

Genesis 37

Aim of lesson

To show the cruel outcome of jealousy and hatred.

Background study

Acquaint yourself with the patriarchal way of life and the systems of trade, travel and slavery.

Suggested outline of lesson

Discuss with the class family relationships, particularly between brothers and sisters. Ideally, members of a family should love and help each other, but this is not always the case. Brothers and sisters quite often quarrel and resent any sign of favouritism. Such disagreements can usually be resolved when the parents try to be fair, although parents may treat children differently while loving them equally. The children will be able to recognize that Jacob's favouring of Joseph could lead to trouble. Show how both Joseph and Benjamin had a special place in his heart because they were the children of Rachel whom he had loved best, and who was now dead. Perhaps they resembled their mother in looks or characteristics and so constantly reminded him of her.

Joseph's coat

As Joseph grew up his brothers became increasingly aware that their father preferred him above all of them. When this was demonstrated very obviously in the gift of the special coat, their jealousy turned to hatred. Make sure the children understand that this was not just an extra present but an honour of great significance, which raised considerably the status of this much younger brother. The wearing of the coat was a continual reminder of their father's favouritism. (Ask the children how they think they would feel if their younger brother or sister were singled out for some special privilege. Would they mind this very much? Wouldn't it depend on how much they loved each other?)

Dreams

Joseph may have been tactless, but he appears otherwise to have been the innocent victim of his brothers' jealousy; we have no evidence that he courted particular favour. Moreover, the dreams were visual messages from God, foretelling greater honours to come. The fact that Joseph was privileged to experience such revelations from God provoked his brothers to further hatred. It is recorded that they envied him, which implies that they did not disbelieve him but they determined to take action to prevent the dreams from coming true.

Bitterness

That Joseph was an obedient son is evidenced by his undertaking a long and difficult journey to locate his brothers. Meanwhile, the ten brothers had ample opportunity to discuss Joseph's dreams and give voice to their jealousy. This stirred up their bad feelings and united them in a common desire to do him harm. Now Joseph approached, oblivious to the bitterness of their resentment and their evil intentions.

Help the children to try to imagine the shock that Joseph felt when, miles from home and completely defenceless, he realized that his brothers wanted to kill him; he was powerless to resist these ten strong men who had become his enemies - the children will readily identify with the fear felt when being bullied.

Jacob deceived again

One brother, Reuben the eldest, prevented murder being done. Perhaps his plan was to give the others time to reconsider their actions and finally decide against harming Joseph; in fact, this is exactly what happened. When Judah reasoned that it would be wrong to harm their own flesh and blood, all the brothers agreed. They were not averse, however, to disposing of him in a less violent manner, and at the same time making a profit. This transaction was carried out in the absence of Reuben, who, on his return, was horrified. It was too late then for him to save Joseph, and he did not resist the plan to deceive Jacob into believing Joseph was dead. Jacob, the deceiver, was once more deceived.

Point out the insensitivity and cruelty of the sons toward their father, firstly in selling Jacob's most beloved son, secondly in taking home the blood-stained garment and pretending Joseph was dead, and worst of all in being able to watch their father's abject grief and agony of mind - not just for a few days, but for many years - and not tell him the truth. How hard they must have been.

Worksheets

These should be self-explanatory.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we thank you for our families. Help us to love one another and to be kind. Amen.

Memory verse

"whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:21).

Relevance to the children's lives

In our families, what sort of things do we think are unfair? Do we sometimes feel jealous of our brothers or sisters? What should we do about it? (The discussion here may bring to light some child's real problem, and present you with an opportunity to help.)