

“Joseph: Dealing With a Dysfunctional Family”

GENESIS 37

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This past Friday afternoon, some of you know that I sent an email and asked for a little help with this morning's lesson. I was pleasantly surprised, and I am very thankful that so many of you responded almost immediately. There were two "complete-the-sentence" type questions: Assuming that there could in theory be such a thing as the perfect family, first of all, "The perfect family will always...", and then secondly, "The perfect family will never..." And many of you helped with some excellent opinions on what the perfect family might look like. For example:

- A perfect family will always enjoy each other's company and want to be together. They will respect each other and want the best for each other.
- A perfect family will never choose to do something that would harm another member of the family either physically or spiritually.
- A perfect family will always love – sometimes it's tough love.
- A perfect family will always do things together (work, and play, and hang out).
- A perfect family will always love each other and tell each other how much they love them in words and actions like hugging, kisses, listening when they need to talk; they will be open-minded and caring.
- A perfect family will always work on building trust, because once that's gone, you have a long road ahead of you depending on which actions you decide to take.
- A perfect family will always put Christ and his church first
- A perfect family is always together, they always love God and follow the New Testament, they are encouraging to one another, they are forgiving, they serve together, worship together and have fun together; they are sad together, they celebrate together, and they support one another through the difficult times.
- A perfect family will always encourage each of its members to feel safe enough to share their views without fear of being chastised.

And then from the negative point of view:

- A perfect family will never attack or put another down, but they will show love and mercy.
- A perfect family will never argue, disagree, or forget about each other.
- A perfect family will never give up on each other and will never abandon one another.

- A perfect family will never lie to each other, say hurtful things to each other, or cheat each other.
- A perfect family will never fight over trivial things
- A perfect family will never speak lies about one another, belittle, yell and swear or hit or abandon one another. A perfect family will never try to make a family member look bad intentionally. A perfect family will never let a family member fall away from God without fighting to save their soul.
- A perfect family will never act in a manner that discourages open dialog among its members.

I learned so much from those comments, and again, I am thankful, and I certainly agree with everything that was mentioned. However, most of us would probably agree that there is a difference between the perfect family (in theory) and what many of us actually experience. Most families that I know of have their own issues. Most families (even the strongest of families) have their own imperfections here and there. In a book entitled, *It Takes a Village Idiot*, the author, Jim Mullen says, "I have long held the theory that the pilgrims were so happy on Thanksgiving because they didn't have to go back to England and spend time with their relatives." Maybe some of you can relate to that!

With these challenges in mind, I would like for us to start a series on the life of Joseph in the Old Testament, and I would like for us to start this morning by looking together at one of the most twisted, disturbing, and dysfunctional family situations anywhere in the entire Bible. In fact, I would go further, and I would suggest that Joseph's family was more messed-up than just about any family that we could possibly even imagine today. From a Christian point of view, I would define a dysfunctional family as any family that is not functioning as God intended. And Joseph's family most definitely falls in that category. We think about Joseph's family history. We think about Abraham, Joseph's great-grandfather. Abraham and Sarah couldn't seem to have a baby, so Sarah gave Abraham permission to have a kid with her servant, which he did. Abraham and Sarah went on to have Isaac. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. By conspiring with his mother, Jacob tricked Esau into getting the birthright (even though he was the second to be born). Jacob then fell in love with a beautiful young woman named Rachel (who was actually his own cousin, the daughter of his mother's brother). He fell in love with Rachel and worked 7 years for his future father-in-law for the privilege of getting married. After seven years, though, Jacob woke up on the day after his wedding and found out that he had been tricked and that he had actually married Rachel's much uglier older sister. But he was so in love he made another deal with his father-in-law and promised to work another seven years if he could marry both. Jacob is now married, not just to two women, but to two sisters. Rachel and Leah then get into a baby-making competition, their two female servants get involved, and then there is a baby race between those four women – all four were desperate to be pregnant. Unfortunately, the ugly woman got pregnant first, and then the whole situation really got ugly! Joseph is eventually born to Rachel, the pretty wife, but with the other women, Joseph is now one of thirteen siblings - 12 brothers and one sister. Rachel, by the way, dies giving birth to Benjamin, her second child and the youngest of the entire group. Joseph, then, from that point (from roughly the age of 10), grows up without a mother. By the way, in that family of twelve brothers and one sister, the sister is raped, the father does nothing (not wanting to offend the attacker's father who is an important local official), so several of the brothers go on a murderous rampage to get revenge. Not only that, but one of the brothers had relations with one of his father's concubines, and the father (Jacob), once again, did nothing about it – no discipline at all.

