

## “Families Are Tough: Generational Trauma”

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Genesis 37:1-11

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Today we start a new series for the new year, “Families Are Tough.” Like you might guess just from the somewhat “on the nose” series title, we’re talking about family. We’re talking about immediate families, extended families, adopted families, along with no shortage of overlap into how we consider ourselves a church family. And obviously, as everyone knows, there’s never any reason for concern in all the web of connections and relationships within a family, because everyone always gets along.

Not so much? No, of course not. Our families of origin and our present families have the capacity to bless and fill our lives in ways few other relationships can, and they also have the potential to wound us more deeply—we’re talking lifelong sorts of scars.

Fortunately, all of this is a fairly recent development, because prior to 100 years ago, families lived in a kind of utopian zen, with no conflict or tension ever, so the only thing we have to do is look back in history, especially all the way to the Bible, and we’ll find families living in harmony and all the solutions we need to these strictly modern problems.

No, not so much that either. In fact, if you want to find anything about families in Scripture, especially the Old Testament—which tends to operate more on the generational scale than the New Testament—you’ll find more Game of Thrones than Leave It to Beaver.

But there is good news. We’re not just stuck in this loop of drama with the only message being, “Yeah, it’s tough.” But how might the gospel of Christ’s grace speak into something that can feel deeply broken and dysfunctional as the family. That’s something of what we’ll be exploring as we consider the family in particular through the lens of one family in particular: Jacob’s. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, Genesis 37:1-11.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Spirit of God, we pray for your patience this day. Truly we are often slow to recognize the movements of your grace around us and within us, and often we are slow to extend it ourselves. Be with us, we pray, and open our eyes to hear your gospel by your Word. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

It was a coat, but then it was definitely not just a coat. V. 3 reads, “[Jacob] had made [Joseph] a long robe with sleeves.” But if you’re familiar with this story already, you have heard another rendering of that phrase as “a coat of many colors,” or maybe the even more fantastic basis of the Broadway musical, Joseph’s “Amazing, Technicolor Dreamcoat.”

Whether it was technicolor or not, it was apparently an extravagant gift, a sign of favor given to one son but not the others. So obviously the coat was not just a coat. Hear what follows in v. 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.”

There’s a lot of baggage in this coat. It’s not just a coat anymore. It’s the representation and embodiment of, depending on who you talk to, favoritism, resentment, excess, neglect. Sometimes a coat isn’t just a coat.

And sometimes a bear isn’t just a bear. When I was a child, my best stuffed animal was Winnie the Pooh. Pooh bear was well loved. But then one day, Pooh disappeared. I was heartbroken, and rightfully so, I was only fifteen.

No, but Pooh did disappear at one point in my childhood, until he indeed faded from memory and mattress both.

Now, my sister in her room for years had this large, comically extensive display of stuffed animals—you can see where this is going maybe. They were all situated on the top of a big row of shelves, up by the ceiling. A few rows deep of stuffed animals, to the point that while you could tell there was a crowd up there, it was like the cover of Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band—you couldn’t really tell who all was in there unless you really got up close and studied it.

She had had that for years, and I never really paid it much mind.

Until one day, I was in her room for some reason and just happened to look up at the top of the shelves at all the stuffed animals. And looking from just such an angle I could see through a small gap in the first row or two a glimpse of part of a familiar red shirt and a tuft of yellowish fur. And I thought, “No way.”

I pulled a chair over by the shelves, dug through the other stuffed animals, and you guessed it, my long lost Pooh bear.

I confronted my sister about it, and she fessed up. Years earlier—years!—she had added him to her little collection, and our parents knew about it. So she had kept Pooh bear captive, away from his rightful home, for years, with impunity. Needless to say, I took him back.

And to this day, it remains a tongue-in-cheek sore spot between my sister and me. I mean, it’s just a stuffed animal. Haha, the things we thought were important when we were kids. But also, you took my Pooh bear and kept him from me for years, and Mom and Dad, y’all knew she did it. The bear wasn’t just a bear.

Just like the coat of many colors wasn’t just a coat.

And as we’re reading this, I’m sure some of us are wondering, “What was the father thinking?”

I mean, surely, even if, and this is a big *if*, one allows for maybe have a stronger inclination toward one child over another for a season, you don’t make a brazen display of favor to one over, in this case, all the others. What was Jacob thinking? This is Parenting 101. You want a surefire way to breed resentment between you and your other children and among all your children toward each other, that’s the ticket.

So when Joseph comes at his brothers with dreams he had, dreams that not too subtly indicate that they would be bowing down to him, and not just his brothers, but his father too, they see this brat who presumed to tattle on them, who was the favorite son, who was shown greater favor by their father, who then has the gall to

tell them of dreams of his superiority over them. Well, at that point the dreams weren't just dreams, so should anyone be surprised that they hate him? Dad, what were you thinking?

