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Series: *Joseph – Living the Dream*
Title: *Faithful in Family Matters*
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Scripture: Genesis 37:1-11

While we were on vacation this summer our family started watching a reality show called, “*The World’s Toughest Race.*” It featured sixty-six teams from around the world competing in a grueling multi-day competition. Teams hiked, sailed, paddle-boarded, mountain biked, repelled up and down cliffs, and white-water rafted for hundreds of miles. They had little to no sleep as they traveled over mountains, rivers, jungles, and oceans. No modern technology was used to help them find their way to various checkpoints, just a map and a compass. The winning team got \$100,000 in cash, which should just about cover most of their medical bills.

Teams had to work together. If any member of the team quit or was unable to continue, the entire team was disqualified. And there were all kinds of teams.

- There was a team made up of a father and his daughters.
- There was another team that included a father and son where the father was fairly elderly. He was in great physical shape but suffered from Alzheimer’s and had to be directed constantly.
- My favorite team was made up completely of older people, I think the youngest was 67. I was rooting for them.

The race began with teams paddling these multi-hulled boats down a river and out into the sea where, if the weather cooperated, they could sail to the first checkpoint. The boats were apparently hard to balance because right off the bat one of the best teams, the team from New Zealand, capsized. It was a terrible start and an embarrassing one as well, especially for an experienced team like theirs. Of course, righting the boat and pulling all the team members out of the water cost them a lot of time. But eleven days and 416 miles later Team New Zealand won, in spite of the fact that the boat they were given for the last leg had a construction flaw, came apart, and sank. Their effort is proof that a bad start doesn’t mean you can’t have a great finish.

This morning we are beginning a two-month sermon series focused on the life of an individual who is a great example of this principle. He had a bad start in life, but an amazing finish. In fact, it was a finish so amazing it still blesses you and me today.

As you can see by the slide, his name is Joseph and his story is recorded in Genesis chapters 37-50. If that seems like a lot of chapters to tell the story of one man, it is. Joseph is given more space in the Old Testament than any other person, with Abraham coming in a close second. Let’s begin our 14 chapter study by read this morning’s text. Take your Bibles and turn to Genesis 37. Follow along as I read verses 1-11. And please stand in respect to God’s Word as it’s read.

1 - Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.

2 - This is the account of Jacob’s family line. 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.

3 - 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 an ornate robe for him.

4 - 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.

5 - Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more.

6 - He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had:

7 - 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.”

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.

9 - 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.”

10 - 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?"

11 - His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Now, to understand HOW bad Joseph's start in life was, we have to go a couple branches back in Joseph's family tree. Joseph's great-grandfather was Abraham. His grandfather was Isaac. Joseph's father was Jacob and since we studied his life not too long ago you should remember that Jacob was a twin. His elder brother by only a few seconds was Esau, and after tricking Esau out of both his birthright and his father's blessing, Jacob was forced to flee for his life. He went to a place called Paddan Aram and got a job with his mother's brother: Laban. After Jacob was on the job a month or so, his Uncle said, "*Nephew I'm a fair man and I don't want you to have to work for nothing. What can I pay you?*"

Well Laban had two daughters. The older daughter, Leah, was not very attractive; the younger daughter, Rachel, was beautiful. Genesis 28:18. says, "***Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful, but Leah had weak eyes.***"

A *terrible* joke that was popular when I was in seminary comes to mind. It's from the days when female seminary students were few and far between. It goes like this: "*A farmer had two daughters. One was beautiful and the other one went to seminary.*" Of course, it's wrong to judge someone for their outward appearance. We are to be like God, Who judges by the heart. Shows like "*The Bachelor*" highlight our fallen culture's focus on physical beauty, which is a ridiculous and sinful way to judge a person. But that's how poor Leah was judged. She was not considered to be physically attractive.

In any case, Jacob loved beautiful Rachel, and he agreed to work for his Uncle seven years with Rachel's hand in marriage as his pay. Genesis 29:20 says, "***So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.***"

Now when the seven years were up, there was an elaborate wedding ceremony planned, but we have to understand a couple things.

