

Message #2  
Joseph

Kurt Hedlund  
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BREAKING FREE FROM THE PRESENT:  
JOSEPH AND HIS DECEPTIVE BROTHERS  
GENESIS 33:18-34:31

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Years ago *Parade* magazine commissioned a consulting firm to determine who or what has the greatest influence on teenagers' values and behavior. Their conclusion: **"The need for acceptance in a group is the most powerful of the forces which mold young people's decisions today."** A Harvard psychologist by the name of Howard Gardner wrote a book entitled *Changing Minds* in which he claimed that by age ten a child's peers rather than his parents assume primary importance in the child's decisions about what to do, especially in the US. I don't know if that is true or not, but certainly parents have some influence over the peer groups in which their kids will become involved. Those peer groups may involve sports or music or hobbies or church.

Peer pressure is something that we tend to associate with children, but the truth is that all of us are affected by peer pressure. There is always a certain pressure upon us to conform to the standards and values of the people around us.

I noticed in the paper this week that William Calley died. That name may ring a bell with a few of you. He was the only person convicted at a court martial for bearing responsibility for the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. By the middle of March in 1968 his company had suffered 28 casualties, pretty much all from mines and booby traps. Army intelligence said that there was a Viet Cong unit located in the area of My Lai. The Eleventh Brigade commander told his officers to **"go in there aggressively, close with the enemy and wipe them out for good"**.

In a briefing on the evening before the assault the company captain said that all of the remaining people in the area were Viet Cong or their sympathizers. Accounts differ about exactly what he said, but most of the platoon leaders understood him to give a green light to wipe out anyone whom they found in the area. According to William Thomas Allison, professor of Military History at Georgia Southern University, **"By midmorning, members of Charlie Company had killed hundreds of civilians and raped or assaulted countless women and young girls. They encountered no enemy fire and found no weapons in My Lai itself."** (*My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War*, 2012) Estimates of the number of people killed range from 347 to 504. All of them were women, children, or old men.

To compound the atrocity what happened was covered up. It took a year and a half for the story to become public. Charges were brought against 26 men. William Calley was the only one who was found guilty. He was sentenced to life in prison, but he was eventually released from custody after just three years.

How do we explain such an atrocity? There are a number of factors which were involved. Certainly evil and sin were connected with what happened. For our purposes today I would like us to notice the role that peer pressure played. There was peer pressure at work which led to the killings. There was tremendous peer pressure at work to cover up what happened.

We Christians are not immune to peer pressure. The culture around us has subtle, and not so subtle, ways of pressuring us to conform to its standards. Most of us sense that the culture in which we live is moving farther and farther from the standards and values of the God we profess to worship. Thus we face pressure to move farther and farther away from the Lord and His standards. How can we resist this pressure? Last week we talked about how we can break free from the past. The subject before us this morning has helpful lessons for us about how we can break free from the present.

Last week we looked at the influence that the past in general and parents in particular have upon us. We acknowledged that bad parenting does leave a mark on our lives. But we also saw from the example of the godly hero of the Old Testament Joseph that we don't have to be bound by the past. Joseph had parents who regularly practiced deception and who lived by the principle that the end justifies the means. But Joseph did not buy into that philosophy. He broke free from the past. He took responsibility for his own actions, and he chose to trust in a gracious God.

Today we are going to see that Joseph also faced pressure from people in the present to conform to ways of being that were contrary to the will of God. Not only did he have to break free from the past, but he also had to break free from the present. For Joseph's own siblings had adopted the negative ways of being of his parents. But Joseph would not conform to their standards either. In his resistance to them there is hope and encouragement for us. Let's look at what Joseph had to overcome in the present and see what lessons are present here for us.

I.

Genesis #33 v. 18 through #34 v. 3 describe THE RESULTS OF A FAMILY'S WORLDLY ENTANGLEMENTS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE RESULTS OF A FAMILY'S...) Joseph was the son of Jacob. Last time we were reminded that Jacob was the son of Isaac who was the son of Abraham. God had promised to make of Abraham a great nation and to bless him in other ways. Before Jacob was born, God told Isaac and his wife that Jacob's twin brother Esau, who would be born first, would end up serving Jacob. So the younger son would be the one to be in the line of blessing. Instead of trusting God to fulfill this promise, Jacob used deceptive means to trick his older twin out of the blessing and birthright.

