

Heroes of History: Joseph

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 10 September 2006

All the king's horses

Today we're starting a new series looking at some of the greatest heroes of history, heroes from the Old Testament. And we're going to begin with one of the greatest heroes of them all: Joseph. So turn with me to Genesis 37 (p.38). You'll need a Bible this morning because I want to do something a little different. I want to walk us through the entire life of this one person to see what we can learn from his story. I should also say that I'm indebted to John Ortberg for much of what we're going to be using in this series.

Now before we get into the story, let me read to you this verse (2 Corinthians 5:16-19):

So from now on, we regard no one from a worldly point of view, though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

It's kind of a loose association, but when I read those words, and when I think about reconciliation, it reminds me of an old nursery rhyme: Humpty Dumpty. How does it go?

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Could not put Humpty together again.*

There's a sense in which our world has had a great fall. It's kind of messed up. Broken. As Mick said last week, our relationships are so often not what they should be. And reconciliation can seem impossible. That brings us to the story of Joseph (Genesis 37:1-11).

Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. This is the account of Jacob.

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flock with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

Now Israel [another name for Jacob] loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them: "Listen to this dream that I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered round mine and bowed down to it." His brothers said to him: "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.

Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said: "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said: "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?"

His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Sibling rivalry

A few weeks back *Time Magazine* ran a big story about families. They cited a study about sibling rivalry. Do you know how much fighting goes on among siblings? Kids between the ages of two and four average 6.2 fights per hour. That's about 90 fights per day. Or about 3000 fights per year! (If you're parenting little kids, it's no wonder you're tired!) It turns out that sibling rivalry – family conflict – has a long history. The text here says that Joseph was the son of Jacob's old age. This is an important detail. Birth order shows up in families in odd ways. Have you ever seen a family photo album and noticed the relationship between birth order and how many pictures there are of each child? With the first child, it's "Here's a picture of Andrew when he was born. Here he is at one minute old. Here's Andrew one hour old. Here's another book of Andrew – day two. With the second child it's, "Here's Paul being born. Here's a picture of Paul walking. Here's Paul's first day at school." With the third child – I was a third child – it's "Here's John being born... We've got to get some more pictures of John." Well in ancient cultures, it was the reverse. The favourite was often the youngest. So Joseph was the favourite.

And his brothers knew it. Because one day Jacob gives Joseph a robe, a “richly ornamented” robe, or as the Old King James version has it, a “coat of many colours.” In those days, clothing was an expression of status. Certain colours, like purple for example, were reserved for royalty. So every time Joseph wears the robe, his brothers are painfully reminded that their father loves him more than he loves them. Their spirits start to curdle with envy. Three times this passage says they “hated” him (vv.4,5,8). They could not speak a kind word to him. That’s how bad things had got. Jump to verse 18. We’re told: “They saw Joseph coming a long way off.” How did they recognize that it was Joseph? He’s wearing the robe. So in verse 19, they say: “Here comes that dreamer. Let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.” Ultimately they decide to sell him into slavery instead of killing him. They take his robe and dip it in the blood of a slaughtered goat to trick their father into thinking Joseph was killed by wild animals.

One generation after another

There’s such irony in this story. It is an amazing story, if you know the Book of Genesis. Because one day when Jacob, their dad, was young and upset because his father had a favourite son and he wasn’t that son, he took a goat and his brother’s clothes and he deceived his father, and betrayed his brother, Esau, with awful consequences. You might think that he would have said to himself somewhere along the line: “I’ve seen the destructiveness that happens when there are favourites in a family. It’s going to end. No more.” But Jacob falls into the same pattern. He marries two sisters: Rachel and Leah. And Genesis 29:30 says that he “loved Rachel more than Leah.” So now he favours Rachel’s son, Joseph, just as his father had favoured Esau. And now his sons take a goat and their brother’s clothes, and they deceive their father Jacob. They betray their brother. One generation after another. There is something broken in our world.

At the beginning of Genesis you read about God creating the earth and humanity and it’s all good, all woven together in a rich tapestry of community and rightness. But Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. The story of Genesis up to this point is simply one broken relationship, one broken family, after another. Adam blames Eve. Cain kills Abel. Isaac is separated from Ishmael, Jacob from Esau. In the newspaper recently you might have read about the Congo, where four million people have now died in the bloodiest war now since World War Two. Little children are being accused of witchcraft so they can be put away. What kind of world is this? Nobody wants it that way. But all the King’s horses and all the King’s men can’t put it back together again.

Good news, bad news

But then, in this story, the strangest thing happens. Joseph is now a slave in Egypt, and Genesis 39:2 says: “Now the Lord was with Joseph.” God hasn’t given up. God is with Joseph in the midst of his painful, broken circumstances. And Joseph’s story starts to look like one of those “Good news, Bad news” stories that you hear. He ends up working for Potiphar, a high-ranking, wealthy Egyptian official. Potiphar likes him. He ends up in charge of everything. Plus he’s “well-built and handsome” (39:6) – sort of like Brad Pitt, who my wife thinks is good-looking, although in person I’m sure he’s not all that impressive. Joseph looks impressive. Everything is good. But then his boss’ wife is attracted to him and tries to seduce him. That’s bad. Joseph clings to his integrity and resists her advances. That’s good. But the wife is furious, and she lies to her husband and gets Joseph arrested and sent to prison. That’s bad. In prison, he meets Pharaoh’s cupbearer. He interprets his dream correctly. The cupbearer is released. That’s good. But then he forgets all about Joseph, and Joseph languishes in prison. That’s bad. Then one day, Pharaoh has a dream and nobody can interpret it. The cupbearer remembers Joseph. So Joseph is brought to Pharaoh from prison. He interprets the dream: There will be seven years of abundance and richness, then seven years of famine. But if we use the seven years of abundance to get ready, it can be managed. Pharaoh is so impressed by Joseph’s wisdom and ability that he puts him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. This is good. Joseph is a hero. But his most heroic chapter is yet to come.

