

Genesis 37 & Lord's Day 10 >> Joseph 1: Only in Your Dreams

Stanley J. Groothof

Telkwa CRC, 15 March 2009

You probably know the expression, *You can choose your friends, but you cannot choose your family*. It's usually said when something's going on in your home that you don't like, that's embarrassing to you, or that's creating friction and even hurt between the people living under one roof. Maybe you wish you were part of a different family altogether. Or maybe you love your family, but still wonder what life would be like today if you could go back in time and change a few things. It might be a painful conversation, it might be a good conversation over supper today for you talk about what you wished had been different growing up or even what you wish were different in your home right now.

Members in Jacob's family sure wish things were different! Leo Tolstoy once wrote these words in one of his novels: "All happy families resemble each other, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."¹ There is a lot of unhappiness in Jacob's family. By the time we get to the end of Genesis 37, that unhappiness has turned into hatred (*cf.* 37:4, 5), and that hatred has turned into violence towards Joseph in particular (*cf.* 37:18ff).

It's not the most encouraging start to a sermon series, is it? And I need to warn you up front that it's going to take a bit before it gets better.

But I'm going to lay my cards out on the table right now: By the end of the story, we have a happy ending. Maybe that's not very good storytelling to tell you that up front, but I want you to know that with God's help, Joseph is able to overcome the challenges life throws at him. In fact, God is able to use those challenges and even transform them into blessings. Although we say the coming chapters in Genesis are about Jacob and his sons and Joseph in particular, they are really chapters about God keeping covenant with His people.

Maybe right now you feel more like the Joseph of Genesis 37 rather than the Joseph of Genesis 50 when the story is neatly wrapped up. Take courage: The story isn't finished yet for you or your family. God is able to use Joseph and his circumstances; God is able to do the same for you and your family, even giving you blessings along the way!

Trouble in Jacob's Home

So we begin with the Joseph of Genesis 37 (anticipating seeing the Joseph of Genesis 50). "Israel [the updated name for Jacob] love[s] Joseph more than any of his other sons..." (37:3).

You'd think Jacob would know better.

Joseph is his 11th son, but Joseph is the first child born of his wife Rachel (*cf.* 30:22-24). His other children were born of his three other wives (*cf.* 29:32-30:21), one of whom is Rachel's sister, Leah. Jacob is married to two sisters, but he clearly loves Rachel more than Leah (*cf.* 29:30), resulting in a family feud between Rachel and Leah characterized by Leah's

¹ This is the opening line of Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*. Quoted by Bill Crowder in *Overcoming Life's Challenges: Lessons from the Life of Joseph* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 2007), 17.

competition for Jacob's attention (*cf.* 29:32, 34), and Rachel's jealousy of Leah's ability to bear children (*cf.* 30:1). Even before Joseph is born, this is not a happy, peace-filled home because of Jacob's favouritism of Rachel over Leah.

But it goes further back than that. Jacob is repeating the pattern set by his own father, Isaac. Jacob has a brother named Esau, whom Isaac loved more than Jacob (*cf.* 25:28). but, by any deceiving means possible, Jacob does everything he can to gain a place of honour in his family (*cf.* 25:29-34; 27:1ff), going to such extremes that he has to flee from his home because of the hatred Esau develops towards his brother (*cf.* 27:41-45). ...All because Isaac shows favouritism towards Esau over Jacob.²

You'd think Jacob would know better than to repeat the same pattern with his wives or (at the very least) with his own children. Yet, he loves Joseph more than his other sons. His favouritism is clear when he gives Joseph "a richly ornamented robe" (37:3). The KJV calls it "a coat of many colours;" Andrew Lloyd Webber calls it the "Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." It is an expensive robe, most likely long-sleeved and going down to his ankles, mindful of clothing that royalty of the day would wear.³

Reflecting on this passage, radio preacher Chuck Swindoll writes:

You can't work very well in a garment that has sleeves and extends all the way down to your ankles, especially if it's a costly, richly ornamented robe. It would be like sending a welder to a construction site wearing a full-length mink coat. In Joseph's day, the working garb was a short, sleeveless tunic. This left the arms and legs free so that workers could easily manoeuvre and move about. As you can imagine, by giving Joseph this elaborate full-length coat ... his father was bolding implying, "You can wear this beautiful garment because you don't have to work like those [half-]brothers of yours."⁴

And so Joseph's brothers hate him; they cannot even "speak a kind word to him" (37:4).

