Lesson: Genesis 37:2-11, 23-24, 28; Time of Action: 1897 B.C.; Place of Action: Hebron; Shechem; Dothan

Golden Text: “And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying” (Genesis 37:11).

I. INTRODUCTION. In Jacob’s large family, sibling conflict was almost assured because of the polygamous atmosphere in which they grew up. The sons anxiously watched their mothers compete for Jacob’s affection. They watched their father focus his love on Rachel until she died giving birth to the youngest son, Benjamin. By then their hearts were bitter. Jacob himself had grown up in a home where parental partiality was evident. He knew firsthand the great harm this caused children, yet he repeated the error in his own home. In this week’s lesson, we see an example of the kind of fruit that a family produces when it does not follow God’s model for the home.

II. BACKGROUND FOR THE LESSON. Jacob, whom God also named Israel (see Genesis 32:27-28), the son of Isaac and brother to Esau had tricked his brother out of his birthright causing Esau to hate him (see Genesis 27:36, 41). When Rebekah their mother heard that Esau wanted to kill
Jacob, she sent him to live with her brother Laban in Haran until Esau’s anger subsided (see Genesis 27:42-44). At the direction of Isaac, Jacob went to Padanaram to find a wife among Laban’s daughters (see Genesis 28:1-2). Once Jacob arrived, he met and fell in love with Rachel (see Genesis 29:10, 18) Laban’s youngest daughter, and he offered to work for Laban for seven years for Rachel. After serving Laban for the seven years he agreed upon, Jacob asked Laban for Rachel as his wife. But Laban tricked Jacob when he was drunk and gave him his eldest daughter Leah instead (see Genesis 29:20-26). As a result, Laban was able to get Jacob to work another seven years for Rachel and he did (see Genesis 29:27-29). Jacob ended up having children by both Leah and Rachel as well as by their handmaidens Bilhah and Zilpah, and his family grew with Joseph being born to Rachel (see Genesis 29:30-35; 30:1-24). Sometime later, God ordered Jacob to return to Bethel (see Genesis 31:3, 13). As he was returning to Bethel, Jacob was met by the angel of God who after a wrestling match renamed Jacob Israel (see Genesis chapter 32). As Jacob and his family continued to travel, they soon met up with Esau, his brother and they reconciled (see Genesis 33:1-16). When Jacob and his family arrived in Bethel, he destroyed all the images of idol gods that they brought with them, and they worshiped Jehovah and set up a memorial there in Bethel (see Genesis 35:1-15). After being in Bethel for some time, Jacob and his family moved to Bethlehem where Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin (see Genesis 35:16-19). Later, Jacob went to Hebron to be with his father Isaac who died at the age of 180 (see Genesis 35:27-29). Chapter 36 lists the names of Esau’s descendants. This brings us to chapter 37 which opens up declaring that Jacob dwelt in Canaan (see Genesis 37:1). Our
III. JOSEPH FAVORED AND HATED (Genesis 37:2-4)

A. Joseph reports to Jacob (Genesis 37:2). Our first verse says “These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad was with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report.” The phrase “These are the generations of Jacob” can be translated as “this is an account of Jacob’s family line” (see the NIV) meaning that this is one account of Jacob’s family situations. We are first introduced to “Joseph” who was the oldest of “Jacob’s” two sons by his wife Rachel. Benjamin was their other son (see Genesis 35:18-19) and the youngest of Jacob’s twelve children. At the time of our text, “Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren.” “Joseph” was serving as a shepherd of his father’s flock being assisted by his older half brothers Dan and Naphtali, who were “the sons of Bilhah,” and Gad and Asher who were “the sons of Zilpah.” Both of these women are described as “his (Joseph) father’s wives” (see Genesis 30:1-13). Although it is stated that “Zilpah” and “Bilhah” were “Jacob’s” wives, they were actually the handmaidens or servants for his legal wives Rachel and Leah. Then we are told that “Joseph brought unto his father their evil report.” The pronoun “their” refers to Joseph’s four half brothers who were with
him. Undoubtedly, “Joseph” witnessed them either saying or doing something dishonest, immoral, or maybe even vicious that he felt needed to be shared with their “father.” It’s quite possible that “Jacob” may have expected “Joseph” to report such acts according to the Law of Moses (see Leviticus 5:1).  