- First, it was the custom of that day for the older daughter to be married first. No self-respecting father would permit the younger daughter to be married ahead of the older. Apparently, Jacob didn't know about this nuptial custom.
- Second, the weddings took place at night when the bride could not be seen very well. They didn't have electric lights. They just had torches or oil lamps. And the bride wore a heavy veil over her face during the entire ceremony.
- Third, they served a lot of wine at these weddings.

Do you begin to get the idea? Yes, Laban, Jacob's father-in-law, arranged for Jacob to marry not Rachel (the beauty) but Leah (who had weak eyes) and went to seminary.

Genesis 29:22, "***So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob---and Jacob lay with her.***"

I love the next sentence. "***When morning came, there was Leah!***" I almost feel like there should be a Hebrew "***TA-DA!!!***" at this point.

Can you imagine what was going on in Jacob's mind that morning when he woke up and "***there was Leah?***" Maybe he thought, "*My mom always warned me that women don't look as good in the morning before they put all their makeup on...but---wow, what a change!*" Or perhaps he thought, "*I never realized how much Leah and Rachel look alike.*"

Then after his second cup of coffee kicked in, he realized he had been duped. And he came bolting out of the tent, charging into Laban's tent furiously demanding an explanation. Jacob said, "***What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?***" (Genesis 29:25) Laban said, "***Take it easy Jacob. It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also---in return for ANOTHER seven years of work.***" (Genesis 29:6-7)

And that's what Jacob did. He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife.

This is where Joseph's bad start in life began. I mean, we know that divorce can be hard on children, but this home was worse because it began with two rival sisters as wives, competitors for the same husband. Leah was jealous of Rachel because she was prettier, and she was deeply loved. Rachel became jealous of Leah because Leah soon gave Jacob four sons, and Rachel was barren.

Then things went from bad to worse. To keep up with her sister, Rachel said to Jacob, ***"Since I've not been able to give you a child, I want you to sleep with my servant girl, Bilhah. She'll be a surrogate mother, and we'll adopt her children as our own."*** (Genesis 30:3) Jacob agreed and Bilhah had two sons. Not to be outdone, Leah persuaded Jacob to impregnate her servant girl, Zilpah, who gave them two more sons. Then Leah had two more sons and a daughter named Dinah.

So, at this point Jacob had four wives, ten sons, and one daughter. Then, finally Rachel gave birth to a son saying, ***"God has taken away my disgrace,"*** and she named him Joseph. Now can you imagine the turmoil that existed in this home as Joseph was growing up? His Grandad Laban was a greedy conniver. His mother was in competition with his aunt/stepmom, they were constantly bickering. And, there were two servant girl wives also vying for continued attention for their children.

Have you heard the phrase *"Happy wife, happy life?"* Well four wives of Jacob were NEVER happy, so there was no happy life! Can you imagine what that was like? Think of the tension that was CONSTANT in that home with Joseph, his Mom, his three stepmoms, 10 half-brothers, and one half-sister.

You might say, *"Well, it was a blended family and they can be wonderful."* I agree. They can, unless it's a blended POLYGAMOUS family. In that kind of home, which was Joseph's home, no one wanted to blend. They all wanted to win! We can only imagine what it was like in that polygamous rat's nest of relationships.

And to make matters even more difficult for Joseph, while he was still a little boy, his father decided to move. Jacob finally had all he could stand with his father-in-law's schemes, so he packed everything and everyone up and moved out. If the mini-van was invented it would have taken four just to move the family. But think of the threats and heated exchanges between Jacob and Laban that Joseph was exposed to that led to this move. Then a few years after the move back to Canaan came the worst blow of all: Joseph's mother died giving birth to his little brother, Benjamin, when Joseph was ten or twelve years of age. So, Joseph was left without a mother in a strange country. He had no one to protect him from his jealous half-brothers and competing step-moms.

Could you be faithful to God if you grew up in an ungodly environment like that? Well, Joseph was. In fact, not only does his story take up more space, it's also unique in that his life has no glaring flaws. In the fourteen chapters that tell Joseph's story there is no flagrant sin. This is not true of the other heroes of Scripture: Abraham, Gideon, David, Paul, Peter.

