

Lesson 1: Life of Joseph, God's Man--Background (Genesis 12-37)

Introduction:

For years we have been taught that we are products of our backgrounds. Psychologists and Psychiatrists (even Christians counselors) have told us we are whom we are because of:

Our Families--Influences and interaction with grandparents, parents, brothers, and sisters

Our environment--Influences and effects of surroundings, homes, schools, and neighborhoods

Our opportunities--Influences and advantages of education, jobs, good breaks, and accomplishments

Great events--Influences of and reaction to special circumstance and people

Are we experiencing problems? Then we must delve back into our past to find out why we are as we are. Let's find something or someone to blame for our problem, weakness, phobia, or our continued sinning and we'll be ok.

What is the danger of this approach? There are least two:

1. Doing this releases us from the responsibility for our own sin.

Romans 3:23 *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"*

2. Doing this does not allow for a grace miracle by God.

Romans 3:24--*"being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith*

God brings about a miracle of rebirth, regeneration and a rebuilding of our character, a creation of a new creature so we have no excuse.

2 Corinthians 5:17 *"Therefore if any man is in Christ, {he is} a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.*

How often, when counseling a believer I have heard them say,

"I have a terrible temper but I can't help it cause I'm Irish." Sorry, that doesn't wash with God. God says, "Control your temper."

Or, "My parents abused me therefore I can't relate properly to my children." God says, "Men disciple and train, women teach and love, your children."

Or, "I cannot accept authority because all the authority figures in my life were negative." God says, "Obey authority whether they are righteous or not and work as though you're working directly for Me."

This kind of thinking makes the story of Joseph as relevant today as it has ever been. *The Life of Joseph shows us that, regardless of family, environment, opportunity, or special event all of us can be God' Man or God's Woman.*

Gene Getz wrote a little book titled *Joseph*. In it he says,

Joseph, probably more than any other Old Testament character demonstrates the "mind of Christ." And what is even more startling, his exemplary life-style antedates by hundreds of years the revelation of God's law. He is indeed is a model "Christian" in the Old Testament.

Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, urging them to offer themselves to God and not to "conform any longer to the pattern of the world." Rather, he said "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2)

Joseph dramatically illustrates this process of renewal. His struggles, heartaches, temptations, decisions and victories speak to every twentieth-century Christian.

JOSEPH'S HERITAGE

Today we'll look at Joseph's family and upbringing and in weeks to come we will study his environment, opportunities and events in his life.

This lesson will include material from Genesis 12-37. It would be to your advantage to read Genesis, chapters 12-50 several times during the six weeks of this series.

I. ANCESTORS (Three Strikes)

I grew up as a P.K. (a preacher's kid) so I know what it is like to try to live up to external expectations. Those little old ladies were watching.

Other kid's moms were watching. Our elders and deacons were watching. Local merchants were watching. My teachers were watching. Even the neighbors were watching.

What must it have been like to be a P.K. (a patriarch's kid). The one who's ancestors received *The Covenant* from God. The men that were always linked directly to God, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

How do you follow that act, Joseph? How do you follow in their giant footprints? How can you possibly live up to that heritage?

You can because you know the truth! You were there. These mighty men of God were only men after all. They were flawed and human.

In fact, they were so flawed that today we would say that Joseph had three strikes against him before he even got into the game.

A. Great Grandfather and Grandmother

1. Abraham

He was a man of faith. Romans 4:3--for what does the Scripture say? "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." And, in fact, the example of his willingness to kill his son is the quintessential picture of what true faith is.

He was also flawed. He doubted God's promise for a son and tried to help God out by impregnating his wife's servant. He told the Pharaoh in Egypt that his beautiful wife Sarah was his sister so he wouldn't kill him in order to take her for himself.

But women do better, right?

2. Sarah

She was a great and gorgeous woman, mother of a great and special nation. Her obedience to her husband is often used as an example of a Godly woman.

She was also flawed. She laughed at God. Even though having Abraham impregnate her servant was her idea she blamed him for the pain it caused her. She treated Hagar and Ishmael cruelly and has been blamed by many for beginning the strife that still exists between Arabs and Israelis in the Middle East today.

B. Grandfather and Grandmother

1. Isaac

He was God's son of promise. He was the ultimate obedient son as he allowed his father to carry out God's will.

He was also flawed. He loved earthly things. Like many men today, he liked sports and food and favored his "jock" son Esau over his more sensitive twin Jacob. He allowed his wife and son to manipulate him using his weaknesses and lack of discernment.

2. Rebekah

She was a beautiful woman who was chosen for Isaac by God Himself. When Isaac vacated his responsibility for his sons, Becky usurped that position. She was a master manipulator who plotted to steal the birthright and blessing for her favorite son Jacob and had to arrange to send him to her brother Laban to keep Esau from killing him.

C. Father and mother

1. Jacob

He eventually became known as a perfect example of a man changed by a face-to-face confrontation with God. Herbert Lockyer calls him, "The Bible's Dr. Jeckel and Mr. Hyde character. He was patient and hard working in carrying out his father's instructions for finding a mate, but he showed signs of his heritage as he vied with Laban and Esau to get his way. There was far more than his name changed after his Peniel experience. He becomes a kinder gentler Israel, especially when he obeyed God and settled his family in Bethel.