Note: There are some Bible students who consider “Joseph” to be a tattletale while others think that he must have had good reason to tell his father about the actions of his brothers. The slaughter of the men of Shechem by two of “Joseph’s” other brothers, Simeon and Levi (see Genesis 34:25) gives us some insight into what these men were capable of. The fact that they wanted to murder their own brother, “Joseph” (see Genesis 37:18-20) leads many to conclude that “Joseph” was justified in what he did. It appears that when “Jacob’s” sons were not under his watchful eye, they did or said something they would not have if they had been at home with their father. But “Joseph” most likely told his father about their bad behavior so that “Jacob” might reprove and restrain them. He didn’t do it to be a malicious tattletale who wanted to cause discord, but as a faithful brother who, when he couldn’t admonish them himself, went to the one who had the authority to admonish them—their father.

B. The sibling rivalry (Genesis 37:3-4).

1. (vs. 3). This verse says, “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.” The name “Israel” was given to Jacob after a
wrestling match with the angel of God (see Genesis chapter 32). We are told that “Israel (or Jacob) loved Joseph more than all his children.” The reason given for this was “because he was the son of his (Jacob’s) old age.”

**Note:** At this time, Jacob was 108 years old. We get this number this way: Joseph stood before Pharaoh when he was 30 (see Genesis 41:46); there were seven years of plenty that passed in Egypt followed by two years of famine (see Genesis 45:6). So Joseph was 39 when Jacob brought his family to Egypt at age 130 (see Genesis 47:9). This means that Joseph was born when Jacob was 91. Joseph was 17 at the time of the events in our lesson (see Genesis 37:2). So Jacob was 108.

While Jacob’s feeling for “Joseph” may be somewhat understandable, he didn’t help things by making it obvious that “Joseph” was his favorite. However, it’s interesting that Benjamin had also been born by this time and was the youngest son (see Genesis 35:16-20). One way that “Israel” or Jacob showed obvious favoritism toward “Joseph” was that “he (Jacob) made him (Joseph) a coat of many colours.” This “coat” was a sign of “Joseph’s” preferential status (see II Samuel 13:18), and an irritating reminder to his brothers of their father’s favoritism. The exact nature of the “coat” is uncertain. The phrase “of many colors” is from the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) translation. Some suggest that in Hebrew it means a “long coat with sleeves,” probably a long-sleeved tunic that reached his ankles. It may well have been colorful. This “coat” may have had the look of nobility while “Joseph’s” brothers undoubtedly wore clothing of workmen or shepherds.
2. (vs. 4). This verse says “And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.” It is clear that the gift Jacob gave to Joseph set him apart from his brothers. We are told that “And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him.” This is proof that when parents show favoritism, their children will soon take notice of it often causing feuds and quarrels in families. Of course, Jacob’s treatment of Joseph was easily noticed by the other brothers. They knew what was going on. When they saw the position that Joseph had been elevated to by his father, they “hated him” so much that they “could not speak peaceably unto him.” In other words, his brothers couldn’t even say a kind word to Joseph. We can imagine that this was not a very happy family life. The seeds of serious trouble were being sown by a man, Jacob, who should have known better because of the anger he caused in his brother Esau (see Genesis 27:41).

