

Message #10
Joseph

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GOD'S PEOPLE AND THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL UNITY
GENESIS 42:35-43:34

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

According to John #13 v. 35 (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 13:35) Jesus declared to His disciples, **“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** Later in John's Gospel in #17 vv. 20-23 (JOHN 17:20) our Lord prayed to His Heavenly Father, **“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, (JOHN 17:21) that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (JOHN 17:22) The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, (JOHN 17:23) I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”**

The foundation and content of the Christian message is doctrinal truth. But according to Jesus, the hook, the contact point, the sales pitch that attracts unbelievers to that message is spiritual unity. What causes a watching world to sit up and take notice is Christians who love one another.

The Old Testament version of this unity principle is found in Psalm 133 (PSALM 133:1), which begins in v. 1: **“Behold, how good and pleasant it is/ when brothers dwell in unity!”**

According to the Bible the building block of society is marriage and the family. The post-Christian world in which we live is producing an increasing number of broken families. According to the Pew Research Center (2019) the US has the world's highest rate of children living in single parent households. (PROJECTOR OFF) This amounts to one-fourth of all children. Our country has one of the highest divorce rates among the countries of the world. For hurting mates and suffering children who don't know the meaning of family stability and a secure home those families which are solidly based on Biblical principles and which display spiritual unity increasingly stand out like light in the darkness.

The other divine institution identified in the Bible is the church. Certainly Jesus had His followers in mind when He spoke about the importance of unity. Families and churches which display unity point people to the true God.

In the early 1700s there was a considerable amount of migration which occurred within Europe as war, economic challenges, and religious persecution prompted people to move from one part of Europe to another. Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (PROJECTOR ON--- VON ZINZENDORF) was a devout Lutheran who lived in eastern Germany. In 1722 he bought a large estate from his grandmother. Shortly after that a

group of Moravians showed up at his place, seeking refuge from religious persecution. The Moravians were Christians from what we know as the Czech Republic. They traced their religious ancestry to a Reformer by the name of Jan Hus. They suffered severe persecution at the hands of the Catholic Church.

Count von Zinzendorf let them live on his estate. The Moravians named the place "Herrnhut," meaning "the Lord's Watch." In the next few years they were joined by Anabaptists, Lutherans, and other Reformed Christians. They came together to this refuge with different cultures, different languages, and different religious traditions. This presented some challenges. How were they all going to get along? Could they get along?

God's people will make a positive impact upon the world only when they display spiritual unity and love for one another. How does a family or a Christian community or a church develop and maintain that quality? Our study in the life of Joseph today has some answers.

I.

Let's begin by considering the last four verses of Genesis #42 which describe GOD'S PEOPLE AND THE PROBLEM OF DISUNITY. (I. GOD'S PEOPLE AND THE PROBLEM OF DISUNITY) From our study of Joseph we have seen that Jacob's family did not display a lot of unity. Years earlier the Lord had revealed His plan to choose one family that would be the object of His special blessing. By blessing this family, which would become a nation, the divine idea was that the other people of the world would be drawn to this nation's God.

Thus the psalmist (PSALM 67:7) wrote in the last verse of Psalm 67, "**God blesses us, / That all the ends of the earth may fear Him.**" King Solomon prayed in 1 Kings #8 vv. 59 & 60 (1 KINGS 8:59), "**Let these words of mine, with which I have pleaded before the Lord, be near to the Lord our God day and night, and may he maintain the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel, as each day requires,** (1 Kings 8:60) **that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no other.**"

God's promise of blessing had passed from Abraham to his son Isaac to his son Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons and his children began to have children. So finally God's promise to Abraham that he would have descendants who would become a great nation shows signs of beginning to be fulfilled. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But if Jacob's family is going to be a blessing and a testimony to the other nations of the world, there must be spiritual unity. And we have seen already that Jacob has a fractured family. Instead of love there is jealousy. There is jealousy among his four wives. There is jealousy among his twelve sons. Jacob had favored Joseph, the son of his favorite wife. The other brothers had sold Joseph into slavery. They convinced Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast, and they kept the truth a secret for the next twenty years. The oldest son, Reuben, had sexual relations with one of Jacob's

wives. So he lost his birthright and the trust of Jacob. We have seen in #38 that another son, Judah, had married a pagan woman and had sex with his daughter-in-law whom he thought was a temple prostitute.

