Unit I: Struggles with Love

When Love Is Lost

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Genesis 37
PRINT PASSAGE: Genesis 37:2-11, 23-24a, 28

Key Verse—His brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.
(Genesis 37:11, KJV)

His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.
(Genesis 37:11, NIV)

Lesson Aims
As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

- Examine the circumstances of familial love and hatred between Jacob/Israel’s sons.
- Repent of times when they allowed jealousy and hatred to override a commitment to love.
- Develop strategies to allow a commitment to love to override feelings of jealousy and hatred.

*Key Terms

Dream (verse 5)—Hebrew: chalom (khal-ome’): dream; dreamer.
Robe (verse 3)—Hebrew: kethoneth (keth-o’-neth): outer robe or tunic; “coat” (KJV).
Were jealous (verse 11)—Hebrew: qanna (kan-naw’): being envious; provoked to jealousy; “envied” (KJV).

*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)

Introduction
This writer was blessed to grow toward maturity as a Christian and future husband and father under the pastorate of a godly man who taught practical applications of biblical doctrine and commands. He was not a trained psychologist or counselor, but he was able to provide workable solutions to challenges to family solidarity. He often warned against parents’ “raisin’ up enemies” in their homes by showing obvious favoritism and preference for one child over another. For example, one parent’s claiming one of his/her children as “my heart,” refusing to allow one child to
The Biblical Context
God's specific dealings with the nation of Israel began with the calling of Abram (Abraham) in Genesis 12. The writer of Genesis records events in the lives of Abraham's son Isaac, grandsons Jacob and Esau, and their descendants. Esau was not the heir of God's everlasting covenant with Abraham's family, but God blessed him and made his descendants into a nation (Genesis 36). Of particular interest is Jacob and his sons. Ten sons were born by his first wife, Leah, and his secondary wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. Humanly, these births were the result of sibling rivalry between Leah and her sister, Rachel, Jacob's favorite. For an unspecified length of time, Rachel had been unable to conceive children. However, through divine intervention she was finally able to conceive and gave Jacob two more sons, Joseph and Benjamin. Repeating the pattern of parental favoritism that he had experienced, Jacob openly and ostentatiously favored Joseph over the rest of his sons. Genesis 37 is a record of the results of his demonstration of favoritism and its negative effect on his family.

be punished by the father or the mother, or giving one child more materially or more privileged freedom than another are ways this can happen. He emphatically identified such actions as sure causes of a loss of love among family members. The solution he taught was to treat each child equitably while honoring their individuality in the home in terms of discipline, responsibility, and the demonstration of parental love. Although each child will be unique in terms of personality and disposition, parents should make every effort to make each of them feel loved and respected as individuals if their love for each other and for their parents is to be developed and maintained. In Ephesians 6:4, we read, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger [do not exasperate them to the point of resentment with demands that are trivial or unreasonable or humiliating or abusive; nor by showing favoritism or indifference to any of them], but bring them up [tenderly, with lovingkindness] in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (AMP). Although our pastor did not specifically cite this verse, this was the foundation of the instructions we received that helped us develop biblical parenting skills. Although we would fail in some ways, the foundation was clearly laid for us. Sadly, many families today have suffered and will suffer the consequences of a loss of familial love because of parental favoritism. This was the case in Jacob's relationship with his sons. A victim of parental favoritism himself, he followed his parents' example and created hostile sibling rivalry between Leah's and his secondary wives' sons and Joseph. What began as minor conflicts among them soon escalated into violent acts of hatred.

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Parental Favoritism (Genesis 37:2-4)

KJV

2 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.
3 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.
4 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.

NIV

2 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.
3 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.
4 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.

Genesis 37 begins the account of Joseph, Rachel’s firstborn son by Jacob, and vividly illustrates how parental favoritism can damage sibling relationships. Joseph’s family environment was a breeding ground for deceit and rivalry. He is introduced at the age of seventeen, when he brings to his father a bad report about his half-brothers, the sons of Jacob’s secondary wives, Bilhah and Zilpah (verse 2). The substance of this report is not given but was most likely an accurate account of their behavior. The fact that he was “tending the flocks” suggests that he had been given a degree of authority by his father as the master shepherd over his older brothers. This in itself was an unusual parental decision that led to hard feelings against Joseph. Additionally, Jacob openly favored Joseph because he was the firstborn of the wife he loved, Rachel. Jacob also made and gave Joseph a distinctive multicolored tunic or “coat” (verse 3). The descriptive Hebrew phrase (kethoneth passim) has also been interpreted to mean a garment with long sleeves. It was apparently costly and reached to Joseph’s ankles. In this context, it was not a worker’s garment but, rather, one worn by a supervisor. It visibly identified Jacob’s intent of granting Joseph a larger portion of the inheritance than his brothers. Jacob should have recalled how parental favoritism had separated him from his own mother and had estranged him from his brother, Esau.

Joseph’s exalted position over his brothers and his richly ornamented, symbolic robe led to bitterness and animosity against him to the degree that his brothers were not able to speak a kind word to him (verse 4). The result of favoritism and partiality in a family will inevitably lead to strife and the loss of mutual familial love. This can take several forms—to include parental self-focus, neglecting their children, favoring one child over another, or even a child’s favoring one parent over the other. Jacob made unwise and ungodly decisions that parents should avoid. The key factor is for parents to have a right relationship with God and obey
His commands relating to child rearing. This includes modeling selfless love for each other as parents and intentionally recognizing and accepting the uniqueness of each child.

