

The Coat of Different Colors



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 29:21–30:24; 34; 37; 42:13; 1 Cor. 9:24–26.*

Memory Text: “Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours” (*Genesis 37:3*).

The seed (so to speak) for this whole story began in Genesis 29, with Jacob and his wives and concubines. One father, four mothers, and about a dozen children between them: one didn't need to be a prophet to know beforehand what a dysfunctional and dismal family this would turn out to be.

How much better had Jacob followed the earliest archetype example, the one from Eden: one husband, one wife. Period. This was the ideal model for all homes, for all times.

But as we have seen, God created us free beings, and that freedom includes the freedom to do wrong. Symbolic, perhaps, of the mistakes that Jacob made, the famous “coat of many colors” reveals how one mistake can lead to others and others, with consequences far beyond our control.

How much better, then, to nip sin in the bud before it devours us and those we love.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 23.*

The Genesis of a Family Disaster

Life, as we all know, doesn't come sealed off, in distinct and separate categories or sections. Everything impacts just about everything. In fact, Einstein's theory of general relativity teaches that all matter in the universe has a gravitational pull on all other matter. That is, your body exerts a gravitational pull not only on your neighbor but on the sun and everything else in the created world, as well.

Of course, we don't need a lesson in physics to recognize the reality of how the deeds and actions of one person can radically, and even tragically, impact others, even generations later. Who we are, where we are, why we are what we are—these all have been affected to some degree by the actions of others completely out of our control. Thus, we need to be careful regarding the things we say and do; for who knows the impact, short-term and long-term, and either for good or for ill, that our deeds and words will have on others?

Read Genesis 24 and 29:21–30. What kind of family is being created here? What lesson should this reveal to us about how following customs of the world, especially when they go against principles of truth, can lead to disaster?

“The sin of Jacob, and the train of events to which it led, had not failed to exert an influence for evil—an influence that revealed its bitter fruit in the character and life of his sons. As these sons arrived at manhood they developed serious faults. The results of polygamy were manifest in the household. This terrible evil tends to dry up the very springs of love, and its influence weakens the most sacred ties. The jealousy of the several mothers had embittered the family relation, the children had grown up contentious and impatient of control, and the father's life was darkened with anxiety and grief.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 208, 209.

What things have you been handed that were beyond your control? A lot, isn't there? Right now, think about some important decisions you are going to make. Ask yourself, How might these choices impact others, and is that what I really want to see happen?

Joseph and His Brothers

Sibling rivalry, even in the most traditional of homes, can be bad enough. But in this mix, it turned into a festering brew, for in it were ingredients such as hatred and jealousy and favoritism and pride that led eventually to disaster.

For starters, the brothers of Joseph weren't exactly the sweetest lot of young lads, were they?

Read Genesis 34. What does this chapter tell us about the brothers' characters?

Then, too, there was the issue of Joseph's dreams (*Gen. 37:5–11*), in which the whole family bows in obeisance toward him. If the brothers didn't like him beforehand, these dreams would only increase their dislike. In fact, that's exactly what Genesis 37:8 says.

But there's more.

Read Genesis 37:2. How would this only make relations worse between Joseph and his brothers?

No one likes to be tattled on, and regardless of how bad the brothers' conduct was, they surely didn't appreciate Joseph telling on them to their father. Though the text doesn't say specifically what they were doing, considering their past conduct, it most likely was something that needed to be dealt with before they brought even more shame and reproach on themselves and their family.

Finally, too, perhaps the biggest issue was that, as the Bible comes out and says, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children" (*Gen. 37:3*). The brothers weren't stupid; they had surely picked up on their father's attitude, and that could have made a bad situation worse.

Hence, however inexcusable the brothers' actions were toward Joseph, this background helps us better understand what led to them.

We all, to some degree, are trapped in our circumstances. Things happen that are beyond our control. The questions for us always must be, then, How do I respond to these circumstances? Do they dominate me to the point that I compromise my principles, or do I allow my principles to guide me through my circumstances?

The Coat of Many Colors

The bad characters of the brothers stood out even more in contrast to the character of Joseph.

