

September 6  
Lesson 1 (NIV)

## BIASED LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 105:1–6, 16–22  
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Genesis 25:28; 35:23–26

### GENESIS 37:2–11, 23–24A, 28

<sup>2</sup> This is the account of Jacob’s family line.

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.

<sup>3</sup> 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 an ornate robe for him. <sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. <sup>6</sup> He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: <sup>7</sup> 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.”

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.”

<sup>10</sup> 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?” <sup>11</sup> His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

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<sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing—<sup>24</sup> and they took him and threw him into the cistern.

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<sup>28</sup> 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.

### KEY VERSE

*His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.—Genesis 37:11*

# LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

## Unit 1: Struggles with Love

LESSONS 1–4

### LESSON OUTLINE

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  - A. Friction (v. 2)
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- II. A Brother's Dreams (Genesis 37:5–11)
  - A. In the Fields (vv. 5–8)
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    - Dreaming of Grandeur*
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  - A. Shaming Joseph (vv. 23–24a)
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- B. Prayer
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### HOW TO SAY IT

Bethel*Beth*-ul.

Bilhah*Bill*-ha.

Canaan*Kay*-nun.

Dothan*Doe*-thun (*th* as in *thin*).

Esau*Ee*-saw.

Haran*Hair*-un.

Ishmaelites*Ish*-may-el-ites.

Israel*Iz*-ray-el.

Laban*Lay*-bun.

Midianites *Mid-ee-un-ites*.

obedience *oh-bee-sense*.

Zilpah *Zil-pa*.

## Introduction

### A. House vs. Home

Why don't we use the expression "house, sweet house"? A house is just a structure or place of residence. Without a family within, the building can never be a home. *Home* has much more sentiment attached to its meaning, evoking different emotions based on the family life within the house. A home consists of all that goes on within that structure. It is the place where memories are made.

When we consider the family life of the patriarch Jacob in the Old Testament, "home, sweet home" is not the first phrase to cross our minds. "Family feud" seems more appropriate! The strife and hard feelings within that family are seen in today's lesson text.

### B. Lesson Context

Joseph was born around the year 1916 BC. In world historical context, this would be near the middle of the Bronze Age, which began around 3000 BC. Other technological and societal advancements made this a time of important, though comparatively slow, change.

The struggles with love involving Joseph go back years before Joseph to his father Jacob (about 2007–1860 BC). Jacob was raised in a home where favoritism appears to have been the primary parenting skill of his father and mother, Isaac and Rebekah. Genesis 25:28 tells us all we need to know: "Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob."

Such a scenario was bound to produce family conflict. This infighting came to a head when Rebekah learned of Isaac's desire to bless his favorite son, Esau (the older of the two). This would solidify Esau's privileged position, with promises of abundance for the future. She disguised Jacob so that he would feel hairy like Esau in the presence of blind Isaac. The ruse worked, and the blessing intended for Esau was pronounced on Jacob (Genesis 27:1–41).

To escape Esau's vengeance, Jacob traveled to Harran, where Rebekah's brother Laban lived (Genesis 27:42–43). There Jacob married the two daughters of Laban, namely Leah and Rachel, and became the father of one daughter and 11 of his eventual 12 sons (29:15–30:24). Joseph was the last son born to Jacob in Harran (30:22–24). On the way back to Canaan, after residing in Harran for 20 years (31:38), Benjamin was born. He and Joseph were the only two sons of Rachel. Tragically, Rachel died while giving birth to Benjamin (35:16–20).

Eventually, Jacob settled with his family in Canaan near Bethel (Genesis 35:1), a journey hundreds of miles from Harran. Perhaps he believed that he would enjoy his last years in relative calm, as opposed to all the strife he had experienced thus far. However, some of Jacob's most heartbreaking trials were yet to come, sown from seeds in his own past.

## I. A Family's Discord

(GENESIS 37:2–4)

### A. Friction (v. 2)

#### **2a. This is the account of Jacob's family line.**

The book of Genesis is organized partially by the use of the Hebrew phrase translated *this is the account of*, used for the last time here. The phrase first appears in Genesis 2:4: "This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created" (see also Genesis 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9). Each instance emphasizes the continuation of life and introduces stories concerned with those lives in some way. Importantly, Jacob was the grandson of Abraham (Matthew 1:2), who was given great covenant promises by God (Genesis 12:1–3; 17:1–16).

#### **2b. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers,**

Joseph's birth is recorded in Genesis 30:22–24. Genesis 33:1–2 mentions how Jacob placed Rachel and Joseph in the rear of the entourage as Jacob prepared to meet Esau. This preferential treatment foreshadowed the family dynamics that would contribute to the drama present in today's text. Since Rachel was Jacob's preferred wife and Joseph was her only son so far, Jacob wanted to reduce the risk of their being harmed should Esau come seeking revenge for Jacob's previous deceitful actions (see Lesson Context).