He was also flawed. His name means "supplanter" and he, with the help of his mom, certainly used every dirty trick he could devise to gain his twin brother's birthright and blessing. He continued this

bent toward deception until he "wrestled with God" and became a humble servant, a man of faith (Hebrews 11:21), and his children became the foundation to the future Nation of Israel.

2. Rachel

She was also beautiful and was by far, Jacob's favorite wife.

She also was flawed. She learned a lot from her father, Laban, about how to manipulate people. She responded to her sister Leah's fertility and to her barrenness with tantrums.

Like her grandmother-in-law she offered her servant, Bilhah, to Jacob and reacted just about the same way.

What a family heritage it was? All God's people but definitely flawed and human. What an environment: Bickering, infighting, rivalry, hatred, and deceit on all fronts for three generations.

Look again at the mess:

Joseph was the 12th child of 13. Jacob had seven by Leah, two by Bilhah, two by another servant Zilpah, and finally two by Rachael, Joseph and Benjamin.

This was not a two-mother family, it was a four-mother family, and there were only two true "love children."

What a tangled web they wove. What a perfect excuse for poor character development. What a psychological nightmare and reason for maladjustment. What a dysfunctional family!

And yet, out of this comes Joseph, one of a very few glorious God's Men. So instead of identifying with Abraham, David, and Peter perhaps we should try to relate to Daniel or Joseph.

Joseph chose to allow God to work a grace miracle in his life to transform him into a true MAN OF GOD.

We need to pray, "Lord, let us learn from the life of Joseph how we to can become men and women of God.

II. UPBRINGING (Three More Strikes)

Not only did Joseph have a diseased family tree, but also his parents forgot to read Dr. Dobson's books on child rearing. They did everything wrong. Just look at these three problems.

A. He was his parent's favorite.

This was the first thing that happened in Joseph's young life that actually set the course for his life.

1. Fact

Joseph was Dad's favorite. We know its true because the bible tells us in Genesis 37:3 a, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons,"

2. Reason

Why would Jacob do something so destructive as to obviously favor one son above all the others? Verse 3b tells us why, "*because he was the son of his old age;*" Actually this phrase says volumes:

He was Rachel's first born son. The first real love child of Jacob and his favorite wife. Remember he had worked seven years for her hand in marriage only to wake up married to her less attractive older sister. He worked another seven to win Rachel and even though she was barren for years he loved her best.

He was born when they were old. Jacob had many children: Seven by Leah, two by Bilhah, and two by Zilpah, before God gave them their first son. Much like Isaac was to Abraham, he was very special. Of course, by now Rachel had died and I imagine Joseph reminded him of her as well.

He was a good kid. According to verse 2, when Joseph was only seventeen he reported some kind of bad behavior by his brothers. Perhaps he and Benjamin missed the biggest part of the deceit and conflict that dominated Jacob's household before God humbled him and thus had more developed consciences.

3. Proof

Of course we have solid proof of Jacob's favoritism in the last phrase of verse 3, *"and he made him a varicolored tunic."*

That must have been some coat. There is much speculation as to what this coat was like and what it signified. The term "varicolored tunic" is taken from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew. It has also been translated long-sleeved coat or ornamental tunic. A tunic is a long formal coat as opposed to a shorter, short-sleeved work coat.

Most agree that it was surely an indication that Jacob favored Joseph over his other sons. Some see it as even more serious perhaps even including passing on the birthright and inheritance to Joseph instead of his first born Reuben. This could be possible since Jacob might have considered Joseph as his true "first born" and would have given him a double portion of his estate.

Genesis 49:4-8 also indicate that Reuben lost his position as heir because he slept with his father's concubine and the next two in line were passed over because of the slaughter at Shechem.

This could easily have been true because his brothers surely recognized the meaning. *"And 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."* (Verse 4)

Then to make matters worse, He dreamt he would be king.

B. He was immature and naïve.

Joseph was only seventeen years old (v 2) when his dad gave him the special coat. Like most teens he was not especially tactful and seemed to be operating in pride and insensitivity.

First he didn't realize there was a problem in receiving the coat from his dad. It was gorgeous and he undoubtedly loved it and wore it with pride. He also didn't see any problem sharing dreams that seemed to exalt him over his brothers.

1. Dream One (vv 5-8)

He dreamed that he and his brothers were tying sheaves (bundles) of grain in the field when, *"my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf."* (v 7)

When he shared this dream with his brothers their reaction was incredulous. *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.* (v 8)

2. Dream Two (vv 9-10)

Even though the reaction to the first dream was hostile, Joseph didn't handle the second one any better.

Genesis 37:9--*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."*

Even his father reacted this time. *"And 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?" (v 10)*

Again the action was met with hostility. *"And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying {in mind.}" (v 11)*

C. He was hated and eliminated.

The hatred that was spawned by his father's favoritism and the telling of the two dreams in front of his brothers was so strong that it brought about the eventual plots and actions to eliminate Joseph from the family and rid his brothers of his odious presence.

Jacob and Rachel saw Joseph as: Joseph's brothers saw him as:

The love child of Jacob and Rachel
A troublesome half-brother

Answer to prayer of their old age
A punk kid

A good kid
A snitch/
A spoiled brat

The true first born heir
He stole the birthright

Next week we will follow those plots and actions.

Meanwhile, what lessons can we learn from this material?

1. Each of us is responsible before God for our character and actions regardless of our ancestry, environment, opportunity, or events.
2. Favoritism in dealing with people, especially our children, can lead to serious and long lasting problems for all concerned.