

# JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS: FAMILY JEALOUSY

**THE POINT:**  
UNCHECKED ANIMOSITY  
CAN LEAD TO GREATER  
HARM WITHIN  
THE FAMILY.

Leader pages on pp. 148-151

## GENESIS 37:1-4,18-24,31-34

<sup>1</sup> Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup> These are the family records of Jacob. At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended sheep with his brothers. The young man was working with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought a bad report about them to their father. <sup>3</sup> Now Israel loved Joseph more than his other sons because Joseph was a son born to him in his old age, and he made a long-sleeved robe for him. <sup>4</sup> When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not bring themselves to speak peaceably to him.

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### MEMORY VERSE

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<sup>18</sup> They saw him in the distance, and before he had reached them, they plotted to kill him. <sup>19</sup> They said to one another, "Oh, look, here comes that dream expert! <sup>20</sup> So now, come on, let's kill him and throw him into one of the pits. We can say that a vicious animal ate him. Then we'll see what becomes of his dreams!" <sup>21</sup> **When Reuben heard this, he tried to save him from them. He said, "Let's not take his life."** <sup>22</sup> Reuben also said to them, "Don't shed blood. Throw him into this pit in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him"—intending to rescue him from them and return him to his father. <sup>23</sup> When Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped off Joseph's robe, the long-sleeved robe that he had on. <sup>24</sup> Then they took him and threw him into the pit. The pit was empty, without water.

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<sup>31</sup> So they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the robe in its blood. <sup>32</sup> They sent the long-sleeved robe to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it. Is it your son's robe or not?" <sup>33</sup> His father recognized it. "It is my son's robe," he said. "A vicious animal has devoured him. Joseph has been torn to pieces!" <sup>34</sup> Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth around his waist, and mourned for his son many days.

### KEYWORDS

**Bad report (v. 2)**—The Hebrew word translated report designates a slanderous or defaming utterance.

**Loved Joseph more (v. 3)**— This verse clearly identifies Jacob's (Israel's) favoritism of Joseph. He was the elder son of his favorite wife, Rachel.

**Speak peaceably (v. 4)**—The brothers' dislike for Joseph demonstrated itself in contentious unkind words to him.

**Tore his clothes (v. 34)**—Jacob's actions reveal his intense mourning for a favored son, whom he perceived to be dead.

# HOW DOES GOD WANT US TO HANDLE ANIMOSITY AMONG FAMILY MEMBERS?

Jealousy thrives in the world of artists and musicians. One Sun Sentinel article details the heated rivalry between R&B supergroups New Edition and Guy at the 1989 Superfest in Greensboro, NC. New Edition was the headliner of the tour, but Guy—the newer group with the fresher look and sound—was becoming an audience favorite. As Guy performed and felt the support of the crowd, they continued in their performance over the allotted time. This “angered members of New Edition, who brazenly took the stage while Guy was performing.”<sup>17</sup> Eventually a brawl broke out on stage, causing the whole show to be suspended for an hour. When Guy’s crew members and associates responded the next, a crew member from New Edition ended up dead. All of the senseless violence was a direct result of jealousy. It is pervasive, and not just in the art world. Families often stew in that sort of emotional unhealthiness. The story of Joseph offers a clear example.

## Maintain a Proper Attitude //

**Genesis 37:1-4**

Favoritism was a constant factor throughout Jacob’s (Israel’s) life. In his boyhood, Jacob saw the pain that came from parental favoritism, as Isaac’s favorite son was Esau and Jacob was the favorite of his mother, Rebekah. Now, in his old age, Jacob had a favorite son. In the story of Joseph and his brothers, the real problem began because their father was a neglectful parent who showed favoritism and fostered a hostile rivalry.

Jacob had a favorite wife, too; he loved Rachel. But before he could marry Rachel, her father, Laban tricked him into marrying her older sister, Leah. With Leah, Jacob had six sons and one daughter; he had another four sons through Zilpah, Leah’s slave. To add to the family’s distaste for Jacob’s favoritism, the sons of Leah surely heard how their father did not love their mother.

