

Joseph Sold into Slavery

Victim of a Family Tragedy


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What We Will Learn

- A tragic family event nearly claimed Joseph's life
- Likely a product of the polygamist structure of Jacob's family
- Based on Genesis 37:1–36

Uneasy Relationship Between Joseph and Brothers

- Joseph's senior brothers hated him
- They believed he stole their father's love
- Israel loved Joseph more than the others
- He made a richly ornamented robe for him
- Joseph brought bad reports to their father regarding the other brothers' activities
- Genesis 37:1–4




Genesis 37 (NIV)

- 1 Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.
- 2 This is the account of Jacob. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.
- 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him.
- 4 When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

Joseph's Dreams

- He dreamed he will be in authority position
 - Over his brothers
 - and over his parents
- Genesis 37:5–11




Genesis 37 (NIV)

5 Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more.

6 He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had:

7 We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."

8 His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.



Genesis 37 (NIV)


9 Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

10 When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?"

11 His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Brothers Plot to Kill Brother

- Israel sent Joseph to check on his brothers
- They were grazing flocks near Shechem
- They had left Shechem when he arrived
- He continued and found them near Dothan
- His brothers saw him coming and plotted to kill him
- Genesis 37:12–20



Genesis 37 (NIV)


12 Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem

13 and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them."
"Very well," he replied.

14 So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron. When Joseph arrived at Shechem,

15 a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

16 He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?"



Genesis 37 (NIV)

17 "They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.' " So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan.


18 But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

19 "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other.

20 "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

Reuben's Compromise

- Reuben convinced them to throw him into a cistern instead
- He hoped to rescue him later
- When Joseph arrived, his brothers stripped him of his robe and threw him into a cistern
- There was no water in the cistern
- Genesis 37:21–24



Genesis 37 (NIV)

21 When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said.


22 "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—

24 and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

Slavery Instead of Death

- Judah persuaded his brothers to sell Joseph instead of killing him
 - We gain nothing by killing him
 - Let's sell him to the Ishmaelites instead
 - He is our brother, our own flesh and blood
- They sold him to Midianite merchants for twenty shekels (about 8 ounces) of silver
- Genesis 37:25–28



Genesis 37 (NIV)

25 As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.


26 Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?"

27 Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

28 So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

The Conspiracy

- Reuben returned and found Joseph was no longer in the cistern
- He was unhappy and questioned his brothers
- He and his brothers conspired to lie about the event
- Genesis 37:29–30




Genesis 37 (NIV)

29 When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes.

30 He went back to his brothers and said, "The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?"

The Cover-up

- They soaked Joseph's robe in goat blood, took the robe back to their father, and said they found it
- Israel recognized the robe and concluded a ferocious animal had devoured Joseph
- Israel mourned for his son and refused to be comforted
- Genesis 37:31–36



Genesis 37 (NIV)

31 Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood.

32 They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."

33 He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."

34 Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days.

35 All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him.

36 Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

Discussion Points

- Tragic event due to polygamist structure
- Unhealthy Rachel-Leah competition
- Likely passed to the children
- Maidservant-wives Bilhah and Zilpah
- Any attempt to protect children against possible “second class” status

Discussion Points cont'd

- Joseph and Benjamin were much younger than their brothers
- No senior brother from their mother at the same level as the other brothers
- Israel's love for Joseph and Benjamin likely motivated envy
- Israel's family likely functioned like four separate families with only one father

Concluding Remarks

- Inherent problems of polygamy
- Do not appoint polygamists as overseers or deacons [Paul in 1 Timothy 3:2 & 12]
- God will re-direct events toward His purpose, even out of a great family tragedy
- God's willingness to re-direct from a tragedy does not exonerate agents of tragedy