IV. JOSEPH SHARES HIS DREAM (Genesis 37:5-11)

A. The dreamer (Genesis 37:5). This verse says “And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren: and they hated him yet the more.” One can see from “Joseph’s” actions here that he was more of a prophet than a politician, or he would have kept his “dreams” to himself. At this point he had to know that his brothers already “hated him” (see verse 4) and that sharing
his “dream” would make the situation worse. While it may have been better if he kept the contents of his “dreams” to himself, we are told that “Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren.” This verse is actually a summary of what Joseph did and the response he received from his brothers: “they hated him yet the more.” What he told “his brethren” is given in detail in the next two verses.

B. The dreams (Genesis 37:6-8).

1. (vs. 6). This verse says “And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed...” Now Joseph asked for his brothers’ attention so he could tell them the specifics of his “dream.” The phrase “Hear, I pray you” can also be translated as “please listen.” He describes the “dream” to his brothers in the next verse.

2. (vs. 7). This verse says “For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf.” Joseph had two dreams; the one described here and another in verse 9. In this first dream that Joseph shared with his brothers, he said that they were all “binding sheaves” of grain “in the field.” The term “sheaves” refers to stalks of grain. Joseph said that his “sheaf arose” or stood up and the “sheaves” of his brothers “also stood upright” around his “sheaf.” Then Joseph said that his brothers’ “sheaves... made obeisance to my sheaf.” In other words his brother’s “sheaves” bowed down before his “sheaf.” The word “obeisance” means “to show reverence or homage
through a gesture or action.” Of course, Joseph’s brothers didn’t need great interpretative skills to understand the meaning of their younger brother’s dream; it was obvious. Jacob’s actions toward Joseph had already indicated that Joseph was being groomed for some prominent role in the family. Now Joseph himself was having visions of greatness before his brothers—or that’s the way it looked to them. It’s interesting that Joseph dreamed about his future promotion (see Genesis 42:6; 43:26-28), but he didn’t dream about his future imprisonment (see Genesis 39:13-21). This is a lesson for many young people. When they are starting out in the world, they mostly think about prosperity and pleasure, and never dream of the trouble that is sure to come in some form or another.

3. (vs. 8). This verse says “And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words.” After hearing Joseph’s dream, his brothers didn’t take it very well at all. In fact, they became more and more enraged against Joseph asking him “Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us?” They wanted to know whether Joseph intended to “reign over” them and “have dominion” or rule over them. Their questions indicate that they correctly interpreted Joseph’s dream, that he should “reign over” them (see Genesis 41:40-43; 42:6). They perceived that he was talking about them (see Matthew 21:45). Furious that Joseph would suggest such a thing as “having dominion” over them, his brothers “hated him yet the more for his dreams, and
for his words.” How much more can anyone be despised or hated?

C. More dreams (Genesis 37:9-11).

1. (vs. 9). This verse says “And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me.” After revealing the first “dream” to his brothers, Joseph had to know how they felt about him, because the hatred they had for him would have been very difficult to hide. That being said, we are told that Joseph “dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more.” As he did with the first “dream,” Joseph went on to give the details of this second “dream” to his brothers. He said “behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me.” The theme of both of Joseph’s “dreams” was that one day his brothers would submit to him, but this dream also included his mother and father who are referred to as “the sun and the moon.” This verse is a repetition of that theme (see verse 7) much like the similar repetition in Pharaoh’s dreams (see Genesis 41:1-7), showing that the entire matter was determined by God and He would bring it to pass in His own time (see Genesis 41:32).

2. (vs. 10). This verse says “And he told it to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren
indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?” After telling this second “dream” to “his brethren,” Joseph also “told it to his father” Jacob who “rebuked him.” Even though Joseph was Jacob’s favorite, he was not above being rebuked, for Jacob asked him “What is this dream that thou hast dreamed?” Again, the meaning of the “dream” (see verse 9) was clear as seen in Jacob’s further question “Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?” In essence, Jacob was asking Joseph “Do you really believe that your mother, your brothers, and I will bow down in respect before you?” The truth is that one day Joseph’s entire family would bow before him. But as for Jacob, it was inconceivable that he would actually bow down to his son. After all, he was Joseph’s father and the patriarch of the family. But if we look closer at Jacob’s second question, “Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?” it appears that Jacob was also insinuating that it was just an idle “dream,” because he included Joseph’s mother who had been dead for some time (see Genesis 35:16-20). However, he could have also been referring to Leah, Rachel’s sister whom Jacob also married (see Genesis 29:20-28). She would’ve been Joseph’s stepmother.

