

“When Dreams Become Nightmares”

Genesis 37

Series: Behind the Scenes – The Story of Joseph Week 1.

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It all began with two dreams. These were not wild, surrealistic montages. You know that kind: racing to get to class and discovering you just missed the SAT. These dreams were simple. Two different visions: one from the day and the other at night, one on earth and the other in the heavens. The first occurs at harvest time: brothers binding sheaves of wheat. The second pictures stars joined by the moon but also the sun. Most dreams are forgotten once we wake up. Others are dismissed as empty fantasies. But Joseph made this one mistake: he told them to his family. It turns out: they were dangerous dreams – the kind that drive people wild, even move some to plot murder.

Joseph’s dreams promised him a place at the pinnacle of glory. But now we find him at the bottom of a well in the depths of the earth. Bruised and bloodied from the fall, the teenage boy can find no way to climb up the smooth rock walls of the cistern. Total darkness envelops him. Joseph shivers in the dank, moldy stone prison. Maybe because he is almost naked. Or maybe he’s scared to death about what comes next. He’s in a living nightmare and he wishes to God that he could wake up.

How did his dreams become a nightmare? Who plotted to kill his dreams? His family. In the circle of his home there is envy, jealousy, and sibling rivalry, favoritism and resentment, neglect and even abuse. No different than today. And as with most families, the sins of the children begin with the sins of the parents.

Consider Joseph’s father. He is such a wily and deceptive con artist he went by two names – neither of which is flattering. “Jacob” means “supplanter.” In other words, he sneakily tries to take someone else’s place. Second son of Isaac and Rebekah, but first in Mama’s eyes, Jacob and his mother conspire to trick the old man and to steal his brother’s inheritance. Jacob also runs afoul of his father-in-law and winds up fathering at least thirteen children by four different women. His other alias is “Israel” which means “the one who wrestles with God.” Do you get the picture? This “Bible saint” gives everyone, including God, a run for their money.

But Jacob also has his share of trials. In a blended families it is often difficult for everyone to get along. This blended family feels more like a blender family. Imagine then how hard it was for one man, four wives, and thirteen children to live under one roof. The usual tension, competition, and sibling rivalry are magnified in this household. And in any family, large or small, it’s unfortunate but frequent that a parent will favor a certain child. This of course builds fires of resentment in all the others.

When Lisa was pregnant with Kristin, we found a book to help us prepare our first born – Peter – for the arrival of his sibling. The first chapter listed several common sayings which parents should never use. For example, when the child asks, “Why are we

having a baby?” the parent should never respond “Because we love you so much, we want to have another.” This, the book told us, is like a husband saying to his spouse, “Honey, I love you so much I want to have another wife.”

Oddly enough, Jacob may have said that. He had four wives. His family is a perfect example of why God says polygamy is not a good idea. He favored his wife Rachel. Consequently when Rachel, after years of infertility, finally gave birth, Jacob loved her child, Joseph, far more than his older ten sons. Just as Jacob’s Mama loved him more than her older son, so Jacob, in his old age, doted on the little lad. He let him stay home while the others sweated in the fields or herded the sheep. The few times he allowed the boy to tag along behind his brothers; Joseph came running back to tattletale on them. When Rachel died, Jacob’s love and favor for Joseph increased. So did the seething resentment of the brothers. “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” (Genesis 37:4).

It almost pushes them over the edge when Jacob wraps Joseph in a rich, regal finely woven coat that stretches out to his arms and down to his feet. The gift alone is enough to inflame their anger. But it’s more than that. The symbol of this coat is not lost on Jacob’s other sons. It’s a suit suitable for a prince. No common field hand can wear such a fancy robe. As they watch the old man drape the seventeen-year-old in a royal cape, they know Jacob is publicly declaring Joseph to be his heir and their master.

So the stage is set for the final stroke to bring down the boy prince. And the last straws are those dreams. Joseph is not just a tattler and a slacker. He is also a dreamer. “Listen to this dream I had:” he tells his brothers. “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.” “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” they replied in anger (Genesis 37:6-8). At this point, Joseph should have gotten the message and shut up. But he doesn’t. “‘Listen,’ he said, ‘I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me’” (v. 9). Now Papa Jacob is annoyed. “Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?” (v. 10) Jealousy flares in the brothers. But Jacob tucks the whole scene in the back of his mind.

Unfortunately, Jacob must have been out of his mind when he sent Joseph to check up on the brothers. They are over fifty miles away in Dothan. And when they see the teen approach in his fancy coat, they conspire to murder him. ‘Here he comes – the king of dreams! Let’s kill him and throw his body in this cistern. We’ll say wild animals tore him apart. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.’ But Reuben, the oldest, knows this is wrong. “We can’t shed his blood. He’s our kin. Let’s just scare him a little. Throw him in the cistern. That’ll teach him who’s boss.”

When Joseph finally arrives, I imagine his taller, stronger, older brothers circling round him with menacing stares. Soon there is shoving and pushing and pulling until the hated coat is ripped from his back. Then, as one, the wild pack of wolves pick him up,

toss him down the hole and roll a stone in place. And there he sits ... awaiting his sentence. He is terrified. What will his brothers do when they pull him out?

