

Prayer

We praise You Almighty God, for it is our greatest joy to know that despite all the problems, our eternal future is secure through Jesus Christ our Lord. Challenge us each day by Your Holy Spirit so that we do not lose our way on the pathway of Christian life, and lift our hearts each day in praise of Your holy Name; AMEN!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Television

The world of television is vast; employing large numbers of people in media and in production. Pray for people in this industry, and the media bosses and their influence.

On-going prayers

- *Pray that Christians will engage with the issue of stewardship of our planet*
- *Pray about the tourism industry, its evils as well as its benefits*
- *Give glory to God for the seasons; and the sun, rain and the weather*

Meditation

We reach out to you, Lord God, in confidence,
Knowing there is always more of You for us to find
As we pray, as we listen, as we read Your Word,
And as we give our time and energy to You each day.

May we never give up this quest, this searching
Through each small corner of our finite inner selves,
And through the vast expanses of the Universe;
Finding out more about ourselves and about You.

Inspire us by those who have searched before,
Leaders, teachers, scientists, explorers, and also
Those ordinary people like us, who never give up
Searching to know more of Your beautiful heart, O God.

Bible Study - Genesis 37:1-11

¹ Jacob lived in the land where his father had lived as a stranger, the land of Canaan. ² This is the family history of Jacob. When Joseph was seventeen years old, he was shepherding the flocks with his brothers; and he acted as an assistant to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. Now Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³ Now, Israel loved Joseph more than all his other sons, because he was born to him in old age; and he had made him a decorated tunic. ⁴ But his brothers saw that their father loved him more than he loved them, so they hated him and were unable to speak peaceably to him.

⁵ Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶ He said to them, 'Listen to this dream I had. ⁷ There we were, binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly, my sheaf rose upright; and then your sheaves gathered around it, bowing down to my sheaf.' ⁸ His brothers replied angrily to him, 'So, are you going to make yourself a king over us? Do you intend to rule over us?' They hated him even more because of what he said and His dreams.

⁹ He had yet another dream, and told this to his brothers as well, 'Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' ¹⁰ But when he told his father as well as his brothers, his father reprimanded him, and said to him, 'What do you think is the meaning of this dream you have had? Do you expect us to come; I, your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground in front of you?' ¹¹ His brothers held this against him, but his father kept all this in mind.

Review

The last fourteen chapters of Genesis contain a well known narrative of high drama, and one of the best known stories in the Bible. It is the story of Joseph, the younger and favoured son of Jacob who rises from being an irritating and precocious teenager to being the saviour of his family, after enduring rejection and suffering, and an eventual salvation and rise to power in the foreign land of Egypt. At the end, Joseph shows magnanimous and gracious forgiveness to the brothers who threw him out when they come to him in a state of distress due to famine, and from his position of authority, he secures their prosperity and liberty.

Today, many people know this story in the form of the musical 'Joseph and the Technicolor Dream coat', the stage show written and created by Andrew Lloyd Weber. However, even though this production is clever and ingenious, it barely scratches the surface of the great Biblical story, which draws together some very important themes about the way God deals with His people. The whole saga concludes the book of Genesis, a book that has taken us from the beginning of time to this story of God's dealings with one chosen family on earth. The story of Joseph is important because it points forward in a prophetic manner to the many things that will happen to God's people in years to come; and it also reveals a little of how God works to save His people; we can even see something of the saving work of Jesus Christ within the story of Joseph. A number of famous preachers have written about the story of Joseph over the years, and they explain how this ancient narrative from Genesis illuminates the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and how it helps us understand the power of love shown in forgiveness, and the providential guidance of God.

The truth is that the story of Joseph is very long in Biblical terms, taking up chapters 37 to 50 of Genesis, but not including Genesis 38, which is about Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar. The story is repetitive in parts and structured in a way that was probably far more familiar and meaningful to ancient peoples than to us. When we read the accounts of how the brothers came from Canaan to Egypt in the latter part of the story, for example, the story seems to go on almost endlessly before Joseph is revealed as the long lost son. The story would have to be adapted for Hollywood, but it was originally designed to aid the memory of people who had no access to written records!

What we have read today introduces the general family scene of Jacob and his twelve sons (we should remember that Jacob also had one daughter, Dinah – see Gen 30:21). Joseph was not the youngest son; he was the eldest son of Jacob's favoured wife Rachel, who died in giving birth to Benjamin, Joseph's younger brother (see Gen 35:18f.). However, the fact was that Joseph had ten older brothers who each had their role in shepherding the flocks of their father Jacob. Shepherding for a man such as Jacob was a difficult job, given that Jacob had made his wealth out of sharp practice in the tending of flocks of sheep and goats (see his cheating of Laban - Genesis 30,31)!

