

*The Coating of Lies*  
*Joseph: More than a Dreamcoat Part 1*  
July 7, 2019  
Trinity Bixby  
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[Genesis 37:1-11 \(VOICE\)](#)  
[James 3:2-10 \(CEB\)](#)

Today marks the beginning of a sermon series on the story of Joseph. Elana and I will be going through Joseph’s story in depth, because it is a story that we often gloss over – or may only know through musical productions, like “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.” Thus, our series name: *Joseph: More than a Dreamcoat*. May you hear good news and reach new understandings through this series.

Joseph’s story is the last story in the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible – and it’s a rather complicated one. Though later, the chosen people of God will be referred to as Children of Israel, Joseph literally is Israel’s son – his father, born with the name Jacob, took the name Israel after wrestling an angel and reuniting with his brother, Esau, in the Holy Land. And Jacob married two sisters, Leah and Rachel – and had children with two more women, their servants, Zilpah and Bilhah. That’s a lot of mothers – and there were a lot of children. Joseph, though he was the second youngest child in the whole family, was the firstborn of Rachel, the most beloved wife of Jacob/Israel – and so, Joseph became the favorite son, despite being one of the youngest.<sup>1</sup>

Our story of Joseph opens with a teenage Joseph helping his brothers in the field. Or, possibly, “acting as servant to them” – the Hebrew word could mean either.<sup>2</sup> The Bible tells us he was helping specifically the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. That means he’s the servant to the servants’ kids! So, when favorite-son Joseph

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<sup>1</sup> I say this not to imply that youngest children are unworthy of respect and favor, but to point out that, generally speaking, the oldest child was considered to be the heir. Except in the Bible, where, generally, it’s the younger child that ends up being the heir, through design or trickery.

<sup>2</sup> Elana Keppel Levy, “Gen 37 1-11 Joseph Dreams of Greatness” (unpublished, 2019)

takes “bad reports” back to their Dad – it’s a terrible setup for sibling harmony. Now, many people try to excuse Joseph – they say, “oh, maybe the reports he brought back, maybe they were true, but nobody likes a tattletale and it’s tacky to say bad things about your brothers.” Nope. While English has that possibility, the Hebrew word used here means “slander” or “defamatory reports.”<sup>3</sup> Joseph lies to their dad to make his lower-status, but oldest brothers look bad.

And the Bible tells us that his brothers – all of his brothers – had the reaction to this we would probably expect. “They hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.” Not only does this mean that Joseph’s brothers were upset with him – it also means that they literally couldn’t bring themselves to say “hello,” since the way to greet someone was to say “Peace be with you” – *Shalom alechem*.<sup>4</sup>

Have you ever held someone in such contempt that you couldn’t even say hello? At first, you note more and more how that person always does that one thing that annoys you so much. Every time they speak, you start to look for the thing they’re saying wrong. Later, the other person looks so poisonous, covered in filth, that you can’t open your mouth to speak even a single word, for fear of accidentally letting a drop of that poison in. But that vileness, it’s not actually covering them. Instead, it’s like a varnish over you, a coating of anger, fear, hatred, and negativity that tints everything you see. Sometimes, that anger and fear and hatred can remain so long that you forget it’s not supposed to be that way.

It’s like wearing tinted glasses – or ski goggles. When you first put them on, everything looks wrong, and “yellow,” and if you immediately take them off, it’s like you never had them on at all. But if you leave the goggles on, spend the day skiing – or driving, or gardening – then, you adjust to the coloring. When you take them off, that’s when everything looks “wrong.”

And while wearing goggles or tinted glasses is helpful in many circumstances, the coating of hatred and lies never is. When looking through the coating of lies, everything is distorted so that others seem to reflect your own

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

negativity. It becomes easier and easier to insult someone, to treat them as less than human, to want to fight them, to hurt them – even to kill them. It also becomes harder to let go of the hatred – living without it seems wrong, just like taking off the glasses.

The book of James, in the New Testament, has other examples of the importance of telling the truth. He says that you've not reached full maturity until you've learned to control the tongue – and that lies and slander are like the spark that starts a wildfire. James compares the tongue to a ship's rudder – that with only a small part, the much larger vessel can be turned. In other words, if you speak truth, you will steer yourself around the flotsam and jetsam, the rocks and the whirlpools that stand in your way. Most of all, James reminds us to stop bragging about ourselves – that bragging, ambition, and jealousy lead to disorder and evil. In contrast, peaceful, gentle, merciful, fair, and genuine speech plants the seeds of justice and peace.

So now, back to Joseph. His brothers already hate him, for being in his dad's favor, and telling lies about them. Not only is Joseph the favorite son, but Jacob decided to make Joseph a special coat to show everyone his status. It's a long coat, with long sleeves, probably made with stripes of different color cloth. Later on in scripture, the same words are used to describe clothing worn by royalty and priests – it's a special coat indeed, however it looked. And Joseph appears to have worn it everywhere, rubbing in his status with his jealous brothers.

Maybe, even with Joseph wearing the coat everywhere, his brothers would have cooled down after a time – maybe. But Joseph ramps things up a notch. He tells them about his dreams. The first one shows him and his brothers gathering grain in the field, when his bundle of grain rises up, and their bundles gather around it and bow down to it. His brothers, already coated in the varnish of hatred, don't take this dream very well, seeing it as a boasting that Joseph will one day rule over them.

As we'll see, important dreams in Joseph's story always come in pairs. In his next dream, not only the 11 stars of his brothers, but also the moon and sun of his

mother and father bow down to him. Any hope he had of positive relations with his family seem to go out the window with this second telling of his boastful dreams.

Now, Joseph is not telling lies to his family – he’s telling the truth about his dreams. But none of them want to hear him out, because of the lies he has already told. In this same way, lies that we tell have a tendency to stick around longer than we’d like them to. And even though Joseph is now speaking the truth, he’s also telling the story boastfully – exactly what James warns us against much later. I wonder what would have been, if Joseph had been more careful in speaking peacefully with his brothers? Would he have been worthy of this special coat his father made for him? Could he have apologized, and lived in peace with them?

Just as Joseph and his family made choices in what to say to each other, so do we. The mounting tension among the family of Jacob – or the children of Israel – was not helped by boastful statements or rising hostility toward each other. I have hope that we will one day live in a world without lies, a world without boasting, a world without slander. One day, we will live in a world where the coating of lies and hatred has been fully wiped away, and we will see each other in the peace and love that God has always intended. Until that day arrives, though, we can still be bearers of the peaceful word, helping to clear the coating of lies off of ourselves and our loved ones, speaking words of peace, and living into mercy, gentleness, and authenticity. In that way, we can help prevent escalating violence and hostility. We can be the rudders of the great ship of the world, helping to turn back to God’s Way.

May God’s love lead you to love your neighbor. May the light of Christ lead you to shine with truth and goodness. May the peace of the Holy Spirit guide you to lift up others rather than yourself. Amen!