It gets worse.

Adding to the visual insult that is his richly ornamented robe, Joseph begins to insult his brothers verbally by telling them about his dreams, dreams suggesting one day he won't only *look like* a prince with his fancy robe, but he *will* be royalty before which his family will bow in servitude (*cf.* 37:6-7, 9). If Jacob is foolish for playing favourites, Joseph is foolish for not keeping his big mouth shut. Hearing about these dreams just make Joseph's brothers that much more filled with hate (*cf.* 37:8), that much more jealous (*cf.* 37:11).

One day, Joseph is sent from the homestead to check up on his brothers in Shechem. Joseph has done this at least once before, returning to his father with "a bad report about them" (37:2). Now the brothers see him coming on the horizon, "sent ... once again to check on their work and once again report what he [sees]... The spoiled one, the special one, the loved one, Joseph [is] now their father's appointed overseer of their work!"⁵

² Going back another generation, Isaac's mother Sarah (Abraham's wife) showed favouritism to Isaac over his half-brother Ishmael, which led to Abraham sending Ishmael away (*cf.* 21:9-14).

³ According to Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis" in *New Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 1; L.E. Keck, ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 598.

⁴ Charles R. Swindoll, *Joseph: A Man of Integrity and Forgiveness* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 10-11.

⁵ Crowder, 22-23. Harvey A. Smit in *The Genesis Message: A New Look at the Old Stories* (Grand Rapids:

The hatred and jealousy that has been seething within the brothers now boils over and becomes a desire for murder: *Only in your dreams will you now ever rule over us!* they say among themselves.

Joseph narrowly avoids being killed that day, being stripped of his robe (that is, his favoured status) and tossed into a dry cistern instead (to a position below them for a change⁶). Maybe Reuben would have been able to rescue him (*cf.* 37:21); maybe he would have ended up being left there to die. Instead, he is sold to a group of travellers making their way to Egypt; he is sold to them for 20 shekels of silver, the value of a male slave.⁷ Ironically, this becomes the first step in the dreams the brothers resented so much and endeavoured to destroy – it becomes the first step in those dreams coming true.

The brothers hang on to the robe and dip it into some blood. They return with the bloodied robe to their father. “Expecting a report from Joseph, Jacob receives a report about him... “The coat, given to confirm love, becomes a confirmation of death”⁸ as the brothers let Jacob make his own conclusions: “‘It is my son’s robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.’ Then Jacob [tears] his clothes, put[s] on sackcloth, and mourn[s] for his son many days. All his sons and daughters [come] to comfort him, but he refuse[s] to be comforted. ‘No,’ he [says], ‘in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son’” (37:33-35). And Jacob weeps and weeps and weeps. Little does he realize that his sons have simply borrowed a page from his own book, using any deceiving means possible to get what they want.⁹

Trouble in Our Homes

So what do we do with a story like this? There are certainly some lessons we can apply to our families. Allow me to suggest three lessons from this story to take home with us, maybe to even talk about over supper today, giving some direction or shape to your conversation about what you wished was different about your home growing up or what you wish is different about your home now.

First, we see a lot of *passivity* in the father, Jacob. Doesn’t he see the hatred expressed in his own home? Why doesn’t he address it? Reflecting on passive parenting, Chuck Swindoll comments on how parents “may eventually discipline [their children], but by then the delayed reaction is often carried out in anger... When that happens, children are not disciplined, they are brutalized.”¹⁰

Being passive in your home – turning a blind eye to anything that’s wrong, pretending to be equals or buddies rather than parents of your kids – provides no boundaries and no

CRC Publications, 1999), 78, comments how “Jacob sending Joseph to check on his brothers’ wellbeing (or *shalom*) is ironic since the text said earlier that the brothers were not able to speak peaceably (“with *shalom*”) to Joseph.”

⁶ The connections in the parentheses in this sentence are from Fretheim, 600.

⁷ According to Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 31.

⁸ Fretheim, 600.

⁹ Smit, 79, comments that “there is a final irony in that Jacob, who deceives his father with the skin of a kid, is himself now deceived by the blood of a goat.”

