

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

Genesis 37

The teacher should refresh his memory on the story of Jacob's experiences in Haran. It will be better to emphasize the length of time—twenty years—in Haran and the sons born there than to retell the story of Leah and Rachel, which cannot be explained briefly. Mention the Lord's promise to Jacob at Bethel and Jacob's longing to return to the Holy Land.

Doctrinal Points

The Word in its inmost sense treats of the life of the Lord Himself. Our regeneration is a succession of cycles of temptation, struggle, and victory.

Notes for Parents

The story of Joseph is one of the best-known stories in the Bible, and people have always recognized that there are several similarities between it and the story of the Lord's life on earth, for both Joseph and the Lord were carried into Egypt, both were betrayed by those who should have loved them, both were sold for a few pieces of silver, both were always faithful and always forgiving, and both were saviors of their people.

Joseph was Jacob's eleventh son, the first child born to Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife, and the last one born in Haran, where Jacob had been sent to escape the wrath of his brother Esau. Rachel's second child, Benjamin, was born after Jacob had brought his family back to Canaan and been reconciled to Esau. Rachel died when Benjamin was born, and was buried near Bethlehem.

Joseph was different from his older brothers. As the later story shows, they were concerned only with worldly success, but Joseph cared about the things of the spirit and was unselfish. They called

him “this dreamer.” Often today people who think about the heavenly life are scoffed at by the worldly as dreamers or idealists. But it is the people with ideals who have been the really great men and women of history.

One of the reasons why Joseph’s brothers hated him was that he was his father’s favorite. Another was that his dreams indicated that he would be greater than they. In the series of patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—Jacob pictures our state when we are beginning our independent life in the world. His twelve sons stand for all the faculties which we develop that enable us to act as individuals: the ten older sons our practical, worldly abilities, and the two youngest the higher spiritual impulses and thoughts which are our inheritance from our Heavenly Father.

For a long time these higher things in us are put aside, as we busy ourselves with making our way in the world. We sometimes even imagine that they have been killed, as Jacob thought Joseph had been, but the Lord preserves them deep within us, until the experiences of life bring us to a sense of need which only spiritual truth and good can satisfy. Joseph by the abilities he received from the Lord rose out of prison to the place of ruler of Egypt. Later his brothers came to him there for help in time of need.

Primary

The children should be reminded of the number of sons Jacob had altogether and the name of Joseph, whom Jacob loved best. The gift of the coat and the jealousy of the brothers will be easy for them to understand. Later in the story tell them that it was the Lord who put it into Reuben’s heart to save Joseph from death, and that the Lord was preparing Joseph to become a great man and to save his whole family. The moral lesson of the way in which envy of another person grows until it wants to do him real harm is a good one for young children, and not too far from their experience with brothers and sisters and playmates.

Jacob stayed in Haran for twenty years, working for his uncle Laban. He married two of Laban’s daughters, Leah and Rachel, and became very rich in herds and flocks. Eleven sons were born

to him in Haran and another after he came back to the land of Canaan, twelve in all. When he came back, he was still very much afraid of Esau, but he found that Esau, who had also become very rich, had long since forgiven him and was happy to see him again.

Someday you will want to learn the names of Jacob's twelve sons. These were their names, in the order of their birth: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. They also had a sister named Dinah. Perhaps you can remember that the oldest was Reuben and the two youngest Joseph and Benjamin. These two youngest sons were the children of Rachel, who was Jacob's favorite wife. That was one reason why Jacob loved them best, and he especially loved Joseph.

What did Jacob make for Joseph?

Why did the older brothers hate Joseph?

His dreams showed that he was to be greater than they.

What did the brothers decide to do?

Who persuaded them not to kill Joseph?

What did they finally do with him?

Who was Ishmael, the father of the Ishmaelites?

Where did they take Joseph?

To whom was he sold?

The brothers thought they would never see Joseph again, but the Lord took care of him in Egypt and he became a great man there, and several years later he was able to save his whole family from starving to death. Joseph always obeyed the Lord, and he came to realize that the Lord had permitted the hardships of his boyhood for a good purpose.

