

Message #3  
Joseph

Kurt Hedlund  
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JOSEPH AND THE CALL TO LEADERSHIP  
GENESIS 37:1-11

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Consider these observations about the challenges that come with leadership: **“The leader is assailed because he is a leader, and the effort to equal him is merely added proof of that leadership. Failing to equal or to excel, the follower seeks to depreciate and to destroy--- but only confirms once more the superiority of that which he strives to supplant. There is nothing new in this. It is as old as the world and as old as the human passions--- envy, fear, greed, ambition, and the desire to surpass. And it all avails nothing. If the leader truly leads, he remains--- the leader. Master-poet, master-painter, master-workman, each in his turn is assailed, and each holds his laurels through the ages. That which is good or great makes itself known, no matter how loud the clamor of denial. That which deserves to live--- lives.”**

The comments of management guru Peter Drucker? The observations of famous pastor Rick Warren? The remarks of an advisor defending one of the presidential candidates? (CADILLAC AD) Actually these words come from a magazine ad--- in the Saturday Evening Post--- in 1915--- for the Cadillac Car Company.

Despite the unusual setting these words express an important truth about leadership. Those who lead in any significant way will be assailed. The motivation behind those attacks may be envy, fear, greed, ambition, and the desire to surpass, as the Cadillac ad mentions. (PROJECTOR OFF) Sometimes it is legitimate philosophical or religious differences. This holds true not only in the secular world but also in the Christian arena. Christian leaders can expect attacks from without and within the Christian community, whether that leadership involves the church, some other Christian organization, the home, or the workplace.

The challenge for us who exercise Christian leadership is to be attacked for the right reasons. If we are going to be assailed for our leadership, it is better that it be for our Biblical convictions, for our commitment to the truth, or for our core philosophical beliefs. We will encounter enough opposition on those grounds. What we want to avoid is being attacked for our tactlessness, for our insensitivity, for our inconsistency, or for our failure to follow Biblical principles.

Peter Drucker, regarded by many as the foremost authority on leadership, especially in the business world, wrote in his book *Management*, **“They may forgive a man a great deal: incompetence, ignorance, insecurity, or bad manners. But they will not forgive his lack of integrity.”** Drucker goes on to say that integrity is essential for any position of leadership.

The question is: How can we maintain our integrity and avoid unnecessary attacks when we are in positions of leadership? Our passage today about Joseph provides us with some help about that and about what our responsibilities as followers are toward legitimate leaders.

As we have seen from our study of Joseph thus far, this young man came from a tough family background. He lived in a household that had four mothers. Both his parents and his brothers operated on the basis of the principle that the end justifies the means. They were therefore prone to use deceit and dishonesty when they got into tough situations. But Joseph broke free from this background. He chose to take responsibility for his own actions and to trust in a gracious God. Today we are going to shift our focus from Joseph's parents and family to Joseph himself and his development of godly leadership qualities.

I.

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. JOSEPH AND HIS FATHER...) First, in vv. 1-4 of Genesis #37, we are going to consider the subject of JOSEPH AND HIS FATHER: THE DANGERS OF FAVORITISM. Verse 1 makes reference to the geographical setting for our story. We saw last time, three weeks ago, that a key incident happened in Genesis #34 at Shechem. (JACOB MAP) The Canaanites of this town raped Jacob's daughter Dinah, and the sons of Jacob responded by killing all of the men of the town.

Chapter 35 describes the return of Jacob and his clan (HEBRON SHECHEM MAP) after a stop in Bethel to his hometown of Hebron. Along the way Jacob's wife, and Joseph's mother, dies. In #36 we are given a list of the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob.

Now we find that Jacob has returned to the place where he was raised and where his father is still living. Hebron is to the south of Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Today it is a Palestinian town, but there is a small, vocal Jewish community there. (HEBRON TOMB) There is also a large building, built by Herod the Great, that surrounds the tomb of the patriarchs, where Abraham and Isaac are buried. In better days it is a place visited by tourists.

Some thirty years earlier Jacob had left Hebron in fear that his twin brother Esau would kill him for tricking him out of his father's blessing and birthright. (PROJECTOR OFF) Jacob had gone to live far to the north in Syria with his mother's brother. There he had married Laban's two daughters and begun a family. Now he has returned home to stay.