3. (vs. 11). This verse says “And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.” After all of these things, Joseph’s brothers not only hated him, but now they also “envied him” meaning that they were jealous of Joseph. But on the other hand, Jacob “his father observed the saying.” Jacob, like Mary did later (see Luke
2:51), “observed” or kept these things in his heart, and no doubt remembered them years later when the prediction became a reality.

V. JOSEPH DESPISED AND DISPATCHED (Genesis 37:23-24, 28). Verses 12-22 are not part of our lesson, but what happens in those verses are pertinent to the rest of the story. Sometime after Joseph had revealed his dreams to his brothers Jacob decided to send him to see about them while they were tending sheep near Shechem. Without hesitation, Joseph did what his father asked (see verses 12-14). When Joseph arrived in Shechem, he learned that his brothers had moved on to Dothan which was about fifteen miles north of Shechem near one of the major trade routes of the region (see verses 15-17). As Joseph approached his brothers in Dothan, they recognized him from a distance probably because of his colorful coat. Taking advantage of this opportune moment when Joseph was away from the protection of his father, his brothers “conspired against him to slay him” referring to him mockingly as “the dreamer” (see verses 18-19). Undoubtedly, because of Joseph’s dreams his brothers intended to make sure that they didn’t come true so they devised a plot. First, they would kill him and get rid of the body by throwing it into one of the many pits in the area. Then they concocted the story that Joseph had been eaten by animals which would cover up their murderous plot and free them from any suspicion of his disappearance (see verse 20). These brothers not only had a malicious motive, the means, and the opportunity to get rid of their brother, their actions
were also premeditated. Even though all of Joseph’s brothers hated him, his brother Reuben didn’t want to go as far as the other brothers, so he said “Let’s not kill him” (see verse 21). But we are not told what his motive was for doing this. Reuben went on to suggest that they should only throw Joseph into a pit. He hoped to could come back later and rescue him and return him to his father (see verse 22). The remainder of our text continues with verse 23.

A. The plot (Genesis 37:23-24).

1. (vs. 23). This verse says “And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him...” The phrase “And it came to pass” identifies the relatively brief time it took the unsuspecting “Joseph” to come near his brothers. It’s highly likely that after his long trip he may have expected being welcomed and offered some refreshing food and a comfortable place to lie down and rest. But instead, the very first thing that “Joseph’s” brothers did when he arrived was to “stript (stripped) Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him.” His “coat” was apparently a source of great irritation for his brothers. It symbolized both their father’s special affection for “Joseph” and his supposed superiority over them. Years later in Egypt his brothers would confess that they refused to listen to Joseph when he pleaded for mercy (see Genesis 42:21). It’s true that wherever envy reigns pity is absent and being humane is forgotten (see Proverbs 27:4).
2. (vs. 24). This verse says “And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it.” After stripping Joseph of his coat of many colors, his brothers “took him, and cast him into a pit.” It appears that they were considering Rueben’s suggestion or maybe they felt that killing him quickly might be showing too much mercy. Leaving him to die slowly in a lonely pit might bring them more satisfaction. Remember, they really hated Joseph. Ultimately, their purpose was to remove him permanently to prevent his prophetic dreams from becoming reality (see Genesis 37:20). The writer also adds that “the pit was empty, there was no water in it.” The fact that “the pit” had “no water in it” indicates that this was during the dry season. Note: Verses 25-27 are not part of our printed text but they let us see deeper into the hearts of Joseph’s brothers. They paid him no attention when he was in distress in the pit and were not bothered by his situation. When he was undoubtedly bemoaning his misery in the pit (see Genesis 42:21), and calling to them for pity, “they sat down to eat bread” (see verse 25). It seems that these brothers felt no remorse for their sin for if they had, it would not have been so easy to sit down and eat peacefully. It’s hard to imagine the anger and hatred they had for their brother because of their jealousy. But even today, family members cause unthinkable harm to each other often for the same reasons. While the brothers were eating, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelite merchants on their way from Gilead to Egypt (see verse 25). At this time, Rueben was not with his brothers probably because the brothers were taking turns watching the sheep (see verse 29). With Rueben
away, it appears that Judah, another brother, had second thoughts about what they had planned to do with Joseph. He said to them “What do we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his murder?” Then he suggested that since Joseph was their brother instead of killing him they should sell him to the Ishmaelite merchants and they all agreed (see verses 26-27). We don’t know what motivated Judah to take this position, but when he saw the merchants, his idea appealed to his brothers’ greed. However, two texts in the later Mosaic Law reveal how God felt about Judah’s idea (see Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7). As far as the brothers were concerned, selling Joseph into slavery would not only get him out of his father’s house, but it would also make it possible for the brothers to make some money. This brings us to the final verse of our lesson, verse 28.