“There was one, however, of a widely different character—the elder son of Rachel, Joseph, whose rare personal beauty seemed but to reflect an inward beauty of mind and heart. Pure, active, and joyous, the lad gave evidence also of moral earnestness and firmness. He listened to his father’s instructions, and loved to obey God. The qualities that afterward distinguished him in Egypt—gentleness, fidelity, and truthfulness—were already manifest in his daily life. His mother being dead, his affections clung the more closely to the father, and Jacob’s heart was bound up in this child of his old age. He ‘loved Joseph more than all his children.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 209.

Read Genesis 37:3, 4. How did this act by their father make the situation worse?

The costly coat, given to Joseph by a doting father and beautifully woven in a variety of colors, certainly was finer than any of his brothers’ cloaks and was a kind of garment usually worn by people of distinction. The brothers no doubt assumed that their father would bestow further honors upon this child, and that could mean that he would get the birthright. They could have easily read into it that Joseph would get the greater inheritance. Whatever the father meant by giving Joseph the coat—and it could simply have been a token of love and nothing more—it was a big mistake, for it fanned even more the flames of hatred in the brothers’ hearts toward Joseph.

In a sense, the coat symbolizes earthly honors and earthly distinction—earthly and, therefore, temporal and superficial in the end. In writing the story, however, Moses placed the coat in the context of Jacob loving Joseph more than the other children, and thus, it was also central in the context of their hatred for him and what that hatred led to.

Have you ever been given a worldly honor? How good did you feel at the time? How long before the euphoria or the sense of satisfaction or whatever good feeling you had wore off, and the honor came to mean little or nothing? What lesson should you take from that? See 1 Cor. 9:24–26.

The Coat Stripped

Read Genesis 37:12–25. What great contrast between good and evil is seen here, between innocence and treachery?

Not only did Joseph's brothers plot his death, they also planned in advance just what they would tell their father. *Oh, Father. We're so sorry. We found this coat. Is it Joseph's? If so, then a ferocious animal must have devoured him.* It's hard to imagine how people could be so full of hatred toward their own brother that they could do something like this.

Read Genesis 37:23. What is significant about what happened there?

The first thing the brothers talked about when they saw Joseph from afar was the dreams, which made their hatred for him grow. Now, once and for all, they would see what would come of those dreams. It's interesting to note that the first recorded act against Joseph by his brothers was the stripping away of his coat. The Hebrew makes it clear that they were talking about the much-hated coat, the one that their father had made for him. The text stresses that it was "on him." Along with everything else, to see him approach wearing the coat must have only added to their anger.

Thus, here we can see the brothers attempting to undo all the things that caused them so much hatred and anger. The coat for them symbolized all that they hated about their brother, all the good things about him and the bad things about themselves. It must have been with a lot of joy, glee, and satisfaction that they stripped off the coat. Now, suddenly, without that fancy garment, which symbolized what they feared was Joseph's superiority over them, Joseph was helpless before those who, according to his own dreams, were one day to bow down before him.

Look at how irrational the brothers' actions were as a result of their emotions. How often do we allow our emotions to drive us to do irrational things? How can we learn to keep our emotions under the power of God and thus spare ourselves (and often others) from the terrible consequences of things done in fits of deep emotion?

“Thy Son’s Coat”

“So they took Joseph’s tunic, and slaughtered a male goat and dipped the tunic in the blood; and they sent the varicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, ‘We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son’s tunic or not’ ” (*Gen. 37:31, 32, NASB*).

How could they, the sons of a loving father, stoop so low as to hand their father the cloak he had given his son, now splashed with blood, and ask him to identify it? Maybe even a day before they had committed this crime, nothing like it had entered their minds. But once we start on a trail of sin, who knows where it will lead?

Read Genesis 37:26–36. What is revealing about the language the brothers used before their father?

Notice, the brothers’ question referred not to “our brother’s coat” but to “your son’s coat.” The coldness, the callousness, is amazing. Perhaps, too, it was a kind of unconscious defense mechanism for them. It wasn’t “our brother’s” coat that they found but, rather, “thy son’s coat”—a way to limit in their own minds the evil that they had done.

Thus, the coat had a role both in the beginning and in the end. A symbol of the relationship between Jacob and Joseph, it now was covered in blood, a symbol of Joseph’s “demise” and what they all assumed would be the end of Joseph and all their animosity toward him. No doubt, though, this act solved one problem only to bring on a host of others. Surely the brothers must have been pained by their father’s grief. Surely, day by day seeing Jacob mourn, these men must have struggled with guilt and remorse.