After tricking his father Isaac to give him the blessing instead of Esau, Jacob went away from home to go to the north to live with his uncle Laban. There he married Laban's two daughters, Leah and Rachel. By these two wives and by each of their maidservants Jacob had a total of twelve sons and at least one daughter. Joseph was son number eleven. Dinah the daughter was born a year or two before Joseph.

(JACOB MAP) So when the family pulled up stakes in the north to return to Jacob's homeland, Joseph was probably five or six years old. In v. 17 of #33 we are told that the family stayed for a while in Succoth, which was to the east of the Jordan River. As our passage starts, we find that they have moved to the city of Shechem in north central Israel. Shechem was actually what we would call a small town or village. It is a couple of miles east of the modern Palestinian city of Nablus.

Women married at an early age in that culture. Most commentators guess that Dinah was about 15 or 16 years old at the time of this incident. Joseph was probably about 13 or 14.

Jacob did not do the wisest thing in deciding to live for a time beside Shechem. He had promised the Lord to return to Bethel to worship him. He had not yet done that. As events unfold, it becomes clear that there were dangers that the people in the city of Shechem posed to Jacob's family. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We are told then in v. 1 of #34 that Dinah "**went out to see the women of the land.**" Dinah is the only daughter in this clan whom we are told about. There were also servants and hired workers in this clan. But Dinah may not have had many girlfriends around who were her age. Those of you who have had girls have probably noticed that they like to socialize sometimes. So we can understand that Dinah would have had an interest in getting to know some of the people of the town.

The problem is that they were Canaanites. They were idol worshippers. This was not the best peer group that most of us would want our daughter to hang out with. As events unfold, it is clear that they were not people of good moral character.

We also know that it was the cultural view among the Egyptians and the Canaanites of this time that eligible young women found roaming about the countryside were fair game for eligible bachelors. Such women were in danger of being hauled off to somebody's house and claimed as a wife. So we have to wonder why Jacob and his sons allowed Dinah to wander off into town apparently without any of her brothers, although it is possible that she snuck off without telling anyone..

Shechem, the son of the mayor of the town, saw her and took her and assaulted her. Jacob may bear some responsibility for settling down near this town and not being more protective of his daughter. Dinah may bear some responsibility in going off to see these people. Maybe she did not tell her parents about going into town. Then also there is this Shechem about whom we are told in v. 2 that "**he seized her and lay with her and humiliated her.**" The text says that Shechem did love Dinah and wanted to take her as a wife. But what he did was clearly wrong. Verse 26 says that at the end of the attack Dinah was still at his house. It could be that Shechem kept Dinah at his house against her will.

II.

We come then to vv. 4-29 of #34 and THE WORLDLY METHODS OF DEALING WITH A FAMILY'S WORLDLY ENTANGLEMENTS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE WORLDLY METHODS OF...) Shechem asks his father to make arrangements to get Dinah as his wife. There is no apology. There is no recognition of wrongdoing against Dinah or Dinah's family. There is no hint that Shechem feels guilty about his actions. He simply wants to follow through and get Dinah as his wife.

That reaction is typical of the way of being which the Bible labels as "worldly." There is wrongdoing that happens, and no apology or confession of sin is made. Excuses or explanations may be offered. The offender may occasionally speak of having made a mistake. But in other instances, as seems to be the case here, the sin is simply ignored.

The good thing that happens with Jacob and his family is that they do recognize that an evil thing has taken place. Verse 5 says that Jacob heard that Dinah had been "defiled." According to v. 7 the sons were angry when they heard about it. They recognized Shechem's sin as "**an outrageous thing in Israel**" and a thing which "**must not be done.**" Some recognition of godly standards has rubbed off on Jacob's sons.

Furthermore, they all recognize that it would be wrong to intermarry with these Canaanites. God had made it very clear to Abraham and his descendants that they were to be a separate people. They were to be a distinct nation. They were not to marry unbelievers. So when Hamor came along with his proposal that the two clans intermarry and live together as one people, there was unanimity in Jacob's family that this should not be done.

