

SERIES: Joseph: From Pit to Prominence
SERMON: **When Parents Play Favorites**
SCRIPTURE: Genesis 37
SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
DATE: June 10, 2007

Today we are beginning a new series which will take us through June and July, a biographical series on one of the great heroes of the OT—Joseph. Joseph lived nearly 4000 years ago—in the 19th century B.C.—the fourth of the Great Patriarchs of Israel—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.

Four thousand years is a long time ago, but we must resist the notion that Joseph was some kind of prehistoric character with whom we cannot connect. I think we have a tendency to view anyone who lived before the 18th century as pre-historic, but Joseph actually spent most of his life in an extremely advanced culture. Egypt at the time was producing amazing results in science, literature, architecture, engineering, and astronomy. The great pyramids of Gisa had already been standing for at least 700 years when Joseph arrived, and the Sphinx was already showing the ravages of time.

Joseph's life is fascinating for several key reasons. First, there is probably no Bible character whose life more closely parallels the life of Christ than Joseph. Many have called him a type of Christ, i.e. a divinely painted prophetic portrait. Of course, just as every analogy breaks down at some point, this one does as well, since Joseph was not perfect, as Christ was. But there are so many aspects of his life that parallel those of Jesus—his being loved by his father, his rejection by his brothers, his sojourn in Egypt, his undeserved punishment, his faith in God through the most trying of circumstances, his rise from pit to prominence, his forgiveness of his brothers, his freedom from bitterness, etc.

We will not, however, focus a lot of attention on these obvious parallels to Christ. After all, we have just spent many months on the life of Christ, and we will return to that great theme in the Gospel of Matthew this fall. Furthermore, I think too much emphasis on typology may well cause us to miss the fact that Joseph was a real person in his own right from whom we can learn great life lessons.

And that brings me to the second reason I believe it is well worth our time to study the life of Joseph, and that is that he demonstrated amazing character. He was obedient and faithful through a great many trials. In fact, I don't know anyone other than Jesus who serves as a better example of perseverance and courage than Joseph. Think of the possible trials you have faced or could face in your life:

- A dysfunctional family
- Rejection
- Betrayal
- Isolation
- Sexual temptation
- Loss of a job for unfair reasons

Wrongful imprisonment

Joseph experienced all of these, and to an extreme degree. He was a flesh-and-blood saint who wrestled with the worst Satan could throw at him and emerged faithful. That gives me courage to continue.

Now this morning we are going to focus on the first of those trials Joseph faced—that of being reared in a dysfunctional family. I have often wondered if the term “dysfunctional family” is not redundant. Since we are all dysfunctional individuals (the theological term for that is total depravity), there is a sense in which every family suffers from dysfunction. But I’m sure we all would admit that certain families suffer more than others.

We all recognize, too, that the more dysfunctional a family, the tougher road the children have to walk. We are inclined to cut some slack to those who grow up in badly broken families and experience various kinds of deprivation and abuse. Well, let me tell you something: it would be hard to find a more dysfunctional family than Joseph’s birth family. Let’s turn in our Bibles to Genesis 37 and read about it. This is a long portion of Scripture, but I encourage you not to disengage. The simple reading of the Bible may actually be the most valuable part of our time together. Any insight I can offer to the text is, I trust, worthwhile, but *only* what I am reading is the very Word of God.

By the way, I attended the Gospel Coalition meeting at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School two weeks ago, and Dr. Don Carson openly encouraged the audience of 500 pastors and Christian leaders from a wide range of denominations to follow an ancient practice of the church. When the Scripture reading ended the pastor says, “This is the Word of the Lord,” and the people respond, “Thanks be to God.” We did that throughout those meetings, and I thought it was very meaningful. I’m not interested in turning this into a liturgical church, but if you are so inclined I would encourage you to say “Thanks be to God” when we conclude the reading of God’s Word.

Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. This is the account of Jacob.

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.

Now Israel (i.e. Jacob) loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. 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.

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: 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."

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.

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."

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?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them."

"Very well," he replied.

So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?"

"They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'"

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

"Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

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.

When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, "The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?"

Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it

to see whether it is your son's robe."

He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."

Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him.

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

This *is* the Word of the Lord.

In rehearsing the dysfunctional family in which Joseph was reared, I have decided not to go back to his grandparents and great-grandparents, though that would add a great deal more evidence. I'll just start with his father Jacob. Jacob deceived his own father, Isaac, and stole his brother Esau's birthright, forcing Jacob to leave his family and go live with his uncle Laban. There he fell in love with his uncle Laban's daughter, Rachel, but Laban was a greedy scoundrel and required him to work for seven years before he could marry Rachel.

