

## Prayer

Jesus Christ; You are our constant companion in life,  
a guide throughout the roughest storms,  
a companion who shares our inmost thoughts,  
a support when unexpected trouble comes;  
a tutor in the midst of all our deepest learning;  
touch our hearts afresh today and grant us peace. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Television

*Pray about the power and influence of television in your country. Pray for Christians who work within the television industry either as performers or as one of the many support staff.*

### On-going prayers

- Give thanks for those things of beauty God has placed around you
- 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

## Meditation

Where do you find peace?

In a quiet moment sitting down with something to read?  
Wandering about in a garden, with its sights and smells?  
Thinking to yourself whilst alone for a few moments?  
Walking briskly through the hills on a weekend break?  
Putting your head back for an afternoon snooze?  
Talking to the one you love on a lazy Saturday morning?  
Doing what you know you can do well, and enjoying it?

Where do you find peace?

Perhaps the truest peace comes unexpectedly,  
When, in moments never guessed or pre-determined  
Something of God's love has opened like a flower:  
We stop, we look, and as we take the offered gift,  
We find that everything seems different;  
And it is ...

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## Bible Study - Genesis 37:12-24

<sup>12</sup> Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock at Shechem. <sup>13</sup> Then Israel said to Joseph, 'Your brothers are pasturing the flock at Shechem are they not? Get ready, and I will send you to them.' He answered, 'I am ready.' <sup>14</sup> He said to him, 'I would like you to go and see if all is well with your brothers and all is well with the flock, and bring me word.' So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

When he came to Shechem, <sup>15</sup> and a man found him wandering in the countryside, and he asked, 'What are you looking for?' <sup>16</sup> 'I am looking for my brothers,' he said; 'could you please tell me where they are pasturing their flocks.' <sup>17</sup> The man answered, 'They travelled on from here, for I heard them saying, "Let's go to Dothan."' So Joseph pursued his brothers, and caught up with them at Dothan.

<sup>18</sup> However, they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. <sup>19</sup> They said to each other, 'Here comes that great dreamer. <sup>20</sup> Come now, let's murder him and throw him into one of the wells, and we will then say that a wild animal has disposed of him. Then we will see what becomes of his dreams!' <sup>21</sup> But when Reuben heard this, he persuaded them otherwise and said, 'We must not take his life.' <sup>22</sup> Reuben told them, 'Shed no

blood; throw him into this pit here out in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him' (he said this so that he might rescue him from them and restore him to his father.)<sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his tunic, the decorated garment he wore,<sup>24</sup> and they took him and threw him into the pit. It was empty, with no water in it.

## Review

In this passage we have started the story of Joseph in earnest. Yesterday we learned about Joseph's prophetic dreams that hint at so much to come, and now we read on into a dark episode of family strife and murderous intent in Jacob's deeply divided family. The twelve verses we have read today describe a frankly incredible move by Jacob to bring some peace to his dysfunctional family. After Joseph told his family about his dreams, the results were catastrophic and divisive and there was a great deal of anger amongst his brothers (see Gen 237:1-11). Nevertheless, Jacob's plan was to send Joseph to find his brothers, presumably to try and establish some peace; but it set the whole family on a pathway to disaster, at least from an earthly perspective. The ugly scenes with which we are presented today (37:18-24) make us wonder what God could possibly be doing with His chosen people. The chosen son of Jacob and potential heir of God's covenant promises had rent apart the family of his father with division and hatred.

Jacob's actions are typical of those well intentioned plans we all come up with from time to time, but which fail because we have not consulted the Lord, or we have underestimated the strength of feeling in others. Jacob knew full well that Joseph was loathed by his brothers, and it appears that he had to keep him back from his shepherding duties (37:2) for a while in order to preserve the peace. Jacob believed that by sending Joseph to them (37:13), his other sons would respect their father's authority. In those days it was expected that an emissary would be treated with such respect (as in Jesus' parable – Matt 21:33f.). It was Jacob's sincerest hope that a small mission such as this would bring reconciliation; but how wrong he was!

The journey Joseph embarked upon was difficult, travelling the length of Canaan from Hebron in the south to Dothan in the North; he was virtually lost in the countryside in the attempt to find his brothers. When he finally met them, his brothers had prepared a plan to deal with him, and the majority of them wanted to murder him on the spot, and present a tragic story to Jacob as an excuse for their crime (37:20). Reuben, the eldest son, and with the greatest authority amongst the brothers, would not hear of murder. He wanted to let his brothers teach Joseph a lesson by throwing him in a pit, so that he could rescue Joseph later. So when Joseph eventually arrived, they manhandled and stripped him before throwing him into a dry pit, probably an old waterhole. From that merciless moment, Joseph's prospects were non-existent, but we will explore tomorrow what happened to him.