Beginning in v. 2 of #37 the author of Genesis turns his attention in the rest of the book to the descendants of Jacob, especially to Joseph. We are told that Joseph is seventeen and that he is pasturing the flock with his half-brothers, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, the servants of Leah and Rachel. In that culture Bilhah and Zilpah were regarded as secondary wives. Rachel and Leah were regarded as primary wives. Rachel, the favorite wife of Jacob, was Joseph's mother.

The tension in the story is quickly identified as we are told that Joseph brought back a bad report about his half-brothers to Jacob. The implication is that the report is true, and we are given the first hint that Joseph is going to have a character different from that of his brothers. For he displays the qualities of honesty and integrity. He also feels a greater responsibility to his father than to his brothers. But in communicating the truth to his father, Joseph opens himself up to attack from his half-brothers.

In v. 3 we find another source of tension: **“Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors.”** Jacob loves Joseph because he is the son of his old age. That in itself does not seem to be an especially godly reason. Jacob’s father Isaac had loved Jacob’s twin brother Esau more than Jacob because Esau had been a hunter, and Isaac had a taste for game. You might think that Jacob would have learned from his own experience about the problems of favoritism. But he did not.

There is a common tendency among families for parents to favor the youngest child. I suspect that this is due to the fact that this one will always be the baby and the last one to leave the nest. Often parents are a little more relaxed in their parenting by the time that they get to the last child. Also the financial situation has sometimes improved so that they are able to spend more money on the last one. But those among us who are last-borns would probably object that we were the ones who got all the hand-me-downs, right?

There are other reasons why Jacob may have favored Joseph. We know that Rachel was the wife whom he loved most, and Joseph was the oldest son of Rachel. Then also Joseph seems to have been the most faithful to his dad. He gave an honest, though unfavorable, report to him about his brothers. Then there is also a natural tendency for parents to favor children who are the most obedient and compliant.

Jacob’s favoritism of Joseph became even more obvious to the other sons when Jacob made a special robe for him. Instead of picking up one off the rack at WalMart, he had one custom made at Nieman Marcus. Traditionally this robe has been called “the coat of many colors,” or something to that effect. The NIV calls it “a richly ornamented robe.” The original Hebrew word is rare. But today most scholars think that the word means “a full length robe.” It may have had different colors in it with some ornamentation. But the basic idea is that it was a long robe. Such robes were not practical for work. If you were working in the shop or in the field, you would be tripping over it, and it would be getting in the way. So such robes were generally worn by supervisors and officials and royalty. In this case it was worn by the favored child. Perhaps the implication was that Joseph did not have to do any dirty work.

The fact that Jacob gave the robe to Joseph suggests that the father planned to give the birthright and the special blessing to him. Normally that went to the oldest son. But there were at least two reasons that it didn’t happen here. The first is that the oldest son had disqualified himself in Jacob’s eyes. Reuben was the oldest son. He was born to Leah. In #35 v. 22 we are told, **“While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with**

**Bilhah his father's concubine. And Israel heard of it.**” That sounds pretty disgusting, doesn't it? This reinforces the picture that this family has some serious spiritual and moral problems.

The second reason that Reuben didn't get the birthright was that Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife, and Joseph was her oldest son.

The bad report about the brothers and the display of favoritism as evidenced in the special coat or robe combined to create anger in the sons of Jacob. This anger was not directed toward their father, who was guilty of the favoritism. It was directed toward the object of favoritism, Joseph.

At this point it was the dad who was the problem. The sad thing is that Jacob himself had experienced what it was like not to be the favorite son of the father. For Isaac had consistently favored Esau over him. But now he was doing the same thing with his own kids, and he was displaying his favoritism in an obvious way. The result was going to be division in his own family.

Unfortunately we are often prone to pass on the mistakes of our own parents. Social scientists tell us that alcoholics tend to produce kids who are more likely to be alcoholics. Victims of sexual abuse have a disproportionate tendency to abuse their own kids. From our visits from Indian Bible College we have seen that this is an especially big problem among native Americans. Parents with anger problems tend to produce kids with anger problems. Here we see Jacob, who grew up in a family that suffered because of parental favoritism, producing a family with the same problems.

