

Women's Bible Study – Fall 2008

Overcoming: A Life Well Lived

The Life of Joseph from the book of Genesis

September 17, 2008

Overcoming Family Discord – Genesis 37:1-11

Gretchen Steer



It struck me as quite ironic that I spent last week in the backcountry with my four siblings during a time when I was preparing to speak on the subject of “Overcoming Family Discord”. I’m happy to report that discord was at a minimum...actually, nonexistent. This may have had something to do with our solemn agreement not to discuss religion or politics. You’d be surprised - there are other subjects to talk about!

I ended up sharing a tent with my little sister Tina. It was cold at night – in the 20’s - and after we ate dinner around six pm it was all we could do to stand around the fire, yawning, til about 8:30. At that point we all crawled off to bed to reappear around sunrise at 6:30 am. Here’s what our tent looked like. Now that’s a long night, and because we were in bear country, all food and toiletries, anything with a scent, had to be locked up each night in the bear vault. Consequently it didn’t matter if you were starving by midnight; it was courting disaster to think about eating in your tent or getting up for a snack. So night after night Tina and I lay in our tent talking endlessly about what food remained in our bear vaults, and in what order we planned to eat it. Should we eat the chicken teriyaki on Wednesday night and save the turkey tetrazzini for Thursday? You need to understand that we had freeze dried food and so this wasn’t like we discussing the menu at the Broad Street. If all else failed and our stomachs started growling, we drank water. But that of course had disastrous consequences as we then had to get up numerous times to use the facilities, which consisted of the nearest bush or rock in an icy wind. Ah, the happy memories! Why don’t we camp all the time? Especially when you can look this attractive!

I start with family stories because today we are talking about how to overcome family discord. Yes, it may sound as though we always get along, and certainly we love each other enough to spend a week in the wilderness together. But many of you know there was a time when there was a serious rift among us, and it took lots of heartache to sort it out. None of our families are perfect. We all suffer stresses, so it’s my prayer that the stories of Joseph will help us overcome difficulties that we face – including family discord.

Let’s begin by turning to Genesis 37, verse 1, where we find Joseph’s story. While you keep your finger in that spot, I’m going to give the background of Joseph’s highly dysfunctional family.

I. Joseph’s Story

A. A Dysfunctional Family (Genesis 35:23-26; Genesis 37:1-2)

The story of Joseph is actually the story of God’s dealings with his nation of Israel. To recap, God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation. In Abraham’s lifetime, he fathered two boys – Ishmael, who became the ancestor of all the Arabic peoples, and Isaac, the

father of the Jews. Isaac had twin boys, Jacob and Esau. Jacob became the child of the promise and went on to have twelve sons with four different wives. God met Jacob, blessed him, and gave him a new name, Israel (Gen. 32:28). Jacob returned to Canaan with his twelve sons, his daughters and his four wives, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah. Leah and Rachel were sisters, and were bitter rivals for Jacob's affection. Each of them gave her serving girl to Jacob in order to increase their families.

Here's a quick rundown of the twelve sons in order of their birth:

Reuben - Leah's son (Genesis 29:32). The firstborn son had many rights in this culture. Reuben should have been Jacob's heir. Yet Reuben showed very poor judgment by sleeping with his father's concubine, Bilhah. He never really recovered the place of the firstborn.

Simeon - Leah's son (Genesis 29:33) Simeon followed close on Reuben's heels in the birth order. He and his next brother Levi showed their hotheadedness and willingness to deceive in Genesis 34 when they avenged the loss of their sister Dinah's honor by slaughtering an entire city.

Levi - Leah's son (Genesis 29:34) Levi also suffered the consequences of his anger in Genesis 34 when his tribe was scattered generations later in Judah. However, the descendants of Levi became priests, and, while they didn't get to inherit land, they did have a very specific inheritance - the privilege of leading worship.

Judah - Leah's son (Genesis 29:35) Judah became the favored one when he became the ancestor of Jesus Christ, who is known as "The Lion of the Tribe of Judah" (Rev. 5:5) You can see a foreshadowing of the work of Jesus Christ in the way that Judah was willing to lay down his own life in exchange for the life of his brother Benjamin in Genesis 44:18-34.

