

## Genesis 37 Am I my brother's keeper?

### Introduction

Keeping our sense of perspective can some times be very difficult. Life throws up so many unexpected experiences and situations that we can sometimes struggle to cope with our successes or failures; our joys or our disappointments. It takes real wisdom and insight to keep our feet firmly on the ground on this roller-coaster of a journey that we may experience on average for seventy to eighty years, some more years, others with many fewer years. For some people the pressures of life cause them to snap when they have faced one too many problems they could not handle, but for whatever reason had never sought help with. A small number turn to extreme violence even killing another person in their rage; many hundreds of thousands more seek their solace in drink or drugs or legal prescription medication, the former options of course are inevitably an unsatisfactory if not unsurprising attempt to escape pressures that appear too heavy to bear without some form of chemical assistance. The later may under the guidance of trained medical personnel be an appropriate way to deal with a health or other problem being experienced. In all walks of life there are scandals caused by this loss of perspective. In the more extreme cases someone may go to jail, for example for sexual abuse of a minor under their care, or for the misappropriation of a client's money or possessions. It happens too in professional sport. In Nigeria the football season was drawing to a close in July 2013. Two teams Plateau United Feeders and Police Machine went into their final league games level on points. If as expected they both won their games then goal difference would determine which of the two teams would win promotion to the lowest tier of the Nationwide League Division at stake. Both games were one-sided affairs. PUF were leading 7:0 over Akurba FC at half-time while PM were leading Bubayaro FC 6:0. It was too close to call and the season now would be defined by the final forty-five minutes of play. What happened next is suitable as a quiz question. As the respective scores were relayed by mobile phone goals were raining in at a rate unseen in the professional game. Police Machine who added sixty-two (62) second half goals had needed to score more goals than their rivals to win the league title but Plateau United added a further seventy-two (72) to their first half tally. Spectators reported outrageous own goals; the losing teams making no effort at all; dubious refereeing decisions, especially over ridiculous amounts of extra time added at the end of the games. The Nigerian Football Association rightly suspended all concerned for bringing the game into disrepute (BBC Sport website 9 & 10 July 2013). Genesis chapter 37 records an account of a family, many of whose members had completely lost their sense of moral perspective. It was not the first time, but it would become a defining moment that years later would force them to amend their ways. A careful reading of this story enables us to gain insights into why this tragedy occurred and how to prevent ourselves making our own mistakes by losing a sense of moral perspective in our own lives.

### 1. The Foundation of Bitterness (Genesis 37:1-11)

(a) The special coat –a symbol of Jacob's favour (Genesis 37:1-4) <sup>1</sup> *Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.* <sup>2</sup> *This is the account of Jacob's family line. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.* <sup>3</sup> *Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him.* <sup>4</sup> *When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.* Young Joseph had been entrusted with the privileges of the first-born son. The sons of the concubines did not qualify for such an

honour, but a number of his elder brothers had behaved in ways that disqualified them from the possibility of receiving this privilege. His brothers increasingly resented Joseph when he pointed out their shortcomings to their father Jacob. It appears that the sons of the concubines especially resented their second-class status in the family. This is no surprise as none of us would like such a position, purely by accident of birth. It does remind us very forcefully that God's guidance on a simple monogamous marriage as the basis for family life is a more straightforward proposition than alternative arrangements.

It was expected that the son having this pace of honour would be dressed differently. However, it is possible that Jacob was particularly generous in his choice of outer garment for Joseph. It was most probably a designer coat like those worn by well-to-do Egyptians and in stark contrast to the plain version of a simple black, brown and grey tunic of ordinary workers. It had long sleeves, rather than the short style of workers tunics, indicating that the wearer supervised the manual labours of other people, rather than participating himself in those tasks directly.



In essence, the special coat was seen by his brothers as a symbol of Joseph's unfair treatment compared to their own. It was a regular reminder that he was the chosen heir of his father. I think it likely that Joseph would have been Jacob's nominated heir even if the older sons of Leah had not disqualified themselves by ungodly conduct. However, all concerned knew that the past could not be changed, but it did not mean that the future probable course of events had been accepted by these older men. It appears that they were looking for a way out of their apparent predicament, but without any particular plan coming to mind. The tension of the situation began to rise with the announcement of Joseph's dreams. In a social and religious context where dreams were viewed with the utmost seriousness as potential indicators of future events what their younger brother would declare to them could not be ignored.