There was a woman in our last church who grew up in a family with only one sibling, a sister. This woman had been the child not favored. She had major resentments about that toward her parents and toward her sister. But I could see that she was doing the same thing with her own kids. She had two kids, and one she treated as a pain and the other as a delight. The favoritism was bad for both of them.

A.

There are a couple of lessons that we can learn from the way in which Jacob treated his kids. The first is that **WE SHOULD BE FAIR IN OUR TREATMENT OF OUR KIDS AND PEOPLE IN OUR CARE. (I. JOSEPH AND HIS FATHER... A. WE SHOULD BE FAIR IN...)** There is a natural tendency that we may feel as a parent or a grandparent to favor a particular child because that child has interests similar to ours or because he or she is especially compliant. If we are teachers or have supervisory responsibilities in our job, we may be inclined to favor the worker or the student who has our same political beliefs or sports interests or religious convictions. Or we may tend to favor an attractive person of the opposite sex.

What our concern should be as Christians in our role as leaders is fairness. Children and people in our realm of responsibility want some sense of justice and equal treatment. Injustice and favoritism is resented. It creates divisions in a family and

discord in an office or a classroom. What is helpful is to make our children or students or employees clear about what the boundaries and expectations are. Then we have to strive for consistency in applying them. Showing compassion and care also wins a lot of good favor and respect.

We parents will always have something of a difficult balancing act between rewarding good behavior and showing favoritism. But if we work on making our expectations clear and striving to have unconditional love for all of our kids and grandkids, we will at least avoid the blatant and obvious forms of favoritism which Jacob employed. We will also avoid the serious mess that Jacob ended up with in his family.

B.

The second lesson out of the first four verses is that VICTIMS OF FAVORITISM NEED TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN ACTIONS AND TRUST IN A GRACIOUS GOD. (I. A. VICTIMS OF FAVORITISM NEED TO TAKE...) There were two sets of victims in this story. One was Joseph's brothers. We have already seen that these guys were not especially godly. They were deceitful, at times dishonest, prone to anger and jealousy. But their father's actions made a bad situation worse. His blatant favoritism fueled their jealousy and anger and hatred.

The other victim was Joseph. His life was threatened, as we shall see next week. Jacob and his open display of favoritism bore some responsibility for that. Joseph was sold as a slave by his brothers. Eventually he ended up in a filthy, stinking prison in a foreign country far from home. Some people in that situation would have devoted the remainder of their lives to revenge. They would have expended all of their energy and resources toward getting back at the brothers who were responsible.

But Joseph did not do that. He took responsibility for his own actions, and he entrusted himself to a gracious God. The Lord took care of him, and in the end the Lord provided a certain vindication for Joseph before his family.

Some of you may be victims of favoritism in your family. You may have been a favored child or an unfavored child. You may bear scars from that experience. Some of you may be victims of favoritism at work or school. The boss or the teacher may seem to have it in for you for some reason. Maybe he resents you for your Christian convictions.

Years ago I worked at a computer company. I had a four year Masters degree. There was one guy in the company who had more formal education than I did. But I was low man on the totem pole. There was no one among the 150 or 200 employees who ranked lower on the scale of things than I did. My job was collecting parts in the stock room for computer systems. Each day I collected thousands of parts and made a record of them. The nature of the job was such that one was bound to make a few mistakes.

One of the bosses whom I had was a woman who seemed to delight in finding the slightest mistakes. She would come storming into the stock room waving these reports and would make a big deal of the slightest errors and would treat the mistake as if I had

personally and intentionally offended her. Of course I just loved her appreciated her for it. It was a challenge to my Christian patience.

In all of these situations we have choices. We can focus our energy at getting back at those who have mistreated us or at those who have received the favors that we thought should come to us. We can get depressed at our own situation and say, "Woe is me!"

The lesson from Joseph is that we ought to decide to take responsibility for our actions and to trust in a gracious God. "Sure I have been mistreated in the past or the present. Sure I may have some scars from that. But I am going to get on with my life. I am not going to be controlled by the past or the present. I will trust in God to help me do it."

II.