Read Genesis 42:13, 21–23, 32 and Genesis 44:28. What do these verses tell us about the long-lasting impact of the brothers’ deeds on themselves and their family?

In the end, the Lord brought good out of the evil that the brothers had done, but that hardly justifies what they did. However extreme their actions were, this story should remind us of how quickly sins can get out of hand, blind us, and lead us to do things that more often than not lead to tragedy and suffering.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Return to Canaan,” “Joseph in Egypt,” and “Joseph and His Brothers,” pp. 209–240, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; pp. 428–432, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1.

“Joseph, unsuspecting of what was to befall him, approached his brethren with gladness of heart to greet them after his long, wearisome journey. His brothers rudely repulsed him. He told them his errand, but they answered him not. Joseph was alarmed at their angry looks. . . . They accused him of hypocrisy. As they gave utterance to their envious feelings, Satan controlled their minds, and they had no sense of pity, and no feelings of love for their brother. They stripped him of his coat of many colors that he wore, which was a token of his father’s love, and which had excited their envious feelings.”—Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, pp. 128, 129.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What other kinds of “coats of many colors” are there? What are things of the world that we covet, which sooner or later can be easily stripped from us and defiled in blood? What kind of worldly honors seem to mean so much and yet, in the end, really mean nothing at all?
- ❷ Think about the context of this week’s lesson and then read Genesis 45:22. What irony is found there?
- ❸ Joseph often has been seen as a type of Christ. Go through the Joseph story and see what parallels you can find between Christ and Joseph. Share your answers with your class.
- ❹ There’s little doubt the brothers felt great remorse for their actions. We don’t know what their father did with the bloodied coat. Perhaps he kept it as a memento of his beloved son. Imagine how the brothers would have felt each time they saw this coat, once a symbol of their jealousy, and now a symbol of their guilt. How can we learn to think before we act and not to do things rashly? How much different this story would have been had the brothers known the Lord whom their father served! If the brothers knew how to pray, how to die to self, how to surrender to the Lord in faith and obedience, none of this would have happened, and so much pain and suffering could have been spared. How can we learn not to fall into the same trap that these men did?

A Passionate Giver

Deok Ja (*Dohk jah*) watched the Christians enter the church across the street from her home in southwestern Korea. The children were so well behaved; she wished her daughters had such friends to play with.

One day a woman knocked on her door and introduced herself as the wife of the pastor of the church across the street. She offered Deok Ja a magazine, *Signs of the Times*[®]. The pastor's wife visited often after that, bringing gifts of vegetables and bread. She invited Deok Ja to attend a meeting on health, and Deok Ja went, because she wanted to know more about healthful living. She attended worship services, and in time, she found Jesus as her Savior and joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

God's love bubbled over in her life, and Deok Ja shared that love with others. But her husband and children held the first place in her prayers.

Her husband allowed her to worship and to teach their children about God, but he wasn't interested in religion. Deok Ja prayed that God would work a miracle in her husband's heart and bathed her prayers with kind words and deeds.

For ten years she prayed and shared God's love with others, leading many to Christ. She taught their daughters to do the same. Still her heart ached for her husband, who told her that he would consider attending church with her after he retired from public service. Then on New Year's Day one year the family shared their wishes for the coming year. One daughter expressed her wish that the family could be united in Christ. When Deok Ja's husband heard that, he responded, "I'll try."

He kept his promise and began attending church with the family. One Sabbath he stood in church and said, "I'm here because I've seen God through my wife, who has prayed for me faithfully for many years." In time he surrendered his life to Christ and was baptized. Today Deok Ja's husband invites his colleagues to special meetings in the church.

Deok Ja continues to bring people to Christ through every means possible. Her daughter has caught her mother's spirit of evangelism and plans to serve a year in the church's 1000 Missionary Movement program in the Philippines.

"Evangelism is giving," Deok Ja says. "And our church has many great programs that help us to share God's love with others. Our mission offerings help make this outreach possible, and when someone gives their life to Christ, I invite them to share the blessings they've received with others. In this way many will come to know my beautiful Savior."

DEOK JA lives in southwestern Korea.