From Israel’s favorite wife Rachel, came his favorite son, Joseph. Joseph worked tending sheep with four of his older brothers. Joseph brought a bad report to their father about these four older brothers. Now his brothers viewed Joseph as both the favorite and a snitch.

Perhaps Joseph could have gently suggested to Israel that he should be the one to ask his sons to provide their own report of themselves. Or Joseph could have informed his half-brothers their father



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requested a full report about them. He could have said, "It may go easier for you if you speak with our father in person." But Joseph was only 17 years old. Joseph's bad report only fueled the fires of hatred from his brothers.

Compounding the favoritism, Israel gave Joseph the famed robe of many colors. But his brothers saw only red for hatred and green for jealousy. The gift of the robe was not only a sign of favor; it likely revealed that Israel planned to bless Joseph with the inheritance of his estate—as a firstborn. After all, Joseph was the firstborn of his true love, Rachel.

When the sons realized their father loved Joseph more than all of them, they hated Joseph in response. They could not say a kind word to Joseph, which Israel had to notice. But Israel proved to be a neglectful parent. His lack of leadership or correction left their family's dysfunction to worsen. We must correct our children early in their lives and not tolerate bad attitudes. And parents must not "stir up anger in [their] children" (Eph. 6:4) by favoring one over the other.

Israel's unrestrained favoritism created harmful side effects in their family relationships. First, it led to an emotional distance. That distance led to hurt, the hurt turned into bitterness, bitterness intensified to hatred, and the brother's unchecked hatred escalated to murderous intentions.

Israel's whole life was affected by favoritism. The pain of partiality would come full circle with the devastating loss of his favorite son, and the family would live under the cloud of a dirty secret for the next twenty years.

### HOW DO PARENTS' SINS AND FAILURES INFLUENCE THEIR CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR?

## Maintain a Peacemaking Spirit //

### Genesis 37:18-24

The trade route from Gilead to Egypt began from the northeast, past the hills of Dothan, and looped around near the Mediterranean coast southward. From where the brothers were pasturing their sheep, they were in the higher elevations, so they could easily see people approaching them from far distances. These ten brothers came from three different mothers; they all had the same father: Jacob/Israel.

As Joseph approached, his jealous brothers chided, "Here comes that dream expert!" They quickly hatched a plan to kill him. But Reuben, the oldest, stepped in to cool off their hatred from carrying out the murder of Joseph. He convinced them just to



## DIGGING DEEPER "HATERS"

Joseph's story is used as an illustration in many popular modern-day pulpits. A quick Google search will turn up pages of sermons titled "From the Pit to The Palace." This concept attempts to relate to those who've felt wronged or mishandled, oftentimes inside the Church. On the surface, Joseph's brothers are the villains of his story based on their murderous intentions (Gen. 37:4-11, 18-35). However, Joseph had his father's favoritism (vv. 3-4), and a gift with dreams (37-44) that appeared to come without relational awareness. When he shared his dreams, they were not well-received (vv. 5-11). Because of this, some refer to his brothers as "haters." This happens with gifts of the Spirit in the Church as well, but the believer's responsibility is "not to think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one" (Rom. 12:3).

### How could pride or selfish ambition possibly breed "haters"?

throw him into a pit—a dried-up well. Reuben had enough of a conscience and a first-born sense of responsibility to plan on returning to the pit and freeing Joseph. Reuben planned to take him back to “his father.” Not their father, but his father. There was no sense of brotherhood in their family. Deeper still, the heart of their hatred was a father-son conflict. They hated their father’s favoritism toward Joseph. Their anger was ultimately against their father, but they took it out on the brother.

The bitterness in the brothers’ hearts sprang to the surface as Joseph drew closer. Their hatred erupted into action. When Joseph came within arm’s reach, they stripped him of his robe and threw him into the pit. They overpowered Joseph and knocked him “down to size.”

When conflicts with others are left unresolved, we often say people’s feelings fester or take root. That is what the Bible calls a “root of bitterness.” The Hebrew writer warned, “Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and defiling many” (Heb. 12:15). When bitterness “springs up” it can be an exploding emotion that overwhelms us and will defile, or emotionally contaminate, others. Today we use the term toxic to describe this type of environment.