Jacob himself had shown little trust in God. His operating philosophy that the end justifies the means had rubbed off on his sons. So people in this family were separated from each other and from God. Outwardly there seemed to be little hope that this family was going to be a blessing to anyone.

But God is a sovereign God who always keeps His promises. We saw last week that He was using Joseph as His instrument to get this family to deal with its disunity. The Lord had placed Joseph as the number two official in Egypt, and the Lord had arranged a famine to bring Joseph's family down to Egypt. Joseph recognized his brothers when they showed up, but they didn't recognize him. So he began to test their spiritual status and to provoke them to deal with their sin. Among other things he put Simeon in prison until the other brothers should return with Joseph's full brother Benjamin. Joseph also put the money that they gave for the Egyptian grain back in their sacks.

Now in vv. 35-38 of #42 we find that the brothers discover that their money is in their sacks. They are upset because they fear that this Egyptian ruler who accused them of spying will now accuse them of stealing. For a second time they have returned home to their father with money in their pockets but without a brother. The first time they did it when they sold Joseph to the Midianite traders. Now they have left Simeon behind.

Someone asked me last week why Joseph locked up Simeon rather than one of the other brothers. The text does not tell us. I was thinking about it this week, and the thing that I noticed was that in #42 v. 21 the brothers did not realize that Joseph could understand them and they said that their bad situation was because of what they did to Joseph twenty years earlier. They saw his distress and they did not listen. Simeon was named by his mother. His name means "He has heard." His mother Leah gave him that name because she was not loved by her husband but God heard her cry for children, especially a son. Perhaps there is a subtle message that Joseph is sending here that he has heard what the brothers are saying, and God has heard his distress also.

In v. 36 Jacob's response shows his painful awareness of the brokenness of his family. He is separated from Joseph. He is separated from Simeon. Now he may be separated from his favorite remaining son Benjamin. He accuses his sons of having caused this separation, which was truer than any of them yet realized. Jacob also feels separated from God. What a mess!

Reuben then makes a rather strange offer. He says that Jacob can kill his two sons if he does not return home with Benjamin. Reuben had lost his birthright when he went to bed with one of his father's wives. He had returned to Jacob with the other brothers to break the news of Joseph's supposed death. Perhaps as the oldest son Reuben bore more of his father's upsettedness for what happened. The truth was that Reuben had

been the only one who had wanted to have Joseph released from the pit. For years he had kept this secret while enduring the distrust of his father.

In v. 38 Jacob speaks of Benjamin and says that his brother is dead and Benjamin is the only one left. How does that make the other brothers feel. Jacob doesn't care much about them?

This is a fractured family. Outwardly there appears to be little hope that this clan can make any kind of positive contribution to the world. There seems to be little hope of spiritual unity--- unless God intervenes.

At Herrnhut in Germany in the early 1700s it was a group of genuine Christians who found themselves living together. But they came from different cultural backgrounds, they spoke different languages, and they had different religious traditions. Difficulties arose about their religious status. Were they part of the local Lutheran parish church, or were they actually a community of "true Christians" (as they called themselves), governed by their own elders and pastored by their lay leaders? Opinions differed profoundly, some even calling Zinzendorf the "beast" from the Apocalypse for trying to keep the Herrnhut community within the Lutheran Church. (Christianity Today Institute #151)

In our congregation we are blessed with what seems to be a great spirit of unity. We all seem to get along pretty well. But in our larger community, as we approach the elections, there is an obvious political division. Each party and each major presidential candidate perceives the other side to be the face of the devil. How is this going to work out? What contribution can we Christians make? We shall see.

II.

In the first 15 verses of Genesis #43 we shall see if there are any helpful lessons for achieving unity. Here we learn about GOD'S PEOPLE AND UNKNOWING STEPS TOWARD UNITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. GOD'S PEOPLE AND...) Jacob may have felt that everything was against him. But in reality God was working everything together for good. He had brought Joseph to power in Egypt, and now He was using Joseph and circumstances to bring this family together.