Whether this reaction was simply due to anger over what had happened to their sister or that they also recognized that it would be contrary to God's plan for them to intermingle with the Canaanites is not completely clear. But the brothers as well as the father have some correct understanding of God's moral standards.

So Shechem and his father tried to smooth things over with Jacob's family. They sought to be generous in their marriage proposal. They made what on the surface appeared to be an attractive offer to Jacob's clan to join with them. But later on, in v. 23, when Hamor explains the proposal to his own people, he asks, "**Will not their livestock, their property and all their beasts be ours?**" The implied answer is "yes." The Canaanites in this town are more numerous than Jacob's clan, and the expectation and plan is that these foreigners will ultimately be absorbed into the Canaanite culture and this particular community.

That is the same danger which the world system poses for us Christians today. In 2 Corinthians #6 the Apostle Paul quotes from the Old Testament (2 CORINTHIANS 6:17) and tells the Christians in Corinth, "**Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord...**"

His point is that believers in Jesus Christ should be distinct from the world system about them. We Christians should not be like everybody else. We should not live by the same standards and values as everybody else. We should take our directions from God and His Word. We are to be in the world but not of the world. If we do not maintain our distinctiveness, we will be sucked up by the culture around us. (PROJECTOR OFF)

While the boys in Jacob's family were right to reject the offer of the Canaanites, the way in which they responded was not right. They had grown up with parents who used deceit and who operated on the basis of the principle that the end justifies the means. So they used the same methods to deal with the Canaanites.

There is no appeal here to God for guidance. There is only the desire for revenge. They also choose to use deceitful methods learned from their parents in seeking this revenge. Notice v. 13: **"The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah."**

What the young men in the family did was to tell Hamor and Shechem that they would only agree to their proposal if all of the men of the village would be circumcised. So Hamor and Shechem went back to their people and convinced them to accept the plan.

Circumcision would not have been a foreign concept to them. The Canaanites seem not to have practiced it. But other people in the Ancient Near East, such as the Egyptians, did practice it. They used it on boys who reached the age of puberty, making it a ritual marking the passage of boys into manhood.

The problem from God's perspective was that circumcision as used by the descendants of Abraham was to be a religious ritual that signified obedience to a covenant with God. It was intended to be used with people who were spiritually unified. There was no such unity here. Jacob's sons were using it in a plan of deceit. The end result would be murder.

Thus we are told in v. 25 that when the Canaanites were incapacitated, Simeon and Levi, who were probably in their twenties, went into the town and killed every male. It may well be that Simeon and Levi had help from their own household servants. The two brothers took a lead in this attack probably because Dinah was their full-blooded sister. They shared the same mother as well as the same father. Dinah and Levi and Simeon were all children of Jacob through Leah.

Verse 27 says that the other brothers came in and joined together in rounding up the booty and the surviving women and children. If my estimate that Joseph's age was about 13 or 14 is correct, then Joseph was too young to participate. All of the other brothers, except Benjamin, were older and probably were involved.

Jacob and Rachel had used deceit on several occasions. No one had ever been physically hurt because of it. But now when the family became entangled with a pagan

clan and an incident of rape, the boys took their parents' methodology to a logical extreme.

That is what happens when people begin to act on the basis of the principle that the end justifies the means. Given the right circumstances horrible evil can take place. That is what happened at My Lai. Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm was asked in an interview years ago about whether he would have renounced Communism if he had known in the 1930s that millions of people were dying in the Soviet Union. **"Probably not,"** he replied. And why not? Because **"the chance of a new world being born in great suffering would still have been worth backing."** So it would have been worth the sacrifice of 15 million, 20 million? **"Yes."** (interview with Michael Ignatieff, *The Spectator* online, 10/2/2012)

Unfortunately conservatives occasionally also buy into this methodology. Abortion is a horrible evil. Therefore we are justified in using whatever means are necessary to stop it. A few extremists then decide that they are justified in assassinating abortion doctors. But the end does not justify the means.

III.