(b) **The special dreams – a symbol of God's favour** (Genesis 37:5-11) The coat was His father's choice that the brothers had resented. However, their problem which they thought was with their father was actually an unwillingness to accept the changing circumstances in their family. Then and now in families and church families the process of change can be difficult for some people to accept. Sometimes human preferences can be dressed up in spiritual language, but underlying them is an unwillingness to accept that God is speaking in their midst. Jacob's actions were consistent with the will of God. In fact it was because he was now walking more closely with God that his family difficulties with his older sons had taken on a more clearly spiritual dimension. The hard feelings the sons had for their father were misplaced. It was they who now needed to change and accept that God was calling them to accept the new direction He wanted them all to go in with Him. Hebrews 12:14-15 states: *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.* <sup>15</sup> *See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.* His brothers refused to sort out their differences with Joseph. We will never know if he wanted to resolve the ill-feeling but it is clear that when people refuse to meet with those who have apparent or real differences with them difficulties become more entrenched and a resolution more difficult to find. It was clear that they were jealous that if Joseph's dreams came true their influence would decline further and their opportunity to control things in the family circle would be gone for ever. Proverbs 14:30 reminds us that *a heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.* James in his letter gave a warning that applied so accurately to this family situation. *For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice* (James 3:16). They resented the fact that Joseph's good behaviour and obedience to his father's instructions cast their disobedience in a negative light. It was highlighted by the fact that Jacob had turned from his less than God-honouring behaviour in their youth to a lifestyle more in keeping with his profession of faith. For those of us who are parents it is sobering to note that each of these children of Jacob were, in general terms, copying the values and lifestyle they had witnessed in their youth. The heartache that Jacob had caused his father Isaac and brother Esau had never adequately been resolved. His own sons would in time replicate his act of deception. There are times when families need to address their history before God in prayer to break these cycles of sinful behaviour. However, over it all God was in control. He was preparing Joseph for the extraordinary work he had to do in the future. God's hand is on your life and mine. His providential care we trust acts for our good and supremely for His glory.

The first dream is recorded in Genesis 37:5-8: *Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more.* <sup>6</sup> *He said to them, 'Listen to this dream I had: <sup>7</sup> we were binding sheaves of corn out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered round mine and bowed down to it.'* <sup>8</sup> *His brothers said to him, 'Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?' And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.* There is no indication of context – probably the timing was irrelevant, but little step-brother in his special coat making such a proclamation – even if he told it in a matter of fact

and truthful way, was unlikely to get a good reception. In the hierarchical society of the ancient world the gifting of greater honours to younger sons was inevitably problematic, even for Joseph when the dying Jacob wished to give a greater blessing to Joseph's younger son Ephraim (Genesis 48:17-19). His protests were overruled by the dying patriarch. God is no respecter of persons. The calling He has for each of us may include opportunities and privileges that we could have no right to expect. One dream on its own might be simply that – not a precursor of things to come. However, God in His goodness allowed Joseph to experience a second dream which confirmed the information provided in the previous one. Genesis 37:9-11 records: *Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. 'Listen,' he said, 'I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.'*<sup>10</sup> *When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, 'What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?'*<sup>11</sup> *His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.* It appears that all the members of this extended family were in no doubt as to the meaning of these dreams. The brothers came up with the predictable opposition once again –unwilling to consider that God might be at work in this way. Jacob was at first shocked which resulted in his mild rebuke to Joseph. However, deep down as he prayed and reflected upon it there was something about these dreams that rang true. Could they be the means God was using to speak to us? The words of Genesis 37:11: *his father kept the matter in mind...* are similar to Luke's words about Mary in Luke 2:51 when she reflected on Jesus' explanation, aged twelve, concerning His reasons for staying on in Jerusalem to speak with the religious leaders in the Temple. <sup>48</sup> *When His parents saw Him, they were astonished. His mother said to Him, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.'*<sup>49</sup> *'Why were you searching for me?'* He asked. *'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'*<sup>50</sup> *But they did not understand what He was saying to them.*<sup>51</sup> *Then He went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But His mother treasured all these things in her heart* (Luke 2:48-51). God was at work but not everyone is open to hear Him speak. There are times when all of us as Christians have unwisely told the Lord that certain things cannot be His will and needed to humbly accept that His will not ours be done. The failure of the brothers, unlike Jacob, to concede the possibility that they might be wrong allowed the evil one to influence them to say and do things they might otherwise have avoided. This aspect of the Joseph story is a sobering one, yet despite the mistakes that were made God overruled sinful attitudes to bring blessing to many people and great glory to His name.

## 2. **The Fruits of Bitterness** (Genesis 37:12-24)

(a) **A simple errand** (Genesis 37:12-17) *Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem,*<sup>13</sup> *and Israel said to Joseph, 'As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them.'* *'Very well,' he replied.*<sup>14</sup> *So he said to him, 'Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me.'* *Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron. When Joseph arrived at Shechem,*<sup>15</sup> *a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, 'What are you looking for?'*<sup>16</sup> *He replied, 'I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?'*<sup>17</sup> *'They have moved on from here,' the man answered. 'I heard them say, "Let's go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan.* Joseph's trip to Shechem was inevitably problematic. The nomadic grazing patterns of the animals under his brothers' care would take them over many miles and now into an area where Levi and Simeon had committed acts of murder against local people some years previously. The older brothers would have been less than human not to have had some apprehension in grazing their animals in that location (see Genesis 34). However, their presence had passed without incident and in fact they had already moved a further thirteen miles from home to Dothan by the time Joseph had arrived in Shechem. It is perhaps with

hindsight surprising that there is no record of Jacob sending any servants to accompany Joseph on this trip. If he was alone then it must be assumed that relative peace and security were being experienced at that time. There is no doubt that Jacob viewed this errand as a straightforward one. Had there been the slightest concern in his mind then it is most improbable that Joseph would have been sent to locate his brothers. It was a journey of more than fifty miles that would take him several days to complete. His mission was a simple one. Yet others would view it in a different light. His mission was honourable and in obedience to his father's wishes, yet there were those suspicious and resentful of what he was seeking to do. Let us be careful how we judge other people. It is so easy to make hasty judgements without all the facts. The brothers with minds completely closed to what God desired for Joseph were on the verge of making a very big mistake. May God keep each of us from similar kinds of mistakes in our own lives.