But then if we had Jacob up here and made him give an account of his actions, why he would do something so toxic and potentially harmful on a generational scale, he might say any of the following:

“He reminds me of my wife who I loved, who died not too long ago. I worked for a dishonest man, my father-in-law, for fourteen years to marry her. He swindled me, but I got him back.” (Nevermind that Jacob showed brazen favoritism between his two wives, who were in fact sisters, each of whom subsequently for the sake of bearing more children gave their maids to him, who then in turn became known as his wives too.) “And she struggled bearing children, but after a long time waiting, this child Joseph came along.

“Oh, and I'd like to add,” Jacob might continue, “Who are you to judge me? I was passed over when I was a boy. *My* father, who actually just died too not too long ago, loved *my* brother more than me, and look how I turned out! Sure I had to trick him into giving me a fair shake, but he had it coming. Oh, and my brother? Yeah I had to trick him too, but he overcame it. Look at him now, a family of his own, household of his own.” (Nevermind that there were decades of strife between the two brothers, and Jacob was worried his brother would come to kill him.) “And hey, we patched things up. My children will be no different.”

“So why shouldn't I give this beautiful gift to my son whom I love?”

Sometimes a coat isn't just a coat. Sometimes dreams aren't just dreams. Sometimes a bear isn't just a bear.

Friends, each of us has some kind of family of origin, and some kind of present family. Could be biological family, could be extended family, could be adoptive family, could be surrogate family, you name it, but each of us has one. Now some of us may say, “Whew, I know we got our drama, but at least it's not like Jacob and Joseph and his brothers,” while others might say, “Hey, I hear all the drama of Jacob and Joseph and the technicolor dreamcoat, but wait til you hear about my people.”

We've all got those stories. There may be some truly wonderful and warm stories, for which we can and should be thankful. There may be some stories that were painful or confusing at the time but now we just look back on and chuckle. And then there may be some stories that were hurtful then and left scars that even now shape us and affect how we relate with our parents, siblings, children, aunts and uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews, you name it, anyone.

And for each of those stories we know the story doesn't just start. It's just a matter of when you decide to pick up. Like in those opening verses, “Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob.” Some translations have it as “These are the descendants of Jacob,” and maybe that's more appropriate, but in just that phrasing, “This is the story of the family of Jacob,” you almost have to laugh. *This* is the story? Have you not been listening? The story started a long time ago, and a lot has happened that shapes what's happening now. A coat isn't just a coat. A bear isn't just a bear. A family isn't just a family: among many other things, it's a collection of stories handed down, and stories that we lived, that shape us, for better or worse.

And inevitably, it's some of the harder stories that loom the largest for us, that can harden our hearts toward one another, that become the lenses through which we view the world, interact with the world, and impact all

relationships and especially the ones closest to us, so in turn the stories that shaped us inevitably shape the stories we'll live out and will shape those that come after.

Families are tough, no way around it. But is that it? Are we just condemned to repeat, recycle, and reinterpret the dysfunction that we witnessed and lived through in our lives and reenact it for those that come after us? Or might we be freed into something else, something better? Is there something that can reshape and restore whatever brokenness we sense within us and can restore whatever brokenness that has shaped us?

There may not be some magical set of words, some silver bullet that erases and resolves generations of dysfunction in your world, in your household, or mine. But there may be a word that gives us a different lens, a different paradigm, something that tells us that the past is the past, and while the past shapes us, it is not the first or the last word upon our lives.

In Romans we read these words, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."

And I wonder what stories might be written when we hear that word of grace, the word of adoption, that word of love and embrace of our Father in heaven preceding and superseding all other stories that shape our identity. I wonder what it could look like within our families if we think about coats or bears or dreams, that we think first not of unprocessed grief and cycle of favoritism and manipulation, like Jacob, not of privilege and entitlement, like Joseph, not of resentment and neglect, like Joseph's brothers, but rather of signs of grace of a Father who loves us, and of a brother, a joint heir, Christ himself, who though before us gave himself for us, that we might be glorified in him.

My wife Frances has two younger siblings. (I asked her permission to tell this story.) She has one younger sister by about 18 months, and then a younger brother about six years younger. So it meant that she and her sister were in college or just out of college when her brother was in high school.

Now growing up, Frances and her sister had their rules and boundaries, things they could do and things they couldn't do. But they started noticing as their brother was growing up, especially in those high school years, that the rules and boundaries weren't quite as strict for him as they had been for them. He didn't have things like curfews, for example. He could go out, spend time with his friends.

And so at one point they go to their dad and ask, "Hey! What gives? How come he gets to do all this and we didn't?" And honestly it was more jokingly than anything else, because their assurance of their parents' care for them, for all of them, outweighed any kind of signal they might have gathered from a curfew or no curfew. Still they asked, "Hey! What gives?"

And their father said, "He's nice to your mother."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.