Consider then vv. 30 & 31 and THE LEGACY OF A FAMILY'S WORLD ENTANGLEMENTS. (III. THE LEGACY OF A FAMILY'S...) Jacob seems strangely silent and in the background in this story. His sons take the lead in the negotiations with Shechem and Hamor. They carry out this deceitful plan and slaughter seemingly without their father's knowledge.

In v. 30 Jacob expresses his opinion about what has happened. He says to Simeon and Levi, **"You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household."** The boys respond in v. 31, **"Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?"**

How much godliness do we see in this family? Is Jacob concerned about God's reputation? Is he concerned about what kind of a testimony this action is going to have on the watching world? No! He is concerned about his own hide. Is Jacob trusting that God is going to be faithful to His promises and protect the line of Abraham as He promised? No! Jacob is concerned only for himself and his family.

On the other hand his sons are motivated only by revenge, by anger--- not by a desire to please God. Jacob is motivated by fear, and his sons are motivated by fury. I suspect that both the sons and the father were about the same distance away from true justice and godliness.

Jacob did not forget what Simeon and Levi did. He did not approve. At the end of his life he gave a blessing for each of his sons. In #49 (GENESIS 49:5) of Genesis he said, **"Simeon and Levi are brothers;/ weapons of violence are their swords./** (GENESIS

**49:6) Let my soul come not into their council;/ O my glory, be not joined to their company./ For in their anger they killed men,/ and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. (GENESIS 49:7) Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce,/ and their wrath, for it is cruel!/ I will divide them in Jacob/ and scatter them in Israel."**

Both tribes were indeed scattered. Simeon's descendants were given an allotment centuries later within the territory of the tribe of Judah. But they were absorbed by that larger tribe. Levi was not given an allotment. For the men of this tribe were assigned to assist the priests in the temple and to teach the people the law of God. They were given towns in which to live that were scattered among the other tribes. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jacob and his sons faced pressure from two sides. They were pressured to conform to the surrounding world by the Canaanites among whom they lived. But they had enough awareness of God to realize that these idol worshippers lived contrary to the ways of the true God. When they got too friendly with the Canaanites, they got burned by them. Dinah was raped by the son of the ruler of the clan. Verse 19 says that this Shechem guy was more respected than anybody else in the family. So how bad were the rest of them?

On the other side there was the sovereign God who had determined that this family was going to be the object of His special blessing and promises. One way or another He was going to see that the family of Jacob would keep its distinctiveness from the surrounding nations. But when they did not cooperate with God's revealed will for their lives, they encountered heartache. The only daughter in the family that we are told about was defiled. Then when all of the men of the guilty village were killed, the members of Jacob's clan were left with fear for their lives from the other Canaanites.

It is tough to be one who is not committed to the true God and yet one who doesn't quite belong to the world system either. This kind of person has enough awareness of the truth to see the problems and pitfalls that come from living like the average person. But because his or her life is not in line with the Bible, he doesn't experience the joy and meaningful life that God has promised. He gets pressured from both sides because he or she has not committed to either side.

This was the legacy left to young Joseph. Not only did he get an example from his parents that the end justifies the means and that the practice of deception is an appropriate response to tough situations, but he also was subject to the same influence from his older brothers. Yet as the story of Joseph's life develops in coming weeks, we shall see that he broke free from the present as well as the past. He refused to adopt his brothers' philosophy of life as his own.

IV. A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE LESSONS) Let's look then at THE LESSONS FROM THIS PASSAGE. The first lesson is that WE NEED TO BE ALERT TO THE WORLD SYSTEM'S ATTEMPTS TO SUBVERT US. (IV. THE LESSONS A. WE NEED TO BE ALERT...)

Joseph was a home schooler. One of the advantages afforded by home schooling is that there is more opportunity for the family to shape the values of a young person and less likelihood that the negative influences of the outside world will shape those values. But in Joseph's home school some of those worldly influences were practiced regularly. His brothers and his parents practiced deceit. They displayed uncontrolled anger. They failed to trust God.

Somehow Joseph was able to understand that the worldly way of doing things by which his brothers and parents operated was responsible for a lot of negative consequences. He saw the results of using deceit and operating on the basis of the principle that the end justifies the means. Instead of giving in to these influences he resisted them and became sensitive to attempts that were made to compromise his godly standards.

