

Message #1
Joseph: The Model of an Overcome

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BREAKING FREE FROM THE PAST: JOSEPH AND HIS DECEPTIVE PARENTS

INTRODUCTION

His family's roots were in the hills of Kentucky. His ancestors were hillbillies from the Appalachians. James, though, was born in Ohio. His parents were divorced when he was just a toddler. There was no father around for most of his early life. His mom was a smart woman. She got a nursing degree, but she also became addicted to drugs. Life for James and his sister was characterized by poverty and abuse. It was largely their grandmother who raised them and gave them some direction in life.

James graduated from Middletown High School in Ohio, the same school from which my son's girlfriend graduated. She was a couple of years behind him in school. James decided that the best way out of his difficult life was to join the military. So he became a Marine. He did a tour of duty in Iraq. He then used the GI bill to go to college. Because he was a bright and serious student, he did well in school and was accepted at Yale Law School. Because of his difficult early life and the influence of a secular education, he became an atheist. But he also met a woman who became his wife. In the contemplation of being a husband and father, his philosophy and religious convictions began to change. When he had his first child, he went back to church.

James began to experience success in his career. He served as a lawyer, wrote a book, and became involved in business ventures. Today J D Vance is the Republican candidate for Vice President of the United States. Whatever your political convictions might be, you have to appreciate what he has made of his life after coming from a very difficult family background.

Some of us face difficult circumstances in the present. We have health challenges or financial pressures. We have problems with the kids or grandkids or with our parents. We have habits or addictions that are hard to conquer. School is difficult. Like J D Vance we may have a family background which keeps coming back to haunt us. All of these situations can be obstacles which keep us from being and doing what we want to be and do and what we perceive that God would want us to be and do.

I am going to begin a series of messages today that focus on a character in the Old Testament who faced a difficult background, a series of losses, great opposition, and unfavorable circumstances. He could have turned out to be an unproductive, depressed, angry, defeated individual. He could have become a criminal or a rebel. Instead he became a success and a hero of the Bible.

(PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 15:4) Romans #15 v. 4 tells us, **“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”** As we study

the life of Joseph, we are going to discover reasons why we can have hope in the situation in life in which we find ourselves.

Today we are going to begin by looking at the family background of Joseph. Joseph had definite negative influences in his family situation. Are we helpless victims of the negative influences and bad experiences that we had in our upbringing? Are we excused from accountability for our present behavior because of the broken homes from which some of us have come? Or is it possible to break free from the past?

I.

Let's look first at THE DECEPTION OF JOSEPH'S FATHER. (I. THE DECEPTION OF JOSEPH'S FATHER) Earlier this year and at the end of last year we looked at the life of Abraham. We saw that God appointed him to be the father of the Jewish people. The Lord promised to make of him a great nation. We saw that Abraham's wife Sarah was unable to have children. In her old age God supernaturally opened Sarah's womb, and she gave birth to a son who was named Isaac. Isaac eventually married Rebekah. For a time she was also unable to bear children. But about 1900 years before the coming of Jesus, she did give birth to twin boys, Esau and Jacob. It is Jacob who would become the father of Joseph. Despite the fame which Abraham has to this day, there is actually about 25% more material in the Book of Genesis focused on Joseph than upon Abraham.

When the twins Jacob and Esau were still in Rebekah's womb, the Lord told her, (GENESIS 25:23) according to Genesis #25 v. 23, **"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger."** When the boys were born, Esau came out first. But the Bible says that Jacob came out holding on to Esau's heel. Given this special revelation from God and the manner of the birth, the younger twin was named "Jacob," which means in Hebrew "one who takes by the heel," or "one who supplants, or takes the place of." In the manner of Jacob's birth we get a hint that Joseph's father is going to be a deceiver.

A.

Thus in Genesis #25 vv. 27-34 we find that JACOB'S DECEPTIVE CHARACTER BEGINS. (I. A. JACOB'S DECEPTIVE CHARACTER BEGINS) In v. 27 we read, **"When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game,"** It strikes me as a shallow, superficial reason to love one son more than the other because of the meat that one son provides.

The second part of v. 23 reads, **"... but Rebekah loved Jacob."** The implication is that the parents are picking favorites among their kids. Many of you know the story about what happens next. Jacob is cooking stew in the kitchen one day when Esau comes home hungry. He asks for a bowl of stew. Jacob says that he can have it only if he gives up his birthright.

According to the ancient custom of that time and place the older son in the family had a right to a double part of the family inheritance. That double part was the birthright. Esau says that he is dying of hunger, which is an exaggeration. So he foolishly promises his birthright to Jacob. The observation of the author in the last sentence of v. 34 is **“Thus Esau despised his birthright.”**

Perhaps Jacob was aware of the prophecy which was made to his mother that Esau, the older brother, would serve Jacob, the younger brother. Certainly Jacob knew the meaning of his Hebrew name--- “the supplanter, or deceiver.” Unfortunately he uses questionable means to try to see that this prophecy comes to pass and that he gets what he wants. Jacob will continue to use deception and trickery and lying to get his way.

