

Bite Size Bible Study

Joseph part 1 #93

By Pastor Lee

Everyone probably knows the story of the patriarch Joseph, with his multicolored coat. But we are seeing it through our individualist culture as opposed to the collectivist culture in which it took place.

The entire story of Joseph is actually about Joseph's *family* and how God reconciled them. For collectivists, it is a story about how Joseph angered his brothers, who respond badly, and Joseph becomes estranged from the family. This is a tragedy in collective cultures who are all about family relationships.

Some say it is Joseph's fault for angering his brothers or his brothers for selling him into slavery. Collectivists lay most of the blame squarely with their father, Jacob. He is the father of all the brothers. As the head of the (ancient) household, it would have been his job to sort out disagreements and tensions like this one.

Remember Jacob stole Esau's birthright, so we may assume that he has little regard for the ideals of his culture. He is also his mother's favorite son because she is in cahoots with him in the theft of the birthright. Clearly this extended family is not following the cultural norms.

Instead of correcting the problems he exacerbates them. He gives Joseph a special robe and allows him to stay home while the others have to work. There are a lot of problems in this family.

In our individualist culture we constantly focus on the individuals and their interests and miss the affects on the collective group and their interests. Joseph is Jacob's favorite son, and Jacob gives him a gift. Right there, we have focused on two individuals. This is actually a kinship (family) story.

Jacob has two wives, Leah and Rachel. At this point we know Jacob prefers the younger wife, Rachel. The Bible tells the story of Rachel first. Jacob asks to marry Rachel when her older sister is still unmarried. This matches a pattern in Jacob's behavior of not respecting relatives, including his own brother.

For Laban to arrange the marriage of the younger before the elder sister might doom Leah to spinsterhood. Jacob ends up married to both sisters but loves only Rachel. Leah, the older sister, bears many sons, but Rachel had none. In the values of the ancient Mediterranean world,

children are not a choice. Children determine the inheritance. They are a gift to the family and a blessing from God.

Eventually, God helps Rachel give birth to a son of her own, Joseph. As is his proclivity Jacob plays favorites and prefers Joseph over his brothers. All of the other brothers in the story are sons of Leah. When Jacob gives the multicolored coat to Joseph, this isn't just a matter of Joseph getting a nicer gift than the other brothers and it isn't merely Jacob showing he loves Joseph more. Jacob is indicating who will be the heir. Reuben is the oldest son, but he is the son by Leah. Joseph is the oldest son of Rachel. Jacob is indicating that the inheritance will run through Rachel's side of the family, the wife he loves. Joseph is given a higher status.

Jacob also keeps Joseph home with him while the other brothers are out shepherding in the field. What went without being said is that Jacob is giving Joseph more than just an easier job. Joseph is in the manager's chair, while the brothers are out working. Jacob even sends Joseph out to give instructions to the older brothers.

Inheritance wasn't just a father-son relationship issue. If Joseph inherits, then the sons of Leah are out. These sons, Joseph's half brothers, have their own families to consider. What will happen to them and their children? In the ancient world, those who did not inherit counted on the inheritor. Joseph's brothers should be able to count on him to look after them and treat them fairly because they are all family. But Joseph's attitude about inheriting has already been made clear 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"* (Gen 37:6-7). Bible doesn't say whether God gave him that dream or not, Joseph is under no obligation to share it with his brothers. Yet, his attitude has already been made clear; he is bragging he will lord it over them, flaunting that he is to inherit and not them.

Alienating his brothers is a bad idea. The ancient world had no police force. *Your family* was the one to protect you from wandering caravans. Yet, Joseph's brothers don't protect him. Instead they are the very ones who sell him to the caravan. They very likely reason that removing the favored son of Rachel will ensure that Reuben will inherit and thus guarantee a better future for all their families.

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