

JOSEPH: Living with Integrity - PART 1

Dysfunctional Families

By: Dr. Derek Morris

Preaching passage:	Genesis 29-35
Subject:	What was Joseph's family like?
Complement:	Dysfunctional.
Exegetical idea:	Joseph's family was dysfunctional.
Homiletical idea:	No matter how troubled your past, God has a good plan for your future!
Purpose:	To encourage my hearers to believe that God has a good plan for their lives, no matter what their past or present is like.

Jana grew up in a very dysfunctional family, if you could even call it a family. She only met her father a couple of times. He spent most of his life in prison. Jana's mother was an alcoholic. A steady stream of "visitors" stopped by their little trailer. Many times Jana was left all alone to fend for herself. That's not easy for a small child. Jana's mother always showed favoritism to Jana's brother, but he ended up in jail for accidentally killing his cousin. When Jana was about 9 years old, her mother gave her away to a family traveling to Oklahoma. Yes, you heard me correctly. Her mother gave her away. It's a wonder that her picture didn't show up in the local newspaper: Have you seen this child?

Jana is just one of many children who grew up in dysfunctional families. The individual stories may vary but the trail of tears and trouble is the same. The Bible records the story of another child who grew up in a very dysfunctional family. It might seem rather depressing to study his family history today, but embedded in this story we find a word of hope and a challenge to rise above our troubled circumstances and live with integrity.

Long before Joseph was born, his family was a mess. His father was a liar and a cheat. His

uncle tried to kill his father. When it was time for his father to get married, Joseph's grandfather Laban also practiced deception, and Joseph's mother went along with the deception, though I'm not sure that she had any choice in the matter. We can read the story in Genesis 29:25-28. "When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?' Laban replied, 'It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one.'" If I was Jacob, I would have said, "Fine! Just be honest with me. Just tell me about your custom before you marry me to the wrong woman!" But Laban continued: "Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work." And Scripture records that Jacob did so. "He finished the week with Leah," though I'm not sure what kind of honeymoon week that would have been, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife.

Can you imagine how Leah felt all week? It wasn't her fault that her father had deceived Jacob. How would you have felt if the next day after your wedding you were told that your husband was going to marry your sister at the end of the week because she was the one that he really loved?

Apparently, Leah thought to herself, "If only I could have a baby, then my husband would love me!" Have you heard that line before? Let me tell you something. If you have an unhealthy marriage without children, don't complicate the situation by having babies. Having a baby won't make a spouse love you. Leah learned that the hard way. Look at Genesis 29:31-35. "When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, 'It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.'" But that didn't change her dysfunctional relationship with her husband. "She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said,

‘Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too.’ So she named him Simeon.’” But that didn’t help either. “Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, ‘Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.’ So he was named Levi.” “She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, ‘This time I will praise the Lord.’ So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.” After four babies, Leah gave up hope that having a baby would improve her relationship with her husband. If you’ve been thinking that way, please don’t have four babies before you figure that out! Go and get some help so that you can have a healthier relationship with your spouse.

Unfortunately, Rachel wasn’t praising the LORD that Leah was having so many babies. Rachel was jealous. She had her husband’s love, but she had no babies. So Rachel came up with a terrible idea. Genesis 30:3-8. “Then Rachel said, ‘Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family.’ So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife.” Jacob didn’t argue with his wife and say, “That’s a terrible idea.” No. Jacob slept with Rachel’s maidservant Bilhah and she became pregnant and bore him a son. Then Rachel said, ‘God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son.’ Because of this she named him Dan. Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, ‘I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won.’ So she named him Naphtali.”

How did Leah respond? Genesis 30:9-13 “When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her maidservant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife.” And Jacob said, “No, no, not another woman to sleep with! I’ve already seen what trouble that can cause!” Right? Wrong! Jacob slept with Leah’s maidservant Zilpah and she got pregnant and bore Jacob a son.

Then Leah said, "What good fortune!" So she named him Gad. Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, 'How happy I am! The women will call me happy.' So she named him Asher." I told you that this was a dysfunctional family.

We don't know how much time had passed, but Leah's first born, Reuben was growing up. We read in Genesis 30:14, "During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah." The mandrake with its odoriferous fruit was considered by the ancients to be an aphrodisiac that increased sexual desire and fertility. Apparently, Leah had sent her firstborn son on a special mission. When Rachel heard that Leah had some mandrakes, she said to Leah, recorded in Genesis 30:14-16, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." Leah would have none of it. "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?" Now they are fighting over aphrodisiacs. "Very well," Rachel said, 'he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes.'" This family is weird.

The story continues in Genesis 30:16, "So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. 'You must sleep with me,' she said. "I have hired you with my son's mandrakes.' And Jacob said, "You don't have to hire me. I'm your husband. I made a commitment to love you and care for you!" Wrong. But he did sleep with her that night.

Leah gave birth to a fifth son, and later a sixth. And finally a daughter, named Dinah. Then we read in Genesis 30:22, "Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb." In the midst of all of this family dysfunction, enter Joseph. You might be interested to learn that Jacob was 91 years old when Joseph was born. Joseph was a child of his old age. But Joseph was born into a family that was full of contention and turmoil.

Joseph was 6 years old when his father decided to leave grandpa Laban. It was on that trip that Joseph's mother Rachel stole the family idols and lied to her father when he tried to find them. We can read the story in Genesis 31:33-35. "So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two maidservants, but he found nothing. After he came out of Leah's tent, he entered Rachel's tent. Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel's saddle and was sitting on them. Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing. Rachel said to her father, 'Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; as I'm in my monthly time.' So he searched but could not find the household gods."

