

## **The story of Joseph – Part 1 by Revd. John White**

This is the first of a set of three sermons on the life of Joseph, taken from Genesis chapter 37:1 to 4 and 12 to 28.

The first verse of our reading tells us that Jacob is living near where his parents used to live in Canaan, and that this is the story of Jacob's family, which chapter 37 is, but this fairly short extract from the beginning of chapter 37 deals more specifically with the story of Joseph and how he ended up in Egypt.

Now Bilhah, a servant girl, was given to Rachel by Laban on Rachel's wedding day, and she became Jacob's concubine as did the servant girl Zilpah who was given to Liar on her wedding day. Bilhah gave birth to two sons, as did Zilpah. Liar gave birth to Reuben the eldest of Jacob's children plus 5 other sons and one daughter Dinah, and Rachel gave birth to two sons Joseph and Benjamin, the youngest of all the children. Altogether Jacob had 12 sons and 1 daughter by 4 women, the two women mentioned in verse 2 plus his two wives Liar and Rachel, and the 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel.

In verse 3 we are told that Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children because Joseph was born in his old age, but he was also Rachel's son, and Rachel was undoubtedly the real love of his life, sadly Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. Regarding Joseph being born in Jacob's old age, Jacob was born in 2006 BC and died at the age of 147 in 1859 BC, and Joseph was born in 1915 BC when Jacob was 91, although of course Rachel would have been very much younger, and our story starts when Joseph is 17 years old.

Now Israel and Jacob are the same person, it was at chapter 32 verse 28 of Genesis that God wrestled with Jacob and then gave him the name Israel, and then after that and throughout Genesis Jacob is called Israel about the same number of times that he is called Jacob.

Now it would seem that being the youngest, apart from Benjamin his younger brother, who we don't hear much about, Joseph was totally spoilt by his father Jacob, who we are told even sat down and made him a long sleeved robe, which although it doesn't say it here, may well have been of many colours. Now the events that took place in our reading concerning Joseph's behaviour and his relationship with his brothers, were in the main due to Jacob's very poor parenting. Also because Joseph carried tales of wrong doing about his older brothers back to Jacob, probably encouraged by Jacob, or at least not frowned upon by Jacob, and because it became obvious to Joseph's brothers that Jacob loved him more than he loved either of them, they began to hate him. And sadly, to make things worse, Joseph suffered from the 50-50-90 law when it came to brotherly relationships, which meant that whenever there was a 50-50 chance of getting it right, there was a 90% probability of getting it wrong, which applied to Joseph a teenager of 17 years who was not given the correct guidance by his father.

Verses 5 to 11, not a part of our reading, although it has a significant bearing on our story, relates to Joseph's dreams of him being superior to his 11 brothers, who, in his dreams, bow down to him, which when he tells his brothers only adds to the breakdown of his relationship to them.

So going on to verse 12, we are told that Joseph's brothers are pasturing their sheep near Shechem, and that Jacob tells Joseph to go and see them to make sure that they are alright and report back, so here Jacob is actively asking Joseph to be a spy for him, so Joseph sets off from the valley of Hebron to Shechem a distance, as the crow flies, of about 50 miles north. Here Jacob was sending his 17 year old son, whom he loved, on his own, on a 50 mile trek north, through barren countryside to find his brothers and their sheep, which we know from the account of King David's teenage years as a shepherd, that Lions roamed the countryside at that time, see 1 Samuel 17, and indeed the brothers use lions in their conspiracy to be rid of Joseph.

Here then is another example of Jacob's thoughtless behaviour towards Joseph in exposing him to such great danger. Clearly boys, which is what Joseph was, grew up quicker than boys do today since his journey, walking 20 miles a day, carrying all he needed for the hazardous journey, would probably take up to 3 days, with no guarantee that he would find them when he got there. Indeed, when he arrives at Shechem, which was an amazing achievement, his brothers and their sheep are nowhere to be found. Eventually a man, who some people think was an angel, found him wandering about looking for them, and the man asks him what it is he is looking for, and he tells the man, "I am seeking my brothers and their sheep." The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'let us go to Dothan.'" Now Dothan is about a further 10 miles or so further north from Shechem, and Joseph eventually found them at Dothan. On arrival at Dothan we are told that they saw him from a distance, they probably recognised him by his colourful full length robe, a robe not normally worn by shepherds, and before he came near to them, they had already conspired to kill him.