God had promised that Esau would in the end serve Jacob. But Jacob used deceptive means to fulfill that prophecy. Years earlier God had promised Jacob’s grandfather Abraham a son. But when Sarah was unable to bear a son, Abraham decided that he had to help out God to fulfill that promise. He did not wait for God. Instead he took his wife’s servant and had a child through her. That child was Ishmael, who was not the child of promise. Ishmael became the father of the Arab people. Today the descendants of Ishmael are still fighting against the descendants of Isaac and Jacob. Such is the history behind the fighting in Gaza.

Obviously Jacob had not learned anything from the lesson that the Lord had taught his grandfather. God will fulfill His promises. His people should not use unethical and immoral means to help God keep His promises. God’s people should follow God’s Word and let God do the things which He has promised to do.

B.

(I. THE DECEPTION... A. B. JACOB’S DECEPTIVE CHARACTER BLOSSOMS) In #27 we find that JACOB’S DECEPTIVE CHARACTER BLOSSOMS. Isaac is an old man. One day he calls in his son Esau to ask him to hunt an animal, bring it back to him, and prepare a meal with it before he gives Esau the special blessing due to the older son. Rebekah overhears these instructions. So she tells Jacob about it, and the two of them come up with a deceptive plan to trick Esau out of the blessing intended for the older son.

Quickly Jacob picks out a choice lamb from the flock and brings it back to his mother for her to cook for Isaac. Jacob puts on some of Esau’s clothes, and he puts lamb’s skin on his hands and neck to imitate the hairier skin of his twin brother. He goes into his father’s tent and proceeds to deceive his father Isaac who has become blind.

Beginning in v. 24 of #27 we read, **“He said, ‘Are you really my son Esau?’ He answered, ‘I am.’ 25 Then he said, ‘Bring it near to me, that I may eat of my son’s game and bless you.’ So he brought it near to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank. 26 Then his father Isaac said to him, ‘Come near and kiss me, my son.’ 27 So he came near and kissed him. And Isaac smelled the smell of**

his garments and blessed him and said, ‘See, the smell of my son/ is as the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed!/ 28 May God give you of the dew of heaven/ and of the fatness of the earth/ and plenty of grain and wine./ 29 Let peoples serve you,/ and nations bow down to you./ Be lord over your brothers,/ and may your mother’s sons bow down to you./ Cursed be everyone who curses you,/ and blessed be everyone who blesses you!’”

Jacob, with his mother’s help, uses lies and deceit to get what he wants. Esau comes in right after Jacob leaves, and the deceit is uncovered. But Isaac is unwilling and unable to change his blessing. So Esau is understandably angry toward his brother Isaac, and he plans to kill Jacob after their father dies. The mom, Rebekah, finds out about this and helps to send Jacob off to her brother Laban in another part of the region. She also hopes that her son Jacob will find a wife in this part of the extended family. This is the messed up family from which Joseph comes.

But there is more. While living with Laban, his uncle, Jacob becomes the victim of deceit himself. He falls in love with Laban’s younger daughter Rachel. His life is consumed with her. As Pastor Tim Keller writes, **“Jacob’s life was empty. He never had his father’s love, he had lost his beloved mother’s love, and he certainly had no sense of God’s love and care. Then he beheld the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and he must have said to himself, ‘If I had her, finally, something would be right in my miserable life. If I had her, it would fix things.’”** (*Counterfeit Gods*, p. 27)

But it does not. Putting some one or some thing in the place that only God should occupy always leads to disappointment. Laban agrees to give Rachel to him as a wife for seven years of work on the family sheep ranch. Jacob does it, but on the wedding night Laban substitutes his older daughter Leah. Jacob is deceived. Laban agrees to also let him have Rachel, but he has to put in another seven years on the sheep ranch. Joseph is going to grow up in this family that is marked not only by deceitfulness but that also has three stepmothers, ten stepbrothers, one brother and at least one stepsister.

Later on Jacob works out an arrangement with Laban to divide up and share his flock. He then proceeds to use methods of selective breeding to get the most and the best sheep and goats. Laban changes the agreement with Jacob several times. Finally Jacob gets exasperated and decides to take his family back to the land of his birth. He does it without telling his father-in-law Laban. (GENESIS 31:20) According to v. 20 of Genesis #31, **“And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee.”**

Such was the father that Joseph was given. Dad operated on the basis of the principle that the end justifies the means. Trickery and lying and deceit are OK as long as the end, in Jacob’s eyes is good. (PROJECTOR OFF) Perhaps some of you had a father like that. Perhaps your father struggled with an addiction. Perhaps he just was not around very much.

