in the pit; and he rent his clothes. <sup>30</sup> And he returned unto his brethren, and said, The child *is* not; and I, whither shall I go? <sup>31</sup> And they took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood; <sup>32</sup> And they sent the coat of *many* colours, and they brought *it* to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it *be* thy son's coat or no. <sup>33</sup> And he knew it, and said, *It is* my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. <sup>34</sup> And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days.

## Questions for Study

### "Israel Loved Joseph"

1. What factors may have contributed to Israel's love for Joseph?
2. How does parental love best inspire love from their children?

### "His Brethren Envied Him"

3. What might have been the reasons behind Joseph's brothers' envy?
4. What spirit is behind "Shalt thou indeed reign over us?" (See also Luke 19:14.)

### "They ... Sold Joseph"

5. Discuss Joseph's response to Israel and then to his brothers (37:13; 42:21).

6. List the evil actions of Joseph's brothers that reveal the severe hardness of their hearts.

7. What are the consequences when truth is compromised?

### **Analyzing the Passage**

Joseph was not a spoiled talebearer. His brothers Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher (sons of Bilhah and Zilpah), though not in the limelight like Reuben and Judah, by their evil report (an infamy compounded by furtive wickedness), wielded influence behind the scenes (37:2).

Joseph's coat of many colours, literally meaning "reaching to flat of hand and to sole of foot" (or made with long sleeves and of full length), was a garment worn by one of distinction. By this gift Jacob plainly indicated that Joseph, the firstborn of his beloved Rachel, was to receive the family birthright which Reuben had forfeited (1 Chronicles 5:1).

Joseph's dreams were poignant. His brothers mocked and even his father reacted to their obvious meaning (37:10). The dreams increased the brothers' hatred and envy, but his father "observed [kept] the saying" (37:11).

Joseph obeyed his father without question (37:14). He expressed no fear of his brothers. It seems he did not perceive the level of hatred his brothers held toward him.

The brothers sold Joseph to their relatives. The Ishmaelites and the Midianites were descendants of Abraham through Hagar and Keturah (25:2). Their names are used interchangeably either because they were integrated through marriage or because they were confederates.

The "twenty pieces of silver" (37:28) the brothers received from the merchantmen gave each brother in the field two pieces. What little gain for such a heavy weight of guilt for twenty-two long years (42:21; 45:6).

### **Principles and Applications**

#### **"Israel Loved Joseph"**

1. Faithfulness in youth lays a solid foundation for a faithful life (37:2). Joseph learned faithfulness from his father. Faithful parental example gives young people a frame of reference that is invaluable. In cases where parental example is lacking, godly foster parents, spiritual guardians, godly ministers, and faithful mentors or employers help to fill a vital place in a young person's life. We should spare no effort in helping our youth develop patterns of faithfulness in the prime of youthful vigor.

2. The upright refuse to conceal sin (37:2). Our intentions in revealing sin should always be redemptive and be shared with the proper authority.

Sharing incriminating evidence with unrelated persons tends to foster gossip. But to deliberately conceal sin associates one with the sin and the offender (Leviticus 5:1; Psalm 50:18).

3. The upright treasure a close relationship with godly parents (37:3-4). Love at home is a rarity today. Thank God if you were raised in a home where godly love reigned, even if it was not your birth home! Honoring father and mother not only applies to youth but to us adults throughout our lives and even when parental inconsistencies exist.

4. The faithfulness and the favored position of the upright often move the degenerate to hatred and envy (37:3-4, 11). Christians appreciate the blessings of God on their lives. The degenerate often covet these blessings but are unwilling to live accordingly. So many times, instead of responding to God in like manner, they mock the righteous and devise wicked means by which to bring them down. Jesus commands us to pray for those who hate us and despitefully use us (Matthew 5:44). The Bible calls us to pray for deliverance "from unreasonable and wicked men" (2 Thessalonians 3:2).

#### **"His Brethren Envied Him"**

5. The upright proclaim God's message in spite of opposition (37:5, 7-9). Proper tact must not compromise the Word of God. In spreading the Gospel, ethnic cultures must be understood, but must never override Biblical principles of faith and practice. To introduce alterations or mixtures to avoid opposition or to gain favor jeopardizes the truth. Whether the opposition comes from friend or family, neighbor or foe, at home or abroad, God help us "to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us" (Luke 1:1).

6. The degenerate rebel against the thought of serving another (37:8). This is especially true if it is someone they consider inferior to them. The citizens in Jesus' parable in Luke 19:14 said, "We will not have this man to reign over us." The disciples also had strife among themselves as to who should be the greatest. Jesus said, "But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve.... I am among you as he that serveth" (Luke 22:26, 27). Jesus exemplified this principle by washing the disciples' feet.