We must bear in mind that this is the story of a sacred family chosen by God for the bearing of His Covenant love and mercy, His plan of Salvation for the whole world; but what has happened? Everything was in chaos! Throughout the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we have read about family strife of one kind or another, and God's chosen people have had to learn through personal experience the lessons of faith necessary to bear the Covenant promises of God; Abraham and Lot, for example, or Ishmael and Isaac, or even Jacob and Esau. In this story, however, the whole drama is played out on a far bigger scale; it is about the whole family of God's people, twelve brothers, who as tribal leaders, were destined to play an essential part in the future of God's people. Our story here cannot finish with one family member being God's 'chosen' and the rest disappearing from scripture, like previous stories in Genesis. All of the brothers are essential for God's future. The drama of the story of Joseph and his brothers is about how God worked to bring reconciliation to this family so that they could grow into a nation. At this point, Genesis ceases to be about one person, but about a family in the process of becoming a nation.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The hope of Jacob and the mission of Joseph
- Why did the brothers plot to kill Joseph?

## Going Deeper

The story of Joseph and his brothers is one of the most fascinating and misunderstood narratives within scripture. It is full of intrigue and unhappiness, and it speaks from this point forward of sinful humanity redeemed by the acts of God; and of the forgiveness given which makes that redemption real. As we read on, we will find many parallels between the story of Joseph and the later life of God's people, including the coming of the Messiah and the Gospel of the New Testament.

### **Jacob's hope and Joseph's mission**

Apparently, Joseph's brothers were pasturing their flocks at Shechem (37:12,13), and Joseph remained with his father Jacob (also named Israel – see 37:13) and his family group in Hebron (37:14). It is easy to let these details slip by, but they reveal interesting details. Jacob stayed at Hebron where his father Isaac had settled, and this was in the south of Canaan, about 20 miles south of Jerusalem as we know it today. Shechem, however, was situated in the midlands of Canaan, close to where Jacob had first entered Canaan since arriving from Mesopotamia, and was around 30 miles to the north of Jerusalem.

The important thing about this is that only a couple of years previously, Jacob's sons had slaughtered the inhabitants of a settlement near Shechem (see Genesis 34), and Jacob felt he had to leave the area because of the threat of reprisals (34:30f.). Because we know from later on in the story that the brothers were in fact a further 20 miles north in Dothan, we are tempted to believe that they had not been entirely truthful with their father about where they went with the flocks. They would certainly not be welcome anywhere near Shechem. It may have been their intent to place some distance between themselves and Hebron, where the odious Joseph remained with his father. Also, the distances seem long for shepherds and their flocks; however, we know from later in the story that drought was coming upon Canaan, and in such circumstances, shepherds had to travel considerable distances with large flocks in order to obtain adequate pasture.

It is certain that Jacob sent Joseph on the errand in order to bring peace to his troubled family. The word 'shalom', meaning peace, occurs twice in verse 14 where it is translated 'all is well', as if to emphasise the peaceful intent of Jacob in sending his son. Certainly, what he wanted was not the 'bad' report he previously received from Joseph about the brothers with whom he first shepherded (see 37:2), but a report of well-being and 'shalom'. Whether this intent was realistic was a different matter, and we who know the rest of Scripture are reminded by this incident of the story in the New Testament told by Jesus in which a Vineyard owner sent his son to check on the performance of tenant farmers and assert his authority, only to be shocked by the murder of the son (Matthew 21:33f.). It is certainly possible that Jesus was alluding to the Joseph story (as well as other Old Testament prophecies) in this parable, for the story of Joseph becomes a story of salvation through the mercy and will of God.

Returning to today's text, Joseph appears to be lost somewhere near Shechem, as the text says; 'wandering in the countryside'. If Joseph wished to find his brothers, the best place to go would be the local towns and cities, and it may be that the young Joseph was nervous about entering any towns or settlements near Shechem because of the bad reputation of his brothers. He was helped by a stranger who found him wandering, someone who performed the duties of an angel in guiding the young man on his way!

### ***Why did the brothers plot to kill Joseph?***

It is obvious that the brothers would seek to take out their feelings on the young teenager Joseph in some way, though it is perhaps hard for us to understand why they should want to murder him simply for being inappropriately precocious. Even the insult against his parents (37:10,11) was something we would reprimand today, but not allow as a reason for murder. What reason could possibly incite the brothers to want to kill Joseph? We have to enter into the world of these ancient people for whom what had happened was far more serious than anything we can imagine from our experience today.