Believe it or not, after completing that long time of probation Jacob entered the tent on his wedding night only to discover that his uncle had substituted his older daughter Leah for Rachel. So Jacob had to obligate himself to work seven more years in order to receive the woman he really loved, now as his second wife. Later Jacob added two other wives, but he made it clear to all of them that Rachel was his favorite. Not surprisingly this caused considerable jealousy in the home. (You know, there are good reasons why polygamy was never part of God's original design and was forbidden in the NT).

To make matters worse, the wives were all having children except Rachel. This created tremendous grief for her. Eventually, however, God looked with favor on Rachel and she had a son named Joseph, Jacob's eleventh son, besides several daughters.

Jacob not only played favorites among his wives; he made the same mistake among his children, for Joseph was . . .

Favored by his father (1-3)

Joseph was the apple of his father's eye, and no effort was made to conceal it. I want to ask a simple question, "What happens when parents play favorites?" And I will answer my own question by saying, "nothing good." Oh, I don't mean *absolutely* nothing, because God can bring good out of anything, but the amount of pain that can be produced by parental favoritism is almost incalculable. The fact that God can bring some good out of sinful behavior never justifies the behavior.

This is probably the best time to draw our attention to the key verse in the whole account of Joseph's life in the book of Genesis. It is his own testimony at the very end of his life where he

speaks to the brothers who sold him into slavery: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (Genesis 50:20). There are many harmful things that happen to us—some intentional, some accidental. But God has the power to bring amazing good out of those things. That doesn’t make the bad things good, nor does it excuse the one who perpetrates the evil. It doesn’t restore the life that is lost or the reputation that is ruined. But it is still enormously beneficial to our eternal perspective to know that God can and often does bring good for us out of the worst of circumstances.

When parents play favorites it sets into motion terrible twists and turns in the lives of children. The favorite child rarely sees that he is being favored but often becomes arrogant and even irresponsible. The children who are neglected invariably suffer confusion toward the parent, resentment toward the favored sibling, and poor self-esteem toward themselves. They often ask themselves, “Why doesn’t my mother or my father love me? What have I done to deserve this treatment?”

There is no doubt that such dynamics were at play in this home. The text clearly tells us, “Now Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any of his other sons.” And it tells us why, or at least part of the reason: “because he had been born to him in his old age” (verse 3). There is a strong tendency for parents to be more lenient with their youngest child. Sometimes it’s because they see the mistakes they made with their other children and somehow think, “This one is going to be different. I was too harsh with the others; I will substitute reason for spanking with this one.” Furthermore parents usually have more money when the youngest child is born and tend to lavish it on the baby of the family. Joseph’s coat of many colors, like those worn by nobility, is evidence that this was going on in this home.

Another reason why Jacob favored Joseph is probably that by the time our story opens Joseph’s mother has died. Rachel died in childbirth at the time she was giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. Joseph was probably about 15 at the time, and Jacob undoubtedly felt empathy toward his teenage son in losing his mother at such a critical time of life.

The ultimate effect of Jacob’s favoritism should not surprise us. Joseph is . . .

Hated by his brothers (4)

It says in verse 4, “When his brothers saw that their father loved him (Joseph) more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.” Who is at fault here? Well, certainly the brothers are at fault, for hatred is sin; in fact, the Scriptures make it clear that it is tantamount to murder. Besides, these sons of Jacob have already proved themselves to be out-of-control. The older three, Reuben, Simeon and Levi all have criminal records, as recorded back in chapters 34, and 35, so we should not think of them as simply innocent victims of family dynamics. But I wonder if Jacob isn’t even more guilty than his sons who hated Joseph. Their sin is instigated by his. If he hadn’t shown favoritism the brothers would probably not have hated.

I have seen many families where a parent’s favoritism caused incredible pain and

destructiveness. I have seen the wounds in the lives of the child who is neglected. I have seen the resentment that was created between siblings when children were treated unequally in their parents' will. I have seen the resultant hatred break families completely apart.

A pastor friend of mine recently shared how difficult it has been for him that his older brother was left the family farm. This was a huge asset, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Because my friend had chosen the ministry and his older brother chose to stay on the farm, the parents gave the older brother everything—land, buildings, equipment, and all the other assets. I understand the parents' desire to preserve the farm, but there are other ways they could have handled their estate and still accomplished that; they could have divided up the land and allowed the eldest son to rent the portion that belonged to his brother. But instead they cheated their younger son and bequeathed inevitable tension between these two brothers and their families.

It's fascinating to me that Jacob doesn't learn his lesson even after losing his son Joseph. In chapter 42 when the brothers come back from their first trip to Egypt to buy food (some of you know the story well), they tell Jacob that the Prime Minister of Egypt gave them food to take back to the land of Canaan, but he insisted on taking as hostage one of their brothers, Simeon, as a guarantee that they would return to Egypt with their youngest brother, Benjamin. We are told that Benjamin is Jacob's new favorite. And even though Reuben offers to have both of his own sons put to death if he fails to protect Benjamin, Jacob refuses, saying in 42:38: "My son (Benjamin) will not go down there with you; his brother is dead and he is the *only one left*. If harm comes to him on the journey you are taking, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in sorrow."

