

## Difficult family, dependable God

### Genesis 37

I've noticed that my nieces and nephews are starting to watch  
the same TV shows that I watched as a kid: *the Brady bunch, the Cosby Show*  
and as I've watched these shows with them  
I've noticed that family sitcoms have evolved over the last 30 years or so.

In the 70's and 80's each episode ended well,  
the characters had their problems to face but the family pulled together  
and there was no problem that couldn't be solved within 30 mins!

Then in the 90s TV started to display the dysfunctional side of family life:  
*The Simpsons* is one example,  
it's only a cartoon but the show thrives on dysfunctional characters.  
And we saw sitcoms that ditched the family all together: *Friends* and *Seinfeld*.

But now the family setting has made a comeback.  
The big one in recent years is of course *Modern Family*.  
But as you watch *Modern Family*  
you quickly realize that it's not the same thing as what we saw in the 1980s.

Of the three households that make up the *Modern Family* cast,  
only one is the traditional nuclear family.  
One is a marriage of two divorcees from two different cultures,  
the 3rd consists of 2 white gay men with an adopted daughter from Vietnam.

It seems to me that the producers of *Modern Family* have a clear message:  
even within the increasing complexity of modern relationships.  
a stable, safe and happy family life is possible,

I wonder whether your experience leads you to the same conclusion.  
I suspect for many people, real life points to a different conclusion  
Relationships often fail;  
households can become places of disappointment;  
... Families can be damaging.

This morning we're continuing in our series on Jacob and his sons,  
and we take up the story in Genesis 37. Take a look at verse -1  
*Jacob* lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.  
Jacob's long years of displacement seem to have come to an end.  
He's back in his father's land,  
the land that God had promised to him and his family  
And so the attention now shifts to the next generation, verse 2  
This is the account of *Jacob's family line*.

And what a family line it is: twelve sons and one daughter.

*At last* we see the promise to Abraham of many descendants taking shape.

Numerically this family is very impressive, but morally, not so much.

This football team that Jacob has fathered has come through numerous women, Technically there's no law against that at this point in time in the Bible's story but the description of how Jacob and his wives established their family leaves you with the impression that their domestic life is far from ideal. The men have abused and taken advantage of their female kinsfolk, and the women descended into jealousy and competitiveness.

And now as the focus shifts to the next generation,

we see yet another step down into human sinfulness.

This family is complex and quite often very cruel.

And it may be that you see reflections of your own family here, or, at the very least,

you ought to see reflections of our wider human race.

Remember, the book of Genesis begins with the whole human race in view,

And so it's a story teaching us the reality of what it means to be human.

So let's meet the family, and let's see just how messed up these guys are.

In v2 we're introduced to one of Jacob's sons in particular,

Joseph is the son who will have the most attention from this point on.

We're told that Joseph has brought Jacob a bad report concerning his brothers.

And so already we suspect that there's going to be some fireworks.

Some people assume Joseph was a young upstart causing trouble;

But given what we know of the brothers

it may be that Joseph was simply telling the truth!

In Ch 35 Reuben the first-born had slept with his father's concubine,

In ch 34, Simeon and Levi had put a nearby town to the sword,

creating a new raft of enemies for Jacob.

These were hardly model or helpful sons;

These guys were out of control,

and Joseph is about to find out just how out of control they are.

Jacob himself doesn't do much to help.

Vs 3-4 Now Israel (another name for 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.

<sup>4</sup>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.

By playing favorites with Joseph, Jacob was simply adding fuel to the fire.

Jacob should have known the damage that favouritism would cause.

He himself was *not* his father's favourite. that honour went to his brother Esau.

But he's failed to learn from his past and so his actions only amplify things.

And then, as tensions within the family are simmering away,  
Joseph reveals to his brothers two dreams that he had.  
In one, the brothers' sheaves of wheat bow down to Joseph's,  
in the other, the sun, moon and stars themselves bow down to him

Even though these dreams came with no official interpretation,  
the meaning is not lost on his family,

v 8 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.

Jacob also expresses some alarm, as his favouritism finds its limit in verse 10:  
When Joseph 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?"

So there's the background,  
we have a family waiting to explode,  
and things boil over in the very next scene.

The older brothers are tending their flocks and Joseph is sent to check up on them.

V18 tells us that the brothers saw Joseph from a distance  
(with his fancy robe it wouldn't have been hard to spot him),  
and so they form a plot, planning to take full advantage of this opportunity  
"Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other in verse 19 <sup>20</sup>"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.

But then there is a glimmer of hope,  
Reuben has a pang of compassion and convinces the others to ease off.  
Don't shed any blood he pleads with his Brothers.  
He is planning, we are told, to eventually recuse Joseph.

And so the altered plan is put into action:  
Joseph is stripped of his precious coat and cast into the well.  
Later on in Genesis as the brothers recall this event  
they add that Joseph at this point was pleading and crying out for his life.  
You can imagine his shrieking as his clothes are ripped off his back  
And as he is left crying in the well,  
his brothers dispassionately sit down for a meal in verse 25.

And then, seemingly by chance, a caravan of traders appears on the horizon.  
It's Judah who suggests that Joseph be sold off into obscurity,  
And it seems like an ideal move:  
Joseph would be *as good as* dead,  
yet technically the brothers would not be guilty of bloodshed.  
Furthermore, when a shepherd might earn only a few shekels a year,

20 shekels of silver would come as tidy bonus,  
even after it had been distributed amongst the conspirators.

And so Joseph is gone by the time Reuben returns to the well.  
Where Reuben has been is a mystery.  
As the eldest he had a responsibility that he started to live up to,  
but his absence at the critical moment means his plans come to nothing  
and he joins the long list of men in Genesis who have failed others.