The thing that I want for us to see in coming weeks is that Joseph never bought into his father's philosophy.. He used only ethical means to pursue godly goals. He broke free from the past. In coming weeks we will learn more about how he did that.

II.

Often when we have a parent who has glaring imperfections, the other parent compensates with godly strengths. That was not true in Joseph's case. For his mother Rachel was also a deceiver. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE DECEPTION OF JOSEPH'S MOTHER) Let's consider then THE DECEPTION OF JOSEPH'S MOTHER.

A.

Our introduction to Rachel comes in Genesis #29. We find there that RACHEL'S DECEPTIVE CHARACTER ORIGINATES AT HOME. (II. THE DECEPTION... A. RACHEL'S DECEPTIVE CHARACTER...) She is a beautiful woman. She is the younger daughter of Laban, Jacob's uncle and eventual father-in-law. She is a shepherdess on the family sheep ranch. Jacob falls deeply in love with her, and he promises to work for seven years for Laban in order to gain her as his wife. As I mentioned earlier, Laban substitutes the older sister Leah for her on the wedding night. He also forces Jacob to work for seven more years in order to, in effect, pay for Rachel.

The point is that Rachel, Joseph's mother, also grew up in a household where deception was used and where the principle of the end justifies the means was at work. We begin to also see Rachel operate on this basis in her marriage. For we discover that her sister Leah, who is also Jacob's wife, has children, but Rachel is unable to have children. So Rachel, in frustration and jealousy, and in accord with the principle that the end justifies the means, gives Jacob her maidservant to bear children for her. The maidservant does bear several children for Rachel and Jacob. These are to be the half-brothers of Joseph.

B.

Skipping over to Genesis #31 we find that RACHEL'S DECEPTIVE CHARACTER BLOSSOMS. (II. A. B. RACHEL'S DECEPTIVE CHARACTER BLOSSOMS) Rachel and Leah have had a family conference with Jacob, and they are all agreed that it is time to pull up stakes and head south for the homeland of Jacob. Without telling Laban, they get ready to do that. In v. 19 we read, "**Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods.**"

Thus we find Rachel using deception to get what she wants. Beyond that, what does the fact that she wants the household idols say about her spirituality? There is some indication that possession of the household idols in that culture represented the right of inheritance. But still the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob did not look with favor upon idols. They were never something that He desired to be part of the life of His people.

So Jacob and his family took off to the south for the land of what would one day be Israel. Laban discovered that they had departed, and he noticed that the household idols were gone. So he took off after them. God warned him in a dream not to hurt any of them. Things got somewhat smoothed out when Laban caught up to Joseph's family. But he still wants his idols back. Jacob doesn't know anything about it. So he lets Laban search through the camp.

In vv. 34 & 35 of #31 the text says, **“Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. 35 And she said to her father, ‘Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.’ So he searched but did not find the household gods.”**

Joseph was born to Rachel and Jacob a few years before this. He was born at the time that Jacob and Laban came to an agreement whereby Jacob would have ownership of part of the flock. The text implies that this arrangement continued for several years. My guess is that Joseph was five or six years old when the family departed from Laban in Syria. So Joseph was a child at home when his parents were still practicing their deceptiveness. Maybe he witnessed his mother hide the idols in her tent.

Later Joseph's father did seem to have a growing awareness of God's protection and guidance upon his life. There are references to his worship of God. After the family had been back in the land of Israel for some time (GENESIS 35:2), we read in #35 vv. 2 & 3, **“So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, ‘Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. (GENESIS 35:3) Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.”**

As Joseph grew older, he witnessed respect in his father for the true God. It would be unfair to think that Joseph's parents had no positive influence on his life. They did some things right as parents. Rachel apparently loved and disciplined her son. Jacob clearly loved Joseph, although it was to the unhealthy extent of favoritism of Joseph over his other sons. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But in Joseph's formative years, his parents could hardly be considered godly. They were deceivers. As we shall see next week, this deceptive character--- this willingness to live by the principle that the end justifies the means--- was passed on to all of their sons--- except for Joseph.

III.A.

Let's consider then THE LESSONS that come to us from the understanding of Joseph's family background. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE LESSONS A. WE NEED TO TAKE...) First, WE NEED TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR OWN ACTIONS. As we investigate Joseph's life, we are going to see that there were circumstances that came across his path which made it very tempting to fudge the truth, to act according to the

principle that the end justifies the means. But Joseph seems to take the high road. He does what is right. He chooses not to act according to the principles that his parents too often followed. He chooses to break free from the past.

