

## Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ; You are Lord of all and we depend on You every moment of the day. Help us to know how far we should pursue things according to our own efforts and when we should stand back and leave things in Your hands. By exercising trust and discernment, and accepting Your gracious and ultimate authority over everything we do, give us peace and confidence. May we show others that by faith we trust You every moment of every day. Thank You, Lord Jesus, AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Television

*Pray about the issue of advertising. Many industries use advertising to project an 'image', and use this power to deceive people. Pray for those who control advertising in your country*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray about how children are taught about our world and God's creation*
- *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*

## Meditation

Jesus said, 'beware of wolves in sheep's clothing' (*Matt 7:15*)

To warn us of false prophets who lead God's people astray.

Beware of those who try to reorganise the church,  
so that their personal power and influence will increase.

Beware of preachers who give the appearance of faith,  
but will not declare eternal life through the risen Lord Jesus.

Beware of counsellors with impressive qualifications,  
who have never known the spiritual gift of discernment.

Beware of evangelists who will preach a message,  
yet have not real love for the people to whom they preach.

Beware of those who manage the church's finances,  
but run the church by controlling what can and cannot be done.

Beware of those who dominate a church's worship,  
by parading musical gifts rather than their spiritual sensitivity.

Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing ...

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## Bible Study - Genesis 37:25-36

<sup>25</sup> They sat down to eat, and when they looked up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels loaded with gum, balm and resin, which they were transporting down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup> Judah said to his brothers, 'What do we gain by killing our brother and concealing his blood?' <sup>27</sup> Instead, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not harm him, for he is our brother, our own family.' His brothers agreed. <sup>28</sup> When some Midianite traders approached, the brothers lifted Joseph up from the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt.

<sup>29</sup> When Reuben went to the pit and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. <sup>30</sup> He went back to his brothers and said, 'The boy is gone; and as for me, what can I do?' <sup>31</sup> So they took Joseph's robe, killed a goat, and dipped the tunic in the blood. <sup>32</sup> They sent the decorated tunic back to their father, and reported, 'We found this; please identify whether it is your son's tunic or not.' <sup>33</sup> Jacob recognized it, and said, 'It is my son's tunic! A wild animal has devoured him; he has been torn to pieces; Joseph!'

<sup>34</sup> Then Jacob tore his own garments, and put on sackcloth. He mourned for his son for many days. <sup>35</sup> His sons and daughters all attempted to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted. 'No,' he said, 'I shall go down to Sheol in mourning, to go and be with my son.' So his father grieved for him.

<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's courtiers, the captain of the bodyguard.

## Review

The extraordinary story of Joseph's captivity and separation from his family unfolds within this passage with all the features of a relentless and heartless tragedy. True, Joseph was a precocious youngster who broke all the rules of good behaviour in front of his elder brothers and his parents, but his naive openness unleashed a wave of anger from his brothers, which finally engulfed him.

Prior to this passage, Joseph had been sent by his father on a long journey to find his brothers, but had been stripped and thrown into a waterless pit (see yesterday's study). We are now shocked to read of the uncouth behaviour of the brothers, sitting down to eat a meal beside the pit into which they had thrown their little brother, starving and thirsty after a long journey! Normal rules of hospitality in the ancient world required people to share food and drink, but such was their bitterness, they acted without mercy. Little did they know that the next time they would have a meal in the presence of their brother, they would cower in abject fear of him (43:16f.) just as Joseph himself had prophesied. The time would come when they would tremble before him as lord of all Egypt, trapped by dread of the brother they now treated with contempt.

Meanwhile, Genesis unfolds a story of strange drama. A group of traders bound for Egypt passed by, a sight that would have been common because of Canaan's strategic trading position between Egypt and Persia. The traders are called either Ishmaelites or Midianites, and the two names are used interchangeably in some Old Testament texts. They were nomadic traders used to handling slaves and transporting them from one part of the world to another.

The brothers then hatched a plot to deceive their father Jacob into believing that a wild animal had attacked Joseph; lions and other wild cats did indeed inhabit Canaan in those days (37:29f.). However, their embarrassment at what they had done is shown by their reticence in presenting their father with the evidence (37:32) of his death, the torn tunic covered with blood. Jacob was horrified, but we, the readers of this story, know that Jacob had once tricked his own father Isaac with goatskin and his brother's clothes (Gen 27:14f.)! He was now the subject of cruel trickery by his own sons, using the blood of a goat and some torn clothing. Just as Jacob's father Isaac had been mortified to think that his wayward sons put the great Covenant of God in jeopardy, now Jacob is made to feel the same. He refused to be comforted (37:35) and despaired of going to Sheol (the place of the dead) to go and be with his beloved son Joseph. Jacob, like Isaac and Abraham the bearers of the Covenant promise before him, was tragically blind to what God was doing within his family in order to pursue His covenant promises.

