

Navigating Family Conflict

Session 5

November 10, 2024

Joseph and His Brothers: Family Jealousy

The Point: Unchecked animosity can lead to greater harm within the family.

Session Passages: Genesis 37:1-4,18-24,31-34

Genesis 37:1-4

Connection to the Point. Between Joseph's bad report and Jacob's favoritism, the brothers were given to jealousy and hatred.

Setting. After his reunion with Esau, Jacob moved his family to Shechem in Canaan (Gen. 33:18-20). The rape of Dinah, his daughter, reveals the loose morals of Canaan's inhabitants (chap. 34). In chapter 35 Jacob and his family returned to Bethel where they renewed their commitment to the Lord. There Jacob built an altar and received the Lord's confirmation of the covenant. Chapter 35 also provides a record of Rachel's death as she was giving birth to Benjamin, and records Isaac's death. Chapter 36 details Esau's family records. He became the father of the Edomites.

Canaan (v. 1). The term *Canaan* identifies both a person and a land. The person Canaan descended from Ham, one of Noah's sons (9:18). Although an ancient word as indicated by its usage around 2300 BC, *Canaan* is not a Semitic term. The name probably was originally associated with "merchants." In Hosea 12:7 the Hebrew word translated "merchant" can be transliterated *Canaan*. (See also Zech. 14:21 where "Canaanite" also can be translated "merchant.") Canaan's identity with merchants most likely can be traced to a time when the land of Canaan was limited to the area of Phoenicia. Evidence of Semitic influence in Canaan by at least 3000 BC has been found at Jericho and Megiddo. Prior to the Israelites' entrance into Canaan, the country evidently was loosely organized around major cities. Apparently the region's inhabitants made no attempt to organize centrally for defense.

His brothers brethern (v. 2). Joseph had eleven brothers. Jacob fathered twelve sons as follows: (1) six by Leah—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun; (2) two by Rachel—Joseph and Benjamin; (3) two by Rachel's slave Bilhah—Dan and Naphtali; and (4) two by Leah's slave Zilpah—Gad and Asher (35:23-26). While Joseph brought his father a bad report about Bilhah's and Zilpah's sons, the phrase *his brothers brethern* may refer to all Jacob's sons, not just Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. Rivalry probably already existed among Jacob's twelve sons because of the rivalry among their mothers. Bilhah and Zilpah were recognized as secondary wives because they were slaves of Rachel and Leah. Furthermore, Jacob had made clear his preference for Rachel over Leah, and these two wives competed with one another. In fact, Laban had deceived Jacob by first giving him Leah after he had worked seven years for Rachel (29:16-30).

Bad Evil report (v. 2). The Hebrew word translated *report* designates a slanderous or defaming utterance. That the content of the report presented the brothers in an unfavorable light is intensified by the addition of an adjective that basically means "evil." Scripture does not record the specific information Joseph reported. He may have observed unethical or ungodly behavior among his brothers. The behavior may have threatened the flock or Jacob's reputation. Was Joseph's report a wise and needed action on his part or was it tattling? Scripture does not indicate. In any case, we observe that Joseph demonstrated willingness to speak against his brothers even though he must have been aware speaking out could cost him dearly. Ultimately the Lord would transform Joseph's bad report about his brothers into a "good" outcome not only for Joseph's family but for future generations (50:20).

Loved Joseph more (v. 3). This verse clearly identifies Jacob's (Israel's) favoritism of Joseph. Jacob had grown up experiencing favoritism in his own family of origin. Isaac had favored Esau, while Rebekah had favored Jacob (25:28). Apparently Jacob failed to learn from the devastating consequences of that favoritism. He openly displayed partiality for Joseph by giving him a special robe coat. Jacob's preference for Joseph stems from several factors. Joseph was the elder

son of his favorite wife, Rachel, who had previously died. In fact, Jacob had been willing to work seven more years to marry Rachel after being deceived into marrying Leah (29:16-30). Furthermore, Joseph was a son of Jacob's old age since Rachel had not born children until the couple's older years.

Old age (v. 3). Jacob not only favored Joseph because he was Rachel's son but also because he was the son of his old age. Rachel, who died giving birth to Benjamin, had been barren while Jacob's other wives were bearing him sons (Gen. 29:31–30:24). The expression "born to him in the son of his old age" undergirds Jacob's love for the sons of Rachel, who had remained his most-loved wife. A similar expression describes the miraculous nature of Isaac's birth (21:7).

Long-sleeved Ornate robe Coat of many colours (v. 3). This expression more literally can be rendered "a robe of extremities." It identifies a tunic reaching to the wrists and ankles worn by people of nobler rank. Outside of Genesis 37, this type of robe is mentioned only in 2 Samuel 13:18-19 to single out the garment the king's virgin daughters wore. The robe signaled elevation and distinction. Throughout the account of Joseph's experiences his clothing played a significant role related to his changing status. His brothers stripped him of his special robe (Gen. 37:23); Potiphar's wife snatched the garment he was wearing (39:12-13). Both actions signaled Joseph's descending status from favored son to slave. Finally the clothing he eventually received from Pharaoh announced Joseph's exalted position (41:42).