When the brothers saw a caravan passing by, on its way around what we would call “the loop” to Egypt, Judah spoke up and suggested a way to avoid murder but still get rid of Joseph—for a small profit. So, instead of killing Joseph, they stopped the caravan while Reuben was away and sold Joseph into a life of slavery in Egypt.

As far as the brothers were concerned, Joseph was now out of the picture. While they did not kill Joseph, their sin of hatred was just as bad as having committed murder. Later, the Ten Commandments would declare “Do not murder” (Ex. 20:13) and the biblical law would state, “Do not harbor hatred against your brother” (Lev. 19:17). The apostle John wrote, “Everyone who hates his brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him” (1 John 3:15).

### WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT JOSEPH’S FAMILY FROM THESE VERSES?



## Maintain Principled Actions //

### Genesis 37:31-34

The ten brothers’ harsh mistreatment of Joseph included tearing off his robe of many colors and throwing him into the pit, where he was left alone while they ate lunch. After lunch, they pulled him up from the pit only to sell him to the Ishmaelites.

These hate-filled brothers immediately set into motion their cover-up. They took the remains of Joseph’s torn-up robe, slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the coat in its blood. Rather than tell their aging father another lie, they presented falsified evidence of Joseph’s demise so Jacob would come to a false conclusion. To add to the brother’s indifference, they “sent” word to Jacob with the evidence of the bloody robe. It sounds like they sent a messenger or a courier who appeared before Jacob using the art of the deceptive question, “Is it your son’s robe or not?”

The brother’s deception against their father may remind you of Jacob’s earlier deception against his father, Isaac. Years earlier, Jacob placed goat’s hair on his arms to deceive his father into believing he was his brother, Esau. There is a dreadful irony that Jacob’s sons deceived him about his son’s death by using a goat’s blood.

Now, the bloody robe of Joseph lay before Jacob. The ten brothers callously had false evidence sent to their father. Jacob couldn’t conclude anything but that his favorite son, Joseph, was dead.

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Notice when they had the bloody robe presented to their father, they did not speak the lie they had initially planned about a wild animal having eaten Joseph. Instead, the courier delivered the robe with a question so he would believe it without them having to say a falsehood. They sent word, "We found this. Examine it. Is it your son's robe or not?" Notice they never said Joseph's name. They never asked if the robe was their brother's. But to their father, they said, "Is it your son's robe or not?" They could not speak kindly about him even during Joseph's phantom death and their father's shock. What hatred! What indifference!

Jacob concluded his son was dead from being torn apart by a wild animal, and his sons let him live with that lie as though it were a reality. Jacob's remaining sons let him sink into grief because of their hateful, deceitful ploy. The ten brothers who did away with Joseph attempted to comfort their father, which became a part of their ongoing cover-up. Jacob "tore his clothes, put sack cloth around his waist, and mourned for his son many days." He was inconsolable. Jacob said he would take his grief for Joseph to the grave. Only those who have lost a child could begin to understand the depths of Jacob's grief.

### WHAT ARE SOME APPROPRIATE WAYS TO DEAL WITH ANIMOSITY OR JEALOUSY?

### DID YOU KNOW?

Scar, from the iconic Disney animated film, *Lion King*, was based on a character from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, King Claudius.<sup>18</sup> One specific example of their connectedness is how they plotted revenge on each of their kingly brothers and mourned each death insincerely. This is not unlike the way Joseph's brothers tried to comfort Jacob after deceptively sending Joseph's blood-stained robe to him as proof of his "death" (Gen. 37:35), even though they had sold him to Midianites traders. They, like Scar and Claudius, had grown so cold that they could only see their scheme. To plot is one thing, to kill is another, but to grieve disingenuously is—literally—a villainous act. It seems nothing is off-limits to the one consumed with jealousy. Solomon gives us a warning in Proverbs 27:4, "Fury is cruel, and anger a flood, but who can withstand jealousy?"