The dreams of Joseph portrayed the young man as the future leader and governor of his own clan and family; moreover, they even claimed that he would have superiority over his own parents! This was something that went against every moral bone in the bodies of a group of brothers of those ancient times. Reuben was the eldest of the brothers, and although it was probably known that his mother Leah was not Jacob's 'favourite' wife, since the death of Rachel (35:18), Leah was Jacob's only wife. Reuben would have been the unquestioned heir of Jacob and the respected elder brother. Whilst Jacob's favouritism of the young Joseph was tolerated by the brothers to a degree, the incidents recorded earlier had 'overstepped the mark'. For each of the brothers, their own place in the 'pecking order' of the family group was at stake, and Joseph's dreams threatened to turn everything upside down.

It is all the more remarkable that when the brothers see Joseph coming from a distance, their plot to murder the young pretender is thwarted by none other than Reuben, the eldest son. Reuben however, may well have decided to take personal advantage of the situation. He was not in favour with his father because of an earlier incident recorded in Genesis 35:22, in which he had committed the sin of sleeping with Bilhah, Rachel's maid. This action could have been seen as a threat to Jacob's own leadership of his family, and Scripture records the incident with strong disapproval. If Reuben was now seeking to gain favour with his father again, then it would work in his favour to save Jacob's favourite young son and return him safely home.

In the end, jealousy ruled the day, and perhaps the brother's rage was enflamed by the symbol of favouritism worn by Joseph, the elaborate coat given him by his father. This coat was torn from Joseph's back (37:23) and the teenager was thrown into a pit. The Hebrew word for 'pit' also means 'well', but in this case, the pit

into which Joseph was thrown was dry. This is a sign of the coming drought which later on, controls the whole story of the family of Jacob.

## Application

Although the story of Joseph begins to turn downwards in this tale of jealousy and revenge, and we know that there is far worse still to come, the story speaks of God's purposes and His care even within a downward spiral of events. Yet again, God has made it clear that His choice rests upon someone who is the victim in the story, someone who would not have been recognised as a leader worthy of the name in his own day. In this way, Joseph represents many young people who have been misunderstood and misinterpreted throughout their early years. Just like his forefathers, Joseph has to begin a long journey of failure and success before finally reaping the reward of God's visible blessing in his family and his life.

It is also worth thinking about Jacob and what he may have felt about what was happening. Like any parent, he may have been more aware of what was going on and likely to happen than we know. Jacob could not protect the young man from all that would happen to him, and he had to endure indignity and suffering, and wait for many a long year before he could know that the hand of God was upon his family and everything that happened to them. He is like many a parent who has to wait and be patient not just with young people, but with the working of God's plans and purposes.

To this day, God calls and prepares people for tasks in ways that are not evident even to His own people. It may be that the Lord will prepare a servant of His for a special task through suffering and indignity, through failure and success, and against all the normal human logic of training, education, appraisal or obvious merit. Scripture shows that we should look for the leaders of God's people in the unlikely places, not the likely, and that people who do not appear to fit what is required from a human point of view may well be anointed by the Lord for greater things.

In my own previous work as a Bible College Tutor, I have seen young people turned down for ministry in the church who did not meet the elaborate, often 'tick box' criteria demanded of some churches before someone will be accepted for training and the honour of ordination within the church. Yet my spirit has borne witness that they have offered themselves honourably and with the guidance of the Spirit. They are called to walk the path of Joseph; a lonely and difficult path, which can involve great pain and suffering, especially when facing rejection by the church. But God has greater plans for his own. When will we learn!

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Joseph appeared eager to pursue his father's will (37:13). What would make him willing to do this, given what had happened?
2. What deep feelings were aroused by the dreams Joseph had told his brothers, and why did they try to do away with him?
3. Discuss the possible motives of Reuben in attempting to save Joseph.

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*God works through the mystery of life's events, and this can be extremely difficult for us to accept at times. We believe that God should surely make life good for us all the time, but sometimes the greatest of things happen to us through the most extraordinary circumstances and often through suffering and rejection. Joseph was rejected by his brothers, like so many young people who have been rejected in life. However, we know that he had the courage to bear what happened to him and persist in faith and hope. He has much to teach us.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Is the Lord preparing you for something greater than what you experience now? It would be unlikely for you to say that this was not the case, for each disciple anticipates that the Lord will do greater things. However, not all of us are like Joseph, and many are called to act faithfully now rather than look to the future. Pray about what the Lord requires of you.*
- *Pray for those who feel rejected by the church, especially young people who feel misunderstood, or those who do not feel welcome.*

## Final Prayer

Lord God, Creator of the World and Saviour of all, show Your majesty and might through the things You do all around us; through signs and wonders, through works of love and peace, and through the sustenance and guidance of the poor in heart. Bless this world You have made we pray. AMEN

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