Speak peaceably a kind word (v. 4). The brothers' intense hatred for Joseph disrupted any family harmony. The word translated *peaceably a kind word* is the common term *shalom*, still used as a greeting in Israel. Instead of courteous speech, the brothers' dislike for Joseph demonstrated itself in contemptuous, unkind words to him.

Genesis 37:18-24

Connection to the Point. The brothers' hatred of Joseph led them to conspire to kill him.

Setting. Genesis 37:5 begins a record of events that resulted in his brothers intensifying their hatred of Joseph. Joseph shared a couple of dreams with his family. In the first, he was in the field binding sheaves with his brothers when his sheaf stood up and their sheaves bowed to it. In his second, Joseph saw the sun, moon, and eleven stars bending before him. Joseph's dreams instilled jealousy in his brothers. Even Jacob rebuked his son because the second dream implied that Joseph's father and mother as well as his brothers would bow before Joseph. However, Jacob also filed away the experience in his mind, perhaps because he remembered the Lord had previously spoken to him in a dream (Gen. 28:10-16). One day Jacob sent Joseph to check on his brothers who had been pasturing their flocks (37:5-17).

They plotted conspired (v. 18). This Hebrew verb also means "to be crafty" or "to be deceitful." The verb occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament only in Numbers 25:18; Psalm 105:25; and Malachi 1:14. In Numbers 25:18 the term refers to the deceit or treachery that led the Israelites into the worship of Baal of Peor. This worship involved illicit sexual relations and was severely punished. The event became an example of sin and divine judgment for later Israelite generations. In Psalm 105:25 the verb is rendered "deal deceptively subtilly conspire against." And in Malachi 1:14 the term is translated "deceiver cheat" where it refers to an individual who has an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord but offers a defective animal instead.

That dream expert! That dreamer! This dreamer (v. 19). This expression translates a Hebrew phrase that more literally means "lord (master) of the dreams." The designation reveals the deep resentment the brothers held for Joseph. Joseph's dreams along with the distinctive garment Jacob gave his son triggered the brothers' jealousy and hatred of Joseph. The title the brothers applied to Joseph may indicate they were worried about his dreams and determined to act in a way they believed would prevent any possible fulfillment of those dreams. Dreams play a prominent role in Joseph's life. While the brothers thought they were killing the dream by eventually selling Joseph, they were in reality advancing the fulfillment of the dream.

Pits Cisterns (v. 20). This term can also be translated “cisternspits” or “wells.” A well possesses an underground water source, while a cistern serves as a holding tank for water directed into it. Cisterns typically were bottle-shaped or pear-shaped. Because the small opening at the top could be covered, cisterns could function as holding cells for people or materials. At times cisterns functioned as dumping places for corpses. After 1300 BC cisterns began to be coated with a watertight plaster that kept water from escaping. Officials imprisoned Jeremiah in some type of pit or dungeon (Jer. 38:6). Through the prophet Jeremiah the Lord characterized His people as ones who had abandoned Him, the source of living water, and dug for themselves cracked cisterns that could not hold water, a reference to their pagan gods (2:13).

Reuben (v. 21). Reuben was Jacob’s eldest son, born to Leah. The name sounds like the Hebrew phrase translated “has seen my affliction” (29:32), but literally means “see, a son.” The Scripture presents Reuben in both positive and negative lights. Negatively, Reuben had relations with Bilhah, one of his father’s concubines (35:22). Jacob later chastised him for such defiling behavior (49:4). Positively Reuben protected Joseph when his brothers wanted to kill him and planned to rescue Joseph from the pit where he was thrown (37:21-22). Reuben also assumed responsibility for Benjamin’s welfare when Joseph, whose identity was unknown to the brothers at the time, commanded their youngest brother be brought to Egypt (42:37). The tribe of Reuben inherited an area located east of the Dead Sea when the Israelites settled Canaan (Num. 32).

Stripped off Stript (v. 23). The verb conveys two basic meanings. One is “to strip off,” particularly in reference to clothing or armor. The other meaning is “to invade.” In some contexts, the verb may denote violent or judgmental action as in the case of Joseph’s brothers’ stripping him of his special robe. In 1 Samuel 23:27 the verb appears in the sense of invade, where it is used of the Philistines’ raiding or invading the land. In 1 Samuel 31:9 the term portrays the Philistines’ stripping the armor from Saul’s corpse.

Empty, without water;, there was no water in it (v. 24). The pit into which the brothers cast Joseph was likely bottle-shaped or pear-shaped, perhaps coated with a watertight plaster to prevent water from escaping. *Empty* not only designates empty containers but also describes unfulfilled desires (Isa. 29:8). In Proverbs 12:11 and 28:19 the word is rendered “fantasies” reflects following “vain” persons and depicts worthless goals.