Joseph witnessed that deception too. Can you imagine growing up in a family like that? Your father is a liar and a cheat. Your mother has a similar character trait. Your step brothers hate you. Your mother is always fighting with their mother. Before long, that anger will erupt into violence.

Once Joseph's family arrived in Canaan, they settled on the outskirts of Shechem. We pick up the story in Genesis 34:1-7 "Now Dinah, the daughter Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, the ruler of that area, saw her, he took her and violated her. His heart was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl and spoke tenderly to her. And Shechem said to his father Hamor, 'Get me this girl as my wife.' When Jacob heard that his daughter Dinah had been defiled, his sons were in the fields with his livestock; so he kept quiet about it until they came home. Then Shechem's father Hamor went out to talk with Jacob. Now Jacob's sons had come in from the fields as soon as they heard what had happened. They were filled with grief and fury, because Shechem had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter--a thing that should not be done."

Grief and fury were not inappropriate responses to the horrible deed that Shechem son of

Hamor had done to their sister Dinah. But the way that Joseph's brothers handled their anger was very unhealthy. We read on in Genesis 34:13-30 "Because their sister Dinah had been defiled, Jacob's sons replied deceitfully as they spoke to Shechem and his father Hamor. They said to them, 'We can't do such a thing; we can't give our sister to a man who is not circumcised. That would be a disgrace to us. We will give our consent to you on one condition only: that you become like us by circumcising all your males. Then we will give you our daughters and take your daughters for ourselves. We'll settle among you and become one people with you. But if you will not agree to be circumcised, we'll take our sister and go.' Their proposal seemed good to Hamor and his son Shechem. The young man, who was the most honored of his father's entire household, lost no time in doing what they said, because he was delighted with Jacob's daughter. So Hamor and his son Shechem went to the gate of their city to speak to their fellow townsmen. 'These men are friendly toward us,' they said. 'Let them live in our land and trade in it; the land has plenty of room for them. We can marry their daughters and they can marry ours. [22] But the men will consent to live with us as one people only on the condition that our males be circumcised, as they themselves are. Won't their livestock, their property and all their other animals become ours? So let us give our consent to them, and they will settle among us.' All the men who went out of the city gate agreed with Hamor and his son Shechem, and every male in the city was circumcised. Three days later, while all of them were still in pain, two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and attacked the unsuspecting city, killing every male. They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword and took Dinah from Shechem's house and left. The sons of Jacob came upon the dead bodies and looted the city where their sister had been defiled. They seized their flocks and herds and donkeys and everything else of theirs in the city and out in the fields. They

carried off all their wealth and all their women and children, taking as plunder everything in the houses. Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, ‘You have brought trouble on me by making me a stench to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land.’”

Now Joseph’s brothers were acting like their violent uncle Esau. Out of control! Shechem should have been punished for his terrible crime, but to murder every male in the city and to plunder the entire city and carry off the women and children and slaves? These brothers were out of control.

Joseph witnessed all of that violence. Could he have imagined that some day that out of control rage would be directed toward him?

What impresses me as we begin our study of the life of Joseph is this: even though Joseph came from a terribly dysfunctional family, God still had a good plan for his life! Joseph didn’t have to repeat the sins of the fathers unto the third and fourth generation. Joseph didn’t have to repeat the sins of his step brothers. Even though Joseph came from a terribly dysfunctional family, he could choose to believe that God had a good plan for his life. And we will see that plan unfold in the coming weeks as we continue this series on Joseph.

Perhaps you’re wondering what ever happened to Jana. Through a miraculous sequence of events, Jana ended up in the home of Pastor Patty Hofer, who at the time was a third grade teacher in our Christian elementary school right here in Apopka, Florida. Pastor Hofer loved Jana as her own daughter and watched her blossom and grow. Jana lived in Pastor Hofer’s home for almost 2 years. But Jana missed her mother, or the mother that she never had. When Jana was 11 she moved back home. She hoped that things would change. They didn’t. But through a long road of pain and hardship, Jana chose not to follow in the footsteps of her father. She is not in jail. Jana

chose not to follow in the footsteps of her mother. She is not an alcoholic. Jana graduated from college. She is currently a freelance artist in mid-America. Pastor Hofer talked to Jana this week and they reminisced about old times. Jana gave permission for me to share her story. I wish that I could tell you that Jana is walking with Jesus as a fully devoted disciple. She isn't. But her story is not over. She is still on her journey. Jana told Pastor Hofer that she might join us online today. And so, Jana, if you're listening, remember this: No matter how troubled your past, no matter how turbulent your present, God has a good plan for your future!

Someone listening to me today might be thinking, "Pastor, I don't have a troubled past. I was blessed with a wonderful family, loving parents, healthy relationships. And I don't have a turbulent present. So how does this message relate to my life?" I would say to you, "If you don't have a troubled past, give thanks to the LORD!" If you don't have a turbulent present, praise God from whom all blessings flow. But I would also tell you that you know someone who has a troubled past, don't you? You know someone who has a turbulent present, don't you? Tell them a lesson that you've learned today from the life of Joseph. No matter how troubled your past, no matter how turbulent your present, God has a good plan for your future.

You can also invite them to join us week by week for this new series. If they live locally, invite them to church next week! If they live far away, invite them to log on to www.forestlakechurch.org. We'll all be changed as we study the life of Joseph. And we can all rejoice today that no matter how troubled our past, or how turbulent our present, God has a good plan for our future!