Junior

Shechem, the place of Abraham's first altar, appears again here and should be located on a map and impressed on the minds of the class. It is an important place throughout the Bible story. It may also be helpful to turn to Genesis 35, verses 23 to 26, and read the names of the twelve sons of Jacob as a preparation for later lessons. The children will note that Reuben, who persuaded his brothers not to kill Joseph, was Jacob's eldest son. They should learn his name and that of Benjamin the youngest in addition to Joseph. Tell them also

that in those days the Lord often taught people through dreams, and that Joseph's two dreams have an inner meaning which they will study when they are older. Stress the Lord's providence in saving Joseph and tell them that we often find, as we grow older, that experiences which at the time we thought very hard were really blessings in disguise.

Jacob lived in Haran for twenty years and became rich there. He married the two daughters of his uncle Laban, Leah and Rachel, and had eleven sons and a daughter before he left Haran. The oldest was Reuben and the youngest, Joseph. Then he brought his family back to the land of Canaan, was reconciled to Esau and reunited with his father Isaac. His twelfth son, Benjamin, was born near Bethlehem. Jacob loved Joseph and Benjamin best of his sons because they were the children of Rachel, his favorite wife, who died when Benjamin was born.

At the time of our story for today, Joseph was seventeen.

What did Jacob make for him?

Jacob's preference for Joseph was one reason why his brothers hated him, and there were two other reasons.

What do we learn in verse 2?

What two dreams did Joseph have?

What did both dreams mean?

Where did Jacob send Joseph?

What do you remember about Shechem?

Where did Joseph find his brothers?

Dothan is a little plain not far north of Shechem.

What did the brothers say when they saw Joseph coming?

Does it seem strange that they should have been willing to kill their brother? Aren't we all likely to dislike people who are so different from ourselves that we cannot understand them? Read Matthew 5:21-22 and I John 3:15. Every willful murder has its beginning in feelings of jealousy, anger, and hatred in the heart. If we realized how dangerous such feelings are, we should all try harder to put them out of our hearts when they first appear there.

Which brother persuaded the others not to kill Joseph?

What did the others finally do with him?

Whose son was Ishmael, the father of the Ishmaelites?

Ishmael had become a wanderer and a dweller in the wilderness. His descendants became merchantmen, carrying goods in caravans from one part of the world to another.

How much did the Ishmaelites pay for Joseph?

What did they do with him?

To whom was he finally sold?

How did Joseph's brothers conceal their crime?

Intermediate

Sketch for the class the whole story of Joseph in its simplest outlines, using the facts of today's lesson followed by those mentioned in the last paragraph of the notes for Adults. Most of the young people will be somewhat familiar with this story. Then take up the twelve sons of Jacob and their general meaning, the meaning of Joseph, and the importance of this quality to our ultimate salvation. The attitude of the older brothers toward Joseph can easily be illustrated from the young people's own experience. Most of them have at one time or another rebelled against going to Sunday school and church, and doubtless all know other young people—and older ones, too—who scoff at religion and stifle their own impulses to be good in any deep sense—that is, to do more than keep within the law.

When Jacob was sent away from home to Haran to save him from the wrath of Esau, he stayed away for twenty years. During that time, which he spent serving his uncle Laban, he married two daughters of Laban, Leah and Rachel, and had seven sons by them. He had four more sons by Bilhah and Zilpah, the handmaids of his two wives, and after he returned to Canaan, Rachel bore him a twelfth son, Benjamin. In those days people had forgotten that multiple marriages were wrong.

Jacob pictures the natural plane of our life. The Israelitish church, which was really a mere representative of a church, was to be developed among his descendants. Our outward acts, if they are not hypocritical, are pictures of the things hidden in our hearts and minds, even though we may never think of anything but outward acts and of what their results are likely to be for our life in this world. Jacob's twelve sons picture all our proper affections and thoughts through which this plane of outward conduct is

developed and regulated. The earlier sons are the more external affections which develop first; the sons of the handmaids are those which serve our growth in a lower way; and the last two sons—born of Rachel, who was the wife Jacob loved best—represent the deep spiritual affections and thoughts which develop last. They are all good and useful and have their proper place in our lives.

But our more external and natural ideas and desires should be recognized as subordinate to the higher ones. When we first grow up, our ideas of religion are chiefly concerned with external conduct, but deep within us we have feelings which we cannot express and are sometimes ashamed to acknowledge, thinking our friends might laugh at them. It is these deep religious “remains” which will eventually save us from becoming entirely worldly and selfish. They are pictured by Joseph and Benjamin: Joseph, the affection for spiritual things; and Benjamin, the understanding of them or the desire to learn about them.