Dan - Bilhah's son (Genesis 30:6) Dan's birth came about when Leah realized that she was no longer bearing children to Jacob, so she quickly gave her maidservant Bilhah to Jacob as a concubine.

Naphtali - Bilhah's son (Genesis 30:8) Naphtali was born in the same manner, again from Bilhah.

Gad - Zilpah's son (Genesis 30:11) Not to be outdone, and not having any children of her own, Rachel quickly gave HER maidservant to Jacob and Zilpah bore Gad.

Asher - Zilpah's son (Genesis 30:13) Asher was born to Zilpah after Gad. These children in a sense were credited to Rachel even though they were born to her servant woman.

Issachar - Leah's son (Genesis 30:18) Leah got back into the act by conceiving Issachar after hiring Jacob's sexual services for the evening. Her son Reuben found some mandrakes; Rachel wanted them, and in exchange Leah demanded that she be allowed to sleep with Jacob that night. Issachar was the result.

Zebulun - Leah's son (Genesis 30:20) Zebulun's birth followed Issachar, as God answered her prayers that her husband would treat her with honor since she had borne six sons.

Joseph - Rachel's son (Genesis 30:23) Joseph was the son Rachel finally bore to Jacob after many long years of barrenness. She said "God has taken away my disgrace" when Joseph was born.

Benjamin - Rachel's son (Genesis 35:17) Rachel died giving birth to this last son of Jacob's, so he was Joseph's only full brother.

Even though you've only heard a sentence about each of these men, it should be enough to make us realize that this was not a perfect family. They were riddled with competition, jealousy and lack of love. And yet God, knowing the flaws of this family, chose Jacob's sons as the twelve tribes, the nation of Israel. That should give us comfort as we struggle with our family's shortcomings.

Now let's pick up the story in Genesis 37.

“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.” (Genesis 37:1-2)

Here's our introduction to the 17 year old Joseph. In future chapters, Joseph proves himself to be a man of integrity, so it's likely that the bad report he brought home about his brothers was true. But I have to say it makes him sound obnoxious. Here he is tending sheep with his older brothers Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher, and **“He brought their father a bad report about them.”**

(Genesis 37:2) Did you ever have a sibling who drove you crazy? Who constantly finked on you and got you into trouble? One thing we learned as children was that tattling was the ultimate sin. It was all right to fight amongst ourselves but the code of honor kept us from ratting out our siblings to our parents. But Joseph did, and so his relationship with his brothers was strained.

And of course Jacob would believe Joseph's report, because as we see next, Joseph was

B. A Favored Child (Genesis 37:3-17)

“Now Israel 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.

Sometimes parents have a greater affinity with one child than another, just because they are alike. Joseph was the long desired and much loved son of the best loved wife, Rachel, the woman for whom Jacob had served seven years, **“but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.” (Genesis 29:20).** The Bible gives us another reason...because Joseph had been born to Jacob “in his old age.” When Joseph was 17 his brother Judah was old enough to have sons of his own, so there was likely a 20 year age span between the older and younger brothers in this group.

Jacob unwisely gave this beloved son a special mark of his favor...a richly embroidered coat of many colors, which was like a sign on his back proclaiming “My daddy loves me more than the rest of you.” Now this coat may or may not have had many colors; that's the traditional translation, but it can also read “a coat of long sleeves.” It was the sort of garment worn by royalty. It may have even symbolized that Joseph was not to do labor like his brothers. What was intended as a gift from Jacob became a snare to Joseph's jealous brothers.

Now let's continue in 37:5:

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.

Three times in these verses the Bible tells us that **"his brothers hated him all the more"** because of what Joseph dreamed. Perhaps he was already lording it over them inappropriately. In the future, when Joseph was truly in authority, his personality had been tempered by suffering and hardship. He had learned that his strength was from God, not just because he was more loved than his siblings. But he's 17 here, and not very tactful.

In the next few verses, 12 through 17, Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers and the flocks some distance away. Let's pick up the story in verse 18, where we see

C. An Angry Retaliation (Genesis 37:18-32)

"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.