(b) **A malicious proposal** (Genesis 37:18-24) <sup>18</sup> *But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.* <sup>19</sup> *'Here comes that dreamer!' they said to each other.* <sup>20</sup> *'Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.'* <sup>21</sup> *When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. 'Let's not take his life,' he said.* <sup>22</sup> *'Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him.'* Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. <sup>23</sup> *So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe – the ornate robe he was wearing – <sup>24</sup> and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it.* The simple opposition of the brothers to God's plans for Joseph had festered within them to such an extent that bitterness, envy and unchecked internal anger now revealed itself in thoughts of murder. Years had passed during which time seeds of sinfulness has sprung up and flourished unchecked resulting in this bitter harvest. When extreme things happen in society, like the couple on the news that starved the little boy to death in England relatively recently, or the man in the USA jailed for the kidnapping and vile sexual assaults on three young women he kept captive for more than a decade, the sinful seeds of these actions began with much lesser things that were never checked. Thankfully these extreme examples are relatively rare in society, but at a lesser level human envy, anger, bitterness or resentfulness unchecked can result in otherwise good people saying and doing things that appear so out of character. The brothers' increasing anger was actually against God not Joseph or Jacob, though they would have vehemently denied it. Jesus warned His followers in the Upper Room at the Last Supper that living in obedience to God's will does not spare you from opposition and difficulties. In John 15:20-21 Jesus said: <sup>20</sup> *Remember what I told you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed My teaching, they will obey yours also.* <sup>21</sup> *They will treat you this way because of My name, for they do not know the one who sent Me.* What was most sobering here was that the people in question would have claimed to be following God's way. They would have been indignant at the suggestion that Jesus, not them, was in the right. God was bringing about some changes in the way He wished to bring salvation in their midst to His people, but they were not willing to change. The most dangerous and painful opposition in God's work is not from outsiders who have no claims to faith in Jesus but from those just as sincerely who believe they are doing God's will for their lives. Church history is littered with such stories in every generation. The challenge for us in our generation as Christians is are we heeding His voice in an increasingly either post or pre-Christian society and being willing to work in mission in the best ways to reach unchurched people for Christ or do we want to insist on staying within our own comfort zone of how things have been done in the past? At different times in our lives all of us will struggle to make the necessary changes. May we hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches at this time. The folly of their plotting was raised by Reuben who urged them to cease before lasting damage was done, but would they heed his voice? The foolish desire for getting their way and inflicting lasting damage on Joseph was greater

than their willingness to talk things through with Joseph and their father and coming to some resolution.

### 3. **The Folly of Bitterness** (Genesis 37:25-36)

(a) **A moment of madness** (Genesis 37:25-28)<sup>25</sup> *As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.* <sup>26</sup> *Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?'* <sup>27</sup> *Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.'* His brothers agreed. <sup>28</sup> *So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.* Judah's words were chilling. Apparently they had not lost their appetite even though the possibility of committing murder might have been their evening activity. They had lost their moral compass and perspective. We live in a world where so often nobody cares about economic decisions by Western corporations that force the poor into a deeper plight in third world countries to maximise their profits; about Governments whose obsessions with wars rather than resolution by peaceful means creates ever more suffering and grief; by individuals who walk by on the other side of the road in countless situations where different and better choices could have been made; the fearful cries of little brother went unheeded in the pit. They wanted revenge. If Jacob would not give them what they wanted then they would maximise his suffering –it was his fault he had caused the problem by not listening to them! They would not be responsible for the consequences of their actions, had they been listened to earlier it could all have been avoided! The self-justification they would declare amongst themselves would be nauseatingly hypocritical, but as the years passed, after initially fading from memory, it would ring increasingly hollow when trips for food to Egypt became a requirement for survival, but this was naturally beyond their comprehension at that time.

(b) **The wages of sin** (Genesis 37:29-36)<sup>29</sup> *When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes.* <sup>30</sup> *He went back to his brothers and said, 'The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?'* <sup>31</sup> *Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood.* <sup>32</sup> *They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, 'We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe.'* <sup>33</sup> *He recognised it and said, 'It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.'* <sup>34</sup> *Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days.* <sup>35</sup> *All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. 'No,' he said, 'I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.'* So his father wept for him. <sup>36</sup> *Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.* Reuben wanted the situation resolved. He had spoken to his brothers. Yet not earnestly enough to prevent their act of folly; They were prepared to cause heartache and grief in the family that would inevitably last for years – actually more than two decades in this case. If only they had been willing to resolve their differences with their father all the guilt they would experience for years could have been avoided. We are our brother's keeper. We have a responsibility to *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy* (Hebrews 12:14). May God help us to do that, for Jesus' sake, Amen.