One often hears of family break downs, of arguments between siblings, but very seldom to the extent of conspiring to commit murder, Joseph's 11 brothers, with the possible exception of Reuben, must have really hated him, and Joseph must have been totally insensitive to the feelings of his brothers, because he continued to walk towards them totally oblivious of their resentment and anger towards him. Now the brothers said to one another, "Here comes the dreamer." Now, as I have already said, Joseph dreams that his brothers are bowing down to him, and being subservient to him, which he brags to them about, and which only aggravated them even more, and it may have been the dreams that tipped them over the edge. So, they agreed to kill him and throw him into one of the pits, such was the depth of their hatred.

Now the pits were probably dug by previous people to find water, the area they were pastoring their sheep was arid rather than desert, and if you dug deep enough it was possible to find water, but you may have to dig more than one pit before you found it. But before they could kill him, Reuben the oldest of the twelve brothers, told them not to shed any of Joseph's blood and being the oldest, they took notice of him. Now Reuben's plan was that after they had thrown him into the pit then at some convenient time, he would rescue him and either take him home or send him home on his own,

So, when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his long-sleeved robe and threw him into a pit, which in one way was fortunate for Joseph in that it didn't have any water in

it so he wouldn't drown, but unfortunate in that he would die of exposure and thirst very quickly in the hot middle eastern sun without water or the protection of his robe. Then having thrown him into the pit sat down to eat, such was their concern for Joseph's wellbeing.

It was while they were eating that they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead with their camels carrying goods bound for Egypt. Then Judah and his brothers conspired to sell Joseph to them rather than kill him. In this way they will not only be rid of him, they will not have his blood on their hands, and they will also make a profit. So when the traders went by, they lifted Joseph out of the pit and sold him to them for twenty pieces of silver, and the Ishmaelites took him to Egypt as a slave, we know he was a slave, because he was paid for by the Ishmaelites. But in verse 29, not a part of our reading, we read that when Reuben returned and saw the pit empty, he tore his clothes, turned to his brothers and said, 'the boy has gone.' This suggests that Reuben was not there when the decision was made to sell him. But to complete their conspiracy the brothers slaughtered one of their goats and smeared its blood on Joseph's robe to show their father and try and convince him that lions had taken him on his journey to meet them.

Now of course we all know the story of Joseph and how Joseph went on to do great things in Egypt during a severe draught, and how he became the number one official to Pharaoh the king of Egypt. How Joseph's brothers did in fact bow down to him in true humility, when they saw him in Egypt, but did not recognise him. And how it was through Joseph and his brothers that the nation of Israel was eventually created and how God's promise to Abraham was fulfilled through them.

However, on reflection, I could not help but notice that the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham wasn't completed through a family of perfect well behaved people, but through a spoilt child who eventually gained wisdom, and a set of murderous brothers who eventually repented and turned to God. And it is this aspect of the story which gives me confidence and hope for the future, because gaining wisdom and being truly repentant, is not denied any of us, who have faith and trust in God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And remarkably, it is when we do confess our sins to God through Christ, that the burden of them is removed, allowing us to move forward to a better future. So for all of us who are listening to this story today of Joseph and his brothers, and who may have felt that it is too late to be acceptable to God, because of the things we've done in the recent or distant past, then don't worry, but turn to God in repentance, and be released from the burden of them, and know that it is never too late to truly repent, and turn to God who loves us.

We all need to remember that one of the two criminals crucified with Jesus, repented on the cross, and Jesus told him, "Today you will be with me in paradise," And Jesus did not ask him what his crimes were before he forgave him. No, it was his repentance that secured his future. It is never too late to repent and turn to God.

Amen