In vv. 5-11 we come to a consideration of **JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS: THE CHALLENGES OF GOD'S CALL TO LEADERSHIP**. (II. JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS: THE...) God had originally given Abraham promises about physical and spiritual blessing and about a multitude of descendants. The route to the fulfillment of these promises, however, was through only some of Abraham's descendants. The customs of the Ancient Near East dictated that special blessings and rights were to be passed on through the oldest son. But God did not do that with the line of blessing in Abraham's descendants. He made it clear that the line of blessing was to pass through Isaac rather than Ishmael, who was actually the older son. It was to be passed through Jacob rather than his older twin Esau, who was favored by his father.

Now Jacob was intending to give his special blessing to Joseph. The Lord had not yet given His approval to that choice. But in these verses we see divine confirmation of that choice.

Dreams were regarded in the Ancient Near East as having religious significance. The Lord had chosen to reveal himself by this method to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In his dreams of revelation to them there was apparently audible, verbal communication. Now Joseph has a dream which contains prophetic revelation that is communicated only through symbols. But the meaning is obvious.

In the first dream Joseph sees himself binding sheaves in the field when his sheaf stands up and the brothers' sheaves gather around and bow down to his sheaf. Jacob's family had lived a somewhat nomadic existence as sheep and goat herders. But it seems that they raised crops at times, and now they seem to have a more settled existence. So apparently they had some involvement in agriculture, and they knew about raising and harvesting grain.

Joseph told his dream to his brothers, and they had no trouble interpreting it. Up until now it doesn't seem that Joseph himself had done anything to merit the anger of his brothers, other than wearing this special robe or coat. But telling this dream to his brothers did not help his cause. Why did he do it?

He was the little brother who may have been tired of being disrespected by his big brothers. Sometimes in situations of insecurity and rejection, or with those whose approval we desperately seek, we overcompensate. We try to prove to these people who are important to us that we are important and worthy of acceptance. But the effect is counterproductive. In trying to show that we are significant and worthy of acceptance and respect, we may drive people further away from us. That is what happens here. Joseph acted naively and unwisely, but he was still only a teenager.

His description of the dream did not win any appreciation from his brothers. The last part of v. 8 tells us, **“So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.”** Then Joseph had another dream. In this dream he saw the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowing down to him. This symbolized that his parents as well as his brothers were going to give him honor. Joseph’s mother Rachel had already died by this time. So who was symbolized by the moon is a bit uncertain. Perhaps it was Leah.

It should be noted that in that culture stars were often used as symbols of authority and importance. So even though the brothers are seen as bowing down to Joseph, there is a hint that they will still have significance and authority in their own right. Indeed we know from the rest of the story that the brothers did become heads of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Joseph unwisely tells this second dream to his brothers also. This time his father is included in the audience. No doubt Joseph is looking for some kind of affirmation or support from him. Jacob has no difficulty understanding the meaning of the dream. But he also responds negatively to Joseph. The text says that he rebukes his son. In that culture the strong tradition was that one always showed respect and honor to one’s parents. Thus it seems that Joseph’s dream strikes Jacob as an inappropriate and offensive role reversal. But Jacob remains passive. He doesn’t seem to take much of a lead in anything. Nevertheless, v. 11 says that Jacob kept the saying in mind. After all, God had communicated with him several times through dreams.

The brothers had a reaction of jealousy. They did not write these dreams off entirely. If they had disregarded them entirely, they would just have been mad and angry. The fact that they were jealous suggests that they have Joseph’s story come credibility. They were jealous that it was he who was getting the honor and not themselves.

A.

Again I see two areas of application. The first is in regard to leadership. That lesson is that **LEADERS SHOULD EXPECT OPPOSITION, BUT THEY SHOULD NOT PROVOKE IT UNNECESSARILY.** (II. JOSEPH AND... A. LEADERS SHOULD EXPECT...) The individual called by God to a position of leadership in the home, in the office, in the community, or in the church can expect to encounter opposition. Joseph had been chosen by his father to be the son who would receive the birthright and the special blessing. But now in these dreams we have divine confirmation that Joseph is indeed being called into a position of authority. The revelation of this call drew some flack. This flack came from the ungodly and the unrighteous.