The circumstances involved a famine. Jacob's clan soon used up the grain supplies that they had obtained in Egypt. There was no other food to be found in Canaan. So Jacob gave the green light for his sons to return to Egypt. But Judah reminded his father that the Egyptian prime minister had made it clear that they would get nothing unless they brought Benjamin with them.

In v. 6 Jacob blames his sons for the situation whereby this Egyptian official requires Benjamin to show up before him. He tries to delay. Judah then intercedes and promises to make sure that Benjamin is kept safe. If something should happen to Benjamin, he offers to bear the blame of his father forever. This is the same guy who came up with the idea twenty years ago to sell Joseph to the slave traders. This is the same guy who

married a pagan Canaanite in #38 and became involved with someone he thought was a temple prostitute. Something good perhaps is happening to Judah. He is unknowingly taking steps toward family unity.

Jacob finally agrees to let Benjamin go and suggests that extra money and some of the best products of the land be sent to this Egyptian prime minister. In v. 14 Jacob says, **“May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.”**

Jacob is unknowingly taking steps toward uniting his family. He is doing it by acting in faith. It is a weak faith. It is a faith forced upon him by circumstances--- circumstances arranged by a sovereign God and by His servant Joseph. But it is faith nonetheless. The object of that faith is El Shaddai, God Almighty. He is the true God. He is not a local god like the Egyptians had, but a God who has power to change the hearts of even Egyptian rulers. It is in this God whom Jacob finally decides to trust.

Notice that in this chapter Jacob is called “Israel.” That name had not been used of Jacob since #37. The reason is that “Israel” seems to be used of Jacob only in contexts where he is operating by faith, where he is trusting in God. Jacob had shown no evidence of doing that in some time. If his family was going to establish spiritual unity, it was essential that the father of the clan get his act together spiritually. Here we see the Lord bringing events to bear to prod Jacob in that direction.

The Lord often does a similar thing in fractured families--- and in churches today. Members of a Christian family develop grudges and resentments over the years. Issues are not resolved and communication breaks down. Sins are hidden and secrets are kept. Family members become alienated from each other and the Lord. But because the Lord is so concerned about spiritual unity, He will often arrange circumstances in such a way that Christian families and churches take unknowing steps toward unity. God forces His people to deal with the issues and to come to terms with each other and with the Lord. It is possible that some of you in the sound of my voice are experiencing that right now.

III.

In the last part of this chapter we learn about GOD’S PEOPLE AND OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO UNITY. (III. GOD’S PEOPLE AND OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO UNITY) There seem to me to be at least three barriers to unity which are identified in this section.

A.

First, in vv. 16-25, there is a barrier of UNCONFESSED SIN which is addressed. (III. GOD’S PEOPLE... A. UNCONFESSED SIN) When the brothers arrive in Egypt, they are invited to a big noon meal. They go to Joseph’s house, or palace, in considerable fear. Joseph had originally been harsh with them. He had accused them of spying. Now he is inviting them to a banquet. They know that they have money in their possession

that belongs to him. How can they have fellowship with this important ruler of Egypt when there is a potential crime issue that is unresolved?

The penalty in Egypt for stealing, or making money from something that did not belong to you, was slavery. Verse 18 indicates that fear of this punishment was on their minds. These same brothers had sold something that had not belonged to them more than twenty years earlier. They had sold Joseph into slavery. In #42 they admitted their sin to one another. But they have not yet confessed it to Jacob, and it is not clear whether they have really confessed it to the Lord.

The brothers recognize that they need to straighten out the situation of the returned money in their sacks before they can eat with the prime minister. In that culture sharing a meal together indicated fellowship, a proper relationship among the people who are eating. In 1 Corinthians #11 the Apostle Paul urges Christians to examine themselves before they participate in the Lord's Supper, because sharing the meal together implies fellowship with the host. If there is unconfessed sin in our lives, we can't be having proper fellowship with the Lord.

In our text the brothers approach Joseph's steward and honestly describe the situation. The steward is gracious in his response to them. He claims that he knows what was going on all along. He tells them not to be afraid. He reassures them that they can eat with the Egyptian prime minister. Simeon is brought out of prison to join them at the meal. So instead of being made slaves, they are served.