B. The plot modified (Genesis 37:28). Our final verse says “Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt.” Seeing the “Midianites merchantmen” passing by, “Joseph’s” brothers “drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver.” Since both “Ishmeelites” (often spelled Ishmaelites; see Judges 8:24; Psalms 83:6) and “Midianites” are mentioned in this passage, there is some confusion concerning who actually bought “Joseph.” But they may have been one and the same group since the names
“Ishmaelites” and “Midianites” were used interchangeably in Scripture (see Judges 8:22, 24). But since the “Ishmaelites” were descendants of Abraham by Hagar (see Genesis 16:15) and the “Midianites” were also descendants of Abraham by his concubine Keturah (see Genesis 25:2), both groups could’ve been travelling together. We are told that Joseph’s brothers “sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver.” Once the purchase was complete, these merchants “brought Joseph into Egypt.” It’s quite likely that everyone involved in this incident knew that “Joseph” would be sold again in “Egypt.” Note: So “Joseph” was sold into slavery and taken away to “Egypt.” As noted earlier, Reuben was not present when this transaction took place. But hoping to rescue “Joseph,” he returned to the pit only to find it empty (see Genesis 37:29). To cover their deed, the brothers dipped “Joseph’s” coat in the blood of a goat and then brought it to their father. They let Jacob come to his own conclusions concerning what had happened to “Joseph” (see Genesis 37:33) which led to a long period of mourning. In the meantime, “Joseph” was taken to “Egypt,” put on the auction block and sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard (see Genesis 39:1). However, “Joseph’s” presence in the home of Potiphar brought success to his master. Recognizing “Joseph’s” value, Potiphar promoted him to the position of chief steward or overseer over his house (see Genesis 39:2-6). Things were looking up for “Joseph” until he caught the eye of his master’s wife who attempted to seduce him. After refusing her advances, “Joseph” was falsely accused and thrown into prison (see Genesis 39:7-20). Once again, it seemed that things were not
going well for “Joseph.” But this too, was about to turn around for human decisions cannot stop the purposes of God (see Genesis 39:21-23).

VI. **Conclusion.** Jacob did a disservice to his family by favoring Joseph over his other children. His other sons resented his favoritism. They also grew to hate Joseph and to be very jealous of him. Negative attitudes turn into negative actions. The bitterness of the brothers caused them to forsake their normal values. Jealous thoughts had led them to acts of violence and abuse. In every home and family we will often find the same kind of sibling rivalry that we saw in Joseph’s home. God has a special plan for each of us, and He will make sure that His plans come to pass. He is absolutely sovereign and can take our many mistakes and turn them into situations that can be used for His glory.