Soon, the stone is removed. Blinded by the flood of light into his dark prison, Joseph cannot see the rough hands that reach down and yank him out. The next moment he blinks in the sunlight as cords are tightly wrapped around his wrists. Strangers, speaking foreign tongues, drag him to their camels. And as they lead him away on foot behind one of the beasts, he takes a final backward glance. There are his brothers - laughing and dividing the few coins they got for selling him into slavery.

There is still one final act: the cover up. The boys learned the art of deception so well that they even fool the old master. Ripping and slicing the fancy coat, they cover it with goat's blood and present it to their father. "Papa," they ask innocently, "is this your son's coat? We found it in the pasture." Jacob examines the shredded and blood-soaked gift he gave his beloved son. And he wails. "Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has been torn to pieces." Little did he know the real ferocious animals stand around him. And as they watch their father descend into inconsolable grief, the magnitude of their sin finally hits home. "What have we done?"

The family of Jacob is a tragic lot. Though they may be more extreme, they are not so different from us. In a seminary course on counseling, they warned us never to think that a single "problem child" is to blame for all the family's troubles. Everyone bears responsibility for the way things are. Everyone plays a part in the dysfunction. And families today are facing challenges, influences and nightmares that I never dreamed would be possible when I grew up, when I first started in ministry or when I raised my children. Now more than ever we need the Lord, His Word, and the support of a church.

Some of us are Jacobs: Absent and Disengaged. Jacob appears extremely passive and distant in this story. He sends Joseph out to face the brothers alone. Rarely is he involved in his older sons' lives. Chuck Swindoll comments

No enemy is more subtle than passivity. When parents are passive, they may eventually discipline, but by then the delayed reaction is often carried out in anger. Passivity waits and waits until finally, when it can wait no longer, it comes down with both feet! When that happens, children are not disciplined, they are brutalized. Passivity not only blinds us to the here and now, it makes us inconsistent.¹

It is essential for parents to actively engage with each child, to get to know their likes and dislikes, their gifts and challenges, their joys and struggles. I can't count how many parents have commented to me: they come from the same parents, they were raised in the same household, but they are so different. One might be a risk-taker while the other is a rule-follower. This is why the parenting practices which worked for one child are completely useless on another. Each child is uniquely created by God. Take a moment

¹ Chuck Swindoll, Joseph, (Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1998) p. 16.

and write down ten words which describe each child. Then you will see a profile, an identity, emerge. Invest the time to get to know each one and you will help them know themselves.

This practice can help with the second problem in Jacob's household: Favoritism - preferring one child over the others. Kids can tell who Mom or Dad's favorite is. There is no justification for lifting one above the others. Yet even when you try to love each one equally, it's still impossible to treat every child the same. They may perceive this as favoritism. As you discover each child's unique qualities you will know what each needs in terms of guidance, discipline, and praise. Even if your children are grown, it's not too late to correct the unfairness of favoritism. Don't make them fight it out over your will.

There is a third problem in Jacob's family: Secrecy and Lies. The deception Jacob inflicted on his father and brother has now been done to him. His sons learned it from their father. Secrecy is the fertilizer that grows dysfunction and destruction in the family. This is why counselors say, "You are only as sick as your secrets." To truly heal, we must stop the lies and secrecy and be honest with one another. Secrecy kills, honesty heals.

Some of us may be like the brothers: simmering and smoldering with anger. Resentment brought to a full boil can drive us to all sorts of acts we later regret.

The bombs of World War II are still killing in Europe. They turn up – and sometimes blow up – at construction sites, in fishing nets or on beaches over decades after the guns fell silent. Hundreds of tons of explosives are recovered every year in France alone. Thirteen old bombs exploded in France in one year killing twelve and wounding eleven. Unexploded bombs become more dangerous with time. With the corrosion inside, the weapon becomes more unstable, and the detonator can be exposed.

Buried anger over the years is just as explosive. The one you hurt most is usually you. It's good to let it out by talking it out with a trusted Christian friend. I recommend turning resentment and anger over to God. Ask His help to defuse the bomb.

And some of us may be Josephs: boasting and building ourselves up at the expense of others. Showing off his coat and bragging about his dreams only led him to the bottom of a pit. Such self-promotion usually comes out of a low self-image. Instead of drawing others to us, it usually drives them away.

But there was one more character in this drama we must not forget. God is working behind the scenes. The brothers try to kill the dream by killing the dreamer. But they can't. Why? Because God gives the dreams. In time, the brothers will learn that the dreams still come true. The dreams that tore their family apart will tie them together. The dreams they tried to kill will save their lives. Not because they are Joseph's dreams. But because they are God's dreams.

God has a dream for you – a dream for the healing of your family. Maybe you face a nightmare of neglect, deception, resentment, jealousy, envy or abuse. The Lord wants to heal you. Let go of smoldering and simmering. Let go of planning and plotting and let Him take over. You'll find, in time, He can turn your nightmare into a dream.

My great grandfather was a great man. But he was also a little like Jacob. His wife died young, leaving him to raise five daughters. He loved them all, but he also loved to play them against each other. So much so, that when he died at 98, they were not speaking to each other. And when my grandmother died at 80, she left specific instructions for her funeral. There was to be no open casket and we were not to invite her

four sisters. We complied with her first request but ignored the second. Why? Because it was time for the fight to end and the healing to begin. Some time later, my mother planned a reunion with her cousins. The silence and the separation, the division and discord were gone. With the help of God, the nightmare turned into a dream.

“Fix my family?” you say. “In your dreams!”

No. Not in my dreams. In His dreams.