**Biblical Truth:** "Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy . . ." (1 Cor. 13:4).

**Do you have areas of unchecked animosity or jealousy in your heart that need to be healed?**

## LIVE IT

**Proverbs 4:23 says to guard your heart above all else. How will you guard it against jealousy?**

Jealousy always affects those who harbor it more than those they harbor it against. In our families, this is no different. The Lord did not warn against covetousness in vain (Ex. 20:17). It is unfair to oppose our loved ones in that way, but it is even more unhealthy. According to James 3:16, "For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice" and Proverbs 14:30 says "A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones."

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- **Pray.** Pray for God to keep you from all forms of animosity and resentment. Left unchecked, the root of our wrong attitudes can grow into harmful actions with bitter consequences.
- **Share.** Contemplate what you can do to stop these types of issues from taking root in your heart. Connect with a friend who knows you well and share with them your struggles.
- **Forgive.** Plan a way to lovingly engage with someone who has harmed you in the past. Go in a spirit of forgiveness and seek reconciliation (Eph. 4:31-32).

# DAILY READINGS

## 1. ATTITUDE OR PERCEPTION // GENESIS 37:3-10

In life, attitude is the key to how one is perceived. Spoken words, thoughts, or body language can express a person's attitude toward someone else. In some cases, a person may be perceived as having an attitude, but is innocent of the "shade" others are throwing. Joseph, the seventeen-year-old dreamer, was a mixture of personal and perceived attitude. His earthly father showed him favor (Gen. 37:3) and his heavenly Father gave him amazing dreams (Gen. 37:6-10). Thus, Joseph was extremely confident in himself. As a result, his brothers' attitudes turned to hatred towards him (Gen. 37:4-5,8). Like Joseph, we may experience a mixture of self-designed or perceived attitudes and the repercussions.

**On this Christian journey, intentionally display Jesus's attitude of forgiveness, compassion, and love.**

## 2. WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE // ROMANS 12:21

Plotting and scheming are ways people may gain earthly success; however, God always provides an alternative to evil. Joseph's brothers desired to kill him, but Reuben (the eldest brother) offered an alternative. Additionally, God continued to provide an alternative through Judah, who reminded the brothers that Joseph was their flesh and blood. He proposed that they sell Joseph instead of spilling his blood (Gen. 37:27-28). Moreover, God has promised that when we are tempted to do evil, there is always another choice (1 Cor. 10:13). Evil lurks everywhere, but there is an alternative.

**Conquer evil with good (Rom. 12:21).**

## 3. AGAINST ALL ODDS // GENESIS 37:28

Satan gives the illusion that he is in control, yet the God we serve redeems against all odds. There is no situation that is so bad that God's hands cannot reach down and restore. Joseph's life was like a roller coaster ride with the highs of his father's favor to the lows of his brothers plotting

his demise and selling him to the Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:28). Yet, God was with him through it all. Likewise, our ancestors faced harsh conditions, but our heavenly Father was in the midst. Travis Green's song, "You Made a Way," reminds us that God comes through when our backs are against the wall. When it feels like the odds are against you, **believe that God is working for your good (Rom. 8:28).**

## 4. IN THE STORMS // GENESIS 39:14, 19-20

God is faithful to bless His children, but how do we handle the times of storms in our lives? For believers and non-believers, there are moments when God allows troubles to occur instead of removing them. Joseph was shown his future, but before it came to pass, he was placed in a pit (Gen. 37:24), accused by Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39:14), and sent to prison (Gen. 39:19-20). In our lives we are faced with storms of sickness, grief, financial woes, and family struggles. We may feel bombarded with no end in sight. During Joseph's storms, he focused on what was right in life while he waited for God to intervene.

**Similarly, we must look to God our sustainer and deliverer from the storms.**

## 5. FAMINE IN THE LAND // GENESIS 42:3-5

Famine is the scarcity of food in an area. According to the Global Hunger Index, there are 43 countries with "alarming or serious levels of hunger."<sup>19</sup> Realizing that these countries represent millions of people with limited food resources, should prompt our hearts to weep and help. Jacob's family experienced a shortage of food when the famine hit Canaan and they had to rely on Egypt for grain (Gen. 42:3-5). Today, the United States and other countries have an abundance of food, yet there are hungry people in our streets and around the world. God blesses us to be a blessing to others.

**In your own way, try to help those facing their personal famine in the land.**