Don't get the wrong idea, Joseph was a sinner just as much as you and I, but somehow, and we'll talk about HOW in a moment, but somehow Joseph remained faithful to God. In fact, that's why I decided we should study Joseph's life. He is a great example of faith in tough times, a perfect fit for this year's vision. Joseph shows that it is possible to walk by faith not by sight, even when your SIGHT shows you nothing but hardship. Joseph remained faithful to God even in the repeated terrible difficulties he endured. Bob Russell [whose message series on Joseph has been and will be a big help to me] says, *"When he was hated, he didn't retaliate. When he was tempted, he didn't yield. When life fell apart, he didn't. When he was blessed, he didn't strut. When he faced death, Joseph didn't cower."* Okay, let's get back to looking at Joseph's "interesting" family life.

As I have described it, perhaps a popular family phrase entered your mind. Just curious, did anyone think, *"dysfunctional family?"* Yeah, me too. One psychologist defines a dysfunctional family like this: *"It is one where there is a lot of hurt*

going on that produces a lack of respect and a sense of disintegration. Instead of bringing security, there's insecurity. Instead of love, there is hatred. Instead of unity, there is division."

That describes Joseph's family to a tee, and sadly thanks to the crumbling of the nuclear family in our world, it describes too many current families as well. Referring to all the things that challenge healthy family life in our culture, things like; divorce, cohabitation, an epidemic of fatherlessness, and the redefinition of gender and marriage itself, Chap Clark says, *"The effect has been powerfully destructive. Allowing for the definition of family to be reshaped to line up with almost any casual encounter between two or more people---is to deny thousands of years of societal history. The children are left to discern how to handle the multi-conflicting messages related to home, stable relationships and internal security."*

It's sad isn't it? If you doubt this, ask someone who has taught public school all their lives and they are about to retire. Ask them to tell you about the different kinds of family-related challenges many of today's children face; challenges the kids they worked with when they started teaching didn't have to deal with. Sadly, the nuclear family is in danger of extinction.

Well, the thing Joseph shows us is that there is hope for people who endure a rough family life. We can rise above our circumstances. A bad start, a bad family, doesn't mean your life cannot be good---great even! And a bad family doesn't have to stay that way. With God's help, a bad family can become a WONDERFUL family.

Think of it. Joseph rose above an imperfect family to become the prime minister of the most powerful nation of his day. God used Joseph to save his family and his entire race, the Hebrew people.

But I get ahead of myself. Go back with me to Joseph's LESS than ideal beginning.

Imagine the bickering that went on between his siblings. I mean, if you think your children fight, you should have heard what it was like in Joseph's home. With twelve sons and one daughter from four different mothers, it was nonstop bickering, intense jealousy. I mean, the sons of Leah KNEW that their mother was not loved by their father and I'm sure they were always trying to compensate, trying to win their father's affection. Then there were the sons of the concubines who always felt even more inferior. It was like a tinderbox that could and did explode at any time.

And explode it did, thanks to Jacob's terrible single parenting.

- First, he didn't even attempt to conceal the fact that Joseph was his favorite.

Look at verse 3 of our text. It says, ***"Now Israel (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."***

I remember back when I was in Sunday School when we studied Joseph's story we would have a coloring page with a striped coat, and we'd use all the crayons to make it as colorful as possible. But, commentators say probably his coat was just bordered with color; the thing that made it stand out was not the color as much as the style. You see, like the one in the craft kits Peggy passed out, it was long-sleeved and went all the way to Joseph's ankles. No working man could use this coat, the sleeves and the length would get in his way. It was the kind of coat worn by the nobility of the day. So, when Joseph received this coat his brothers knew Jacob was saying, *"This is my favorite son. He won't work like the rest of you half-rates."* And every time Joseph's brothers saw him walking around in it, which Joseph naively did all the time, they hated him more. When Jacob gave that robe to Joseph, it was like he was painting a target on his favorite son's back.

Think of it moms and dads. What would happen if for this school year you bought one son an 85-inch monitor with a hyper-fast computer equipped with the best camera and sound to use for his virtual school and you made your other children share a beat up laptop with a 13" screen that you got at the thrift store? There would be big trouble---right here in River City! I mean, sibling rivalry would blossom in that kind of situation.

