

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Genesis 37

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

So [Joseph's] brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. (Gen. 37:11)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Aug. 31	Rachel, Mother of Joseph and Benjamin	Genesis 30:22-24; 35:16-20
T	Sept. 1	Joseph Checks on Brothers at Dothan	Genesis 37:12-17
W	Sept. 2	Jacob Convinced That Joseph Is Dead	Genesis 37:29-36
Th	Sept. 3	From Slave to Ruler of Egypt	Psalms 106:1-6, 16-22
F	Sept. 4	Jacob Lives with Joseph in Egypt	Acts 7:9-15a
Sa	Sept. 5	Caution, Disputes May Lead to Violence	James 4:1-7

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Sibling rivalry is as old as Cain and Abel. Anyone who has older or younger brothers or sisters knows something about the feelings that emerge as siblings try to live together as a family. Parents often prove to be part of the problem as they directly or indirectly show favoritism of one sort or another to members of the family. Like puppies shoving to find a place to nurse, humans often strive aggressively to be favored by mommy or daddy.

Usually the jealousies of children are worked out over time and with the maturing of those involved. The circumstances that prompted the competition may even become a source of humor around the family: "Do you remember that fight we had?" But on the other hand, lifelong estrangements sometimes result from real or perceived slights and advantages gained by one sibling over another.

The story of Joseph and his brothers presents such a conflict, one clearly complicated by their father Jacob's expressed preference for Joseph: Jacob/Israel "loved Joseph more than any other of his children" (37:3). He treated Joseph differently, showing his favored status in many ways. More than

one family has been torn apart by such a blatant display of parental favoritism. What, then, is to be done? The last chapters of Genesis (37–50) consider this problem in some detail before the answer is found. How are real and/or imagined threats to family harmony to be resolved? What will happen if no resolution is accomplished?

Gracious God, in Jesus Christ you have shown your love for all your children. Help us accept that love for ourselves and enable us to honor it in all people. Remind us that we all are equally valued as members of your family.



SCRIPTURE

Genesis 37:2–11, 23–24a, 28

37:2 This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

⁵Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. ⁷There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." ⁸His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

⁹He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" ¹¹So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. . . .

²³So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. . . .

Note: Find Scripture
Notes for this
reading on the
final page of the
lesson.

²⁸When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

Genesis 37 begins the long story of Joseph, his struggles with his brothers, his enslavement in Egypt, and his family's eventual restoration. Joseph's story ends well enough, but along the way there are grave difficulties and unexpected turns.

The account begins with a telling description of the relationship between Jacob (also known as Israel) with his youngest son, Joseph, "the son of his [Jacob's] old age" (v. 3). At the very beginning, the reader is alerted to a serious problem. Sent out to check on his brothers who were caring for flocks in the hills, Joseph would bring back bad reports to his father Jacob. The brothers, correctly interpreting this action as tattling, resented it deeply. What's more, when Jacob made a special garment for Joseph, one that signified his authority, their hatred for Joseph increased. They could not talk peaceably to him, refusing to share even a simple *shalom*.

Next Joseph received and reported to his brothers and father two disturbing dreams. In each, as his brothers and father interpreted them, Joseph was to be exalted over the rest. The brothers and his parents would bow down to him. As a result, his brothers hated Joseph all the more.

In many ways this story echoes the stories of the tension between Jacob and Esau that precede it (Gen. 27-33). Jacob is favored by his mother Rebekah, and Esau is cheated out of his inheritance as first-born. This rightly made Esau extremely angry. But, while Jacob feared physical harm from Esau, none actually occurred.

In Joseph's case, his brothers actually plotted and attacked him. They stripped him of the hated robe and threw him in a pit, intending his death. Had it not been for Reuben, Joseph would have surely died. But a number of unplanned events occurred.

Unexpectedly, a group of Ishmaelite traders (sometimes called Midianites) came along. When Judah saw them, he convinced his brothers to sell Joseph to the traders rather than kill him. The traders took Joseph to Egypt, where he was sold as a slave to Potiphar, an Egyptian official.

The story is carefully shaped to show how human deceit—both on the part of Joseph's brothers and by Joseph himself—can create grave injustices. Certainly, Joseph is ill-treated, but his brothers did have a legitimate complaint because of the way they were treated by their father.

? Why did Jacob show such favoritism when he was surely aware of how such behavior had complicated his own life? How are we supposed to react when injustice occurs? Do we just accept it as God's will, or is there a place to question and resist?