In v. 23 Joseph's steward makes a statement that their God had put the treasure in their sack. Here was an Egyptian official, one who was expected to be a believer in the various Egyptian gods, pointing to their God as being sovereignly involved in this money deal. That must have been confusing to these guys. But the Lord, partly through Joseph, was bringing this family toward the point of dealing with unconfessed sin. Guilt was keeping them from seeing God's hand of grace in the return of their money.

Unconfessed sin was a major problem in Joseph's family. For over twenty years the sons had kept their sin in regard to Joseph from Jacob. All of them had used deceit and trickery in difficult circumstances. Jacob had blamed his sons for many of the family difficulties when it was his own blatant favoritism and lack of faith and poor example which had played a crucial part in the family difficulties. There is no clear evidence that any of them had confessed their sin to God. This unconfessed sin had to be dealt with if spiritual unity was going to be established. That same remedy is necessary in our churches and our families when disunity occurs.

In that early church community in Herrnhut in eastern Germany their different cultural and religious backgrounds also presented a problem. In August of 1727 Count von Zinzendorf spent three hours one evening addressing these Christians about the necessity of spiritual unity. Many of the Christians were moved to repentance. Three months later a number of the Christians spent the entire night in prayer. One of the

pastors was moved to tears and uttered words of repentance he had never spoken before.

According to a historian by the name of Diana Severance, **“The next morning, Pastor Rothe invited the Herrnhut community to a joint communion with his nearby congregation ... on Wednesday evening, August 13. Count Zinzendorf visited every house in Herrnhut in preparation for this Lord's Supper. The exiles, gathered at Herrnhut, had come to a conviction of their own sinfulness, need, and helplessness. During the service, they made many painful prayers for themselves, for fellow Christians still under persecution, and for their continued unity. Count Zinzendorf made a penitential confession in the name of the congregation. The community united in fellowship. Count Zinzendorf looked upon that August 13th as ‘a day of the outpourings of the Holy Spirit upon the congregation; it was its Pentecost.’”** (Christianity.com, 4/28/2010)

B.

In vv. 26-34 another barrier to unity is confronted. That barrier is JEALOUSY. (III. A. B. JEALOUSY) It was jealousy that had resulted in Joseph being sold as a slave. Joseph more than anyone understood what an obstacle jealousy was to spiritual unity. Was it still a problem in his family? Joseph needed to find out.

The brothers came into Joseph's banquet hall, and pleasantries were exchanged. Of special significance to Joseph was the presence of Benjamin. Benjamin was the only brother that he had by his mother. When Joseph had last seen him, Benjamin was just an infant. Joseph was emotionally touched by seeing him for the first time in twenty years. He had to leave the room to avoid breaking down in front of them.

When Joseph regained his composure and returned, the meal was served. Verse 32 makes reference to the Egyptian caste system. Joseph by virtue of his position as the number two official in the Egyptian government was at the top of the caste system. His marriage to the daughter of the most important priest in the country also gave him status. His position meant that Joseph would eat apart from other Egyptians who ranked lower in this social system. Joseph's brothers were Semites who raised and killed and ate animals that the Egyptians regarded as unclean. They were foreigners. So they had to eat apart from all of the Egyptians, Verse 32 says that eating bread with the Hebrews was loathsome to the Egyptians.

Then in v. 34 Joseph conducts a crucial test. He gives Benjamin five times as much food as the other brothers. This was a common way to honor people in some parts of the ancient world. The honored guest was not required to eat all of the extra food. But extra portions given to a particular guest marked him out for special distinction.

Jealousy is a major obstacle to spiritual unity. Twenty years earlier Jacob had favored Joseph over his brothers in obvious ways. This had created tremendous jealousy in the other sons. This jealousy had led to the selling of Joseph as a slave. If jealousy is still a problem, it is going to become evident. The brothers are going to have wine as well as

food. Their tongues are going to be loosened. They think that Joseph can't understand their language. If jealousy is still a problem, Joseph is going to hear them make comments about Benjamin right now.