#### **"They ... Sold Joseph"**

7. Cheerful, ready obedience characterizes the upright (37:13). With such an attitude, service for Christ will not be drudgery, even when one has been assigned unpleasant tasks. A cheerful willingness to be "hands and feet" in local congregational functions blesses the receiver and the giver, "for God loveth a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

8. The degenerate often seek to silence the testimony and influence of the upright (37:23, 24). Joseph was sold as a slave. Jeremiah suffered in the dungeon. Daniel was thrown into the lions' den. But God vindicated their witness. Others were tortured and martyred, but their testimony still speaks (Hebrews 11:4).

9. A position of compromise identifies one with the degenerate (37:26-30). Compromising with evil always brings a spiritual shortfall. Reuben, by his offer to appease the evildoers, discovered that compromise left them content; yet his good intentions were disappointed. Judah's proposal seemed to offer the best of everything: get rid of the dreamer for a reward without being guilty of blood. But neither course sufficed to ease the guilty conscience or to guide any one of them closer to right thinking.

10. The degenerate increasingly harden their hearts by their wicked deeds (37:31-34). They are merciless, breathing out cruelty (Psalm 27:12), without concern for the sufferer's sorrow and tears. Joseph's brothers sat down and ate while he pled with them in anguish of soul (42:21); they brought upon their aged father great sorrow, and hypocritically gathered around to offer him comfort (37:35).

### **Important Teachings**

1. Faithfulness in youth lays a solid foundation for a faithful life (37:2).
2. The upright refuse to conceal sin (37:2).
3. The upright treasure a close relationship with godly parents (37:3, 4).
4. The faithfulness and the favored position of the upright often move the degenerate to hatred and envy (37:3, 4, 11).
5. The upright proclaim God's message in spite of opposition (37:5, 7-9).
6. The degenerate rebel against the thought of serving another (37:8).
7. Cheerful, ready obedience characterizes the upright (37:13).
8. The degenerate often seek to silence the testimony and influence of the upright (37:23, 24).
9. A position of compromise identifies one with the degenerate (37:26, 27, 29, 30).
10. The degenerate increasingly harden their hearts by their wicked deeds (37:25, 34).
11. The degenerate often resort to treachery and deception (37:31-33)

### **Answers to Questions**

1. What factors may have contributed to Israel's love for Joseph? Joseph was the son of his old age and the firstborn of his beloved wife, Rachel.

Obviously he followed God and righteousness after the ways of his father, Israel. He was truthful, cheerful, and obedient. He exemplified the spiritual qualities that were a guide to his choices.

2. How does parental love best inspire love from their children?

The best way is the Bible way. The Bible way is by being a faithful godly example, by providing Biblical discipline, by teaching and nurturing in the Lord, and by guarding against partiality or any other provocation.

3. What might have been the reasons behind Joseph's brothers' 'envy'?

They were calloused, hard men. They coveted Joseph's relationship with Israel but were not willing to come up to his caliber. Joseph's coat of many colors added fuel to their animosity because it indicated their father's favoritism. Joseph's dreams, poignantly given, added depth to their envy and hatred.

4. What spirit is behind "Shalt thou indeed reign over us?" (See also Luke 19:14.)

Most often it is the spirit of rebellion against the Word of God that strikes out against His delegated authority. Joseph declared God's message as he received it, and his brothers rebelled against it by striking out at him. But he truly became their lord years later.

Rebellion is earthly, sensual, and devilish. "For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work" (James 3:16). It is the spirit that is akin to witchcraft and idolatry (1 Samuel 15:23).

5. Discuss Joseph's response to Israel and then to his brothers (37:13; 42:21).

Joseph responded to his father, Israel, with a cheerful "Here am I," as if to say, "I am at your service." He obeyed without question. He expressed no fears of meeting his brothers alone. He was sincere. Joseph pled with his brothers in anguish of soul (42:21). In later years, after proving them to be true men, he comforted them, saying, "Ye thought evil against me: but God meant it unto good" (50:20).

6. List the evil actions of Joseph's brothers that reveal the severe hardness of their hearts.

They were merciless, cruel, and without natural affection. They were murderous in intent and yielded to compromise, treachery, and deception. They thought by these means to be rid of "this dreamer" while gaining monetarily. In the hardness of their hearts, they could sit down and eat while their brother pled with them in anguish of soul (42:21). They coldly sold off their blood brother like common merchandise. They executed deliberate actions to deceive their father, and hypocritically gathered around him to

offer comfort.

7. What are the consequences when truth is compromised?

One who compromises the truth always loses more than those with whom he compromises. Compromising with truth, for whatever reason, is slippery business. When one compromises truth to accommodate another, he has slipped from the platform of spiritual safety. He remains ripe for more compromise and less likely to return to unadulterated truth.

### **Summarizing the Lesson**

"LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart.... He that backbiteth not, . . . nor doeth evil to his neighbour... In whose eyes a vile person is contemned.... He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not ... nor taketh reward against the innocent. He that doeth these things shall never be moved" (Psalm 15).

### **Research Guide**

1. Study the sin of envy from a topical Bible.
2. Study Psalm 15 to discover what God expects and accepts.