When his brothers call him "that dreamer" they are saying sarcastically, "That dream expert!" That's his nickname...the Dreamer. One of our great hike traditions is assigning a nickname or trail moniker to each member of the group. By the end of the hike last week, everyone had done something to cement a nickname. For example, my sister in law Karin was known as "Firebug" because she spent hours every day tending our fire. I too had a name, but I'm afraid I'm not quite ready to tell you what they named me. But my point is that nicknames usually have a basis in fact. Though they called Joseph "the Dreamer" they did not realize that his dreams were from God. Those dreams reflected future certainty, not a teenager's fantasy. And they were irritating enough to his brothers to make them plot his death.

Just one brother, Reuben, is trying to do right. Reuben understands that the consequences of killing Joseph will be far greater than the momentary relief of shutting up the insufferable dreamer. Much later, Reuben says in Genesis 42:22 – **“Didn’t I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn’t listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood.”** Reuben, at least, knew that a day of reckoning would come.

Pick up the story in Genesis 37:23:

“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.’

This great sin was the result of years of brooding...years of resenting Joseph’s status, and perhaps his mother Rachel’s status in relation to their own mothers. Years of thinking Joseph was an obnoxious tattletale. Years of wanting to shut him up about his dreams and his special coat and his father’s love for him. You see how the seeds of family tragedy are planted when bitterness is allowed to fester.

And notice how the goat gets killed...it’s a necessary prop for the deception. Remember that Jacob once tricked his own father by slaughtering a goat and impersonating his brother Esau in order to gain the blessing of the firstborn. Now his trickery has come full circle against himself.

Here is where the story becomes particularly sad, because the wrong done to Joseph is compounded by the wrong done to their father Jacob, whom they love. And this is where we see:

D. An Unintended Consequence (Genesis 37:33-36)

Look at v. 33 of chapter 37:

“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.” (Genesis 37:33-36)

Sin always affects those who do not deserve it.

How wickedly cruel to make a father think that his son was dead. How Jacob must have suffered, thinking of Joseph being torn limb from limb by a wild animal. For a grieving parent, the inability to say goodbye to his son’s body, to bury him, would have been awful. Jacob tore his clothes and put on sackcloth, showing that this is a father who will not be comforted.

I hope that at this point the other 11 children are stricken with shame. To lose a child is one of the most painful experiences that life can offer, and a parent always asks, “what if? What if I had done things differently?” Jacob would have been filled with guilt at having sent Joseph into the wilderness (v. 14) to find his brothers. And if the other brothers love their father, they must have realized that the wrong done to Jacob outweighed the pleasure of fixing Joseph. As with most sins, they are trapped. They can’t fess up without revealing their own part, and without knowing what has actually happened to Joseph they also cannot make it right again.

Here is the setting for an intergenerational tragedy: a dysfunctional family, beset by competition and envy; a favored child who gets treated differently; an angry retaliation from his fed up siblings; and an unintended consequence of hurt to the innocent.

Do these circumstances sound familiar? This story could be taken from today’s headlines, and so I want to look at our stories...how do we overcome family discord?

II. Our Stories

A. How to Handle a Dysfunctional Family

We use the word “dysfunctional” perhaps more than it deserves. Every family is eccentric in its own way and what makes some families work well would be considered insulting in another setting. But if what you just heard about Joseph’s family resonates at all with you, then we need solutions for the sort of family life that makes our hearts wilt at the thought of getting together with our adult siblings, or makes us prefer work to going home at night.

We have to overcome a dysfunctional family life

- **With hope**

You cannot change the family you grew up with. That era is done and gone and all you can do now is to, by God’s grace, work as well as you can with how your past. But what scripture does offer is the distinct hope of change in the future.

You see, this hope comes from Christ, and it has two outcomes. The first is that we hope to change our own attitudes. The second is that we hope to see change in the other person. Later life often

bring softening, an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, a desire for reconciliation. But of course, the only source of substantive and true change is what comes when we are exposed to Christ.

Last summer our family was in the Czech Republic. In the courtyard of the royal palace in Prague is a round building with two prominent statues. The first is of Paul, and although the inscription on the statue was in Latin (“Gratia Dei – sum id quod sum et gratia ejus in me vacha non fuit.” I was able to work out the biblical reference. It quotes 1 Corinthians 15:10: **But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not in vain.**”

We may think we will never change. But Paul was a murderer and persecutor of Christ, and yet by God’s grace he was changed into a new creature.

