

Brothers do not always get along do they. Has anyone ever had a disagreement with a brother? How about a sister? It's almost a part of growing up isn't it? We have arguments, fights, wrestling matches and these things seem to be part of how siblings relate and learn about conflict, and hopefully in the end about how to resolve conflict. I remember one time my brother and I getting in a very heated argument over something, my guess being that I started it. Anyway we kept pushing and pushing the argument forward and our tempers were really starting to rise until Michael's flared and he picked up what was closest to him, a jelly donut, and whipped it as hard as he could at my head. Fortunately for me I saw it coming and moved out of the way. Unfortunately for Michael it splattered all over our nice white and sky blue wall paper. At first we were stunned, then we started to laugh, and then we started to get really worried because Mom and Dad were on the way home and we knew what was going to happen to us if they saw that stain on the wall. So we scrubbed hard, and to this day I don't think the evidence of our conflict was ever found, but I am sure if you looked hard you could still find a slight purple coloring on the wall around the front door.

But not all brotherly conflicts end with only a jelly donut splattered on the wall and a laugh. In our story this evening we find some deep seated anger that could have easily ended in bloodshed but instead ended in the crime of slavery. This anger is built through a number of bad choices

on the part of a Jacob, Joseph, and the brothers themselves. Let's look these verses now.

Verse one gives us the context of this story within the generations of God's people. The Joseph story begins with a reference to Jacob settling in the land which his father, Isaac has claimed as home. For Isaac this was a land of sojourning, but for Jacob it was a place of setting down roots, of making a home. Jacob, after a tumultuous life, is looking forward to a quiet time in this land. He has many children who are men working and bringing in the good things of life to the extended family. He has worked hard and now it is his time to be reaping the benefits of his work, at least that is his hope. But reality is going to set in, and he will have to deal with heartache in the near future.

Verse 2 in the ESV correctly indicates that this story is going to be about the generations of Jacob, not Jacob himself but his children, the ones who are coming after him. We discover in verse 2 that Joseph is 17 years old. The age when a boy is becoming a man. At this age you often judge boys to be older than they are. Their bodies are beginning to look like a man's but when you get them to start talking you realize they are not as old as you thought, their mental maturity does not match their bodies maturity. To me, Joseph's age explains a number of the problems we find in this story. You see a lot of 17 years olds are cocky and haven't had enough life experience to know when to back down or just be quiet. I have

to admit I was like this, some may say I am still like this, although I hope I am learning when to relax.

Now it says in verse 2 that he was a shepherd of the flocks with his brothers, the children of their father and Bilhah and Zilpah, and he is out with these brothers being the shepherd. One commentator says that the Hebrew could also be translated that he was not only shepherding sheep but was in fact shepherding his brothers. At first I wondered why he would be needing to shepherd his brothers. I wondered if this interpretation of the passage could be taken seriously. In the end I think it can. After all, the brothers seem to be a rowdy bunch of guys and probably getting into trouble with neighbors and others they ran into. I am sure that the violence that will be perpetrated against Joseph is not the first time they have shed blood and in fact needed someone to babysit them to keep them on track. That Joseph runs back and gives an account of the actions of his brothers to his father seems to fit with the idea that Joseph was actually shepherding his brothers.

Verse 3 – here we find the place that Joseph holds in his father's heart. He is called the child of his old age. But this does not make sense! The child of his old age is Benjamin. Maybe the place he holds in his father's heart comes from the fact that he is the one happy birth of his beloved wife Rachel. Now the kind of love we see that Jacob has for Joseph is the kind of love that in a large family would surely cause discord. He

treats Joseph as if he was an only child, lavishing his love on him, coddling him, my guess is never saying no to anything Joseph wanted. I wonder if he realized what kind of animosity this was generating among the siblings, or if he cared. He did not have “focus on the family” to help him through his family troubles but still it must have been obvious that at least some of the brother’s envy over Joseph’s special treatment was turning to anger. Whatever impaired his ability to see that he was not helping Joseph in his relationships, his doting attention was also great enough to keep from seeing that providing him was a distinctive and beautiful coat was also going to ostracize Joseph further.

Verse 4 lets us in on the resent that the brothers are feeling towards their brother. But should they place their resentment on Joseph. No doubt it is the natural place, but wasn’t the father, Jacob really the one to blame here. In fact things were not always easy between the brothers and their father as Genesis 34:31 tells us. But while the father instigates the animosity between the brothers and must take a big chunk of the blame, Joseph applies salt to the wound by sharing his dreams. In fact what Joseph comes off as is as “a spoiled brat, tattletale, and braggart.”