If we remember this, the story of Joseph becomes a wonderful parable. In our chapter today Joseph is pictured as different from his brothers and hated by them because of this difference. He is a dreamer. He has visions which tell him that he is to be greater than his brothers and even than his father and mother. His older brothers want to kill him. Is not this true of our interest in spiritual things when we are coming to maturity? We know it is really the most important thing in our lives, which gives us dreams and ideals for the future. Yet our external reasonings make fun of those dreams and ideals and do their best to stifle them. And they do succeed for a time in putting our Joseph away in Egypt—the land of mere memory-knowledge—and forgetting about him, pretending he is dead. How many young people stop going to church and Sunday school and try to forget the deeper aspects of religion as soon as they get out from under their parents’ control!

But Joseph is not dead. He is preserved by the Lord in Egypt to be the savior of his whole family later in time of need. That is, the Lord preserves our early religious feelings and thoughts deep in our memories where we shall find them again when great need—

the famine—arises in our lives.

We should also realize that the Old Testament in its inmost sense is a story of the life of the Lord Himself. Joseph is one of the Bible figures who most clearly picture the Lord. The Lord was different from others, a dreamer who knew that in the end all would bow down before Him. He went down into Egypt. He was sold for a few pieces of silver. His garments were taken from Him and used to prove His death. But He was not dead. We must keep this thought about the inmost meaning of the Word in our minds throughout our study of the Bible.

Basic Correspondences

the twelve sons of Jacob = all the necessary thoughts
and affections we develop
Joseph = the affections for spiritual things
Benjamin = the affection for learning about
spiritual things

Jacob's Sons

In the order of their birth: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali,
Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin

Jacob's Wives and Their Children

Rachel	Leah
Joseph	Reuben
Benjamin	Simeon
	Levi
	Judah
	Issachar
	Zebulun
Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid	Zilpah, Leah's handmaid
Dan	Gad
Naphtali	Asher

Leah also bore Jacob a daughter, Dinah.

Senior

The most important thought to bring out for the Seniors is the necessity of

recognizing that there are relative values in life, and that one of the objectives of our thinking should be to learn to put first things first. Read them Matthew 6:24-34. Joseph and Benjamin represent our desire for “the kingdom of God and his righteousness” and our thought about it, the other sons our desires and thoughts concerning all other needful things. It is natural that these other desires should develop first, while we are learning the necessary worldly knowledge and finding our places in the workaday world. But the Lord in our earliest years has given us a “Joseph,” and He preserves this quality deep within us until we feel our spiritual need and can be led to find it again. Show the young people that when they pretend to be sophisticated and are ashamed of being thought religious, they are “selling Joseph into bondage in Egypt.”

In studying the internal meaning of the Word, one is sometimes puzzled by the apparently endless repetition of the cycle of temptation, transgression, repentance, restoration, and peace. Today we have Jacob reconciled to Esau and once more peacefully settled in Hebron; yet the very next incident is the jealousy among his sons and the selling of Joseph, his favorite, into slavery in Egypt. And the cycle starts all over again.

But is not this exactly our experience throughout life? We recognize an evil in ourselves; with the Lord’s help we fight and overcome it; we experience the peace of victory—only to discover a new and deeper temptation waiting to attack. You will sometimes hear older people say, “I seem to myself to grow worse instead of better as the years go on.” This is really just as it should be. As one grows in physical strength, harder and harder tasks are entrusted to him; as he grows in spiritual strength, deeper and deeper inner evils are revealed for him to overcome. We cannot overcome all our evils at once. But as we put one behind us, the Lord can show us another, so that our whole life may be a forward progress step by step up the heavenly way.

Jacob represents the natural plane of our life, especially the period when we are finding our independent place in the world and adjusting ourselves to the demands of earning a living and establishing a new home and family in society. Jacob’s settlement in the Holy Land with the new name of Israel (Genesis 32:38) represents our determination that our life and our home shall be

godly and not merely worldly.

Still our desire to do right may have many motives within it, and these motives—represented by the twelve sons of Jacob—are not always harmonious. Joseph and Benjamin, our love for and understanding of spiritual things, we recognize as our highest and most mature qualities. “Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age.” But our lower interests are opposed to what is spiritual in us even to the point of trying to destroy it.