So if you are in despair about your dysfunctional family life, take hope. Like Paul, remember that you can work in the present not to make the mistakes of the past. And we do not do this in our own strength - we can draw hope from Christ. If change were simply up to us I’d be in despair – but in hope we look to One outside ourselves, Jesus Christ.

Another challenge:

B. How to Deal with a Favored Child

I think every person with siblings struggles with the notion that someone else is the favorite one. My own children used to ask which one of them I loved the most. This is a wicked trap for mothers, let me assure you!

But there are families, like Joseph’s, where someone has the clear edge. There is one golden child, and that is very irritating to everyone else.

So how do we deal with this common situation?

- **With wisdom**

James tells us **“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” (James 1:5)**

Wisdom dictates that parents should not do this to any of their children. Jacob suffered from the favoritism of his father Isaac for his brother Esau, yet he turned around and did it to Joseph. If you are more drawn to one child than another, look for things you can share with the child who is harder to love. This is just common sense. Why should we, by our parenting, cause our children distress? The Bible promises that wisdom is there for those who ask God. We don’t have to come up with all the answers on our own, but we can ask God for wisdom in parenting.

Of course, there are some practical ways to stop competition among children. Try making a zero tolerance rule for whining and fighting. If they know that it won’t be tolerated, ever, siblings learn to work together. You can also teach them to look out for each other and stick together in the world outside the home.

If you are a sibling, you can exercise wisdom by not assuming that another child is your parents’ favorite. They love us for different reasons. Squelch jealousy; understand that the favored sibling may not wish it nor be able to prevent it. Joseph didn’t ask to be singled out by his father. He had

no mother to help him. And his father's love was more of a burden than a help to him because it cost him so much ill will.

One of the remarkable truths about God's love for us is that he doesn't have favorites. So let's exercise wisdom and model our parenting on God's, and we won't have to deal with favoritism in our families.

Like Joseph we also need to know

C. How to Forgive an Angry Retaliation

Human nature tells us to repay injury with pain. When we are hurt it is easy to lash out. It is only in Christ that we can really find liberation from retaliation.

Instead, we need to respond to injury

- **With mercy**

Many around us are divorced or are in serious marital trouble. It's very difficult in a divorce or separation to refrain from speaking badly of the spouse to the children, and yet somehow we need to respond with mercy even when we are sinned against. So far as it is possible by the grace of God, we need to respond with mercy.

Perhaps the hurt from a family member occurred years ago. Will we let it linger on and color our daily existence? We are tied to our families all the years of our lives. As decades pass, people change; they may reach a point where reconciliation arises simply because enough time has passed. If we are determined not to forgive we will miss that opportunity.

Mercy was extended to us by Christ. And he can help us respond to others mercifully. **“But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Matthew 5:39)**

You may be thinking that it's all very well to talk about responding to dysfunction with hope, and to favoritism with wisdom, and to anger with mercy. After all, how are we supposed to just “do better” especially when we've been trying in the past?

I'm not telling us to try harder to do better. I'm suggesting that the only way to exercise hope, wisdom and mercy is to draw them from someone greater than ourselves – to draw them from Christ. We cannot possibly do these things on our own.

Whenever I am at a high altitude I suffer from altitude sickness. I've had it my whole life. First there's the pounding headache and the shortness of breath. Then, if I exert myself, the headache is followed by nausea and vomiting. And it's pretty hard not to exert yourself on the first day of a hike that begins at 8300 feet and ends up with a campsite at 9800 feet, where you've covered ten miles with a heavy pack. The first day is always the worst. But this year I had a secret weapon, and no, it wasn't the magic underwear, for those of you who heard about that last year. You can see from this picture that we're crossing a pass near 10,000 feet, and I was feeling great! This year I had prescription medicine to counteract altitude sickness. To me it was practically miraculous that I should have felt so good, so quickly. In fact, I felt BETTER than normal. All my siblings

were panting and one was even throwing up on the first day, but I was almost turning handsprings because I felt so good.