¹⁰ Swindoll, 16.

framework within which kids can truly thrive. One statistic suggests that “the average child spends seven hours a day watching television [or playing video games?], but only five minutes a day with Dad.”¹¹ What would our families be like if parents invested quantity time and love in their kids so that they become more important, more valuable to their kids than technology or their peers?

Second, *jealousy* is lethal to relationships. Proverbs 27:4 says:

Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming,
but who can stand before jealousy?

(The assumed answer is that *no one* can.) Again to quote Chuck Swindoll: “Jealousy, if allowed to grow and fester, leads to devastating consequences.”¹²

Where is there jealousy in your home? What is contributing to it? What can you do – whether you the parent or a child – to begin reversing it? Honestly assess wrong attitudes while rewarding the ones that build each other up.

Third, *favouritism* quickly makes things ugly in a family. When a daughter sees or thinks she sees a son being favoured (or vice versa), the daughter will likely come to resent the son, even though her anger is more logically directed towards her parents. This easily starts fights between the siblings; even when they are older and more mature, they may be left with a chilly, distant relationship.

So... Instead of favouritism, let love and acceptance flow equally (though differently) to everyone in your home. Instead of jealousy, nurture contentment, celebrating your and each other’s accomplishments. Instead of passivity, be active in the lives of your kids, and kids, look for practical ways to honour your parents.

Glimpses of Grace

The beginning of Joseph’s story holds up a mirror to our families today. That challenges us; perhaps it’s making you uncomfortable; maybe it creates pain in you because of your past or what’s happening right now under your roof.

We’d love to run ahead in the story and say, “‘It’s okay. Everything will turn out all right in the end.’ But those who were living it didn’t know that. Look at the immediate pain that flowed from a family eaten up with hate [coming from passivity, jealousy and favouritism]. Reuben mourn[s] for Joseph (and his own lack of courage). The brothers lie[] to their father, but [as it turns out] never escape[] their personal guilt (*cf.* 42:22). ...[And Jacob] mourn[s] the loss of the son he loved best. The pain he [feels] at the loss of Joseph [is] beyond comfort.”¹³

“All happy families resemble each other, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” There is a lot of unhappiness in Jacob’s family to say the least.

Maybe you feel the same way about your own family. So let me remind you that it is within this broken family of Jacob’s – filled as it is with hatred and deceit – that God chooses to work out His purposes, purposes that carry forward to this day. The genealogies of Jesus in the

¹¹ Ibid., 18.

¹² Ibid., 18.

¹³ Crowder, 24-25.

Gospels of Matthew and Luke clearly point out that Jesus is a descendent of Jacob. God can use the brokenness in ourselves and in our families for His purpose. What's more, there is never a point in whatever mess you find yourself in that God stops loving you. Listen to the catechism:

We can be patient when things go against us,
 thankful when things go well,
 and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father
 that nothing will separate us from His love.
 (Lord's Day 10 Q&A 28; cf. Rom 8:38-39)

Retired Regent professor J.I. Packer writes: The part of Genesis that we are looking at is about a dysfunctional family... What you see in the story ... is God's grace to this one flawed family, God's grace in dealing with these dysfunctional people. And God's grace triumphs in the end in the lives of ... Jacob, and of Joseph, and his brothers as well. By seeing God's grace to Jacob's family, in spite of all the pain its members inflicted on each other, we can find hope for our own. One of the things you see most gloriously in this family story is the many-sidedness of the grace that God shows: the grace that forgives and the grace that forbears, the grace that helps and the grace that holds, the grace that renews and the grace that restores, as members of the family fumble and stumble and make mistakes and [as] relationships go wrong. Our God is a God of great grace. If you feel as many nowadays do that you are a victim of dysfunction or broken family relationships, there is much to encourage and help you in the story of Jacob [and Joseph].¹⁴

As we work through these stories in the coming weeks, we will witness in the lives of the characters and maybe even ourselves and our families "radical transformation and restoration."¹⁵ That is the goal that our gracious God has for each of us through Jesus Christ, that our sin is washed away by the blood of the cross and that we become holy as He is holy. And this is something with the power of the Holy Spirit we can work towards – it's not something only in your dreams!

¹⁴ J.I. Packer, *Never Beyond Hope: How God Touches and Uses Imperfect People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 40-41.

¹⁵ Waltke, 505. See also Fretheim, 601, for similar comments.