



Poland Presbyterian Church

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The fifth in a series by
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The Jacob Chronicles: Sold Out

Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ² This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

¹² Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³ And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." ¹⁴ So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, ¹⁵ and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" ¹⁶ "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." ¹⁷ The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸ They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹ They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰ Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." ²¹ But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." ²² Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. ²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴ and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵ Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. ²⁸ When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

The Jacob Chronicles begin with the next generation. The stories of this family are engaging, not merely because they are sacred stories, but because this family has so many problems. They fight, they become violent, they cheat each other, they make up and they fall in love. One would think that things would improve from one generation to the next, but that is not the case. The story today focuses not on Jacob, but on his children, in particular his son Joseph. Joseph, (the younger brother) was an unlikable dreamer. He was a tattletale and the favored child. In short: he was a pain for his brothers.

Today, I want to retell the story, using a rhetorical reporting device, similar to what I used in the first sermon of this series. Then (2) I will draw some insights from the story, and finally (3) attempt to see how this chronicle bears upon our current age.

I

In the first Jacob Chronicle I envisioned them visiting a family therapist, and I read her report. Today, a generation later, we might imagine this family back in therapy. Here is what the report might say:

“Case 37128: After processing intake information from the Jacobson family, these are my findings. This is a large and complex family. The patriarch of the family, Jacob, is reasonably wealthy and that allows him to have two wives Leah and Rachel and two consorts, (slaves) Bilha and Zilpah. He has children with all four of them and this is the source of a great deal of the family conflict. The children of the wives (Rachel and Leah) believe themselves to be superior to the children of the slaves, although both enjoy the same legal status as children of Jacob. This is further complicated by Jacob's poor parenting skills. He plays favorites and the competition for his attention, affection and blessing continues among all twelve sons.

“Jacob, himself, is an interesting study. His wife Rachel died in childbirth with his youngest son Benjamin. Although this happened a number of years ago, Jacob is still in tremendous grief. It is apparent that Rachel was his true love, and this affection is now projected on the children he had with her, particularly Joseph. The favoritism he shows toward Joseph is the cause of the current conflict, because it is overt. Although he has moments of honesty about the limitations of Joseph, he continues to favor him. The symbol of this favoritism is an expensive coat he purchased for Joseph. The luxurious nature of this coat continues to cause strife for the family.

Ironically, I discovered that Jacob is also no stranger to parental favoritism. He indicated, that he was his mother's favorite child. He also said that his brother Esau was his father's favorite. This was the cause of a major conflict in his family of origin. He did indicate, however, that, after many years, he reconciled with his brother Esau.

“The current conflict is agitated by two additional factors. First, the immaturity of Joseph. He is well aware of his favorite status, and rather than play it down, he flaunts it. He wears the coat on every occasion thus adding fuel to the fire of his siblings' jealousy. His arrogance is compounded by his willingness to report his brother's misdeeds to his father. Joseph takes great delight in “tattling” and it serves to reinforce his inflated sense of self. Second, his brothers though not without their squabbles

have joined together in a united front against him. These two factors have resulted in the tragedy that is the cause for this therapeutic intervention.

“His brothers finally had enough and attempted to get rid of him. They sold him to slave traders, and Joseph's whereabouts is unknown at this time. They conspired together and came up with a story that their father Jacob still believes, that Joseph was killed by an animal. This has compounded Jacob's grief. One brother, Reuben (the oldest) confided that he tried to stop his other siblings. He expressed some guilt about the situation but ultimately participated in the conspiracy.

“In conclusion: this family shows a great deal of dysfunction. Pathology is rampant: tattling, favoritism, unresolved and misdirected grief, anger and abuse. This is sibling rivalry gone amuck. We are left with a broken and grieving father, Jacob, a guilty older brother, and other siblings who believe they were justified for the grievous actions they took. Their tale is a tragedy that shows little possibility of a happy resolution.”