Now the power to overcome altitude wasn't something I could dredge up from my innermost being, no matter how much I wished to acclimate quickly. It had to come from outside myself – external help. We can't forcibly manufacture hope, wisdom, or mercy. They must come from Christ, and like Paul we can say, **“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” (Phil. 4:13)**

That same principle, looking outside ourselves to Christ for help, applies to the last situation as well:

D. How to Overcome an Unintended Consequence

Think for a moment about the outcome of the brothers' sin in Jacob's life. It caused him the tremendous grief of believing Joseph to be dead. It also put a permanent, uneasy lie between these sons and their father, and a lie usually makes its presence felt. The unintended consequence of their sin towards Joseph was to destroy their father Jacob through grief.

So how can we overcome the unintended consequences of our sin in others' lives?

- **With love**

Love means asking forgiveness when you know that you have hurt someone. Love means bringing truth to light rather than lies.

We see that with some of Jacob's brothers the passing of years produced a desire to come clean. Judah showed this in Genesis 44:16 when he said, **“What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt.”** Judah understood that God brings truth to light, and that his sin was not against Joseph but truly against God.

Without giving away too much of the coming story, later in Genesis there comes a time when Joseph insists that his younger brother Benjamin remain in Egypt. Then we hear Judah say, **“How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father.” (Gen 44:34)** At this point Judah had himself lost 2 sons (Gen. 38:7; 10) and could perhaps empathize more with the hurt he had done to his own father by telling Jacob that Joseph was dead.

So we overcome a dysfunctional family with hope; favoritism with wisdom; retaliation with mercy, and unintended hurt with love.

That's Joseph's story, and that can be our story. But God's story is part of this narrative as well.

III. God's Story – Three Pictures

In one sense we're not really here to look at Joseph, but rather at the God he points to, and so I'd like to end with three pictures from God's story of Joseph.

The first is that

A. Joseph's life is a picture of Christ's redemption.

Joseph, a victim of his brothers' sin, turns out to be the instrument of their salvation when he is able to provide food for them during a worldwide famine. Generations later, sinful men put Jesus

to death, but his death turns out to be the means of their salvation. And in both cases the redemption or salvation is not an afterthought on God's part, a twist that makes bad come out good – rather, it's part of his deliberate plan and foreknowledge. God in his sovereign mercy permits hardship so that he might demonstrate his goodness. Joseph's suffering brings about good not just in his life or even his family's, but among nations. His life is a picture of Christ's redemption.

Second,

B. Joseph's family is a picture of God's family, the church.

You may not want to resemble Joseph's family at all, but we do. We are unruly, sinful, human, just like those twelve brothers. But he has still chosen us, the church, for his purposes and to be his people, just as he chose Jacob's sons to be the nucleus of the nation of Israel. Joseph's family is a picture of how God lovingly refines his family, the church.

Finally,

C. Joseph's story is a picture of the Spirit's grace.

Joseph was a person of integrity when he was sold as a slave to Egypt, and he kept that integrity. On the other hand, his brothers were despicable, but later events proved that they were capable of repentance, sorrow and change. It takes the many decades of Joseph's life to see how the Spirit worked in each character. We are also works in progress, and so are our family members. It may be decades before we see what long for in their lives and ours, but by the Spirit's grace, change will come.

Joseph was nicknamed "The Dreamer" because of his dreams. His brothers did not mean that nickname kindly. They mocked the reality of the vision God had given Joseph through his dreams. I, too, received a mocking nickname on this trip...

They dubbed me Pigpen because I, alone, washed every day. Now when I saw "washed" I'm using the term loosely; sometimes this meant dunking my head into an icy lake, or sitting down in a river with all my clothes on, but more than most, I tried to do battle against the grime. For that reason it was particularly irritating to everyone when we arrived at a Bed & Breakfast in Mammoth only to discover that almost all the showers had no hot water...except mine, of course, which allowed me to enjoy a lengthy hot shower on arrival. So my nickname mocked my true desire to be clean. And Jacob's nickname mocked the truth of his dream visions.

You may not realize that in the first century Christians were first called by that name pejoratively, as a mean nickname. They were mocking the fact that followers of Christ wanted to become "little Christs", or Christians. But in the end the name stuck and became a badge of honor, because there was truth in it. Like Joseph, whose dreams truly revealed God's plan and whose nickname revealed that truth, may we discover that to be called Christian is a badge of honor. As Peter writes, "...do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." (1 Peter 4:16) And as little Christs may we overcome family discord in our homes, lives and church.