Favoring a child is ALWAYS bad. I know children are different and some are easier to deal with than others, but our kids must know that they all have ALL of our hearts. I love the story a schoolteacher told of a little second-grade girl who

came to her and said, "Now, teacher, my sister and I are in the same class and we're the same age but we're not twins. One of us is adopted but we can't remember which one." That's the kind of equal expression of love that builds a godly family and sadly it wasn't present in Joseph's home.

It's not surprising that favoritism was present because it was kind of in the family DNA. Remember? Isaac loved Esau more than Jacob and Rebekah loved Jacob more than Esau. Jacob was just parenting the way HE had been parented. That's a warning for moms and dads, isn't it! The way we love our children doesn't just affect them!

- Adding to Joseph's family issues was the fact that Jacob was a passive father.

He didn't discipline his kids when they needed it. For example, there was a time when, while Jacob was travelling, Reuben, the eldest slept with his stepmom, Bilhah. Jacob knew what had happened, but did nothing about it. I can't help but think of Proverbs 13:24 which says, "**Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.**" Do you want your kids to feel loved? Discipline them; fairly, but discipline them when they mess up. Then things went from bad to worse, to even worse. Joseph's less-favored brothers were out doing all the work---AS USUAL---and Jacob sent his favored son wearing that robe to check on them. When Joseph returned, he gave a bad report to their father. He said, "Dad, you ought to see what they're doing out there. It's awful!" Of course, when Jacob confronted the sons, they were furious with Joseph.

- Maybe Joseph did the right thing in telling on them.
- Maybe they were stealing from their dad, or
- Maybe they were ruining their dad's reputation and they needed to be told on.

Right or wrong, it enraged the brothers. No one likes a tattletale. And then came the dreams. Look at verse 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 knew what the dream meant and angrily responded, "**Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?**" (Verse 8)

Joseph should have caught on, but when he had a second dream, he boasted about it too. He said, "**Listen to my latest dream. The sun, moon and eleven stars bowed low before me.**"

Now commonsense would say, "Joseph, keep quiet. Don't antagonize your brothers further." But Joseph was naïve and couldn't imagine that anybody would disapprove of him. Favored children tend to be naïve in that way, they have a hard time believing everyone doesn't favor them like their parents have done.

- And, at this point once again we see Jacob's passivity. He knew his other sons were jealous of Joseph. He knew they hated him.

Surely, he knew what they were capable of but verse 11 says all he did was, "**Keep it in mind.**" In other words, he did nothing. Come next week to hear what happens. But before we go, let's look for answers to an important question. Namely, how can a life with a bad start have a good finish? Joseph's experience tells us two things:

1.) First, LOOK UP.

Look to God and remember He is sovereign. He is ALWAYS in control. Joseph's story shows us that God is always at work, even in the WORST times of life. In coming weeks, we will see that Joseph went through trial after trial and every time he could see God at work for his good. That built his faith and made him stronger and better able to face the next crisis. I love this old poem written by Grant Colfax Tullar entitled "The Weaver", however it is often referred to as simply "The Tapestry Poem":

*My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors He worketh steadily.*

*Of times He weaveth sorrow and I, in foolish pride,
Forget He sees the upper and I the underside.*

*Not 'til the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why.*

*The dark threads are as needful in the Weaver's skillful hand,
As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned.*

Joseph's experience shows us that God works ESPECIALLY in the "dark thread" times. So look up!

2.) Look BACK.

Joseph could look back and remember lessons he learned about God as a child. For example, when Joseph was a little boy and his dad moved the entire family back to Canaan, there was a night when Jacob sent everyone ahead and Jacob stayed behind at the Jabok river. Jacob prayed that night and repented of his sinful actions toward his brother Esau. Remember? That night Jacob wrestled with God. The next morning Joseph would have seen his dad limping back into camp. He would have asked what happened and Jacob surely told him about his experience with God. Then in Genesis 35 we read of the time Jacob took the whole family back to Bethel and he showed them the spot where he had his encounter with God. Jacob told the story of God's working in and through his family again. When Deborah, the nurse for Joseph's grandmother died the whole story of God's covenant with Abraham and his family was told once more. I mean, in spite of his messy family, they had a legacy and Joseph could look back and remember it. That told Him God was real and that He had a plan for Joseph's life.

So, looking up and looking back is the secret to a great finish.

Let's pray.