However, the important thing for us to notice in this early part of the story is that Jacob's family is dysfunctional. There was a long history of favouritism within Jacob's own family line (for example, Isaac's favouritism of Esau, and Abraham's favouritism of Ishmael), and Jacob continued this practice by favouring Joseph (37:3). Naturally, this irked Joseph's brothers (37:4). The rest of today's reading consists of two stories of dreams, which the young Jacob was regrettably either too innocent or too bold enough to refrain from telling his brothers and his parents. The meaning of the dreams was obvious to everyone who heard them. They were prophetic in nature and spoke of Joseph's eventual superiority over his whole family including his parents (a quite scandalous implication). Nevertheless, whilst Joseph was a young lad, his repeating the dreams only served to reinforce the divisions already within the family.

Going Deeper

In going deeper, we will look more closely at the features of the passage:

- Why was Joseph specially chosen, and for what?
- What was the meaning of the first dream?
- What was the meaning of the second dream?
- How does this passage help us understand the rest of the story of Joseph?

Going Deeper

Why was Joseph specially chosen, and for what?

Our passage begins with a general phrase which picks up the story of Jacob, describing him as living in the manner of his fore-fathers, Isaac and Abraham, as a 'foreigner' in the land of Canaan. This means that he lived a semi-settled nomadic lifestyle, probably in the region of Hebron, where he had buried his father Isaac (35:27). The story that follows is called 'the family history of Jacob', but we know that what we are about to read is the story of Joseph, Jacob's son. The phrase helps remind us that for ancient people, these historic connections were profoundly important. The adventure of a man's life was built upon the consequence of his own father's experience, and under God, the destiny of the two were intertwined. Our passage tells us that Joseph was 17 years old when his scriptural adventure began.

The first recorded event in Joseph's life was his task as assistant to his brothers Dan and Naphtali, and Gad and Asher; he was probably seconded to them to learn about shepherding. These brothers were the four sons of the Jacob's two concubines, the servants of his wives, namely Bilhah and Zilpah (37:2). We are not told the details of what the sons were doing, but Joseph brought a 'bad report' back to his father. Elsewhere in scripture (Ez 34, for example) we are told that it was common practice for shepherds to kill the sheep they looked after in order to eat and benefit from the sale or use of their wool (after spending many months on the hillsides), so this is the only clear example of bad practice which could warrant Joseph's report to his father. It is not stated, but implied that Jacob believed Joseph, the favoured son, rather than the four lowest ranked of his sons.

To indicate the favour bestowed on Joseph, we are told that 'Israel loved Joseph more than all his other sons, because he was born to him in old age' (37:3). In fact, there is no evidence that Joseph was significantly younger than the other sons, for he was born of his mother Rachel relatively soon after the other ten sons were born by Leah and the two concubines (29:31 – 30:24). It is possible that the designation of the son 'born of old age' was a pseudonym in the family for the favoured son, given that Isaac was born of Abraham's old age. There is no way of being sure, but it is the only explanation which might make sense!

The 'decorated tunic' (37:4), or special robe made for Joseph by Jacob is famous because of the translation in the Authorised version 'coat of many colours'. The Hebrew words used for the coat are used in only one other place in scripture, 2 Samuel 13:18, and it is quite uncertain what the word means. Also, there is no word in another language with which it is easy to cross-reference the word to find its meaning. The best we can do is to say that in 2 Samuel 13:18, the garment is worn by a woman (Tamar) and is clearly a royal garment. The Authorised Version's 'coat of many colours' was simply an English seventeenth century way of saying just this! But given all this, the meaning of the coat is probably clear. It was intended to symbolise to everyone that Jacob regarded Joseph as his heir and the future leader of the family. This was not likely to go down well with any of Joseph's older brothers! They could not 'speak peaceably to him'. There was no 'shalom', or 'peace', between them.

What was the meaning of the first dream?

God favoured Joseph by giving him vivid dreams which he saw as prophetic; revelations of God which had to be told to the rest of his family. The two dreams had an obvious interpretation of which everyone was well aware, and the telling of these two dreams confirms what we have already come to realise from the first four verses of the narrative, which is that Jacob's family is dysfunctional. The anger and tension created by them does not have an immediate effect, but it will have its part to play in the future. In addition, although the reactions to the dreams are highly negative at first and add to this dysfunction (apart from Jacob – see below), both dreams speak of a time when the whole of the family of God's people would be unified, not around Jacob, however, but around Joseph.

In the first dream, we are given a picture of harvest time, the classic scriptural theme of God's judgement, and His time of justice and fulfilment which later on in scripture relates to the 'end times'. At this harvest time, all the sheaves of corn are gathered and stacked, but after this process, something strange happens. The sheaves shuffle together and bow down to one sheaf, the sheaf of Joseph. The brothers immediately identify themselves and Joseph in this harvest theme, and it was not something they would easily accept! They hated Joseph because his dream placed them in subservience to him; as older sons, this was intolerable.

In those days, crops were only a part of the lifestyle of nomadic tribesmen, and their relevance in a dream may surprise us. Jacob was essentially a nomad, but it is quite clear that he and his forefather's stayed many years in each location, both herding and also growing crops. Archaeology has confirmed that people lived like this because the barren nature of the land meant that it was only possible to grow crops for a few years in any location before it was necessary to move on. There is no contradiction (as some have claimed) between the herding activities of Jacob's sons and the growing and harvesting of crops.

What was the meaning of the second dream?