The mechanics of reconciliation

The famine comes and spreads throughout Egypt and beyond. It reaches a family headed up by an old man called Jacob. When he hears that Egypt still has grain he sends his sons to go and get some. He sends all his sons, except for his son Benjamin who, like Joseph, was born to Jacob in his old age, by his favorite wife. Jacob doesn’t want to risk losing him. So all the sons except Benjamin go to Egypt. They come before Joseph to beg for food. It’s been twenty-two years since they sold their brother into slavery. They have no idea that this high official, the Prime Minister of Egypt, is their little brother. So they bow down before him. They lay their faces on the ground. Remember the dream? This is chapter 42 and the text says that Joseph recognizes his brothers. But he doesn’t tell them who he is. Instead, when he hears that they have a younger brother, that Jacob in his old age has produced another son,

Benjamin, he tells them: "I will only give you grain if you first go home and bring Benjamin to me" (42:14-20). Ever wondered why he does that? Maybe this is reconciliation at work.

At first Jacob refuses to let Benjamin go to Egypt. But the famine gets so bad that they'll all about to starve. So the brothers take little Benjamin with them back to Joseph, who arranges a dinner for them all but serves Benjamin five times as much as anyone else (43:34). Why? Why in the midst of a famine, when food is so precious, would Joseph "super-size" Benjamin? Joseph is recreating something. Once again, a younger brother is being treated as a favorite, and Joseph wants to see how the others will respond. What will they do? Have they changed? The ultimate test comes when Joseph has Benjamin framed for stealing, and says, "The rest of you can go home laden with grain, but Benjamin will stay here and rot in prison" (44:17). Once again the brothers have the chance to get rid of their younger brother, the favourite, whom their father loves. What will they do?

This time one of the brothers, Judah, stands up and says, "Please, Benjamin is so young. It would kill our father to lose him. Let me take the place of the boy. I know the law must be upheld. The debt must be paid. Let me pay it. Let his punishment fall on me" (44:30-34). For the first time in the Bible, we see the offer of a substitutionary act of suffering for the sake of someone else. But we see something else too. The ancient rabbis used to have a saying: "You know a man has changed, you know he is truly repentant, when he is subjected to the same situation in which he had once before fallen but this time – the second time – he does what is right." Judah and his brothers have changed. They are repentant. Joseph now knows it. So he brings the charade to an end. He takes off his mask. Calls his brothers close and says: "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves ... because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (45:4-5). They are reconciled.

It's worth reflecting here that true reconciliation requires repentance. Forgiveness is something you can do on your own. You can give up your right to hurt someone back. You can choose to bless them and pray for them, whether or not they repent. But reconciliation – the miracle of rebuilding a new relationship, rebuilding a family, rebuilding trust – that can only be built on repentance. In this story the brothers go home, and they tell old Jacob: "*Joseph is still alive!*" (45:26). In other words, they confess to their father what they had done twenty-two years ago. Reconciliation is not about avoiding unpleasantness or covering things up. It requires truth. And one more thing. It took twenty-two years for this family to become a family again. Reconciliation is not easy; it is not quick; it can take a long time; it can take years. But it's worth it.

The ministry of reconciliation

So now, where in your life is there a relationship that needs reconciliation? Is it a husband or a wife or an ex, a mom or a dad, a dishonest business partner, an unfaithful friend, somebody who lied or cheated or betrayed you? What steps could you take to be reconciled with them? Maybe you're thinking: "There's no point trying to be reconciled. It's impossible." Maybe you're thinking "Why should I take the first step? They don't deserve it." Probably not. But neither did Joseph's brothers. Neither do I. Neither do you. Take the step anyway. Because another young dreamer once stepped as a Servant into this world, and He too was stripped of His robe, and He too was betrayed and deserted by His brothers, and He is the One who finally, ultimately, said: "I will pay the debt. I will bear the cross. Let the punishment fall on me." "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself*" (2 Corinthians 5:19). All the King's horses and all the King's men can't do it. But God can! And, God says, if you're a follower of Jesus, you have been given "the ministry of reconciliation." So if there's a broken relationship in your life, you take the first step today.

Questions

1. Read Genesis 25:19-34; 27:1-41. Compare this with Genesis 37:1-11. What do these stories say about the way sin is passed on from one generation to another? Are there any sinful attitudes or patterns that you risk passing on? What could you do to bury them once and for all?
2. How does our society promote favoritism? Where is it evident in the church? What can be done to eradicate it?
3. Read Psalm 133. What are the consequences of unity? Is there someone in your life with whom you are not dwelling in unity?
4. Read Genesis 45:1-15. This is the first recorded full reconciliation in the book of Genesis. What were the key ingredients? How is forgiveness distinct from the miracle of reconciliation?
5. What does Genesis 50:15-21 tell us about the process of reconciliation?
6. Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-19. What is the ministry of reconciliation that God has given to us? What step will you take this week to discharge that ministry?

Acknowledgement

I am heavily indebted to John Ortberg and a sermon he gave on the life of Joseph earlier this year at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church.