Well, isn't that sweet for a father to say to his sons about one of their brothers, "He is the only one left"? I suspect they thought to themselves, "What am I, chopped liver?" Do you have any doubts about the dysfunction of this family?

By the way, there is another reason for the hatred of Joseph's brothers toward him mentioned in verse 2: "he brought their father a bad report about them." At the time Joseph was helping tend the flocks, and he observed his brothers violating some family rule. Perhaps they were smoking pot or drinking on the job or chasing young women; whatever it was, Joseph snitched on them. We don't know enough about the incident to know whether Joseph was justified in doing so, but clearly this must have fueled the fire of his brothers' jealousy and anger.

In case you thought things couldn't be any worse, think again. In verses 5-11 we find that Joseph is . . .

Hated all the more (5-11)

Joseph has two dreams and shares them with his brothers. I don't know if he was simply naive, or if his father's favoritism toward him had caused him to lose all sensitivity toward his brothers. But I have at least some sympathy for his siblings as they have to deal with this young upstart. Though Joseph has no control over the content of these dreams, I can't imagine why he would

share the content with his brothers! “Your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it” (verse 7). And then if that weren’t brazen enough, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me” (9).

Some things, though truthful, probably shouldn’t be spoken. Even his father rebuked him for his dreams, though Jacob’s ire seems to stirred more because the second dream seems to predict that even he himself will have to bow down to Joseph than for any offense his other sons may have suffered.

What is clear is that the revelation of these dreams becomes the straw that breaks the camel’s back. It says in verse 8, “They hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.” The combination of parental favoritism and Joseph’s own naivety, or conceit, or at the very least immaturity in dealing with his dreams, brings the brothers to the point that they are willing to betray their own brother. We really shouldn’t be surprised at this result. James 3:16 tells us that “where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” Hebrews warns, “See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (12:15). This story is Exhibit One of what the author of Hebrews is talking about.

Fourth, we find that Joseph is . . .

Betrayed and sold (12-35)

The brothers had taken Jacob’s considerable herds to find better pasture near Shechem, about 30 miles north of the family home in Hebron. Such trips could take weeks, so Jacob decides to send Joseph to see if things are OK with the brothers and the flocks and report back (“Go check ‘em in Shechem?”). I suspect Joseph is not helping with the herds at this point because Jacob wants to protect him from the influence of his delinquent brothers. When Joseph arrives in the area of Shechem he is told the brothers have moved on to fields near Dothan (about 20 miles farther north).

The brothers spot Joseph coming toward them (it isn’t hard considering the beautiful colorful coat his father has given him), and before he even arrives they have hatched a plot of betrayal. I can imagine them saying, “Here comes Golden Boy with his fancy coat and his dreams that one day we’ll all bow down to him! Enough is enough! He gave our father one bad report, let’s not let him give another.”

Two brothers are slightly more noble than the others, though it’s hard to feel too much sympathy for them. Reuben, the oldest brother and therefore the one with the ultimate responsibility, doesn’t want any blood on his hands, so he suggests they throw Joseph into a dry cistern. He intends to return when the rest are asleep, rescue Joseph and return him to his father. Our story doesn’t tell us anything about Joseph’s feelings while all this is going on, but a later passage reflects back on the incident by revealing a private conversation among the brothers: “We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen” (Gen.

42:21). Even those words probably just scratch the surface of the fear and trauma Joseph must have experienced.

While Reuben is absent for some unknown reason, a caravan of Ishmaelites heading for Egypt happens by. Judah argues that killing Joseph will produce no gain, and he suggests they sell him to the Ishmaelites instead. And so they do—for 20 pieces of silver. (It’s hard, of course, not to hear the sound of thirty pieces of silver dropping into Judas’ hands as he asks the chief priests, “What are you willing to give me if I hand [Jesus] over to you?”) (Matt. 26:14). The author clearly wants us to hear that sound.

Reuben is surprised and fearful when he returns to find the cistern empty and learns that Joseph is gone. All of them then, including Reuben, hatch a plan to cover their tracks. They dip Joseph’s coat in animal blood, take it back to their father, and ask him to examine it to see whether it is Joseph’s robe (as if they didn’t know). They are pleased that he comes to the conclusion that a ferocious animal has killed his son. Jacob mourns relentlessly for his lost son. He weeps for many days. He refuses to be comforted by his family. He tells them he will never get over the death of his son; he will mourn until he goes to meet him in the grave.

