

**Text: Genesis 37:1-11**

**Theme: Family favourites.**

**Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi at Evening Worship on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2012 at 6pm.**

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Our general theme for the Quarter is “The Hidden Hand of God” and we are going to focus on the life of Joseph from Genesis 37 - 45. This evening we will be looking at Genesis 37:1-11 in the context of a broad introduction to the series.

The book of Genesis (meaning ‘beginnings’ or ‘origins’) opens with insights into God’s creation of a perfect world where people live in perfect harmony with their Creator. However, as soon as people chose to go their own way in disobedience to the expressed will of God, things started to go wrong.

By the time of Joseph, God had started on His plan of redemption by choosing a people who would have a special relationship with Himself. Abraham was the first in that line and Jacob, one of the grandsons of Abraham was chosen by God to develop this special family. He had twelve sons who eventually became the twelve tribes of Israel (the new name which God gave to Jacob). Joseph was one of them.

Genesis 37:2 opens up as an introduction to Joseph. He was seventeen years old. Thus begins one of the remarkable life stories of the Bible and all literature. James Boice commented that “He was loved and hated, favoured and abused, tempted and trusted, exalted and abased. Yet at no point in the one-hundred-and-ten-year life of Joseph did he ever seem to get his eyes off God or cease to trust him. Adversity did not harden his character. Prosperity did not ruin him. He was the same in private as in public. He was a truly great man”. Enoch (Genesis 5:21-24) shows the *walk* of faith, Noah (Genesis 6:9ff) shows the *perseverance* of faith, Abraham shows the *obedience* of faith (Genesis 12), Isaac shows the *power* of faith, and Jacob shows the *discipline* of faith. Along these lines we could say that Joseph shows the *triumph* of faith. Joseph never complained and he never compromised.

Joseph is also a remarkably powerful picture of Jesus.

**Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children (v. 3).** These chapters stand out for the insight they give us into an obviously troubled family. At one level the story of Joseph is the story of a dysfunctional family. That is not why the story is in the Bible, but the fact that it was that kind of family and that it has been recorded in Scripture helps us to see not only the extent to which sin can spoil the closest of human relationships, but also how God can use even such dysfunctionality to further His purposes. He uses imperfect people. In fact, the only material he ever has to work with is fallen, sinful and often deeply flawed, which means that He can work with someone just like you and me! So if your past is one you would rather forget, then let the story of Joseph give you hope that God can take the broken threads of your life and weave them into a beautiful tapestry that will give joy to others.

From the beginning, we get the impression Joseph is sort of a pampered favourite of Jacob, who doesn’t mind tattling on his older brothers at all. Jacob’s favouritism of Joseph was plain to all, including Joseph and his brothers. As an outward display of this, he gave Joseph a richly ornamented robe. This signified a position of favour, princely standing, and birthright. It was a dramatic way of saying he was the son to receive the birthright.

The real idea behind the ancient Hebrew phrase for “**tunic of many colours**” (v.3, **KJV**) is that it was a tunic extending all the way down to the wrists and ankles, as opposed to a shorter one. This was not what a working man wore. It was a garment of privilege and status. Jacob’s favouritism of Joseph was an obvious source of conflict in the family. The brothers naturally **hated him** because the father favoured him.

You might have thought that Jacob would have learned from his own past. His father Isaac had favoured his brother Esau, and Rebekah, his mother, had preferred Jacob, resulting in a rivalry which ended in Jacob having to leave home after stealthily taking his elder brother’s birthright.

Before looking at Joseph’s life in detail, two principles of biblical interpretation need to be borne in mind. The first is that when reading these Old Testament stories, the biblical text must guide us in our interpretation. The bible is its own best interpreter. The second principle is that we must not read the Old Testament as if the New Testament had not been written. We read it today as Christians, that is, as those who have the final revelation from God written in our New Testament. The Old Testament is still a Christian book, however; it is simply full of Christ. As someone has said, ‘every story whispers his name’- and I would want to add that some Old Testament stories shout it out loud!

### **When God seems to be invisible**

The story of Joseph seems to be heading towards this direction, but that was not known to him at this stage. In fact, if you read the first chapter of his life in Genesis 37, you will find that God’s name does not appear at all. Although God’s name is not mentioned and His presence is not seen, he is nonetheless active in everything that takes place. The reality is that in your life and mine there are many days, and hours within days, or perhaps months when God’s presence is not felt; when He seems miles away and when no reference either in thought or word is made to Him. To anyone looking on at the circumstances Joseph goes through, God does not appear to be involved.

Besides the favouritism showed by Jacob to Joseph through the richly ornamented robe, we are told early in the chapter that Joseph brought ‘a bad report’ of the boys to his father after doing a spot of shepherding duty with his brothers. Was he asked to keep an eye on them? Did he spice up the report and make it sound worse than it was?

We are not told but certainly, his future behaviour gives no hint of his having a character flaw like that. One thing we do know from the previous chapters of Genesis is that these brothers had been up to some mischief: Reuben had slept with his father’s concubine (Genesis 35:22), while Simeon and Levi had slaughtered virtually a whole tribe at Shechem because some of the men had disgraced their sister (Genesis 34). These men were rough, reckless and dangerous.

However, the really significant point of the early part of Joseph's story has to do with his dreams. Joseph had a dream, and he told it to his brothers; and they hated him even more. At best, Joseph showed a great lack of tact. Surely he knew how much his brothers hated to hear this dream, which set him above his brothers? One interesting fact to observe is that the dreams come in pairs to suggest certainty of fulfilment. Certainly, his brothers recognised right away what the dream suggested, because they said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us?' Also relevant to this dream is the fact that it involves sheaves of wheat. Joseph's ultimate position of status over his brethren will have much to do with food.

### **Joseph's second dream (verses 9-11).**

If Joseph was unwise in telling the first dream (knowing how irritating it was to his brothers) he was even more wrong sharing this second dream, especially because it set him not only above his brothers, but also set him above his father and mother.

Is it that Joseph seems to be afflicted with the sort of pride often apparent among the favoured and blessed; that he is so focused on how great his dreams are for him, he doesn't begin to consider how the dreams will sound in the ears of others? Significantly, during the time when our Lord Jesus was on earth, He was accused by His opponents of being brash, and even of blaspheming against God by the claims He was making. Today, when we say from the authority of Scripture that we have eternal life (Romans 8:16-17) and that believers will judge angels (1 Cor. 6:3), some people say it is arrogant to make such claims.

If you conclude that Joseph was wrong to tell these dreams, they certainly did come true. One may receive a wonderful message from God that He does not intend them to publish to others, so Joseph might have shown a lack of wisdom here, but it did not set aside the purposes of God. Perhaps there was a hint of pride in Joseph, though the text gives us no such grounds for thinking this. But when we speak what God has said in His Word, we are simply telling the truth.

Only one man wondered about what he had heard. His father kept the saying in mind. Even though he rebuked his son for being so brash, Jacob saw the truth in it: he recognised that God had spoken. He may not have seen how it could all be worked out, but he took it seriously. And God left Himself witnesses so that when all these things happen, they would realize that their lives were not the product of chance or the result of human decision but that they were being guided by a God who works out everything in accordance with His purpose.