But there is no hint in the text of any problem. The brothers seem to have changed, or at least they are in the process of changing. Jealousy as an obstacle to family unity seems to have dissipated.

Jealousy can be an obstacle to spiritual unity in our families. It happens when we parents and grandparents favor a particular child in obvious and unhealthy ways. It can also happen when children take on a distorted view of reality. Sometimes kids decide to focus on certain behaviors and overlook other behaviors to come up with reasons to be jealous. Whatever the cause, jealousy can mess up a family.

In a church feelings of jealousy can develop when people think that someone has more of an "in" than they do with the pastor or the youth director or an elder or deaconess. Someone may be jealous that another person is up front in the service more than they are or that someone else seems to get his way more than they do or that someone else gets more help than they do or more attention and recognition.

Hopefully there is evenhandedness or fairness or valid reasons for some of these preferences in a church. But the important thing is that believers in a church need to be sensitive to their motivations for behavior, and to their unhealthy feelings of jealousy that may crop up from time to time. Is my complaint or my objection or my negativity legitimate, or is there jealousy behind it? Jealousy can be a unity breaker. We need to guard against it.

C.

A third obstacle to spiritual unity that I find in Jacob's family is LACK OF FAITH IN GOD. (III. A. B. C. LACK OF FAITH IN GOD) From our entire study of Joseph we have seen that his brothers and his parents consistently exhibited a lack of faith in God. When the family was faced with a problem, instead of trusting God, they turned to deceit and trickery. They did it with their father and father-in-law Laban. They did it at Shechem with the Canaanites who were killed. After a while they came to use it on each other. The brothers used it to get rid of Joseph. Then they hid the truth from their father for the next twenty years.

In this passage we see the lack of faith evidenced in Jacob's pessimistic outlook on life. Back in v. 36 of #42 Jacob complained, "**All these things are against me.**" We see this lack of faith in his hesitation to send Benjamin with his brothers. We see it in the blaming of his sons for the present situation. But the Lord used circumstances and Joseph to move Jacob and his other sons toward faith in Him. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jacob's family could not accomplish God's purposes unless spiritual unity was established. They could not glorify Him unless mutual love and acceptance was going to

become a hallmark of their family that was intended to become a nation. Jacob's family lived in a world where that kind of unity was absent.

The Egyptians were typical of the social distinctions that pervaded that ancient world. In that society only the upper class was allowed to have access to the most important temples. People of lesser status could not enjoy those privileges. They could not even worship their gods in the same way. Typically those of lesser status had their own separate household gods to worship. Foreigners like the Hebrews had even less hope for respect.

Among the chosen nation that God was establishing it was to be a different story. God's people were expected to have a spiritual unity. They would have a priestly class whose existence would communicate important truths about God's holiness. But they were all to worship one God. They were to have one temple to which all would have access. And they would have one law to which all would be held accountable. Initially the Lord did not even want them to have a king so that there would be direct dependence upon God.

Foreigners were to be welcomed into their communities. The spiritual unity among God's people was intended to be a witness to a surrounding world that had little experience with true spiritual unity.

Today the Lord intends that the church of Christ display that same kind of unity--- both in the family and in the local church. Jesus says that this unity will have a tremendous impact upon a watching world.

The time of confession and spiritual renewal at Herrnhut that came out of the Lord's Supper observance on August 13, 1727, resulted in remarkable spiritual advances. One key product was a commitment to prayer. The Christians organized a round the clock prayer ministry. That regular prayer time continued for 100 years.

This small Christian community in eastern Germany gradually expanded its influence. In the next thirty years these Christians sent out 226 missionaries throughout the world from Greenland to South Africa and from Romania to our state of Georgia. These were the first Protestant missionaries. The set of missionaries who went out to Georgia had an encounter with John Wesley which influenced his conversion to Christ. It is estimated that one out of every sixty of these Christians became a missionary. What an impact they had on the world for Christ!

How did it happen? It came from a commitment to Christ. It came from a determination to display unity. It came from a serious commitment to prayer. We have a weekly prayer meeting every Wednesday morning at 11:00. A couple of us also meet for prayer at 9:20 AM before our Sunday service. If any of you would like to join us for either of these, please do. May God bless our families and our church community.