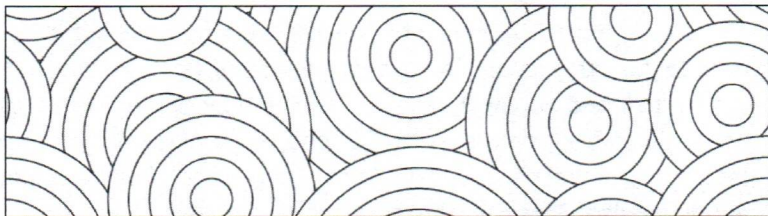


LESSON 7

JOSEPH THE DREAMER

GENESIS 37:1-22



OPEN IT UP

Dreams are usually considered mere curiosities today. Everyone dreams, but most do not take their dreams seriously. This has not always been the case. In the ancient Near Eastern world of the Old Testament, dreams were considered divine attempts to communicate with human beings. Dream manuals existed to aid ancient dream scholars in their interpretations of dreams. And the Bible, too, lends credibility to the value of dreams. Joseph and Daniel rise to prominence in foreign governments due in part to their remarkable skill at dream interpretation. It seems strange to us to assign so much importance to dreams, but we must remember the Bible was written to different people with different beliefs. Understanding the importance assigned to dreams helps us understand why Joseph's brothers hated him so much.

JOSEPH'S DREAMS • GENESIS 37:1-11

The story of Joseph opens by reporting more family dysfunction. Joseph was the kind of kid who just didn't fit in. And this was the case for a number of reasons. First, he was his father's favorite (Genesis 37:3). This fact alone would have made his brothers jealous as it likely

made Jacob himself jealous when his own father Isaac favored his older brother Esau. Second, he dressed differently (verse 3). His coat was expensive and special, and anyone who saw it knew it set him apart. Third, Joseph was simply more talented than everyone else. His brothers were not blessed with the prophetic dreams that Joseph had (verse 5).

Any one of these would be reason enough for his brothers to hate Joseph. But Joseph made things worse by tattling on his brothers for their bad behavior (Genesis 37:2) and by sharing his special dreams with his brothers (verse 5). Joseph was the smartest, most talented kid in the class who could not keep himself from reminding everyone else. That's why his brothers hated him.

Joseph's delusions of grandeur were backed up by his fanciful dreams. In the first, Joseph imagined the sheaves of the field bowed down to his sheaf (Genesis 37:7). In the second, Joseph dreamed the sun, moon, and stars fell before him (verse 9). The dreams were offensive because they were so contrary to social expectations. Normally, the youngest child in the family is the least significant. Custom dictates the firstborn be the most important—a custom Jacob himself had already violated by showing preference to Joseph. Joseph not only claims to be more important than all his older brothers, but he also claims they themselves will acknowledge this fact. It is one thing for me to *claim* to be better than you (and actually believe it); it is quite another thing for you to admit I am better than you (and actually believe it).

JOSEPH'S ERRAND • GENESIS 37:12-17

The Joseph story makes an abrupt turn whenever he is sent to locate his brothers outside their father's protection. Jacob was apparently concerned that no news of his sons' activities had reached him, so he sent Joseph to check on them and the flocks (Genesis 37:14). We note here the concern he may have felt both for his sons and for his possessions. As an obedient son, Joseph went exactly where his father instructed, to Shechem (verse 14). Only his brothers were nowhere to be found.

A random "man" came across Joseph "wandering in the field" (Genesis 37:15) and pointed Joseph in the right direction. We have

no idea who this man was, what he was doing in the field, and how he knew Joseph's brothers. But without this man, Joseph's life would never have unfolded as Scripture records. Sometimes chance encounters change the direction of our lives. A preacher or minister enters our lives to serve as a trusted mentor. A move we dreaded ended up being our salvation. We cannot say what might have happened to Joseph if he had never met this man. But there is no doubt this random encounter changed the course of Joseph's life forever. Pointing Joseph to Dothan, the man disappears, and Joseph sets off to locate his brothers.

JOSEPH'S ABUSE • GENESIS 37:18-22

It must have been quite some time since Joseph's brothers had seen him, but their anger had not cooled. Conspiring together as he was approaching, they exclaimed, "Look, this dreamer is coming! Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, 'Some wild beast has devoured him.' We shall see what will become of his dreams!" (Genesis 37:19–20). Although the specific plot was hatched on the spot, some forethought had been given to killing Joseph. Indeed, murder is rarely an act perpetrated without planning. As Jesus says, murder is a crime that begins in the heart (Matthew 15:19). The brothers had the audacity to kill an innocent family member, make a plan to hide the body, and fabricate an explanation for their father and a self-serving justification for the crime. Their plot was brilliant, and there was little chance they would ever get caught.

I was once present when a criminal was asked why he committed a certain crime. "I don't know," he said. The questioner followed up with, "Are you sorry?" "Yes," the criminal sheepishly replied. "Sorry you did it, or sorry you got caught?" asked the questioner. This last question caught me off guard and taught me an important lesson. There is a difference between genuine sorrow and remorse—wishing you had never done something—and regret for getting caught. Joseph's brothers show no regard for human life, no respect for their father, and no remorse for their plan to destroy the life of their brother. Like Cain, their rage fueled their actions, and they did not consider the consequences.

Fortunately for Joseph, Reuben was listening. As the natural firstborn of Jacob, Reuben was the oldest and the acknowledged leader of the bunch. He prevailed on the others not to kill Joseph but to cast him into a pit. Although Scripture does not explain how Reuben reasoned with the others, we are informed that Reuben secretly planned to rescue Joseph when the coast was clear (Genesis 37:22). The plan was a good one but unfortunately did not work. To paraphrase the famous lines of Burns: "The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry."

WRAP IT UP

Joseph's story does not start well. Although he was the favored son of his father, we are given few details that would justify his ego. He was handsome, talented, blessed, and beloved, but he also seems to have been aware of his own greatness. His dreams were legitimate, but he had to tell them to others. His father's gifts signaled his value, but he made no humble attempt to conceal his importance. Even, and perhaps especially, in extraordinarily gifted young people, humility stands out as an even more admirable trait. But humility is something Joseph would learn through a hard and troubled career as a betrayed brother and foreign slave.



THINK ON IT

1. Explain what dreams meant to people living in biblical times. How do their views differ from ours?
2. Why did Joseph's brothers hate him so much?
3. Describe the role of the random "man" in Joseph's life. How does this man serve as a symbol of God's providence in Joseph's life?
4. Discuss the brothers' plot against Joseph. What does their plotting teach us about them?
5. Describe the ideal person. What personality traits do you wish to see? What qualities make someone likable? Now compare this description with Joseph. How does he fall short?