So in the big picture, we have Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, and the entire family tree is a huge convoluted undisciplined dysfunctional mess. By the time he is a teenager, his mother is dead and he is being raised by a spineless father in a home with three stepmothers along with a bunch of older brothers who have already shown that they are capable of mass murder. That is messed up! We're talking Dr. Phil material here!

And all of this brings us to Genesis 37. As we begin our study of Joseph, we are reminded that living in a dysfunctional family certainly has a way of making our Christian walk more difficult – difficult, but not impossible – and that is what I would like for us to think about this morning as we begin our series on the life of Joseph. Joseph was faithful to God in spite of living in a terribly messed-up family. There is a value, then, to looking at Joseph for some encouragement. As Reid read for us in our scripture reading this morning, we study the Old Testament because, ***“...whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope”*** (Romans 15:4). As we look at Joseph’s family background, we will learn something about our own families and we will also be encouraged to live for God. If you will, then, let us please look together at Genesis 37,

¹ Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan. ² These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. ³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. ⁴ His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.

⁵ Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶ He said to them, “Please listen to this dream which I have had; ⁷ for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf.” ⁸ Then his brothers said to him, “Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. ⁹ Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, “Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” ¹⁰ He related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?” ¹¹ His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

¹² Then his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock in Shechem. ¹³ Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them.” And he said to him, “I will go.” ¹⁴ Then he said to him, “Go now and see about the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the flock, and bring word back to me.” So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. ¹⁵ A man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, “What are you looking for?” ¹⁶ He said, “I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are pasturing the flock.” ¹⁷ Then the man said, “They have moved from here; for I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dothan.’” So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

¹⁸ When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. ¹⁹ They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer! ²⁰ Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, ‘A wild beast devoured him.’ Then let us see what will become of his dreams!” ²¹ But Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands and said, “Let us not take his life.” ²² Reuben further said to them, “Shed no blood. Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay hands

on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hands, to restore him to his father. ²³ So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; ²⁴ and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it. ²⁵ Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt. ²⁶ Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood? ²⁷ Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him. ²⁸ Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt.

²⁹ Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments. ³⁰ He returned to his brothers and said, “The boy is not there; as for me, where am I to go?” ³¹ So they took Joseph’s tunic, and slaughtered a male goat and dipped the tunic in the blood; ³² 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.” ³³ Then he examined it and said, “It is my son’s tunic. A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!” ³⁴ So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, “Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son.” So his father wept for him. ³⁶ Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh’s officer, the captain of the bodyguard.

As we look back at these 36 verses, I would like for us to take a few lessons from Joseph’s incredibly messed up family history.

- I. **Notice, please, first of all, that JOSEPH WAS BORN TO SOME TERRIBLY DYSFUNCTIONAL PARENTS – AND I AM REFERRING SPECIFICALLY TO JACOB, HIS FATHER.**

Back up in verse 3, we find that Israel (or Jacob), the father, *“loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic.”* So if we can picture this, all of the other sons got their clothes off of the clearance rack at Goodwill (if there ever could be such a thing), but dad took Joseph to Macy’s and got him the most expensive and most luxurious coat ever made – a long overcoat, a dress coat. The language experts tell us that this coat had long sleeves, that it was richly decorated, that it was basically a robe extending to the ankles. It was a garment worn by a king or maybe a supervisor or maybe a slave-owner, and so the coat we are talking about here made a powerful statement. As his brothers were wearing clothes that were made for working (sleeveless and much shorter), Joseph was strutting around in a fancy coat that basically made it impossible to do any physical labor. It would be like wearing a three-piece suit on the factory floor. It would not fit in, and it would send a message, “I am better than all of you people.” That is the kind of coat that Jacob gave to Joseph, and it was done for a reason: Because Jacob loved Joseph more than the other children. By giving him this particular coat, Jacob was saying: My favorite son is exempt from all of the work that all the rest of you people are doing. Not only that, but Jacob was also saying: My favorite son is your manager – he might be a lot younger than the rest of you, you might have more experience and know more than he does – but as my favorite, Joseph is in charge of you people. And every time the brothers saw Joseph in that coat, they would have been reminded that their father loved Joseph more than the rest of them. But remember: This robe is being worn not by a king or a ruler, but by a 17-year-

old shepherd who is #12 out of 13 children! Jacob, then, loved Joseph more than the others and treated him with preference. Think again about the family history – his great-grandfather Abraham had shown preference for Isaac over Ishmael, His grandfather Isaac had shown preference for Esau over Jacob, and now Jacob was showing preference for Joseph over the others.