Joseph had dreams and visions. Our spiritual nature centers about internal rather than worldly values, and the worldly part of us makes fun of anything which cannot be perceived through the physical senses. If we think of Joseph as the deep-seated religious impulse which every one of us has from the Lord, we can see in our own experience and in that of our acquaintances how worldly desires seek first to destroy it, then to bury it, and finally dispose of it by relegating it to the realm of childhood experience, part of our necessary knowledge but no longer essential to our life. You will even hear people say, “It is a good thing for children to go to Sunday school; it helps them to form good habits; but of course they will outgrow a lot of the things they are taught.” This is Joseph sold into Egypt for twenty pieces of silver.

But it was fortunate for the worldly brothers that Joseph was not really dead. As we all know, the time came when their very life depended on him. As the Lord preserved Joseph and endowed him with abilities which brought him into a place of authority in Egypt, so He preserves the “remains” of our early spiritual states deep within us against the time when the worldly principles which we have adopted prove to be wholly inadequate in the face of some bereavement or failure or other deep loss.

Swedenborg in the *Arcana Coelestia* develops the meaning of this story of Joseph principally in its inmost sense, in which it treats of the Lord Himself. The quotation at the end of this lesson gives us the key to this sense in the meaning of Joseph.



Adult

Even with this class it may be necessary to review briefly the story of Jacob's sojourn in Haran and return to the Holy Land. Then speak of the correspondence of the twelve sons and of the meaning of Joseph's being sold into Egypt. Finally ask for comments and questions from the class, and let these determine the further discussion.

As Jacob represents the attempt to work out the Lord's teachings on the plane of daily life, his twelve sons represent all the good affections which are developed in the course of this task. We know that our lives are complex. We are constantly reading of psychologists' efforts to analyze our mental and volitional processes. Here in the story of Jacob's twelve sons we can, with the help of Swedenborg, find a complete outline of psychology given us by the Lord Himself. We can distinguish between higher and lower affections in our external life. We know, for instance, that love for friends is a higher affection than love for food, although the latter is a necessary and good affection. We are able to see that affection for the Lord and for heavenly knowledge is the highest of all our affections. The sons of Jacob may be grouped according to their importance, the two sons of Rachel being these highest affections, the sons of Leah the more external affections which lead up to them, and the sons of the handmaids the most external affections which minister to the others. All twelve sons except Benjamin were born in Haran, but Benjamin was born in Canaan.

Our lesson introduces the story of Joseph, one of the most-loved stories in the Bible. Joseph was Jacob's eleventh son—his first by Rachel, the wife he loved best—and consequently he was Jacob's favorite. Jacob made him a coat of many colors.* Colors picture the variety of ways in which spiritual truth is made attractive to different people by the Lord. But this singling out of Joseph

*The Anchor Bible renders this "ornamental tunic" noting that "the traditional 'coat of many colors' and the variant 'coat with sleeves' are sheer guesses from the context." Swedenborg renders it "tunic of various colors [*tunicam variorum colorum*]" and the editor of the Standard edition notes that "the 'tunic' was the undergarment."

aroused the jealousy of his brothers, and their ill feeling was increased to the point of hatred by the fact that he told his father of their wrongdoings—as our spiritual perceptions reveal the evils we try to hide—and later they resented the two dreams which likewise set him above them. When Jacob sent Joseph to Shechem to find his brothers and report to him concerning them, the first thing we read is, “And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh.” We are all able to recognize that it is the man who dreams who leads others; but in practice many of us are inclined to belittle “idealists” and to try, like Joseph’s brothers, to put them aside where they will not interfere with our worldly ambitions. The scribes and Pharisees treated the Lord this way when He came among them and rebuked their evils. We can all see how many points in the story of Joseph foreshadow the life of the Lord. Swedenborg tells us (AC 4669) that Joseph “signifies the Lord’s Divine spiritual Human,” and more clearly, “the Divine spiritual which proceeds from His Divine Human” or “the Divine truth which is from Him in heaven and in the church.” We should remember that it was as the Divine truth that the Lord came into the world to save the human race.

