

Lesson 45
Joseph's Early Life

Genesis 37:1-38:30

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Joseph is a very unique character in Bible History. As much Scripture is devoted to Joseph as to Abraham. Why? There are a number of reasons: (1) his story is necessary for the completion of Jacob's (Israel) story; (2) he is the great link between Israel as a family and Israel as a nation; (3) he is a type of Christ; and (4) his life is a wonderful example of faith that looks at life from the divine viewpoint (Heb. 11:22).

B. Each patriarch teaches the Bible reader something about faith. Abel illustrates redemption through faith; Enoch stands for the walk of faith; Noah bears witness to the confession of faith; Abraham exemplifies the obedience of faith; Isaac is an example of the patience of faith; Jacob reveals the training of faith; while Joseph exemplifies testing and triumph of faith.

II. JOSEPH SOLD INTO SLAVERY 37:1-36

A. Joseph's Home Life (37:1-4)

1. The story begins when Joseph is seventeen years old. There is nothing recorded of his early life although the Bible reader can make some deductions. Joseph was greatly favored by his father, Jacob (v.3), for he was the first son of his beloved wife Rachel and came along when he was quite old. Jacob also gave Joseph a multi-colored coat which had a mark of distinction that carried its own meaning, for it implied exemption from labor which was the peculiar privilege of the heir or prince of an eastern clan. Apparently Joseph was also spiritually minded and God-conscious about right and wrong. Apparently his brothers had done something very wrong and Joseph felt constrained to tell Jacob about it (v.2). Perhaps Jacob and Joseph had a spiritual kinship that Jacob did not have with his other sons, for it is obvious that at this time some of his sons were not yet saved (cf. chapter 38). NOTE. Why was Joseph so much different than the other sons of Jacob? Joseph had been touched by the sovereign grace of God. Yet, there is also a human explanation. Joseph was born at the end of Jacob's carnal life while most of his other children saw Jacob at his worst. Joseph escaped all those bad experiences of life in Haran, but the other children did not. They had been brought up under the influence of the old Jacob, while Joseph had been the companion of the changed Jacob.

2. Because Joseph was favored, his brothers hated him and could do nothing but argue with him (v. 4). They were filled with envy and resentment. NOTE. The root of the entire problem was envy. Envy is dissatisfaction with one's own circumstances, which results in jealousy, and anger with others who are more favored. It is a failure to accept one's lot under the sovereignty of God.

B. Joseph's Two Dreams (37:5-11). Jacob had several dreams that tell of his dominion and sovereignty over his other brothers. These dreams are of their sheaves being subservient to his (vs. 6-8), and of the sun, moon and eleven stars being subservient to him (vs. 9-11). NOTE. Why Joseph shared these dreams with his brothers are not stated but perhaps he was excited about them and thought that he had some divine mission to perform for his family. NOTE. These dreams increased the hatred of his brothers. The hatred builds in intensity (vs. 4-5, 8, 11, 18-20).

C. Joseph Sent to Check on His Brothers (37:12-14). Jacob was concerned about his boys who were in the area of Shechem, for not too many years back they had plundered and killed many Shechemites (cf. chapter 34). He sent Joseph to check on them.

D. Joseph's Brothers Contemplate Murder (37:15-20). So resentful are the brothers that they quietly talk of murder and ways to lie about how Joseph died. NOTE. Envy, if allowed to take its full course, can result in murder.

E. Joseph is Saved From Death by Reuben (37:21-28). Reuben, the eldest son, did not go along with the evil plan. He was for playing a trick. He suggested that Joseph be thrown in a pit, but Reuben had good intentions to come back and rescue Joseph after he was good and scared (cf. 42:22). However, Reuben was overruled.

F. Joseph Sold Into Slavery (37:23-28). The brothers ripped off Joseph's coat and threw him into a pit, intending to kill him. But some merchants on their way to Egypt caught Judah's eye and he suggested that they sell Joseph into slavery rather than take his life. They sold Joseph for 20 pieces of silver. The traders, in turn, sold him to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh (37:36). NOTE. Humanly speaking it seems as though Joseph received a "raw deal" but God's ways are not man's ways. God loved Joseph and had a wonderful plan for his life, and all of the scheming by his brothers was part of that plan (Gen. 50:20).

G. Joseph's Brothers Lie to Jacob (37:29-36). The brothers concocted an explanation for Joseph's disappearance. They dipped his beautiful coat in goat's blood and made Jacob believe that some wild beast had slain his beloved son (vs. 31-33). NOTE. Ironically, this man Jacob, who relied on so many tricks and even deceived his own father Isaac by wearing goatskins (cf. chapter 27), is now himself deceived by his sons who also use a goat. In a real sense, he was reaping what he had sown.

III. JUDAH SOLD OUT TO SIN (38:1-30)

A. Introduction: In many respects this is the worst chapter in the Bible. It is very earthy and reveals the sinfulness of sin. Judah brings great disgrace and shame to Jacob's family. There is a direct connection between this chapter and what follows in the life of Joseph. Chapter 38 develops a crucial reason for God's man being in Egypt. Because the moral cancer of the Canaanite society is eating away at Jacob's family, God will remove Israel temporarily from Canaan. God is going to prepare His man who will bring Israel out of Canaan into Egypt. Chapter 38, therefore, is like a setting of the stage for Joseph's rise to power in Egypt, where he will be in a position to deliver his own people. Chapter 38 also shows, at this precise time in the account, the impurity of Judah and sets the stage for the incident, which demonstrates the purity of Joseph in chapter 39. NOTE. Judah faced the temptation of sexual promiscuity and yielded; Joseph faced it and fled in victory.

B. Judah Sins Taking a Wife From Among the Canaanites (38:1-11). Judah took the Canaanite woman Shuah to wife and she bore three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. Apparently none of these sons were godly or moral. From this wicked association came wicked sons. Years later, Judah took Tamar and gave her to his oldest son, Er, for a wife (v. 6), but God slew him because he was wicked. God also slew Onan because of his wickedness. Then Tamar was asked to remain in the house of Judah until Shelah, Judah's third son, was old enough to marry.

C. Judah Mistakes Tamar for a Harlot (38:12-23). Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, disguises herself as a harlot in order to get pregnant by Judah. Judah, thinking she was a harlot, lies with her. About three months later, Judah discovers that Tamar is pregnant but does not know he is the father and he is furious and says she should be put to death for harlotry (v. 24). He then discovers he is the father and from that time out he knew her no more. NOTE. Notice the double standard of Judah. It was all right for him to be guilty of sexual immorality with a harlot but he thought it wrong for Tamar to be guilty of harlotry. Actually both were wrong. NOTE. At this point in time, probably neither Judah nor Tamar was saved. They were acting like pagans should act, for they had no God-consciousness to guide their morality. But God later saved Judah and Tamar. It is interesting that God chose to make Judah the line through whom Messiah would come and Tamar is mentioned in the genealogy in

Matt. 1:3. Only divine grace could change these sinful characters and use them for God's purposes. There is nothing more wonderful than the powers and possibilities of grace. God's grace forgives, transforms and uses saved sinners for His glory.