So in verses 5-8 Joseph, we might say unwisely shares his dreams with his brothers and puts himself in a position of *persona non grata*. The disregard that the brothers of Joseph hold him is underscored by the narrators indicating the brothers hate of Joseph both before the dreams are

shared in verse 5 and after the dreams are shared in verse 8. The dream is one of sheaves in a field. This part of the dream does not cause problem but when the other sheaves bow down to his; this is a problem, because it signifies that Joseph would be their ruler. There are two ways to connect the meaning of the bowing sheaves with future events. One that indeed the brothers would bow down to him as ruler, and second, since a sheaf is of something to eat, indicates that food or the lack of it would play a part in some part in the future story.

Now interesting to note is the fact that this is the first dream recorded in Genesis in which the voice of God does not speak, and therefore this dream is not to be considered a theophany. This lack of any kind of speaking or personal revelation from God might make us wonder if this is just a bit of Joseph's own ideas, or dreaming or if it was indeed prophecy. The indication that it was from God is that his dream came true. But even though it is true we might wonder if he should have used more discernment in how to share the dream, or if he should share it at all.

Verses 9-11 record the second dream. This dream comes at a later time and again Joseph for some reason takes it into his head to share the dream with his brothers. In this case the sun and moon, words to indicate his parents, and eleven stars that is his brothers, were bowing before him. Now it says 11 stars which means obviously that Benjamin has been born, which means his mother Rachel has died. Yet Jacob says "Am I and your

mother...to come and bow before you.” This most probably indicates that Leah has become the stepmother to Benjamin and Joseph. Joseph is probably, and I would think rightly, chastised by his father for making this kind of statement. While the dream might reveal truth I don’t think any father wants to be reminded that in the future he will be somewhat dependent on others and maybe even at the mercy of his children. This chastisement does not lead to “hate” as it did in the hearts of Joseph’s brothers, but was simply an emotional retort to an unacceptable thing for a child to say to his parent. But when Jacob was able to take some time out to think about what Joseph had said he did not just forget about it. It says that he “kept the saying in mind.” Jacob must have discerned that there was more going on with this dream than his initial reaction indicated. Remember when it says in the New Testament that Mary pondered the things that were revealed to her, that she “pondered it in her heart” (Luke 2:19, 51), this is of the same quality.

Verses 12-17 recounts Joseph going in search of his brothers and reveals a number of surprising things. First that he sends Joseph to do this task. He is quite aware of the violent nature of some of his sons after the situation with Dinah, and pair that with the hate the brothers had for Joseph made sending him alone to be with his brothers foolhardy. The best we can guess is that Jacob was blind to the real rage that was brewing between his children. Second why is he sending his beloved son to

Shechem where the Dinah incident happened and where the children of Jacob, especially Simeon and Levi, would not be welcome. The third question is why are the brothers pasturing so far from home. For Joseph to travel from the Valley of Hebron, to Shechem, onto Dothan is about 64 miles, quite a distance just to pasture some sheep. Whatever the reason for the distance, it is obviously a great enough distance that messages were to be entrusted to one that Jacob trusted, and that was Joseph. I want to direct your attention to verses 15-17...notice in verse 15 where it talks about a man who gives Joseph directions. It is just "a man", no name is given, no thought about his origins or his home, just a man, and then later on in verse 16 and 17 "the man." I wonder, and this is in no way a definite conclusion but a query, do you think that this might be a person from God? I think that it might be. Maybe Joseph was not going to find his brothers and would miss out on the work God intended for him so he sends a messenger to direct him properly. This interpretation at least fits with what we know about our Sovereign Lord, that he directs and causes his will to come about.