Genesis 37:31-34

Connection to the Point. The brothers’ actions and deception caused great grief to Jacob.

Setting. After throwing Joseph into a pit, the brothers callously sat down to eat. A caravan of merchants headed for Egypt approached. The brothers agreed to Judah’s proposal to sell Joseph, not only freeing them from the guilt of murder but also gaining them financial profit. The brothers sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver, a typical price for a slave in the early second millennium BC. The merchants in turn sold Joseph to Potiphar in Egypt. Reuben, who apparently had been away when Joseph was sold, returned to the pit. When he discovered the empty dungeon, he tore his garments in anguish. His secret plan to rescue Joseph had failed! (Gen. 37:25-30).

Slaughtered a male goat Killed a kid of the goats (v. 31). Jacob’s flocks included goats as well as sheep. Goats were cud-chewing mammals with backward-curving horns and long ears. Both males and females had horns. Goats were typically covered with long, black hair although they might be speckled. Sheep and goats might graze in the same pasture. However, the herds needed to be separated because male goats often acted with hostility toward the sheep (Matt. 25:32). Most references to goats occur in the first five books of the Old Testament. Many of these demonstrate the importance of goats in the daily life of God’s people from the patriarchal period onward. The goat might sometimes serve as food (Gen. 27:9). The female goat provided milk (Prov. 27:27). Goats also supplied skin for leather goods and hair for cloth (Ex. 25:4; 26:7). Goats were appropriate as sacrificial animals (Lev. 4:23). The word rendered *male kid Goat* translates two Hebrew words, one of which also means “hairy.” Jacob used the same term to describe Esau’s skin in Genesis 27:11.

Examine it Know whether (v. 32). Jacob's sons urged their father to examine the robe they had stripped from Joseph and dipped in goat's blood. Among the various definitions of the Hebrew verb are "inspect, acknowledge, know, recognize," and "discern." Here the term conveys the idea of inspecting something with the purpose of recognizing it or identifying its owner. In the next verse the same term is rendered "recognized knew" where Jacob identified the robe as belonging to Joseph. The verb occurs with a similar meaning in Genesis 31:32 where Jacob invited Laban to point out any possessions that belonged to him and take them. The verb becomes a key word in the stories of Joseph. In Genesis 42:7-8 the verb appears again when Joseph recognized his brothers when they came to Egypt to buy grain, although they failed to recognize him. With this latter event the center of power shifts from the brothers to Joseph.

My son's robe coat (v. 33). The special garment Jacob made for his favored son has played various roles in the account of Joseph. It first signaled enthronement—elevation and distinction over his brothers (vv. 3-4). Next it symbolized dethronement and death as the brothers stripped Joseph of his special garment and threw him into a pit (v. 23). The robe represented the death of Joseph's dream as the brothers dipped it in goat's blood, sent it to their father, and let Jacob conclude that a vicious animal had devoured his son (vv. 31-33). The robe coat had been created as evidence of the deep love of a father for his son. It had been dipped in blood in deep hatred by brothers who wanted to get rid of the family dreamer. It became a tool of deep deception as Jacob's sons sent the bloody attire to their father. By the end of verse 34 of the account, the brothers' hatred has apparently triumphed over Jacob's profound love for Joseph and over the fulfillment of Joseph's dreams.

A vicious Some ferocious animal has An evil beast hath devoured him (v. 33). Likely from personal experience, Jacob knew the risks a shepherd and traveler might encounter in the ancient Near East. He had traveled through wild territory and also tended sheep in such terrain in journeying to Laban's home and working for him in his younger years. Bears and lions, the two strongest beasts of prey, threatened herds and flocks in biblical lands (1 Sam. 17:34-37). They might also attack human beings (2 Kings 2:23-24). Joseph's blood-stained garment led Jacob to imagine that his son had been brutally attacked. The father believed that a vicious animal had torn his son to pieces and devoured him. Ironically Jacob had deceived his father Isaac at his brother Esau's expense by wearing hunter's clothing and animal skins.

Tore his clothes, put sackcloth around his waist put on sackcloth Rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins (v. 34). Jacob's actions reveal his intense mourning for a favored son, whom he perceived to be dead. Mourning customs in the ancient Near East included various visual symbols. Mourners might tear either their inner or their outer garments. They often put on sackcloth, a coarse, dark material made from camel or goat hair. Women wore black or somber clothing. Grieving individuals might refrain from washing or other normal activities. Other mourning practices included covering the head, smearing the head or body with dust or ashes, and fasting. Sometimes relatives hired professional mourners.

Many days (v. 34). The Scripture does not specify the number of days Jacob mourned the loss of Joseph. Elsewhere we learn the Egyptians mourned Jacob's death seventy days (50:1-3). The Israelites often mourned thirty days for the loss of leaders, including Aaron (Num. 20:29) and Moses (Deut. 34:8). Although typically the length of mourning would be specified, Jacob foresaw no end to his grieving for Joseph. He refused to be comforted and believed his grief would continue until his own death (Gen. 37:35).