It is often the case that the greatest opposition that comes to a person genuinely called by God into a position of leadership is from the ungodly and unrighteous. The ungodly and unrighteous are not necessarily irreligious. Sometimes there are bad people in good churches.

But the Christian leader who is truly called of God to be a Sunday school teacher or deacon or elder or pastor or missionary should expect to encounter opposition at times. At times that opposition may deal with philosophical or theological differences. At times, as with Joseph, it may involve jealousy. The person or persons in opposition may want the power or privileges or recognition that we get from our position of leadership, whatever that is.

What we who are leaders need to avoid is provoking unnecessary opposition. Joseph made a difficult situation worse by acting unwisely. We can't win by trying to prove ourselves to people who are jealous of our position. Joseph would have been better off if he had not revealed his dreams to his brothers. He should have remained distant but loving. He acted naively. He had not yet developed the sensitivity to other people that a good leader needs, but he was only a teenager. The best leaders have a genuine concern for other people.

A former Stanford business professor by the name of Jim Collins wrote a book entitled *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. (GOOD TO GREAT) Collins and his staff researched companies from the Fortune 500 that showed the best results over a period of at least fifteen years. They came up with eleven companies, and they set about to determine why they were so successful. They found that all of these eleven companies had CEOs who had been with the company for a long time. They found that all of these CEOs were ambitious, but also humble. When asked about the reasons for their success, they pointed to the people around them. When asked about failures, they pointed to themselves. They took responsibility for their own actions. These excellent leaders were genuinely nice people, but they did not get the publicity that many bigger and less successful companies got. They didn't care.

B.

Consider then a lesson for followers: SUBMIT TO LEGITIMATE LEADERS AND STIFLE FEELINGS OF JEALOUSY. (II. A. B. SUBMIT TO LEGITIMATE LEADERS...)  
The response of the brothers to Joseph's call to leadership demonstrated that Joseph was more qualified spiritually than any of them to lead. It is often obvious to any kind of objective observer why God has called some people into particular positions of spiritual leadership. Their abilities and credentials and social skills for the job are just obvious.

That is not always the case. The Book of Joshua says that Abraham and his family were worshippers of other gods before the Lord called them. As we have learned from what we have seen of Jacob, this man to all outward appearances was not the epitome of the man of faith. Yet God had clearly called him into a position of leadership. Later on in the



Old testament we read about the first king of Israel, Saul. This guy turned out to be a real loser. Yet the Lord had clearly called him to be king of Israel.

The people in Abraham's family and in Jacob's family and in Saul's kingdom were expected by the Lord to be subject to the leader. Even David, who was the man after God's own heart, recognized that he was responsible to be submissive to Saul. When Saul horribly mistreated him and tried to kill him, David still would not raise a hand against the king.

According to Romans #13 Christians are supposed to submit to their political leaders. According to Ephesians #6 we are supposed to submit to our employers. According to 1 Thessalonians #5 we are supposed to submit to and honor those who are leaders in the church. According to Ephesians #5 Christian wives are to submit to their husbands. According to Ephesians #5 Christian children are to submit to their parents.

One reason that we may at times have difficulty submitting to people in these positions of authority is that we are jealous of them for the position that they occupy. That is what bothered Joseph's brothers. They wanted the power and the authority and the recognition and the privileges that came along with his position. That is what we may consciously or unconsciously want when we have difficulty submitting to someone who is in a legitimate position of leadership. We would like to be in control.

We need to be on guard against our sinful nature out of which may arise feelings of jealousy. In our sinful self we want to have authority and power and popularity and freedom and control. We want to be--- like God. Eve committed the first sin because she wanted to be like God, knowing good and evil. (PROJECTOR OFF)

All of us have roles in which we are followers. In our position of responsibility to someone who is declared by God to have a leadership relationship to us, is there some secret or not-so-secret jealousy? Are we acting to undermine that person's leadership for our own selfish motives? Are we being submissive in a way that is pleasing to the Lord?

In the position of leadership in which we have been placed in the home, at school., at work, or in the church, are we guilty of favoritism? Are we being fair and just in our treatment of people entrusted to our care? Are we truly caring about people, and not just about our position. Our Savior told us in Mark 10:45, **"For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."**