Next we come to verses 18-24 where the brothers are going to conspire to kill Joseph. They lose no time in verse 18, before venting their anger and rage at Joseph. They are ready to kill him upon sight. These guys are so riled up that even after being gone many days from Joseph, even when he has yet to say something to make them angry or even just get

in their way, they are plotting his death. Here comes the dreamer they say. The funny thing is, even though they mean this as a sarcastic comment it actually is an accurate description of Joseph, he is the dreamer, a master dreamer who is lead by God through this sleep state communication. The reason they plot his death is for his being the dreamer. They are going to take things into their own hands. "Lets see how far his dreams get if we kill him" they say in verse 20. Now for reasons unclear to us, other than maybe responsibility as the older brother, Reuben comes to the defense of Joseph. He says lets not kill him but put him to a cistern where, supposedly he brothers will believe he will die of starvation or exposure. This seems to catch the imagination of the brothers, and even though Reuben uses this as part of stratagem to free Joseph he appeals to the well-being of the brothers themselves. You see to shed blood in the Old Testament was a problem for them. Remember the first time one brother killed another. Cain had to listen to the blood of his fallen brother crying from the ground (4:10). Do these brothers want to the listen to the blood of their brother crying form the ground, or so Rueben insinuates with his counterproposal, the answer is obviously NO. So they do as Reuben says and man-handle Joseph. He is stripped of his coat and cast into a cistern. It says in verse 24 that "the cistern was empty; there was no water in it." When you first read this you're probably thinking, yeah, that is self explanatory. If it is empty of course there is no water in it. What you are reading here is a Hebrew way of intensifying the reality of how bleak this

cistern was. For example we might say that the room was dark; devoid of all light. Now to say it was dark, means there was no light, but to add devoid of all light takes us to another level of darkness, it's truly black.

Next are verses 25-30 where Joseph is sold into slavery. The brothers after doing such a vicious act decide to sit down and eat. Pretty cold men I would say. I wonder if they could hear their brother crying for help, if they could it doesn't seem to bother them too much. As they are eating they see some Ishmaelite's coming towards them, on their way to Egypt. Judah gets the great idea of making some profit off his brother. Instead of intense and short pain let's give him something that he will have to live through for many years, let's sell him into slavery. So Joseph is sold for twenty pieces of silver to these traders. You will notice that the traders are referred to Midianite's at one point and then as Ishmaelite's the next. There is not an error here in transcription but the simple fact that these were overlapping identical terms. They were used interchangeably to refer to North Arabian carvaneers who branched off through Gilead from the main transport route on the way to Egypt. Reuben is obviously not here at this time, maybe he is off tending to the sheep. He returns to the pit to get Joseph and lo and behold he is gone. He tears his clothes, a symbol of mourning, but the brothers are not moved by it and they continue with their plan.

See in verse 31 - they get the robe and dip it in blood in order to take it to their father to deceive him. It is ironic, is it not, that Jacob, who earlier

deceived Isaac with the skin of a goat is not deceived by a garment dipped in the blood of a goat. The brothers deliver the garment to Jacob back home in Hebron. Their question, "is this your sons robe or not" is asked in such a way as to separate them from what had happened, to proclaim their innocence. They must have done a good job at keeping themselves from looking guilty because it never comes to Jacob's mind that his other sons might be responsible for what had happened. He draws the conclusion that Joseph has been killed by an evil, fierce beast. Jacob then also, just as Reuben, engages in the symbolic sign of remorse the tearing of his robes, but then takes it father, showing the depth of his remorse. He puts on sackcloth and mourns for many days. And after much mourning the brothers come into the story again and try to comfort their father. Can you image that? In their own tents they are gleeful but they put on a face of mourning for everyone else to see. Jacob rejects their commiserations, maybe there is a tint of falseness that he detects and will not be brought out of mourning. If anything he goes deeper into mourning. He will go down into Sheol, the place of the dead in the OT to be with him. This is not some kind of suicidal thought, but a recognition by Jacob that he will mourn the death of his son until his own death where he will rejoin him.

In summary this chapter is about great trouble and turmoil among brothers. It is becoming a familiar refrain with this family. But isn't that usually the case. When a family engages in certain behavior the children

grow up by those standards and maybe even unwittingly engage in the very things they disliked so much. How many teenagers or young adults have said that they would never do what their parents had done to them, to only less than a decade later do the very things to their children they disliked so much when they were younger. Sometime this is wisdom, realizing that our parents were right about some things, other times it is that we fall into the same temptations and ways of dealing things that are parents, and their parents before them did. If we do not want deception and anger and violence and any other vice to be passed onto the generations after us we must take responsibility to find those areas where darkness has crept in and pray into those areas for healing. Only when we let God begin to change us and bring healing where darkness now exists will we be able to put a period to generational problems, generational sins, and the animosity that can be brought to what God desires to be a beautiful and powerful relationship, that between brothers.