Knowing what happens at the end of the chapter, it seems that there is a huge lesson here for those of us as parents. There can be some huge negative consequences for treating one child with more preference than the others. Notice: It is not wrong to treat children differently. After all, children are different from one another. The problem here, though, is Joseph was being given preference. And according to verse 4, the other brothers saw this and so they hated Joseph. Joseph, then, grew up with a spineless father who loved him more than his other brothers, which caused a lot of trouble from a very early age.

II. And this leads us to the next problem in this family: JOSEPH GREW UP HAVING A DYSFUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIP NOT ONLY WITH HIS FATHER BUT ALSO WITH HIS SIBLINGS.

And again, one of the first signs of trouble comes in verse 4, where we find not only that his brothers hated him, but we also find that they could not even speak to him on friendly terms. They could not even be civil with each other. And I realize that some of you might also have a similar relationship with your own siblings. I am very thankful to have a good relationship with my own sister. It got a little rocky with the “Wheat Thin Incident” when I was maybe 12 and she was 8 or 9 or so, but thankfully we worked through that and we now very good with each other. But I realize that not all are blessed with that kind of relationship. The brothers, then, hated Joseph and could not even communicate with him in any kind of peaceful way. Maybe you know what that’s like in your family. Beyond that, notice verse 11, where we find that the brothers were jealous. The brothers wanted what Joseph had. They wanted his position in the family. And going back to the father, notice what Jacob did (in verse 11), “*...his father kept this saying in mind.*” So here is dad – he knows that his sons are capable of murder, he knows that they hate Joseph so much that they cannot even stand to have a conversation with him – and yet dad does nothing! Jacob sits there, “Yep, my murderous sons really, really, really hate one of their own,” and then he does nothing about it. He just takes that information and he sits on it.

In the next phase, Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers out in the middle of nowhere – again, not very smart at all – but Joseph goes, and as they see him from a distance (in verse 18), they start plotting against him to put him to death. Remember: They can see him coming because of that nice bright coat that he has! So they plot to take his life, Reuben (as the oldest) intervenes and basically suggests just scaring him really bad – we’ll just leave him in a pit for a while and then come back to get him. As I read this passage, it almost looks like Reuben was setting himself up to be the hero – they would throw Joseph in a pit and after a while Reuben would go back and get him and save the day. But again, what a loving family! And notice: The first thing they do is take off that coat! That horrible coat – and then they throw him in the pit. For some reason, Reuben steps away for just a moment, and in the meantime Judah steps in and sells Joseph into slavery. To cover this whole thing up, they concoct a plan to deceive their father by dipping Joseph’s coat in blood and deceiving him into thinking that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. This, of course, was before the days of C.S. I., before the days of DNA analysis. And I would also point out: When they present the coat to their father, they say, “*We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son’s tunic or not.*” They refer to Joseph as “*your son,*” not as “Joseph,” not as “our brother,” but as “*your son.*” A goat, by the way, is the same animal that Jacob had used to deceive his own father into giving him the birthright. So this dysfunction truly does run in the family! Someone has said that hating people is like burning down your own house to get rid of a rat.

That is what the brothers were willing to do. They were willing to kill their own brother rather than deal with the jealousy.

III. There is a third part of this dysfunction that comes across in this chapter, and I am referring, of course, to JOSEPH HIMSELF.