When Joseph takes the high road, sometimes his actions make his circumstances worse. He refuses at one point to give in to the requests of his Egyptian master's wife to commit adultery. As a result, he ends up in prison. But he refuses to compromise his integrity.

Sigmund Freud made some significant discoveries about the nature of the human personality. He succeeded in showing how our behavior is linked to our relationship with our parents. Today Americans spend millions of dollars going to counselors who base their approach on Freud's discoveries and on his methodology. Often clients learn a great deal about how their behavior is linked to their parental upbringing. But often there is little change that occurs. Why? Because the insight of clients into their background does not necessarily bring change. Often it is used as an excuse to continue with negative behavior.

Christian psychologist Larry Crabb writes in his book *Finding God*, "**A focus on increased knowledge of self rarely leads to richer knowledge of God.**" What Crabb says is necessary for a richer knowledge of God and for the development of godly behavior is repentance. Repentance involves taking responsibility for our own behavior. It means not blaming everything on our parents--- or on our boss or on our teachers or on the church or on our mate. It means confessing our own wrongdoing and determining to do what is right whatever the circumstances are.

B.

The second thing to be realized in regard to Joseph's deceptive parents is that **WE NEED TO TRUST A GRACIOUS GOD.** (III. A. B. WE NEED TO TRUST...) God is gracious toward His people. From what we have seen of Joseph's parents there wasn't a lot about their character that was deserving of God's blessing. Yet God was gracious to them. He blessed them anyway.

When Jacob later in his life began to acknowledge God's protection and guidance by worshipping Him, it wasn't because of any great insight on his part. It was because God had graciously chosen to protect him and reveal Himself to him. Several times God appeared to him to tell him what to do and to get him on the right track. God chose to bless Jacob because He had graciously decided before Jacob had been born to make him the child of promise. God always keeps His promises, even when His people are not deserving of them.

As a young person Jacob had become aware of the promise that God made to his parents that his older brother Esau would serve him. Jacob failed to trust a gracious God. He took things into his own hands, and he tricked Esau into giving up his birthright. Later, with the help of his deceptive mother, he also tricked his father into giving him the special blessing. In both situations he failed to trust a gracious God. God would have

fulfilled His promise without Jacob's help, and he would have had less grief in the process. Unfortunately Jacob didn't do a good job of trusting in a gracious God.

We also need to trust this gracious God. In Ephesians #2 vv. 8 & 9 the Apostle Paul tells Christians, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.”** In order to have a relationship with God and to have eternal life, we have to trust in a gracious God. The starting point is a trusting faith in Jesus Christ who died for our sins. In order to become part of God's family and to have eternal life, we must place our faith in Christ as our Savior. We need to welcome Him into our lives.

It is also trust in a gracious God that will help us to overcome negative things in our life that can be traced back to imperfect parents or other negative influences in our past. We need to begin by taking responsibility for our own actions. But then we also need power that can enable us to overcome things of the past. That power comes only by trusting a gracious God. It comes by trusting in a God who promises to transform us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Steve came from a difficult background. His parents were not divorced, but they were both alcoholics. Steve had eight brothers and sisters. All of them were heavy drinkers also. None of them went to church, and none of them had any apparent interest in spiritual things.

Steve's clan had a family business that repaired cars and did auto body work. They barely made it financially, because none of them were very good businessmen, and they were always bickering with each other. They were not very responsible people. All of the outward indications were that Steve would follow in the inglorious steps of his father.

But Steve did not. When Steve was in his twenties, someone shared the gospel with him, and it made sense. Steve decided to trust in Jesus. According to his own testimony, the Lord also instantly took away his desire for alcohol. He stopped drinking at that moment. It doesn't usually happen like that, but in Steve's case it did. It was the result of the power of a gracious God.

Steve also started taking responsibility for his own actions. He married a Christian gal and began to lead his family on the basis of Biblical principles. He got involved in a church. There he gradually acquired more responsibilities. He became head of the AWANA program, a Biblical program for kids. He became a responsible guy. If he said that he would do something, he would do it--- no need to check up on him. Eventually he became an elder in the church.

I met Steve's parents and most of his family members. I saw something of what they were like. Steve did not have a good family background. But Steve turned out--- not just OK, but great. He turned out to be a godly man. What made the difference? He took responsibility for his own actions, and he trusted in a gracious God.

I am fortunate to have had excellent parents. I did not have any experiences that were too traumatic in my formative years. Not all of you have had the same experience. But you do not have to let the past control your future. Joseph did not. He broke free from the pattern of deception and conniving that was practiced by his parents. In the process he became a hero of the faith.

Steve did not let the past determine his future. He, too, broke free. You can break free from the past also. To do that you have to decide to take responsibility for your own actions--- and to place your trust in a gracious God.