The story of Joseph is a true story. His brothers really did plot to kill him and finally sold him into slavery in Egypt. But the Lord uses this story to teach us a beautiful, practical lesson. He was with Joseph and turned his very troubles into a means of advancing him and eventually of saving his whole family. Egypt, we recall, represents the plane of memory-knowledge. We need memory-knowledge not only for our life in the world but for our spiritual development as well. And there is a time in our lives when it is especially orderly and appropriate that our attention should be centered upon acquiring it. The instances in the Bible story of “going down into Egypt” for food and for protection are symbolic of this fact. The Lord takes special care of children until they have learned to take care of themselves. He gives us a long childhood because we need so much knowledge in order to face the problems of adult life. When He came into the world, He Himself went down

into Egypt to show us that this is an orderly part of our lives, and also as a symbol of what He in His assumed human was learning: the letter of Scripture. We remember how constantly He used quotations from the Scriptures during His ministry. It was all stored in His external memory during His childhood. Swedenborg tells us that truth from the Lord does not flow into our minds and remain there for our use except as we have the vessels for receiving and holding it, which are knowledges of the Word learned in an external way. And the Lord constantly reminds us that if we wish to progress spiritually, we must continue to learn more from the letter of the Word throughout our lives. “Search the Scriptures.” We should note that we are not obeying this command when we go to the Word merely to find passages to support our own ideas, or when we read only the passages which we enjoy.

All the stories of the Word relate inmost to the Lord’s life and in their internal sense to the life of each one of us. The twelve sons of Jacob all represent necessary affections, good when properly used; but any of these may be perverted—turned to selfish purposes—just as Joseph’s brothers turned against him. When this happens, the Lord makes use of the best things in us to try to save us. Joseph in us is our affection for truth from the Lord, our love of thinking about the Lord and His care over us. This is one of the “remains” stored up in us by the Lord from our innocent childhood states. As Joseph dreamed dreams and later was given the power to interpret them, so when we are thinking about the Lord from genuine affection, worldly things fall into their proper subordinate place; we see above and beyond them, and can understand the reasons for our various experiences.

But very often our more external affections get the better of our Joseph and put him away in the realm of memory-knowledge, where he is at first imprisoned. Even then the Lord works within us to preserve and strengthen Joseph against our time of need. When some experience comes which our worldly principles are unable to explain and in the face of which our worldly affections fail us completely, we are led to the rediscovery of Joseph and

find him no longer a weak child, but a mighty ruler under whose protection we may willingly place ourselves.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 4669: “*Joseph*. That this signifies the Lord’s Divine spiritual Human, is evident from the representation of Joseph, as being in the supreme sense the Lord as to the Divine spiritual . . . That the Lord is represented by Joseph is known in the church, for when the heavenly Joseph is spoken of, no one else is thought of; but *what* of the Lord is represented by Joseph is not so well known, for it is the Divine spiritual which proceeds from His Divine Human. The Divine spiritual which proceeds from the Lord’s Divine Human is the Divine truth which is from Him in heaven and in the church. The spiritual in its essence is nothing else. The Divine spiritual, or Divine truth, is also what is called the Lord’s royalty, and it is likewise signified by the Christ, or the Messiah . . . For this reason Joseph was made as it were a king in Egypt, that he might then represent what is of the Lord’s royalty.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. How many sons were born to Jacob in Haran? *eleven*
J. Who was the oldest? *Reuben*
P. Who was the last one born in Haran? *Joseph*
P. What son was born after they returned to Canaan? *Benjamin*
J. Which two sons were the children of Rachel? *Joseph and Benjamin*
P. Which son did Jacob love best? *Joseph*
P. What did Jacob make for Joseph? *tunic of various colors*
J. Why did Joseph’s older brothers hate him? *father’s favorite, his dreams*
J. Can you tell about Joseph’s two dreams? *sheaves; sun, moon, stars*
P. On what errand did Jacob send Joseph? *to find brothers*
J. Where did Joseph find his brothers? *Dothan*
P. What did they decide to do? *kill him*
J. Who saved Joseph’s life? *Reuben*
P. What did the brothers finally do with Joseph? *threw him in a pit*
P. Into what country was he sold? *Egypt*
S. What do the twelve sons of Jacob represent? *all basic mental faculties*
I. What does Joseph represent? *spiritual principle*
S. What is pictured by Joseph’s being sold into Egypt?
trying to relegate that principle to our external memory