Jacob was a very successful shepherd (Genesis 30:25–43), and apparently he intended for *Joseph* to follow in his footsteps. To that end, we see Joseph learning the family operation. In this relatively dry region, it was necessary to move the flocks and herds around to provide them with daily food. Sometimes herdsmen would have to go long distances to find that food.

#### **2c. the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives,**

*Bilhah* and *Zilpah* are called Jacob's *wives*, though the actual status of each was that of an attendant (servant) and eventual concubine (Genesis 35:22). *Zilpah* was given to Leah when she married Jacob (29:23–24); *Bilhah* was given to Rachel at the same time (29:29). According to the custom of the time, children born to a wife's servants by her husband were counted as the wife's own children (examples: 30:1–8). *Bilhah's sons* were Dan and Naphtali (35:25); *Zilpah's* were Gad and Asher (35:26).

#### **2d. and he brought their father a bad report about them.**

The content of Joseph's *report* about these brothers is unknown. The Hebrew word translated *bad* does not necessarily imply something evil, though it certainly can. In this case, it may mean that Joseph's brothers have done something disrespectful or mean to their younger brother. It could also be that Joseph brought word of a poor work ethic or other misbehavior.

### B. Favoritism (v. 3)

**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 an ornate robe for him.**

Here we see Jacob's name *Israel*, given to him after his wrestling match in Genesis 32:22–30. Its use reminds the reader that God blessed Israel when he changed the patriarch's name (compare 17:1–8).

While Joseph's tattling didn't cultivate good brotherly feelings, Israel's favoritism likely caused even more tension. The favor that was revealed at the meeting with Esau (see commentary on Genesis 37:2b, above) became even more pronounced once Jacob's family had settled in the land. Jacob made no secret of the greater love he had for *Joseph*. Not only was Joseph one of

Rachel's two sons, but he was also born late in Jacob's life—Jacob was about 90, based on Joseph's age relative to Jacob's when the whole family arrived in Egypt (comparing 41:46–47; 45:6; and 47:9).

There were likely many ways in which Jacob demonstrated his fondness for Joseph. One concrete way Jacob expressed this love was by making *an ornate robe* only for Joseph. This robe was more than a jacket or winter coat. It stood out against any garment the brothers had been given.

### C. Fury (v. 4)

**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.**

Something as conspicuous as an ornate robe is impossible not to notice. This article of clothing became a physical, tangible reminder not only to Joseph but also to his brothers that Jacob played favorites. Simply by looking at Joseph in the robe, the *brothers* could see *that their father loved Joseph more than any of the rest of them*. Events from their family history foreshadow what may happen to Joseph as a result of the hatred his brothers feel (compare Genesis 27:41; see Lesson Context).

## II. A Brother's Dreams

(GENESIS 37:5–11)

### A. In the Fields (vv. 5–8)

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

Now comes another reason for Joseph's brothers to have *hated him*: his dreams. Dreams of revelation are found primarily in Genesis and Daniel in the Old Testament (examples: Genesis 20:3; Daniel 2:28). *Joseph* was one of the few to whom God spoke in this manner. Equally important is the fact that Joseph later demonstrated the God-given ability to interpret the dreams of others (example: Genesis 41:25–32; see lesson 2). This ability opened doors for Jacob's family to come to Egypt.

**6–7. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: 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."**

*This dream* uses images from a *grain* harvest. Men and women would go out with hand sickles and cut the grain. As they did, they gathered the cut stalks into *sheaves*. The sheaves were stacked *in the field* to await transport to the place of threshing (compare Ruth 2:7).

To bow *down* is an act of great respect or worship. Here it signifies that someone else has (or will have) power over those who are doing the bowing. Why would Joseph think it prudent to tell his brothers about a dream in which they were under his power? Being a very young man, around age 17, Joseph simply may not have developed a sense of tact or appropriateness. Or perhaps he sensed already that his dream had come from God and was a word his brothers needed to hear. The Bible is silent concerning Joseph's motivations.

**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.**

The symbolism of the *dream* did not confuse Joseph's brothers: Joseph saw himself as one who would *reign over* the brothers. They immediately grasped its meaning and *hated him all the*

*more* because of it! Whether they took the dream seriously or considered it an attempt at self-promotion, the brothers recognized that, once again, their younger brother was placed above them.

Though the Bible is silent on this matter, it is possible that the brothers have already discussed killing Joseph (compare Esau's idea in Genesis 27:41). Joseph's brothers, of course, did not know how important the fulfillment of Joseph's dreams would be for the men's own lives (42:6–9; 43:26, 28; 44:14; 50:18; see lesson 3).

## B. In the Sky (vv. 9–11)

**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.”**

For Joseph, the second *dream* likely provided verification that the message of the first was true since the two dreams concern the same subject. We may compare this with Pharaoh's two dreams in the same night; those dreams had different images but the same meaning (Genesis 41:25).