Joseph is one of the only heroes in the Bible of whom nothing negative is ever said, and I hope to say more about that next week, but even though we never read about any huge moral failures in the life of Joseph, we look back over this chapter, and there are certainly one or two things that Joseph might have done differently. And again, I don't want to make a big deal about this (because the Bible doesn't seem to make a big deal about it), and I realize that some of what I'm about to point out might have been completely alright, but let's at least think, for example, about what we read in the last part of verse 3. At the age of 17, number 11 in a family of 12 brothers, he goes out to pasture the flock with his brothers, ***"And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father."*** And again, maybe that's okay (we can't establish much of a pattern here), but if I am number 11 out of 12, there are some things I might just keep to myself – especially if some of my older brothers have actually murdered an entire village!

And then, of course, we have the whole situation with the dreams. And again, we don't have much to go on, but I believe we can probably safely assume that Joseph was a fairly typical teenager. So here we have a young man with 10 older brothers, and he has a series of dreams. I don't know about you, but I've had some dreams that I just don't tell anybody about! And I'm thinking that these particular dreams Joseph had might have fallen in that category! He is brother #11 out of #12 – this might not be the dream to share! We combine this with the special coat. He's basically wearing a tuxedo to go work in the yard. He's basically wearing a huge "kick me" sign! And as he's out there with this super-special coat, he says [paraphrased], "Hey, you guys will never believe what I dreamed about last night! I dreamed that all of you were bowing down to me! Isn't that a great dream!" I hate to call Joseph arrogant, because the Bible doesn't call him arrogant, but I might call him "normal." I might call him just a little bit "naïve," which again, is pretty normal for a very young man. But when we add all of this together, there are at least a few things that Joseph might have done differently.

Conclusion:

In summary, I think we might agree that Joseph grew up in a "messed-up family." Now I need to tell you, "messed-up family" is probably not something that you could ever find in the DSM IV. This is not a technical term. Your therapist will never go into a back room and come out and say, "Yep, you have a messed-up family." My sister is a therapist – I need to ask her about this when we get together for Thanksgiving, "Have you ever diagnosed someone as being in a 'messed-up family?'" But Joseph, though, grew up in a "messed-up family." So, as we close our thoughts on this chapter, I would point out: No matter what our family situation might be, God sees what we're going through, He understands, and He is willing to help us break the cycle. Maybe our **PARENTS** were not perfect. Maybe our **SIBLINGS** tormented us as we were growing up. Maybe **WE** made some poor choices of our own. God, though, is willing to help us through it. Just a few moments ago, we talked about perfect families – families that always love and never attack each other – and those qualities are certainly wonderful, but very few of us actually live in perfect families. Some families are certainly healthier than others, but there are none that are perfect. Thankfully, though, God does not hold us accountable for the families we grew up in. If it was bad, we have a chance to make things right and break the cycle with the next generation. When Dr. Laura was on the air here in Madison, I remember her saying, "You have two shots at a good parent-child relationship – once with your own parents, and once with your own children." Joseph would agree with that statement.

Joseph could have used this experience to turn away from God. He could have become bitter. He could have blamed God for his terrible family situation growing up. But thankfully, Joseph kept his faith in God. Maybe some of you here this morning are where Joseph was at this point. Maybe you have some huge family issues. It seems that family issues have a way of hurting us more than just about anything else we could ever go through, and I believe the reason for this is that our families are the closest to us – when we're with our families, we are supposed to be safe. Our families are where we should be able to let down our guard.

Maybe your dad has four wives and your 10 older brothers are trying to kill you – I don't know what your situation is right now. But I would suggest that God sees what's going on in your family, and He understands. He wants what is best for you. God did not cause your situation, but He sees it, and He hopes that you can grow stronger through it. As Christians, we have the ability to lean on each other, and we also have the ability to dump it all on the Lord in prayer.

I am looking forward to our study of Joseph over the next month or so. At the end of Genesis 37, the situation does not look good at all. At the age of 17, Joseph is thrown in a pit and sold into slavery by his own brothers. We might think there is no way to fix that – there is no amount of therapy that could possibly make this right. But God had a plan to make this family into a great nation. God also has a plan for all of us here this morning. More than anything, God wants us to spend eternity with Him in heaven. To make that happen, God sent His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. We accept that sacrifice by turning away from our sins and allowing ourselves to be buried with Jesus in baptism. If you would like to learn more, let us know. If there is something we need to pray about as a congregation, if you are facing a difficult family situation right now, we would invite you to write it down, bring that note to the front, and we would be glad to take your concerns to God as a congregation. If we can help in some way, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing together...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com