I suppose Joseph’s brothers think they have committed the perfect crime! As long as none of them squeals, no one will ever know. And since they are all guilty, no one will squeal. There are no DNA tests to distinguish animal blood from human. Well, no, there is no such thing as a perfect crime. God knows everything that has happened. And even apart from God’s knowledge, the brothers know what they have done and their consciences never let them forget it. We will see in a few weeks that time alone cannot heal a guilty conscience.

Our chapter ends with Joseph . . .

Sold again, this time into slavery

The last verse reads, “Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.” Just think about the tragic turn of events for this 17-year-old boy. He has gone from being the favorite son of his very rich father, free of responsibility, free to dream, to being thrown into a pit and threatened with death, sold like a piece of meat to foreigners known for their cruelty, and put on an auction block in the capital of the slave trade. And believe me, being a slave in Egypt was no picnic! Some 900 years later, in Psalm 105:16-19, King David adds further information about what Joseph suffered, revealed to him, I suppose, by the Holy Spirit or discovered by him in some ancient historical record:

*[God] called down famine on the land
and destroyed all their supplies of food;
and he sent a man before them—Joseph, sold as a slave.
They bruised his feet with shackles,
his neck was put in irons,
till what he foretold came to pass,
till the word fo the LORD proved him true.*

On top of all that Joseph finds himself in a foreign country with different language, customs, dress, diet, and religion. All at age 17! Such is the kind of evil that parental favoritism can produce. I say “the kind of” because this exact scenario has probably never been duplicated. But others like it have been, and will continue to be—some not so stark in their consequences, others even worse. As we conclude this morning, I want to offer us three practical points to ponder.

Points to ponder

1. Parents, renounce favoritism. I know your children are not all the same.

- One is probably more compliant than another.
- One may be a harder worker than another.
- One may be more godly than another.
- One may be more careful with money than another.
- One may even be more lovable than another.

But don’t play favorites! Make a conscious effort to treat them equally—in the time you offer them, in the love you show them, in the help you extend to them, and in your wills.

Now I know someone is saying to himself, “But what if one child is totally irresponsible while another is totally responsible? Are you saying that they should be given the same inheritance?” Not necessarily, but they should be given the same opportunity. There are creative ways to encourage responsibility. A parent can decide to give X amount of money to each child who stays out of consumer debt. Then they have only themselves to blame if they make other choices. One can also choose to leave money gradually to a child; i.e. he can be given 10% of an estate at a certain age, and 10% more every five years thereafter. Or you can skip a generation and leave all your money to your grandchildren (by the way, there is some biblical grounds for this [Prov. 13:22], though I am not sure it’s a mandate). But if that’s what you choose I believe one set of grandchildren should be treated equally to the others.

The second primary application I wish to leave is addressed to parents *and* children:

2. Break the cycle of dysfunction.

There is no question but that dysfunction in a family is contagious, but so is godliness. Some families have terrible dysfunction going back for generations. Joseph’s family’s problems can be traced back at least three generations. But Joseph broke the cycle. He had one wife and two sons—Ephraim and Manasseh. In the last chapter of Genesis we read this summary of Joseph’s life:

“Joseph stayed in Egypt, along with all his father’s family. He lived a hundred and ten years and saw the third generation of Ephraim’s children. Also the children of Makir son of Manasseh were placed at birth on Joseph’s knees.” (Gen. 50:22, 23)

That doesn’t tell us all we’d like to know about Joseph’s parenting, but it hints at something a lot different from Jacob’s.

Leonard Ravenhill tells the story of two families –one headed by a godless atheist, the other by one of America’s greatest men of God. I haven’t checked his research, but I know enough about one of these men to know that he is right on the mark regarding him.

Max Jukes, [an] atheist, lived a godless life. He married an ungodly [woman], and from this union there were 310 who died as paupers, 150 were criminals, 7 were murderers, 100 were drunkards, and more than half of the women were prostitutes. His 540 descendants cost the State one and a quarter million dollars [long before inflation].

Jonathan Edwards . . . lived at the same time as Max Jukes, but he married a godly [woman]. An investigation was made of 1,394 known descendants of Jonathan Edwards, of which 13 became college presidents, 65 college professors, 3 United States Senators, 30 judges, 100 lawyers, 60 physicians, 75 army and navy officers, 100 preachers and missionaries, 60 authors of prominence, one Vice-President of the United States, 80 public officials in other capacities, 295 college graduates, among whom were governors of states and ministers to foreign countries. Jonathan Edwards' descendants did not cost the state a penny).ⁱ

Finally, an application for all of us:

3. Everyone, remember the One who was greater than Joseph, who had a perfect origin but chose to be born into a totally dysfunctional family (the human race), was hated, sold, and even killed, but who has broken the cycle of sin! I’m talking about Jesus, of course. He is the One to whom Joseph ultimately points. He is the One who offers you the free gift of salvation through His death on the Cross. Let’s pray.

i. Leonard Ravenhill, *America is Too Young to Die*, 112