The second dream went further. It was a dream about the sun, the moon and eleven stars (37:9) which all bowed down to Joseph. As an aside, it is quite remarkable that an ancient story such as this should have no hint or indication of the 'sun' being a 'god', for this was an extremely widespread belief amongst the ancients. Clearly, such beliefs had been abandoned by the ancestors of Abraham. Now, when everyone was told the dream, the brothers were incensed, and even Jacob reprimanded Joseph (37:10). It was clear to him that the dream meant that he and his wife (at this point only Leah was left because Rachel had died in childbirth – see Gen 35:218) and his sons would have to bow down to Joseph; again, this was an intolerable suggestion from a human perspective.

It was one thing to suggest that Joseph's brothers should be subservient to him, but a dream that placed his own father at his feet was a further insult to the brothers, let alone Jacob! What is interesting is that Jacob

'kept all this in mind' having delivered the reprimand to the young and pretentious Joseph. Those of us who read the story knowing what is to happen, are led to respect the old man because his reported words and thoughts hint to us that he is aware of the ways of the Lord which are not always what we might expect.

How does this passage help us understand the rest of the story of Joseph

There is a great deal in this passage that points ahead to the rest of the story of Joseph; it also points ahead to the history of God's people and even Jesus. Yet again in Genesis, God has chosen to work through one servant amongst many, obliging that one person to undergo a journey of personal suffering, and from the point of view of the people of the world, to face an impossible, though godly task. The same story reflects the journeys of Abraham and his own father Jacob (though perhaps not Isaac), and it describes many a prophet. Eventually, the Bible demonstrates that Jesus, the Messiah, will travel this type of journey. As a character in the story, Joseph himself clearly represents salvation, and we will come across this theme time and time again throughout this story, and especially at the end of Genesis.

In addition, the two dreams are Messianic in nature; the sheaves of corn at harvest bow down to the one who is the Saviour, and all the heavenly hosts give obeisance to the one who saves in the second dream. Certainly, dreams play a vital role in the guidance of God's people all the way through scripture, and certainly in the life of Christ (see Matt 1:20, 2:12f.). Other themes such as 'harvest' and 'kingly authority' are also important within the story of Joseph and connect well with the New Testament.

Lastly, when Jacob observed what was going on in his dysfunctional family, he could only continue the course that was set before him. His sons would make their own decisions about what would happen in the future and how they would respond to all that had happened. We know the story is just beginning; but so does Jacob. He, after all, was someone who had slaved for years before he could finally return to the 'Promised Land' to do God's will. Perhaps he was aware that God had an plan which was unfolding. He did what he knew he had to do as a father, and like Mary who also kept 'all this in mind' (Luke 2:19,51), he waited on the Lord for what would come.

Application

It is not easy to try and discuss an 'application' of a passage such as this. The story speaks about the precociousness of youth and the providence of God. We all know young people who have said and done things that make us annoyed, and yet we have to stand by those we love within the family, or those we know within the church, to see what God will do with them. Jacob's cautious attitude and his fatherly intent not to criticise his son probably helped the young Joseph accept that what was happening in his life was God's will, and he remained confident in it. I say this because there are too many young people who are criticised so much that the heart is taken out of them for aspiration to higher things. I suggest that in the wider context of this story, this passage teaches us to stand by our young people and encourage them, despite their problems and awkward precociousness. The best way to work with young people is to stand by them, as Jacob did to Joseph, despite what he said and did!

The truth was that God would use this youngster with his dreams. God had a plan for the future that the people of Joseph's youth knew nothing of. We must sometimes accept that God has His hand on strange circumstances, and the course of time will tell us what He has in mind.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which parts of this story are new to you, and is your knowledge of this story largely governed by the Lloyd Weber production of 'Joseph'?
2. Does God work through dreams today? If so how? Can you give examples?
3. Why does God choose one person for one thing, and another for something else? Is there any way we can anticipate God's choice? If not, why not?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I have been aware of times when the Lord has spoken to me when I was not expecting it, and I would be foolish not to respond. I have found myself led to change direction whilst driving and alter my destination, and I have also been led to phone people or write, sometimes quite unprompted. These things will happen in life to most people, but the difference for a Christian is that we can see God's hand in it; sometimes we

see this at the time, and sometimes later. Everything we do has consequences! Those who are most liberated are those who can be confident of God's providential guidance.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *I ask you to consider whether the Lord speaks to you through dreams. Not simply through the dreams you have whilst you are asleep, but those dreams which come to you as surprising thoughts and 'visions' during the day-time, when you are thinking or when you are resting and allowing your mind to wander. If you are willing to let the Lord speak to you in this way, then wait for Him to do so!*
- *Pray for young people, in particular those you know who are trying hard to please people but seem to annoy them instead! It may be that their dreams and aspirations are rather like those of Joseph!*

Final Prayer

Give us an open heart, Lord Jesus, so that we can place the turmoil of the day into Your hands, and trust You for the future, watching to see how things will work out, but not stressing ourselves with a sense of personal responsibility for all the details of what happens. May we rest in You, and with our open hearts, praise You each and every day; AMEN
