

#### 4. A Coat of Different Colors (2Q 2011—Garments of Grace: Clothing Imagery in the Bible)

**Biblical material:** Gen. 29:21–30:24; 34; 37; 42:13; 1 Cor. 9:24–26.

##### Quotes

- The jealous are troublesome to others, but a torment to themselves. *William Penn*
- Calamities are of two kinds: misfortune to ourselves, and good fortune to others. *Ambrose Bierce*
- A competent and self-confident person is incapable of jealousy in anything. Jealousy is invariably a symptom of neurotic insecurity. *Robert A. Heinlein*
- Like hatred, jealousy is forbidden by the laws of life because it is essentially destructive. *Alexis Carrel*
- Whoever envies another confesses his superiority. *Samuel Johnston*
- Our envy of others devours us most of all. *Alexander Solzhenitsyn*

##### Questions

What did Joseph’s coat of many colors symbolize? What warnings are there for us in this story? How do the issues here reflect the great controversy? What do the resolution and reconciliation demonstrate? What should we conclude as to the relevance of this ancient story for us today? How does God come across?

##### Bible summary

The background to the story begins in the torturous family situation that Jacob seems to “fall into” (Gen. 29 and 30). He’s deceived by Laban and ends up marrying Leah and not Rachel. So he marries both. Then Jacob agrees to Rachel’s proposition to have children through her maidservant Bilhah, and then because of the “son competition” through Leah’s servant Zilpah. Jacob does not come through as being particularly strong-willed—note the story about him being “hired” for the night by Leah in Gen. 30:16! Jacob however knows all about playing cunning games—note his acceptance of his mother’s impersonation plan to steal the birthright. (Also note the speckled-spotted goat story in Gen. 30 where Jacob tries to get the better of Laban who had deceived him).

The whole story of the meeting of Joseph and his brothers in Gen. 42 is a classic in expressing how we operate! Joseph wants to find out if they’ve changed, and doesn’t reveal himself to them. The brothers feel guilty for what they have done so many years before. There’s recrimination among themselves. Joseph is overcome with emotion and turns away in tears. But he still needs evidence of their current character. The test is a hard one—especially for Jacob who tells them that they, his sons, have taken his children from him—Joseph is dead, Simeon is in chains in Egypt, and now Benjamin, the new favorite, has to return with them. A way for Jacob to learn some lessons too?

1 Cor. 9:24-26 reminds us we’re like runners in a race, running straight ahead for the prize. We need to keep our eyes focused ahead, running for the prize—God himself!

##### Comment

*It’s just a coat!* Why are we so preoccupied with what we wear? Why is fashion a multi-billion dollar industry? Why would a coat of many colors be seen as so important?

As the lesson makes clear, such a coat was a sign of importance, that the wearer was a person of significance. In wanting to express his love and appreciation for his favored son, however, Jacob aroused the indignation and jealousy of his other sons. The rivalry brought about by polygamy—each of the four mothers trying to advance their own sons—fostered a terrible home situation that Jacob hardly helped by playing favorites. Like his father before him, he failed to recognize that his choices had a devastating effect on the family. In the end his preference came to be a source of great grief to him.

Even so, Joseph also seems to be naïve in the extreme... One wonders what he thought would be the response, knowing his brothers, to his dream of pre-eminence! While his rise to a powerful, prestigious position did eventually happen, it was only after a great deal of hardship and suffering. While not wishing to minimize the evil actions of his brothers, maybe Joseph could have been a little more circumspect. Certainly Jacob was most unwise, in the family situation with mothers and sons vying for preference, to so clearly demonstrate his favoritism. One wonders what he expected his other sons to say!

Joseph's coat, given by Jacob out of love and appreciation, came to be the central point of grief. Knowing that the coat was clearly identified with Joseph, stain it with blood to "prove" his death—and Jacob is inconsolable. Again he shows that he preferred Joseph to all the rest—another source of resentment to the other brothers, confirming them in their antagonism.

But the real point of the story is not in all the scheming and treachery, but in the resolution and reconciliation of the brothers to Joseph. He makes them admit their guilt, and clearly shows that they are wrong. But he still loves them, and works for their redemption. In this historical vignette we have encapsulated many of the issues of the great controversy—accusations and lies that lead to betrayal and murderous intent; pride and rivalry that cause untold damage to the family; and the eventual at-one-ment as the family is reunited.

### **Ellen White Comments**

His [Jacob's] oldest sons had arrived at manhood, and had developed unhappy traits of character... revengeful, jealous, and uncontrollable. They would not endure provocation, for they had too long cherished hatred and revenge. These evils will ever be found to be the result of polygamy. Each of the mothers is envious and jealous lest her own children shall not receive due attention from the father; and again they experience bitterness and discontent whenever they are made to feel that another is preferred before them. Children who grow up together surrounded by such elements are most likely to indulge in resentment for every supposed slight, and revenge for any imaginary wrongs... The favor with which Jacob regarded Joseph could not be concealed, and the gorgeous colored coat which he had given him was a clear evidence to his sons of his partiality. This they thought gave them sufficient reason for harboring jealousy, hatred, and revenge in their hearts. {ST, December 18, 1879}

This is why the church is so weak. Many indulge freely in criticism and accusing. By giving expression to suspicion, jealousy, and discontent, they yield themselves as instruments to Satan. Before they realize what they are doing, the adversary has through them accomplished his purpose... Distrust, unbelief, and downright infidelity have fastened upon those who otherwise might have accepted Christ. {COL 340-1}

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