There are a number of sub-plots to the story line, and one of these is intriguing; this is the contrast in the story line between the actions of Reuben and Judah. Reuben was the eldest son, and Judah was the fourth, and both of them were sons of Jacob's first wife Leah. Reuben devised a rescue plan for Joseph (37:21f.) but failed to persuade his brothers to go along with it, or even rescue Joseph himself. Judah, however, led the brothers with clear and effective advice. He told them that they should profit from the situation by selling Joseph, and avoid the blood-guilt of his death. However, they would have to bear the grief of their father because of their calculated deception. If we compare the actions of Judah with Reuben, we must ask who was the real leader? It was Judah.

This passage is the first indication in Scripture that Judah would prove to be the favoured tribe of Israel, the one that would lead Israel in the future. David came from the tribe of Judah, as did the Messiah. This is an important feature of the Old Testament, and although it is not something we would easily spot, it is no small point!

### **Going Deeper**

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

- Judah and the plot to sell Joseph
- Reuben, the excuse, and the deception of Jacob

## Going Deeper

Each part of this story line holds some degree of interest, which we must be careful to spot if we are to benefit from the story as a whole; the actions of the brothers, the money paid for Joseph, the contrast

between Rueben and Judah, the tunic and the blood, and even captivity in Egypt. All these point us towards more than what we may think we are reading!

### ***Judah and the plot to sell Joseph***

The region of Dothan where the brothers were tending the flocks was around 70 miles north of Hebron where Jacob was living. It was on the eastern side of the mountain range which formed a boundary to the Jezreel valley and in the centre of northern Israel where a number of ancient trading routes came together connecting Mesopotamia and Egypt. It was not surprising that the brothers came across caravans of traders using this route. The traders they met had only come from Gilead with the raw materials of that region; gum, balm and resins all taken from tree sap. Each of the three substances mentioned was used in Egyptian industrial processes for making incense, perfumes, foodstuffs or medicines.

The traders are mysteriously described as Ishmaelites (3 times – 37:25,27,28) and Midianites (37:28,36). From Scripture we know that the Midianites were descendants of Abraham through his second wife Keturah (see Gen 25:1f.) and the Ishmaelites were descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's first son by the slave-girl Hagar. Some people suggest that the use of the two names suggests that the story has been put together from two different stories. However, the origins of these two clans is so similar in time that most people today reckon that these two names were used interchangeably for the people from the north eastern side of the Jordan (just as we might talk of someone who lives in London as 'British' or 'English', for example). Indeed, there is one Biblical reference (Judges 8:24) which indicates that the two names meant the same people.

Judah's plan was unpleasant but practical, and was presented to the brothers as a 'win-win' situation. They could live with deceiving their father, be rid of the troublesome Joseph, and would benefit financially from the transaction. In addition, they would avoid the 'bloodguilt' born by Cain, the blood of whose brother Abel 'cried out to heaven for vengeance' (Gen 4:10). The slave trade was an accepted part of life in those days, and 20 shekels was a fair price for a young man in good condition. The wage of a shepherd in those days was around eight shekels a year, so each brother stood to gain around 2 shekels, which was three months wages.

The assumption they incorrectly made was that by selling Joseph into slavery and into Egypt, they were getting rid of Joseph and making the fulfilment of his dreams impossible (37:20). In God's providence, they were in fact laying the foundation stones of His great saving acts. It is always worth remembering that God is able to bring good out of evil because His authority and power is absolute.

### ***Rueben, the excuse and the deception of Jacob.***

Rueben, the elder brother, was left to bear the brunt of the problem created by the sale of Joseph. He appears to have been absent when the brothers disposed of Joseph, perhaps having wandered off to deal with the flocks. Scripture records his belated and shocked response after turning up later with the intent of saving the hapless Joseph; 'the boy is gone, what can I do?' (37:29,30).