THE HUMAN SITUATION

Genesis 37 provides a clear snapshot of humans struggling with one another. The subject is the manner in which Jacob's sons relate to one another and to their father. From a seemingly peaceful beginning, the scene quickly becomes one of deception and attempted murder.

Jacob loved Joseph the most of all his children. Joseph was Jacob's son born to Rachel, his favorite wife. But the traditional place of honor should have gone to Reuben, the first-born, not Joseph, born late in the unfolding family.

Moreover, Jacob prepared a garment for Joseph to emphasize his special affection. Older translations referred to it as "a coat of many colors." The Hebrew term used to describe the coat, *passim*, occurs in the Bible in only one other passage (2 Sam. 13:18–19), where it is a reference to a garment worn by Tamar, King David's daughter. In Egyptian sources, a related term may refer to clothing worn by royalty. As the other brothers recognized Jacob's favoritism, their jealousy led them to hate Joseph.

It is unclear how much Joseph caused the problem. He did bring a bad report about his brothers to his father. The situation was made worse by two dreams Joseph had that seemed to point to his superiority over the brothers and even to his father and mother. Whether purposely or not, when Joseph related his dreams to his family, it was like rubbing salt into a wound. The brothers decided to get rid of Joseph, the dreamer, the troublemaker.

Earlier in the book of Genesis, humankind was found to be utterly wicked and deserving of destruction (Gen. 6:2–7, 11–12). God set out to correct the situation by sending a great flood, but this story about Joseph and his brothers shows that grave diffi-

strong take advantage of the weak. Some try to justify their actions by self-claimed authority, by their wealth, by their positions in society, but such claims of superiority and exercise of privilege are not what God desires. The story of Joseph and his family illustrate what happens when people act out of jealousy or feelings of entitlement. Joseph was spared but enslaved.

This story continues to unfold through the end of Genesis, illustrating over and over again the imperfections of human community. Jealousy and hate still abound.

? How can people learn to cooperate and appreciate others?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

First, it is important that the sinful character of humankind be acknowledged. Perhaps it is summed up best by Paul's observation that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). This is not negativism but rather realism. Stupid, mean things that people do to one another are not to be applauded, but the perpetrators are not to be condemned to outer darkness either. What prompted the deed in question? Can the situation be corrected, improved, or neutralized? Patience and understanding are the appropriate responses.

Listening—actually hearing what others are saying—is also extremely important. Had the brothers heard Joseph with different ears they might have recognized the insecurities of their younger brother and reached out to him with love. Whether or not Joseph was spoiled, listening with care to what he actually said might have helped. Was he gloating about his privilege, or was he trying to understand why he was being favored by Jacob? Joseph may not have lorded it over the others at first; perhaps he was pushed to that position by being ostracized by his brothers. We cannot know all the details, but we can learn not to jump too quickly to judgments about the behavior or motives of others.

Some individuals will be more likable than others. But this reality can be acknowledged without generating the favoritism shown by Jacob. Loving all doesn't require liking all. The temptation to disregard the talents of someone who is not a favorite or to ignore the opinions or ideas of others who are less likable is to be resisted! Jacob certainly should have recognized the rift his favoritism was creating within the family. After all, a deep

estrangement with his brother Esau was the result of his mother's behaving toward him as he was now doing with Joseph.

Perhaps most importantly, violence and injustice must always be resisted. Even when someone is in the wrong, harassment or murder is never a proper response. Silencing a troublemaker may be tempting, but working out difficulties, changing harmful institutions, and practicing forgiveness are all better approaches. Justice is God's desire, and we are always to work toward that end.

? God desires a just and caring society quite unlike that pictured in this passage. How else can Jesus' charge to us to love one another and ourselves be realized?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture that may be helpful for your study.

1. The meaning of the Hebrew word describing Joseph's coat (*passim*) is uncertain. Its similarity to a word meaning "end" has traditionally caused translators to assume it was made from ends of fabric, making it multicolored. Others have surmised it reached to the end of one's arms, making it long-sleeved. The only other time a garment is described with the word *passim* was one worn by David's daughter Tamar (2 Sam. 13:18–19) with the aside that such a robe denoted royalty.
2. Later, Joseph interpreted dreams through the power of God (Gen. 40; 41). The dreams in Genesis 37, however, needed no such interpretation, since the meaning was already obvious to all!
3. Jacob repeated the same type of favoritism that his mother showed to him, a favoritism that sparked a similar homicidal fury in Esau (Gen. 27:42).
4. The pattern of sibling rivalry crossed another generational divide when Joseph's brothers sold him to descendants of their grandfather Isaac's sibling rival, Ishmael.