II

Apart from the psychological dynamics and dysfunction, this story offers us a fascinating insight into family process and the work of God. First, custom and tradition were disregarded in the family dynamics. Middle Eastern tradition dictated that the oldest male should become the family leader. You might recall that this was also reversed in the first chronicle when Jacob stole the blessing and birthright. Jacob in turn favored his youngest children, especially Joseph. The implications of this are revolutionary! In the ancient cultures where custom prescribed authority and power, this story was subversive. It reversed an oppressive hierarchy. Indeed, it offers a foretaste of the teachings of Jesus, “the last shall be first and the first last.”

Second. This story is important to the Hebrew people because it tells how they came to dwell in Egypt. The story is a complete literary unit, (chapters 37-45)

Third, the story solidifies Jacob's importance in the Old Testament. His sons become the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel.

III

What does this teach us today?

1. It is an illustration of the amazing grace of God. Grace, by its very nature, is that which cannot be earned, rather it is freely given. The grace of God is at work here. Consider: does an arrogant self-righteous tattler like Joseph deserve God's favor? No! But God chooses whom God chooses. This is grace at work. The Bible is filled with God's strange choices:

- Moses was a murderer!
- Jeremiah was but a youth!
- Jesus was a Galilean. It was often muttered about Christ's ethnic identity: “What good could come from Nazareth?”
- The twelve disciples that Jesus called were fisherman, and tax collectors.
- Ironically, the one educated disciple was the one who would later betray him, Judas Iscariot!

- Paul was a persecutor of Christians.
- Peter an impulsive hot head.

All were chosen by God! This is the amazing grace that not only saves "the wretch," but also chooses the wretch for great tasks! Joseph, tattler, arrogant, brat.. God's chosen leader! "The stone which the builders have rejected has become the cornerstone!"

2. We need to be careful regarding our judgments of others. One of the most difficult assignments I have had in ministry was to sit on the Committee for Preparation for Ministry. This committee has the task of screening, accepting but also rejecting candidates for ordained ministry. One of the things that I continually reminded myself was that Joseph, Jacob, Paul, Peter and all the others would have a very difficult time with our ordination process.

We continually pass judgment on the worthiness, value, goodness and piety of others. We need to temper this tendency.

3. It speaks to us individually in terms of our own families. I saw a cartoon recently. The caption read: "Annual Meeting of Adult Children of Normal Families." It pictured a large auditorium. with about three or four people seated.

This is why I love the Old Testament stories: All of us live with family secrets. During the 80's and 90's it was fashionable to claim and own our family dysfunction. All of us are human and our families are usually flawed and most of them could be described as dysfunctional... This chronicle suggests that our families of origin often explain some of our behavior and the way we think and do things... but it is not an excuse! It is an explanation. We read that Jacob eventually took responsibility for his behavior. We anticipate the Joseph will also. This tells you and me that we may come from mixed up, crazy and even abusive families... but the very nature of maturing and growing is to grow away from that, to resist taking our identity and our destiny from our dysfunctional history.

4. The unfinished nature of today's story is bothersome. But it rings with reality. Joseph became a slave in Egypt; his brothers sold him out and convinced their father Jacob, that he was dead. Jacob was in pain with grief... and the story probably ended there for that family for a long time. Loose ends; conjecture about what happened; pain and grief are the realities of life. Closure is a luxury that we don't always have. There are times when we are left with pain and sorrow. There are things that we don't understand. We live with many loose ends. That does not mean that God has abandoned us. It means that the story is not yet complete. The apostle Paul put this so clearly in First Corinthians (13): "Now I see in a mirror dimly, then I shall see face to face... now I know in part, then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood."

Next week, our chronicles will come to a conclusion. Ultimately, in God's time the loose ends are bound.... In the meantime, we live by grace: a grace that enables us to thrive amidst dysfunction; a grace that calls us as God's own, partners in redemption; a grace that never sells us out. rather it frees us to live. This is the Good News. Amen.