Joseph's second dream has implications as serious as the first. Not only would the *eleven stars*, representing his 11 brothers, bow *down* to him, so would Jacob and Leah (who still lived and represented her sister, Joseph's mother, now deceased per Genesis 35:19). The number 11 leaves no doubt about whom these images signify!

**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?”**

Jacob responded first to Joseph's second *dream*. Even though Joseph was his favorite son, Jacob was bothered by the dream and *rebuked* Joseph for sharing it. In a patriarchal society where the father held the primary authority and where birth order determined standing within a family, it was hard to believe that the next-to-youngest son, Joseph, would be the one to whom Jacob, Leah, and the 11 brothers would *bow down*—no matter how much Jacob loved the boy.

Jacob, of course, was no stranger to dreams. He had dreamed as he departed from Canaan and traveled toward Harran (Genesis 28:10–16). In Harran he told Rachel and Leah of another dream, one in which God told him to return to Canaan (31:10–13). Even so, he did not seem to grasp that these dreams were more than fanciful nocturnal fabrications on Joseph's part.

### 11a. His brothers were jealous of him,

Here the brothers' reaction to Joseph's second dream differs from the hatred that has defined them heretofore. Perhaps they were beginning to wonder whether Joseph's dreams have some real meaning to them, or possibly they wished *they* could be the ones having such dreams.

The emotion of jealousy suggests a stronger and more significant passion than even hatred. The emotion magnifies the possibility that their feelings would spill over into violence (see commentary on Genesis 37:8).

### 11b. but his father kept the matter in mind.

*Kept the matter in mind* means that Jacob will watch for one or more events through which Joseph's dream will be fulfilled. This is similar to Mary's own watchfulness in Luke 2:19.

## III. Brothers' Disdain

(GENESIS 37:23–24a, 28)

### A. Shaming Joseph (vv. 23–24a)

**23–24a. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern.**

As the story picks up at this point, Jacob had sent *Joseph* to his brothers who were tending the herds. Joseph found them in Dothan, close to one of the major trade routes to Egypt. When the brothers saw Joseph approaching, they decided it was a good time to kill him. His brother Reuben, however, suggested instead that Joseph be thrown *into the cistern* (see Genesis 37:12–22, not in our printed text).

The act of stripping Joseph out of *his robe* symbolically stripped him of his status as Jacob’s favorite. It likely represents more than anything the brothers’ resentment of the favoritism that Joseph received from their father. When they decided to pretend he had died, the robe became evidence in support of their story (Genesis 37:31–33). Their revenge continued when they threw Joseph into the cistern. It was impossible for him to climb out of it.

## **B. Selling Joseph (v. 28)**

**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.**

Are *the Midianites* and *Ishmaelites* two names for the same group of people? On the one hand, Genesis 37:36 says that the Midianites sold Joseph to Potiphar, while Genesis 39:1 says it was the Ishmaelites; this suggests they were the same people by two names. Similarly, we later find Gideon fighting against “the Midianites” (Judges 7:24–25; 8:1); yet, “it was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings” (8:24).

On the other hand, some scholars suggest that the Midianite *merchants* acted as middlemen for the Ishmaelites and were not actually part of the same people. At the very least, the two groups shared Abraham as a common ancestor (see Genesis 16:15; 25:1–2).

The relative value of *twenty shekels of silver* is uncertain. Such an amount seems to be the going price for slaves in the time of Joseph. His sale brought monetary profit to the brothers as well as providing them a way of enacting their revenge without actually killing him. The brothers then slaughtered a goat, smeared its blood on the robe they tore up, and presented the robe to their father as evidence that the favorite son was dead, killed by a wild animal (Genesis 37:31–35). Meanwhile, Joseph was taken *to Egypt*, presumably never to be heard from again.

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Imperfect Family, Perfect God**

Today’s tragic episode impresses on us what favoritism can do and has done in families. Jacob’s showing favoritism to Joseph created hatred in his older sons that festered and was mixed with envy, finally erupting in violence. Biased love toward one son resulted in the others starving for their father’s favor and taking out their neglect on the object of his affection.

Still, God’s sovereign plan and purpose moved forward under his guiding hand. God had told Joseph’s great-grandfather Abraham that his family would sojourn in Egypt for 400 years (Genesis 15:13). Joseph was being sent ahead as a kind of point man for his family. Though Joseph saw only slavery ahead of him, God saw the fulfillment of Joseph’s dreams and the blessing he would be to his brothers (45:4–11; see lesson 4).

In God's providential work through Joseph, we are reminded that God is never thwarted by the evil intentions of human beings. Though we struggle to see God at work in our trials today, he remains the unseen mover in our lives just as he was in Joseph's life. With Paul, we remain confident that, "God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Truly nothing can separate us from God's love or prevent him from fulfilling the plans he has for us (8:35–39), even our imperfect families.

### **B. Prayer**

Dear Father, help us to love as you do, without neglecting some and favoring others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

God's love favors *all his children*.<sup>1</sup>

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