

Joseph

and his brothers



Colour me!



Genesis 37:17b-30

Joseph was 17 years old. He had 11 brothers but he was his father's favourite. He always boasted about his dreams of future power. He showed off his special coat – a gift from his father Jacob – to his older brothers which made his brothers very jealous of him. One day, his father sent him to check on his brothers who were shepherds grazing their sheep in the fields.

Joseph left and found his brothers in Dothan. But before he got there, they saw him coming and made plans to kill him. They said to one another, "Look, here comes the hero of those dreams! Let's kill him and throw him into a pit and say that some wild animal ate him. Then we'll see what happens to those dreams." Reuben heard this and tried to protect Joseph from them. "Let's not kill him," he said. "Don't murder him or even harm him. Just throw him into a dry well out here in the desert." Reuben planned to rescue Joseph later and take him back to his father.

When Joseph came to his brothers, they pulled off his fine coat and threw him into a dry well. As Joseph's brothers sat down to eat, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with all kinds of spices that they were taking to Egypt. So Judah said, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and hide his body? Let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not harm him. After all, he is our brother." And the others agreed.

When the Midianite merchants came by, Joseph's brothers took him out of the well, and for twenty pieces of silver they sold him to the Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt. When Reuben returned to the well and did not find Joseph there, he tore his clothes in sorrow. Then he went back to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone! What am I going to do?"

Commentary

Although Joseph turns out in the end to be the hero of this family story in Genesis, he is by no means an attractive character — at least not at the beginning. As his dad's favourite, born to his favourite wife after waiting many years, Joseph was clearly spoiled and it went to his head. No wonder his eleven brothers got fed up with him showing off his splendid coat and boasting of dreams in which he turned out to be the most important member of the family. Nevertheless, the plot to kill him off comes as a shock, and his eldest brother's plan to rescue him is foiled when he is sold as a slave to passing traders.

This is a sad but maybe recognizable tale of family jealousy, rivalry and hatred. Even so, God still has his eye and hand on all that happens. There is irony here too in the fact that Jacob, who in his day had experienced favouritism and had himself been a liar, now falls victim to his own foolishness and is lied to by his own children. The poison of bad choices seems to be spread from one generation to another, but so too is the grace of God, who will, we shall discover, turn all this to good in the end.

Questions

- ▶ How would you react if someone in your family started having dreams which suggested they were more important than the rest of you?
- ▶ Who do you blame for what went so badly wrong in this story? Joseph for aggravating everyone? The brothers for hatching the plot? Reuben for not acting more quickly? Jacob for being unfair?
- ▶ What would you have said to Joseph or the brothers to make them behave differently?
- ▶ How and where do you see God at work in this story?



Visual aid

Ask each member of the family to go and fetch his or her favourite item of clothing—something kept for special occasions only. Let everyone talk about why they like it and why they wouldn't use it for everyday activities. Joseph always had his best clothes on and it made the others feel second best.



Activity idea

Find a video of the musical Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. You will probably be able to find it on YouTube or from a public library site. Listen and sing along to this catchy and colourful interpretation of the whole story.



Prayer idea

Joseph's long-sleeved fine coat is often imagined to have been made from a variety of materials in different colours: name as many colours as you can together and note them down. Now go through some of them and link each one with an object of that colour, or a place, person or mood associated with it, and turn your ideas into a prayer. For example:

Green: thank God for forests and fields.

Blue: pray for people who are in cold places or who are feeling sad.

Red: ask God to forgive you for times when your temper has got the better of you.

Key verse

For twenty pieces of silver, they sold him to the Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt (Genesis 37:28).

New Testament story link

Luke 22:1-6: Here, Jesus is also about to be sold to his enemies for money, but it isn't the end, for God is in control.



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