And so all that is required now is a plausible story to sell Jacob.  
The precious cloak is dipped in goat's blood  
and presented to the family patriarch.  
The brothers make no claim about what happened to Joseph,  
they simply ask *is this your sons cloak?* letting Jacob draw his own conclusion.  
And so in this way Jacob is fooled by his own sons and led into despair,  
just as he fooled his own father Isaac when he stole Esau's birthright.

And so this is the family portrait. Charming isn't it?  
What are we to make of this disaster of a family?

Well, I have two simple questions to ask of this story:  
What does it tell us *about humanity?*  
And what does it tell us *about God,*

First of all: *humanity*; what does this story say about *us?*  
Human beings can be pigs, can't they?  
Even your own flesh and blood can sell you out!  
Now, this is not a new element in this story—Jacob ripped off Esau,  
Jacob in turn was played by his uncle Laban—but with 12 of these boys  
now playing the same game the viciousness is taken to another level.  
This descent even further into cruelty is just one more way  
that Genesis reminds us of the grip that sin has on us.

Now when I said earlier that relationships can be complex,  
It's true that some of that complexity is a gift from God;  
personal differences can be enriching.  
But don't be fooled: some complexities are the result of human sinfulness.  
And sin is very destructive.

And it's especially sad when this behavior manifests itself in the family unit.  
Did you notice the generational cycle of destruction in the story?  
Jacob repeated the destructive favouritism of Isaac,  
his sons repeated his own deceitful practices.  
These days we recognize this behavior and talk about cycles of abuse,  
But the Biblical authors had cottoned on to this 1000s of years ago.

Maybe you're afraid that *you might be a Jacob*,  
 unable to break the pattern that you experienced long ago  
 and caught in a cycle where you pass the damage on.  
 Do you ever hear yourself and think "Gosh I'm sounding just like my father",  
 or "That's what my mother used to say and I hated it!"

When Jas and I were planning to be married  
 we attended an Anglicare course on good relationships,  
 and the counselor suggested that we each think about our families of origin  
 and ask "Which habits and patterns of behaviour do I wish to keep,  
 and which habits and patterns of behaviour do I want to leave behind?"  
 Maybe that's a question Jacob could have asked himself.

So this story teaches us the ugly truth about humanity  
 But it also teaches us a wonderful truth about God.

You do have to work a little bit to find this truth about God though;  
 he isn't even mentioned in this chapter.  
 But if we just steal forward to the end of the whole Genesis story for a second,  
 then we see that God was actually very active on the day Joseph was sold.  
 In Gen 50.20, Joseph is reflecting on the meaning of this terrible day, when he  
 says this to his brothers You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good. (x2)

With the benefit of hindsight,  
 Joseph is able to see that God had a plan all along:  
 being sold was the mechanism that brought Joseph to Egypt  
 where wonderful things would happen.

So the pangs of compassion felt by Reuben?  
 That was God's doing.  
 The appearance of a caravan of merchants on the horizon?  
 That wasn't luck. Christians *don't believe in luck*, that was God's doing.  
 The further exchange in v36 where Joseph was sold into Potiphar's hands?  
 God's plan.

It's what Christian theologians call *God's providence*,  
 and this will be a theme that comes up again and again in Genesis.  
*God's providence* refers to the behind-the-scenes action of God  
 where he's putting things in place around us and involving us in his plan.

It may not be easy to see exactly what God is up to.  
 Even though Joseph has those dreams about his family bowing down to him,  
 we know he *still feared for his life* as he was sold,  
 and he must have wondered *how long* he was going to be a slave  
 and *how* he was going to escape.  
 So God's providence won't exclude us from having to exercise patience.

But the Joseph story teaches us that God *does* work to a plan, even if we can't see it.  
 God's plan for Joseph was to lift him up and out from that family environment.  
 With God's help, a bad family need not sink our future.

But of course, God's idea was to save not only Joseph,  
 but to also save and bless his despicable family with him.  
 And God's plan today is similar:  
 to save us and bless a despicable humanity through Jesus Christ.

I wonder whether you picked up the parallels between Joseph and Jesus:  
 Joseph was roundly rejected by his brothers,  
     just like Jesus would be rejected by his people.  
 Joseph was betrayed for a price in silver,  
     Jesus was betrayed for a price in silver,  
 Joseph was stripped of his cloak before he was handled  
     Jesus was stripped of his cloak before being crucified,  
 Joseph's fate was handed over to non-jews,  
     Jesus' fate was placed in the hands of the Romans.

In Joseph we're meant to see Jesus;  
 particularly the Jesus who was rejected and killed  
     But who provides salvation through that same rejection and death.

This is great news for the Jacobs among us,  
 Because the cross cleanses us from our past mistakes.  
 And not only that, but the cross teaches us *a new way of being human*.

At numerous points the NT takes Christ's action at the cross  
 and holds it up as a model for our relational lives.  
 As I have loved you Jesus says to his disciples, so you must love one another.  
 Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church Paul says in Ephesians  
 You see under God, following his path, some of these cycles can be broken.  
 Do you want to change the way you relate to others?  
 Then turn to Jesus, receive his forgiveness for the way you've acted,  
 and ask for the Holy Spirit to teach you to be more like him;  
 loving others in place of abusing others.

The producers of our TV sitcoms would teach us that as long as there is love,  
 then there isn't any difficulty or complexity that can't be overcome.  
 I think they've got it *half right*.  
 It's the love and presence *of God* that's the vital ingredient.  
 The love that forgives us and then teaches us to love others.

Friends, it's the action of God that will overcome the worst of humanity,  
 including what we see in our families. I'll lead us in prayer.