What Do You Think? How can parents demonstrate equitable love and acceptance for their children without showing parental favoritism?

A Dreamer’s Folly (Genesis 37:5-11)

KJV
5 And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren: and they hated him yet the more.
6 And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed:
7 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.
8 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.
9 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.
10 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?
11 And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.

NIV
5 Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more.
6 He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had:
7 “We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.”
8 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.
9 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.”
10 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?”
11 His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.
Joseph must have had some knowledge of his brothers’ hatred of him and probably should have known that any display of superiority on his part would only widen the emotional divide between him and them. He unwisely shared with his brothers a dream which suggested that he was going to reign over them (verses 5-7). It is conjectured that Joseph’s attitude of arrogance and boastfulness can be attributed to his youthful immaturity. God was the source of his dream, but he had not yet developed an intimate relationship with Him and was clueless as to its divine origin and spiritual meaning. This attitude’s source can be traced back to Jacob’s display of overt favoritism toward Joseph. His brothers reacted with increased bitterness that deepened their hatred of him. They openly declared that he would never rule over them (verse 8).

Their response to this first dream should have been enough to prevent his sharing the second. In this one, his parents were also bowing down and serving him (verse 9). Jacob rebuked Joseph for sharing this dream and expressed his disbelief in its fulfillment (verse 10). By openly rebuking Joseph, Jacob may have hoped that it would stop or curtail his boasting and repair or lessen the damage done to his relationship with his brothers. However, his brothers became even more envious and jealous of Joseph (verse 11a). Verse 11b suggests that Jacob may have thought that God was revealing His will for Joseph’s life as His choice of unfolding His covenant promise for Abraham’s descendants. He too would have remembered how God revealed His plans and promises for his life in dreams (see Genesis 28:12, 15). Children of God can know God’s will for their lives by studying His Word, through prayer, and through submission to the Holy Spirit. This knowledge does not grant us permission to be boastful and display an attitude of selfish superiority as Joseph did. Parents need to be aware of the gifts and talents of their children and teach them how to humbly use them and prevent competition and rivalry within the family.

What Do You Think? How can attitudes of superiority and pride be controlled within the family? Within the community of faith?

When Love Is Lost (Genesis 37:23-24a, 28)

KJV
23 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;
24 And they took him, and cast him into a pit.

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28 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.

NIV
23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing—
24 and they took him and threw him into the cistern.

28 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.

We hear and read about children who express hate for their parents and siblings and even kill them over family property, greed, or for several other ungodly reasons. Often, a root cause is parental favoritism that causes division and abuse—a literal loss of love for one another. The favoritism of a father and the immature arrogance and pride of a teenaged son resulted in a plot to commit murder (verses 18-22, not in our Print Passage). At the request of his father, Joseph obediently went to inquire about the welfare of his brothers after they had taken their sheep to pasture near Shechem. Discovering that they had moved further north, he continued after them. Seeing him approaching in the distance, they devised a scheme to rid themselves of him and his dreams. Initially, they planned to kill him but were convinced by their older brother Rueben to put him in a pit in the wilderness. When Joseph reached them, they stripped him of his tunic and threw him in a dry cistern to die (verses 23, 24a). They were finally prompted by Judah to sell Joseph to a caravan of Ishmaelites, their distant relatives—for twenty shekels or eight ounces of silver—and he was taken to Egypt (verse 28).

Joseph was treated harshly by his family because jealousy, envy, and bitterness were allowed to grow and produce hate rather than acceptance, tolerance, and forgiveness—which would have produced love. At this point in Jacob’s family, there is little evidence that any of his children had a personal relationship with their covenant God, including Joseph. They and their father were allowing the flesh to control them rather than a relationship with God. It is possible to know about God and still not know Him intimately. In this context, this led to parenting mistakes that produced hostile sibling rivalry and a loss of love among Jacob’s family. Maintaining love in the family requires acknowledging God as its foundation and teaching and living His commands as parents and children (see Proverbs 22:15; Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:19; Ephesians 4:31-32).

What Do You Think? What experiences have you had with sibling rivalry caused by parental favoritism? How does this lesson relate to our relationships as children of God?

A Closing Thought

Parental favoritism can wreak havoc on relationships between siblings. Sadly, this can become learned behavior and be repeated across generations, as was the case in Jacob’s family. When parents intentionally show favoritism to one child over another, envy, jealousy, bitterness, and hatred rather than love are produced. The solution is for parents to emulate
Christ by loving their children equally while appreciating, accepting, and supporting each child’s uniqueness.

**Your Life**

If you are a parent of more than one child, reflect on your treatment of each of them. Are you fostering a home environment of mutual love and respect? Are you ensuring that each child knows that he or she is loved for who he or she is rather than for what you want him or her to be? Keep focused on God’s love for you as one of His children (despite your failures) and choose to show love to your children by following His example.

**Your World!**

The media is replete with instances of family conflicts motivated by parental favoritism and sibling rivalry, many ending in tragedy. Take time this week to pray for the wholeness of families locally and universally and the restoration of reciprocal love among their members.

**Closing Prayer**

Dear God, thank You for the gift of family. Help us to cherish it by following Your example of demonstrating selfless love for one another as parents and children. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

**Conclusion**

*(Preparing for Next Week’s Lesson)*

Hardships can produce bitterness and foster an unforgiving spirit. Next week, we will see how Joseph responded to the negative circumstances he experienced as a slave in Egypt.

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**Home Daily Bible Readings**

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