(ROMANS 12:1) In Romans #12 v. 1 & 2 the Apostle Paul writes, **"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (ROMANS 12:2) Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."**

The temptation which we face is to become like the world, to adopt the philosophy that the end justifies the means, to use deceit. The pressure is often subtle. The temptation is to lie a little bit, to cheat a little bit, to go along with the crowd this one time, to compromise our standards in this situation only. But the compromising can become a slippery slope that leads to being sucked up by the world.

We need to be alert to the world system's attempts to subvert us, especially living in this area which is built upon an economy devoted to entertainment and fulfillment of the consumer's wants and desires and fantasies and which bills itself as "Sin City."

B.

The second lesson is a repetition of an application that we considered last week: **WE NEED TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR OWN ACTIONS.** (IV. THE LESSONS A. B. WE NEED TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY...) Not only could Joseph have justified negative behavior by blaming his parents, but also he could have justified it by blaming his brothers. Joseph was next to the youngest son in a large family. His older brothers used deceit. They connived to get their way. Joseph could have reasoned that he needed to fight fire with fire. If he was going to survive in this family, he needed to employ deceit and trickery and dishonesty like everybody else. But the evidence that we are given in the Bible doesn't suggest that. In the face of pressure situations Joseph took responsibility for his own actions and refused to resort to lying and cheating and stealing.

In the politics of work and school and family and sometimes even church it can be tough not to play by the same unethical rules that everybody else is playing. When everybody



else is lying and manipulating and playing games, it is tough not to employ the same methods. But the lesson from Joseph is that we need to take responsibility for our own actions.

In our culture today if we are anyone other than an educated, healthy, heterosexual white male from the middle or upper class, we can find grounds for claiming to be a victim. So whatever negative behavior we display, we can justify it by claiming to be a victim.

Such was the nature of the defense used by officers originally charged with responsibility for the My Lai massacre and its cover-up. They were dealing with the fog and stress of war. They were only following orders. Everybody else was doing it.

Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson (HUGH THOMPSON) and his helicopter crew were providing support for the army unit which attacked My Lai. When he saw Americans seemingly attacking civilians, he landed his helicopter. When American GIs approached a nearby bunker containing civilians, he told his crew to open fire on the troops if they started to shoot at the villagers. He rescued that group of civilians and flew them to safety. He and his crew returned a second time and rescued a similar group of civilians. Upon his second return he told his commanding officer that he witnessed American infantrymen acting no differently than Nazi soldiers in World War II.

Although his report was covered up for a time, the truth eventually came out, and Hugh Thompson was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. The entire crew was eventually awarded the Soldier's Medal. When the Army tried to present the award quietly, Hugh Thompson demanded that it be done publicly. He was disgusted by the massacre and its cover-up. Hugh Thompson would not let all kinds of pressure keep him from doing what was right in the face of evil.

The man or woman of God will take responsibility for his or her actions. He will claim (1 CORINTHIANS 10:13) the truth of 1 Corinthians #10 v. 13: **“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”** I can break free from the present, because the Lord will give me a means of escape.

C.

The third lesson is also an application that I made last week: WE NEED TO TRUST IN A GRACIOUS GOD. (I. A. B. C. WE NEED TO TRUST IN A GRACIOUS GOD) Joseph's brothers did not trust in a gracious God--- at least we do not find evidence of it in the Biblical text. They trusted in their own resources. They depended upon their own cleverness and deceit and strength. Joseph chose to trust in a gracious God.

Victims look for scapegoats. Sinners look for a Savior. Victims don't need God. They need a therapist or a good lawyer. Are you a victim, or are you a sinner?

If you, like me, are a sinner, then there is hope. There is a gracious God who does business with sinners. There is a Savior who died for sinners. If we trust in Him as our Savior, we can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

If you feel trapped by a current personal relationship, if you feel trapped by a situation at work, if you feel trapped by circumstances of your own making, there is hope. You can break free from the present. But you must be alert to the world's attempt to subvert you. You must take responsibility for your own actions. And you must trust in a gracious God.