

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 if Jacob had 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? 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?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Genesis 37:3*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe the part that Joseph’s coat of many colors played at the heart of this story of a father’s love for a son, and the anger and jealousy that the brothers displayed.

Feel: Empathize with the conflicting emotions that played out in the long history of Jacob’s family relationships.

Do: Submit the challenges that arise in our own family relationships to the control and mediation of God.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Coat of Love and Hatred

A What were the various circumstances that caused so many conflicts in Jacob’s family?

B How did Joseph’s coat of many colors figure in a major crisis?

C How did God bring good out of this conflicted family? What part did Jacob’s 12 sons play in the history of Israel, and what part will they have in the New Jerusalem?

II. Feel: Painful Memories Healed

A How were the many strong emotions of anger, jealousy, fear, and grief resolved in Jacob’s family story?

B What part did forgiveness play in this healing?

III. Do: Family Ties

A Why do some of the most difficult relationships occur between family members?

B What challenges do we face in our own families, and what steps do we need to take toward healing?

► **Summary:** Of the many challenges that Jacob faced in his family relationships, his grief over his lost son was one of the most painful. Yet God used this situation to save many during a widespread famine and to bring healing to Jacob’s family as well.

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, jealousy, favoritism, pride, all of which 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 worsen relations 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. Although 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 upon 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 realized 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?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: *As free beings we can choose to ignore God and place Him on the periphery. But there are dire consequences for doing so, most of which arise from the course of human nature and our choices. As such, we should make the wisdom of God the primary influence in our decisions.*

Just for Teachers: *Emphasize the importance of adopting God’s values as we make our way through a world that can corrupt us and encourage us to cut moral, ethical, and spiritual corners.*

The Order of Stanislaus was an honor granted by the Polish crown, dating from 1765 until 1832, when Poland lost its nominal independence in the disastrous November Uprising. From then on, the Russian czars took over the awarding of the Order of Stanislaus. Calculatedly, they awarded it primarily to Polish officials who were most diligent in suppressing strivings for Polish political and cultural independence. So it was that this medal—formerly one of the highest honors that could be bestowed by the Polish crown, and named after a Polish national hero—became a symbol of disgrace in the eyes of the Polish people.

A story is told of the mayor of a small Polish town who was “lucky” enough to receive this medal for his service to the Russian occupiers. In ideal circumstances, a medal such as this would have been worn on special occasions or to impress others. But, instead, the mayor promptly hid it away, knowing that it would only make him an object of hatred to his own people and possibly a target of Polish nationalists.

He did find a use for it, though—one that continued through many generations of his family. When a child was particularly ill-behaved, he or she would be confined to the house and forced to wear the heavy, ungainly Order of Stanislaus until sundown.

Many of the worldly honors and comforts we esteem so highly turn out to have a terrible downside. We get them for the wrong reasons or for doing the wrong things. They incite anger or envy in others. Or they may change us in undesirable ways. Like the Order of Stanislaus—or Joseph’s coat of many colors, which we will be studying this week—they may come to mean the opposite of what we thought they meant. Joseph’s story really began only when he lost the coat and was forced to make God his center.

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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 concluded 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 Joseph’s brothers’ 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.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Discuss With the Class: Have you ever experienced a situation in which something that seemed at first to be a blessing became a catalyst for spiritual or temporal difficulties or adversity? What did you learn from it?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: Emphasize the importance of considering the impact of one’s actions on others and oneself, and the necessity of allowing God to guide our decisions.

Bible Commentary**I. “Coat of Many Colors”** (*Review Genesis 37:3 with your class.*)

The nature of the coat of many colors referred to in this passage is uncertain. The original Hebrew refers to it as *ketonet passim*, or, literally, a long robe with sleeves, or possibly a long-sleeved coat with stripes. The assumption of many colors seems to come from the Septuagint, the authoritative Greek translation of the Old Testament from the late centuries B.C. Such a garment later became a prerogative of royalty or other distinguished personages. For example, in 2 Samuel 13:18, 19 the author notes that Tamar and others in the court of David wore such robes or coats. Perhaps the translators of the Septuagint wanted to emphasize the specialness and centrality of this garment in the narrative.