It would have been possible for the brothers to agree a story which said that they had not even met Joseph; however, they decided to play out the earlier plan to deceive their father and pretend that he had been killed, thereby creating the maximum distress for Jacob (37:20). That they did this so illustrates bad feeling between the brothers and their father over the whole issue, and Reuben, yet again, appears to have been ineffective. Indeed, in verse 32, it is unclear whether any of the brothers take the torn and bloodied tunic back to their father; the implication is that servants are required to do the disturbing task of presenting Jacob with the evidence of death. I have translated Jacob's response almost exactly as it is in the Hebrew in order to capture the Jacob's emotions; 'It is my son's tunic! A wild animal has devoured him; he has been torn to pieces; Joseph!'

There is plenty of Scriptural reference for the practice of using sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning (see Job 16:15, Jonah 3:3-5 etc), and the normal period of mourning was a week. But Jacob had no body to bury and no 'DNA' testing to know the difference between goat blood and human blood. He therefore 'refused to be comforted' (37:35) and continued in mourning for his son, preferring the thought of being with him in 'Sheol'. Sheol was the Hebrew for 'place of the dead', and though there are some passages within the Old Testament which talk of a hope that God would save people from Sheol, the majority view amongst Israelite people was that Sheol was a place of dread, where those who had died were cut off from the normal arena of God's work. It was many years later before Jacob heard the good news that his son was still alive (45:26).

In the meantime, like a good 'soap opera', the narrator of Genesis gives us a glimpse of the fact that God has His hand on events. Joseph is not in fact lost and the whole of Jacob's family now cease to be the focus of God's attention and His work. The narrative switches from Jacob to Joseph, who arrives in Egypt to be sold into slavery, but to a high official in the bodyguard of Pharaoh; a man named 'Potiphar' (37:36).

## Application

This story is relatively straightforward to follow, but it does warn us to consider that God might in fact be in charge of events which we find quite intolerable. His plans are designed for far greater things than described in the details of this incident, and the same can often be true of our circumstances today. Too often, we like to see God at work in each detail, as if this and this alone will give us confidence. We are not told Joseph's feelings through these events, and it becomes clear that he has to endure significant suffering before finally finding his place both in society but also in God's plan for him. It is strongly implied that Joseph had to learn to trust God even though the evidence that might warrant that trust did not exist in earthly terms. Would we survive such a test?

True Christian discipleship continues in faith despite everything that happens and despite all circumstances. The discipleship to which many people are called to today is one that must be blind to the turmoil of the divided and fractured world in which we live and the problems of the church that many people experience. It is a discipleship that maintains a long term confidence in the judgement of God to deal with sin, wickedness and wrongdoing, and finally liberate His people again into true world-wide revival; the re-birth of the church that will make Christian faith plain and accessible throughout the world. It may be a few generations before this comes to pass, but it will happen, just as Joseph fulfilled the dreams and vision given to him. God has prophesied this renewal through many people in recent decades, and before it happens, His people must endure uncertainty, suffering and a journey of faith that will prepare them for what is to come. Our duty is to hold our faith firm until the Lord fulfils His Word, even though we do not always see the hand of God at work in what we see around us.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Can you think of circumstances in which God has used events that seem evil, and yet He has turned them around for good?
2. What is the difference between a weak leader like Reuben and a strong one like Judah? Why does God use one person and not another?
3. Discuss the possible feelings of the different characters within this story; what does this tell us about the story of Joseph?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*I have endured many circumstances in which it is difficult to perceive how God is working. There is no escaping such realities however strong our faith, indeed, our faith is often strengthened most through the difficulties of life that face us. It can be extremely hard to believe that God will make all things turn out for the better when all the evidence seems to point to the opposite, and when everyone around you appears to have a better 'deal' than you. These are the truly testing times of life, and the best thing we can do is to stand firm and support one another. God is not intent upon testing us beyond our limits, but He will persist to bring His own plans to fruition. It is my experience that the best thing to do is to come before the Lord and ask Him to reveal His will. Knowing what His will is can help us endure the hardest of trials..*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Do you find it easy or difficult to wait for God? How patient are you when it comes to waiting for God to answer prayer? How do you cope with the difficulties of life when you feel that God is not opening doors as you might expect? Pray and ask the Lord to help you deal with your own feelings at such times.*
- *Pray for those who suffer needlessly, especially because of the sins of other people. Those who starve because of the politics of food distribution in our world, for example, or those who do not receive medical care because they are not wealthy enough to afford it.*

## Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, guide my lips to praise You in all I do and say. May my speech reflect what is good, may my actions display care, and may my thoughts be focused on the Good News of the Kingdom; and help me to know Your presence throughout the day, and rejoice in it. I ask this in Your name Lord Jesus: AMEN.