

## Genesis 37

With this chapter we begin a new section of the Genesis narrative, that of Joseph. Though Jacob and the family are still around, Joseph will become the focus of much (though not all) of the story from here to the end of the book.

We begin with an introduction to Joseph. He is seventeen, the next to youngest of Jacob's sons (Benjamin is the youngest...and will have a role to play later in the book) and Dad's favorite because he is the child of Jacob's "old age." The concrete expression of Joseph's favorite status is that he is given a special coat (maybe of many colors or perhaps only with long sleeves) and is allowed to stay home while his older brothers are out caring for the sheep. We also learn that he is God's favorite. We know this because God gives him dreams in which his entire family is pictured as bowing down to him. As we might imagine, when he shares these dreams with his family, the dreams do not ingratiate him with his older brothers or his father. The level of sibling rivalry increases when Joseph, always the truth teller, tattles on his brothers for some of their nefarious deeds.

The jealousy and resentment break into the open when Joseph makes a journey to visit his brothers in the fields. When they see him coming, they debate as to how to rid themselves of this "dreamer." The initial plan is to kill him, after which they will tell their father that wild animals ate his favorite son. Reuben however, hesitates and encourages them to simply throw Joseph into a pit, from which Reuben plans to later save him. The brothers agree to this plan and when Joseph arrives they strip him of his coat and throw him into a pit. At this point the story becomes a bit murky. One strand of tradition (#1) has the brothers, upon Judah's suggestion, sell Joseph to Ishmaelite traders as a slave. A second strand of tradition (#2) has Midianite traders pass by the pit in which Joseph has been thrown, pull him out and then they sell him to the Ishmaelites.

The upshot of all of this is that Joseph is gone when Reuben returns to draw him out (strand #2). When he informs his brothers that Joseph is gone they hatch a plan to cover up their dirty deed. They take Joseph's coat, cover it in lamb's blood and take this evidence to Jacob to explain that a wild animal had torn his favorite son to pieces. Jacob is inconsolable at the loss. The final sentence in this chapter adds a third strand (#3) to the tradition by having the Midianites sell Joseph directly to Potiphar, who works for Pharaoh. Regardless of which of the three strands of tradition is correct, Joseph ends up being a slave in Egypt.

**Reflection:** These stories and those that follow demonstrate just how difficult it will be for God to bless all people (which is at the heart of the Promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). Every time it appears that God is ready to fulfill this promise, human beings muck it up. In this case, Joseph, the dreamer, who has a deep connection to God (meaning he is probably the vehicle of the Promise) is sent into slavery from which it is impossible (or so it seems) for blessing to go out to the world. This pattern of Promise and disaster will repeat itself through the scriptures and throughout history. It seems as if every time humanity takes one step forward in creating a world in which God's love and grace are present for all, jealousy, greed, envy and violence intervene. Even so as this Joseph story continues, we will find reason to hope that God is still at work, insuring that one day the Promise will be complete.

Questions:

1. Where have you seen jealousy get in the way of God's purposes for you or someone else?
2. Has there been a time when you have hesitated to speak for what is right because of peer pressure? What was that like?
3. Where do you see humanity taking two steps forward and then one backwards?