Indeed, this garment was special: anyone fortunate enough to have one would undoubtedly put a lot of thought into preserving it and keeping it from loss or harm. Jacob and his family apparently derived their livelihood from herding animals, probably sheep and goats. A long robe with sleeves was not ideal for a day in the pastures, which were most likely conglomerations of scrub and brush rather than the green fields we may think of when that word is mentioned. So when Jacob gave Joseph this robe, he was essentially saying either that Joseph did not have to work like the others, or he was assigning him a supervisory role.

In a society in which status was everything, and in which division of authority and labor was based strictly upon age, among other things, the favoritism shown by Jacob to Joseph must have been, to his older brothers, not only irksome but nearly incomprehensible. Jacob sent Joseph on errands that clearly put him in the role of what we would today call middle management. From the fact that Joseph was wearing the coat at the time of his “death,” we can infer that he wore it everywhere, and

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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 that 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 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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

that it functioned—much to his brothers’ resentment—as a mark of his authority.

Consider This: In this situation, one can truly say that everyone involved made mistakes. Joseph’s were relatively innocent and unthinking, whereas those of his brothers were not so much mistakes as crimes, however legitimate some of their grievances may have been. How do you react when you feel that you have been treated unfairly or when someone has advanced at what you feel is your expense?

II. Rock Bottom *(Review Genesis 37:26–36 with your class.)*

Rock bottom. The legendary place alcoholics or other addicts have to hit before they know they need help. Where there is nowhere to go but up. Whatever cliché one may choose, Joseph was there, and it was a precipitous fall indeed. Worse yet, he most likely didn’t know why he was there or what he had done to deserve it, although the modern reader could probably identify a few things.

Many different kinds of pits exist. A literal pit such as the one Joseph was in, while it is not to be wished for oneself or anyone else, has its advantages. At least one knows where one is, and even being raised out of it to be sold into slavery is probably preferable to being left to face starvation and the elements. As Samuel Johnson said of the gallows, being in a pit undoubtedly concentrates the mind wonderfully. In Joseph’s case, it might even have been his rite of passage into spiritual and psychological maturity.

Consider This: Like Joseph’s brothers we have all dug ourselves into pits. We try to deny that we are in pits. We try to rationalize the actions that brought us to these places. The deeper we find ourselves, the deeper we want to go, until we hit “rock bottom.” Why does our only way out come when we discover that the only One who can, and will, bring us out is the One we have sinned against, God Himself?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Help your students to recognize the need to accept God’s guidance in their lives for both eternal and temporal reasons and to avoid behaviors that put them outside of the will of God.

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“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.” 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 after 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 the brothers’ deeds had 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.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Thought Questions:**

- 1 There are essentially two schools of thought regarding the consequences of human sin. One is that God actively punishes us for our sins, either vindictively or redemptively, as a means of leading sinners toward Himself. The other is that God merely lets us reap the consequences of our actions, removing His protection. Which do you believe? How do you support your viewpoint?
- 2 How do you feel about Joseph as he is presented in the early part of the story? While he is the hero, what are some of his unattractive qualities? How does he change and grow as a result of his experiences?

Application Question:

Have you ever allowed your negative feelings toward another person to get out of control? If so, what happened as a result? What did you learn from the experience? How can we prevent such thoughts and feelings from taking root in the first place?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: In the story of Joseph, we see decisions and actions affect things and people that would seem, at first glance, to be quite remote from them. The following activities will help to illustrate how even small decisions that we think affect only ourselves (and possibly those immediately around us) can have wide-ranging and long-lasting results, for good or ill.

Object Lesson: Bring a radio to class. Demonstrate how the radio receives invisible signals from far away. These signals were not emitted with the thought of influencing this particular radio or the particular people listening to it, but they do. In the same way, our actions can influence people far away in space or time; even people we don't know exist. This is definitely something to be considered when we do things that we think are insignificant.

Alternatively, tell a story about something you've done that had an effect on someone or something you weren't aware of at the time. It can be positive or negative, depending on how open you want to be. Encourage others to share their stories as well.

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 to be 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 that 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?