

## **All in the Family** **Genesis 37:2-11**

These are the generations of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf."

His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. **ESV**

**Introduction** — As an old saying goes, "Familiarity breeds contempt." In other words, when something becomes commonplace, we often reject or neglect it in favor of something different, even though the original item may be of greater value.

Take **John 3:16**, arguably the most familiar verse in the New Testament. Because we know it so well, it's easy to forget just how perfectly that brief statement expresses the core of the Christian gospel. Hence, many believers fail to cite **John 3:16** because

“everyone has heard it so often that we need to use something that’s more fresh.”

Another scriptural example of our neglect of the familiar is the story of Joseph in Genesis. It’s safe to say that most Christians can easily recall the major events of his biography and even cite some of its lessons at the drop of a hat. But plumbing the depths of these thirteen biblical chapters is probably another story entirely. That’s unfortunate because Joseph’s life is like a deep mine filled with precious jewels that can never be exhausted. But, again, our presumed familiarity with it has kept many of us from the spiritual wealth that awaits us.

For this reason, we are now beginning a study of Joseph’s entire life story, which is one of the most amazing in both Scripture and human history. So let’s begin even before the beginning.

**I. A Sordid History** — Every person’s life has a context, which serves to define and shape it both positively and negatively. Joseph’s life is no exception. To put it mildly, his family was a mess—even though it had been set apart by God as his human channel for the redemption of all creation. And so, what follows is the R-rated background to Joseph’s birth and early life.

The first person we encounter in **verse 2** is Jacob, Joseph’s father. His other name is Israel which means “God strives.” That title refers to Jacob’s tenacity when, after wrestling with God all night, he continued to cling to the Lord for a blessing (**Gen. 32:2-32**). The name Israel is a definite improvement over the man’s original name, Jacob, which literally means “chiseler” or “deceiver.”

Jacob was moving on in years when Joseph was born. And though his wrestling with the Lord had been a turning point for him, Joseph’s father was still a seriously flawed man. For one thing, he was a passive parent, as well as an indulgent one.

When Joseph was born, Jacob, in a sense, got a new lease on life. Having children late in life can do that. But in addition, Joseph was the first offspring of Jacob’s beloved wife, Rachel. We read of the birth in **Genesis 30:22-24**:

“Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, “God has taken away my reproach.” And she called his name Joseph, saying, ‘May the Lord add to me another son!’”

Until Joseph was born, Rachel had been barren, the greatest of all stigmas for a woman in that culture. Not so for Jacob, who already had children by his first wife, Leah—who happened to be Rachel’s sister. That brings up a rather interesting story, which helps to shed much light on Joseph’s early life.

When Jacob was a young man, he fell in love with Rachel, the beautiful daughter of a man named Laban. Jacob promised Laban, “If I can marry Rachel, I will faithfully work for you for seven years.” The deal was struck, and Jacob served out his seven years. But on Jacob’s wedding day, Laban pulled a switch and tricked Jacob—who ended up married to Leah, Rachel’s older and less attractive sister.

When Jacob realized what had happened, he said, “I will work seven more years for Rachel.” That’s because she was the woman Jacob really loved. So Laban gave him Rachel as his second wife, and Jacob worked another seven years for his father-in-law.

Within the next seven years, Leah bore Jacob seven children: six sons and one daughter. As a result of Leah and Rachel’s competition for his affection and motherhood, he also bore four sons by his wives’ handmaidens.

During all this, Rachel pleaded with God to give her a child. Finally, She gave birth to Joseph.

By then Jacob had worked for twenty years for Laban and was eager to finally be on his own and on his way. Laban lived in Haran, a land far to the northeast of Canaan, and Jacob wanted to take his wives and family back to his homeland. Hence, we read in **Genesis 30:25-26**:

“As soon as Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, “Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, that I may go, for you know the service that I have given you.”

Laban agreed, but in the process he and Jacob both tried to deceive each other. Finally, however, Jacob and his family set off for Canaan—

but not without tragedy. The first incident happened when they got to the city of Shechem, an area populated by people known as Hivites.

“Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to see the women of the land. And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he seized her and lay with her and humiliated her” (**Gen. 34:1-2**).

Dinah was raped. In response, her brothers devised a plan to deceive the Hivites and slaughtered all the men in the city. Then they carried off all their wealth, along with the women and children (**Gen. 34:29**).

When Jacob heard what his sons had done to retaliate, he was angry. But apparently not about what had been done to his daughter, or even about the magnitude of the revenge. What concerned Jacob the most was his public relations with the rest of the people in the land.

The second tragedy involved Rachel. While they were still traveling back to Canaan, Rachel gave birth to another son.

“Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor. And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, ‘Do not fear, for you have another son.’ And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)” (**Gen. 35:16-19**).

Imagine Jacob’s sorrow. He had worked long and hard for the woman he loved, and Rachel had wanted to bear him sons. Now, on the very doorstep of his homeland, with his household and all his possessions in tow, Rachel dies in childbirth. But, that’s not all: “While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine. And Israel [Jacob] heard of it” (**Gen. 35:21**).

Put simply: Reuben had sex with Bilhah, the mother of two of his half-brothers. Jacob was such a passive father that when he heard what his eldest son had done, true to form, he did absolutely nothing. In fact, the only time he acknowledges the offense is on his deathbed. This is the patriarchal blessing Jacob gives to Reuben:

“Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. Unstable

as water, you shall not have preeminence, because *you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it—he went up to my couch!*" (**Gen. 49:3-4**).

This, then, is the family into which Joseph was born: a family brimming with intrigue, resentment, and denial. In a word, it was highly dysfunctional—which makes what happens next not at all surprising.

