



Lesson 22

Joseph and his Brothers

In our last lesson we saw the problems Jacob faced when he settled back in the land of Canaan. Yet his faith was strong and he finally turned completely to God at Bethel. In contrast his brother, Esau, concentrated on building up a powerful tribe for himself and never showed any interest in God or His promises.

Joseph the Favourite Son (37:2-4)

We now begin a new section of the book of Genesis. We read:

“These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colours. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.”
Genesis 37:2-4

We turn from Jacob's life to that of his sons and in particular to that of Joseph, his favourite son. He was with four of his brothers; they were the sons of his father's concubines and they were jealous of Joseph and hated him. Jacob had given Joseph a special coat and the word used for the coat is often used in the Old Testament to describe a priest's coat. It seems that Joseph was a spiritually minded man and his father gave him the responsibility for leading the family in worship of God. But look at what he did! A priest's job is to lead people in worship of God so that they can obtain forgiveness from Him, however Joseph simply reported bad things about his brothers to their father. No wonder they hated him!

Joseph's Dreams (37:6-11)

Things got worse. Joseph had two dreams which he shared with his brothers (read Genesis 37:6-11). The dreams increased their hatred for Joseph for they understood what they meant. They were interpreted as showing Joseph ruling over his family, over his parents and brothers, with them all bowing down to him and acknowledging his rule. His brothers hated him for this and were envious of him.

THE PROBLEM OF JEALOUSY

Jealousy or envy is one of the most destructive emotions we can have. It destroys people's lives and sometimes the lives of those they love and worship with. We look at what other people have - things or positions that we do not have and become so jealous that we are consumed by it. We hate the other person for having something we don't have and look for ways of getting it for ourselves. This may lead us to steal or to try to do harm to discredit the other person, so strong can be the emotions of envy.

In Matthew 27:18 we read that Pilate knew that the Jews had delivered Jesus to him (and asked for his death) because they envied him. The Jews were jealous of Jesus' power and popularity with the people and so they conspired to have him put to death!

In his letter to Timothy the Apostle Paul wrote:

“Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment”

1Timothy 6:6

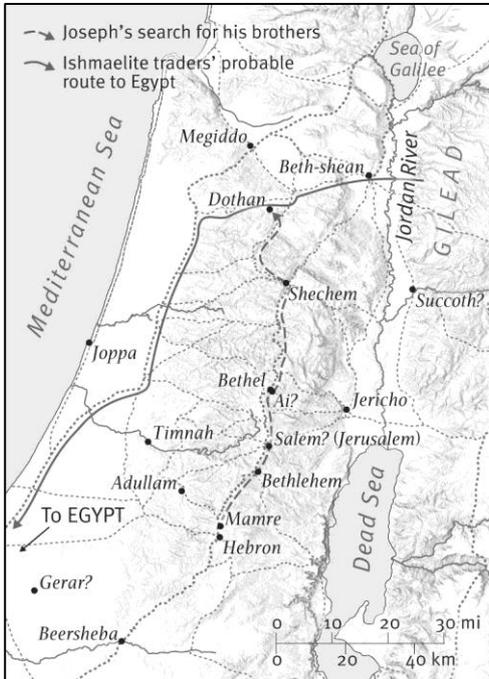
We should not ask God in our prayers for material things that other people have but we should learn to be content with what we have in our own lives. Those who are true disciples of the Lord Jesus have something more precious than anything this life can give us for they have the hope of eternal life in God's kingdom when Jesus returns to this earth. Paul called this hope 'the unsearchable riches of Christ' – it is something so wonderful that it is greater than anything people look for in this life.





Joseph is sold into Slavery

Joseph's brothers took their father's flocks from Hebron to Shechem. This was a long journey of nearly 80km and Jacob was concerned about them so he sent Joseph after them to see if all was well with them. He found they had gone further north to Dothan and went after them. When they saw him coming they decided to kill him and throw his body into a hole in the ground. But this was not all they plotted. What would they tell their father about Joseph? They decided to say that a wild animal had killed and eaten him! The Bible tells us about the 'deceitfulness of sin' and this describes exactly what the brothers planned to do. Their envy had led to hatred; their hatred leads them to plan murder; these plans lead them to think of a terrible story to tell Jacob that they know will cause their father great distress.



Once again we see lessons for us. James wrote these words.

“Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”
James 1:13-15

No-one put these terrible ideas into the minds of the brothers. There was no 'Devil' tempting them. Their plans came from within their own minds; they were driven by their own hatred of Joseph.

However, it is obvious that there was a great argument among the brothers. Some wanted to kill Joseph but Reuben, the oldest, wanted to keep him alive and get him safely back home. This must have been difficult for him. It is not easy to stand up for what is right when everyone else wants to do wrong things. So they did not kill Joseph but threw him alive into a hole in the ground and left him there. It is likely that the discussion about what to do with him continued – no-one gave him anything to eat or drink and in that hot climate he must have been near death.

After three days a caravan of travelling merchants passed by on their way to Egypt and Judah persuaded the brothers to sell Joseph to them for 20 silver shekels – not a very high price! They took the boy down to Egypt and sold him as a slave. We can imagine how he felt about this. God had given him dreams about him becoming the lord of his family but they had sold him and now he was just a slave in a foreign land. This must have been a very great test of his faith in God.

Meanwhile the brothers went back home and lied to their father, telling him that Jacob was dead. The old man was heartbroken and all his family (including the brothers) tried to comfort him. We can imagine how uneasy they felt at their father's distress as they repeated their lies.

SUMMARY

In this lesson we have learned:

- Gossiping about people and telling tales about what they have done is wrong and can cause us a lot of trouble.
- Jealousy is a terrible thing that can eat away in our minds and destroy us if we are not careful.
- Once we begin to tell lies about what has happened it is difficult to stop and we find ourselves telling more and more.
- Sin starts within us – we alone are responsible for what we do.