**II. Teenage Troubles** — Joseph's story in Genesis really gets going when he was seventeen years old, and at first it's not a very good one. We are told that he was his father's favorite son. This indicates that parental favoritism had become a generational sin. Isaac loved Esau more than Jacob, while Rebekah loved Jacob more than Esau. Jacob loved Rachel and her children more than he loved Leah and her offspring. Now Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons.

This did not bode well for brotherly relations. It appears that, at some point, Joseph worked out in the fields right along with his siblings, but this apparently changed after he brought a negative report against them to his dad.

We don't know what the issue was but, given how candid Genesis usually is, we can assume that the infraction was not a huge one. However, the report served to elevate Joseph in Jacob's eyes, which led him to place the teenager in a position over his adult brothers. This advancement is indicated by two things: the coat and the fact that no longer do we find Joseph doing grunt work out with the others.

We have been led to think of Joseph's coat as a sort of patchwork garment of bright colors. We also may wonder why such garb would make the brothers so angry. But the Hebrew word describing the garment simply means a long tunic reaching below the knees, commonly worn in ancient Egypt and nearby lands. Think of a white linen robe extending to the ankles and wrists, and embroidered with stripes of color along the edges.

The brothers' unrest stems from the fact that such a robe was worn only by nobility and those who had no need to toil for their living. Laborers, however, wore short, colored garments which allowed them to do manual work without being hindered. Such were the outfits worn by Joseph's brothers. When Joseph received his robe from

Jacob, it was a sign that the young man was free from the hardships of sheep tending, as was now a sort of overseer or middleman between the father and other family members—reporting back to him about their behavior. And the brothers absolutely hated him for it.

By the way, the Hebrew word (*dibba*) translated “report” in **verse 2** is always used in the rest of Scripture in the negative sense of an *untrue* report, and here it is qualified by the adjective *ra’a* or “bad” or “evil.” Thus, it appears that Joseph misrepresented and maligned his brothers. It’s likely that his report, while essentially true, contained certain exaggerations or inaccuracies. In our culture, such a disclosure is commonly called “tattling.”

But if all this wasn’t enough, Joseph began to dream. There’s no question that his dreams came from God and were related to his ultimate success and the destiny of God’s people, Israel. But what Joseph *did* with those dreams was the problem.

The first dream utilized a farming motif and is described in rhythmic imagery, almost like a dance. Joseph was so taken with it that he felt compelled to pour it all out to his brothers.

“Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, ‘Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf’” (**vs. 5-7**).

No one could miss the dream’s point. Of course, it foreshadows the climax of Joseph’s story, when he becomes an Egyptian official and his brothers do bow down to him. But the gift was obviously misused when, out of naivete and self-obsession, the young man disclosed it to his siblings.

The brothers’ response is entirely predictable: “His brothers said to him, ‘Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?’ So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words” (**v. 8**).

All the dreams in Joseph’s narrative come in pairs, because the paring of dreams mean certainty of fulfillment—as Joseph would later tell Pharaoh (**42:32**). So Joseph’s second dream sealed the matter: great

things lay ahead for him of almost cosmic proportions. “Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me” (v. 9). Now, everyone is bowing before Joseph—from Reuben to Benjamin to his father Jacob to his deceased mother Rachel.

This was too much, even for the doting Jacob:

“But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?” And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind” (v. 10-11).

In spite of human sin, the hand of God is quietly at work in the life of Joseph, as it orchestrated a preserver for his chosen people. As Walter Brueggemann puts it:

“The main character in the drama is Yahweh. Though hidden in the form of a dream, silent and not at all visible, the listener will understand that the dream is the unsettling work of Yahweh upon which everything else depends. Without the dream there would be no Joseph and no narrative. From the perspective of the brothers, without the dream there would be no trouble or conflict. For the father, without the dream there would be no grief or loss. The dream sets its own course, the father-brother-dreamer notwithstanding. And in the end, the dream prevails over the tensions of the family.”

The effect of the dream was that it set in motion a chain of events which eventually turned out not to be disasters but works of grace.

**III. Baggage Claim** — Many lessons which will emerge from Joseph’s story as we work our way through it. But at this point, there is an important one which stands out. It has to do with the “baggage” each of us carries into and throughout our lives—even as Christians.

Especially from a Christian perspective, there is no doubt that every man, woman, and child is a flawed human being. This stems from the fact that you and I not only live in a fallen world, each of us has a propensity to serve ourselves over God and others. In addition, many of us come from family and environmental backgrounds that are, to one degree or another, damaged and even extremely twisted. Added

to that are the efforts we all take (sometime quite extreme) to appear better than we really are.

This is one reason why Joseph's story should speak so powerfully to each of us. As we've seen, his family was, to put it bluntly, a huge mess—and it had been for several generations. So, here comes Joseph, the favored child of his generation and one of the Old Testament's greatest heroes. To say that he started out unscathed by his biological family is a serious misreading of the biblical text—though many have read it that way over the centuries. But this should not surprise us. Apart from Jesus, there are no perfect people in the Bible any more than there are in the rest of life...and, certainly, no "plastic saints," Joseph included.

So, how should you and I respond to, then apply, this first chapter of Joseph's story? I would suggest an honest appraisal of our lives and backgrounds, along with a reality check concerning present conditions. Above all, don't think for a moment that you are disqualified from serving God as a Christian due to the negatives associated with either the past or present.

And so, acknowledge and claim your baggage, present it to God, learn from it, and then take steps to replace or refill it. That's what we will see Joseph doing throughout the passages and sermons ahead.