

JOSEPH, part 1
How Dreams Come True
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I want to share with you some insights from the man Joseph, whose story begins in the 37th chapter of Genesis. I'm calling this series, "How Dreams Come True." Joseph is the most consistent dreamer in the scripture outside of another person who bears his name in the New Testament another Joseph, the stepfather of Jesus, the husband of Mary.

Tonight part 1 if I were to subtitle it I would call it, surviving your childhood. There are some people who have not successfully survived their childhood and adolescence. Many have survived it biologically but that doesn't mean one has survived it psychologically or spiritually.

I see in Joseph three strikes against him right off the bat when you encounter him. I'd like to talk to you about those three strikes and the antidote in Joseph's life that resisted those negative marks against him.

The first strike against Joseph by all odds had to be his family situation.

Unless you have grown up in a confused family situation you have an idea of what it was like in Joseph's household. We live in a day of serialized parenting. Where a child growing up in America may go through a number of parents in the course of their adolescent years. But Joseph had a situation where he had number of parents all present at the same time. We know that his father had two wives and two concubines. The concubines were alongside of the wives and really in effect we'd regard as legal wives in our culture. To cope with that situation, he also had eleven other brothers and one sister that we know and probably a lot of other sisters that are not named.

We know that some of the adults in his life especially his step mothers, the other wives of Jacob, could not have been the most positive influences upon his life. Leah had real problems with her own self-image. We know that she knew she was not pretty. We know that she knew she did not have Jacob's favor. We know also that she had participated in her wedding week as a partner to deceive Jacob into marrying her. Leah paid a drastic consequence for this. Later when Bilhah and Zilpah came into Jacob's life as his concubines and children are born by them that contributed to the family milieu.

While we must avoid looking at Jacob from our own culture and the light of the gospel we know that archeologists in the near East have uncovered contracts of marriage that obligated a barren wife at the time of marriage to provide a substitute woman to have children in the event that the wife herself was barren. Jacob was simply following the custom of the day. The law of Moses had not yet been given. We could say those things even though he had some revelation of God.

It's interesting to see as Joseph emerges that he does not become like his father Jacob. Nor does he become like his grandfather Abraham who himself had concubines. But rather he becomes a person of a higher moral order. We can well realize that there was an awful lot of sibling rivalry in the family. I think any one of us could excuse Joseph for not having a dream, not having any goals. He, after all, was the eleventh son. That means that one son followed him – Benjamin. And anyone in a large family knows that the baby son always gets the best treatment! So Joseph only had it for a year or two and then all of that passed away with Benjamin coming into

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existence. Somehow though he was a child who pleased and became the favorite of his father. He could have become something else. He could have said, "My environment has made me what I am! There's no chance growing up in a household like this. No opportunity in Palestine for me. I'll never succeed in my family because I was not the oldest, the first born. Therefore there is no special lot that I'm going to play in life. I'll just pass my years of existence like any other person." He could have pointed to the negative factors and chosen not to do anything.

But the fact was he chosen to have a dream. He even rejected the possibility I think, of living in comfort although God brought that circumstance about in his life. His family situation if you would look at him as a modern counselor a psychologist, you would have had to say that this little eleventh son growing up in this home did not have a great deal going for him that would write his name in any kind of history book or become an example for people for centuries to come. But yet something very significant happened.

I suppose when we look at whatever background you come from if you feel like you have a strike against you with your family situation there comes a moment in your life where you've got to be a man, or a woman, and you have to say, if you're ever going to come to spiritual maturity, "I must forget the things that are behind and I must press toward the future." We cannot afford as Christians to slip into a kind of Freudian kind of mind set that says my past, my environmental conditioning has made me what I am. Sooner or later we have to take responsibility. We may say "My father and mother did this and my church did that and this person did that, and so forth." But ultimately we must say, "I take responsibility for that. Life is now in my hands. It's going to be with God's help what I choose to make it." I can choose to be enriched by my negative experiences, by turning them into positives in my life and seeing God work for their good. Or I can go on carrying that chip on my shoulder, carrying that wound in my personality, never dealing with it. I see many people today never dealing with their past because somehow it's been communicated perhaps through our humanistic psychology and the like you simply have to be whatever's been made of you. This is simply not true.

Joseph does not live becoming the person that his family lifestyle situation represented.

Susanna Wesley, the mother of John Wesley the great English revivalist and preacher who almost single handedly by the power of God brought a great reformation to England. Susanna was born to pastor family in the Anglican church. She was the last child born in the family. But she was not the third or fourth. She was 24th or 25th child born in her family. They're actually not able to establish which number she was. We do know that she was the last.

She could have grown up in that kind of atmosphere saying, "I was an afterthought. Obviously my coming into the world was not planned. All I get to wear is the hand me down clothes. I was born a woman in a chauvinistic culture and therefore there is nothing I can make of my life. Women don't even have the privilege of going to the same levels of schooling as men do." She could have used all those kind of things that would have excused her existence and allowed her to settle into the normalcy of whatever the 24th or 25th kid did in a family.

But she chose to reject all those avenues of life. She chose to make something of her life. Somehow there was a fire in her that began even as a girl. By the time she was a teenager, 15, 16, 17 years of age, she had successfully learned New Testament Greek, French and Latin and theology. She loved to set at the dinner table when her father entertained ministerial guests and

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partake of the conversation, something girls didn't do in those days. Theology was man's talk. But she could hold her own in a heavyweight situation. Her father would often have to tell her to cool it and let the men talk. But she didn't let that background stagnant her development.

When she was nineteen years of age, she herself married. In the next 21 years she gave birth to 19 children. Some of those children did die at an early age. Child mortality rate was rather high in those days. I think somewhere between 12-15 of her children grew to maturity. She married a preacher but her husband was not the preacher her father was. He was a very poor preacher who was gone a lot. One of his dreams in life was to write a book that would be widely read. He never attained to that station. In fact he spent some of his life in debtors prison. He would sometimes go away from their country parish to preach in the city or be gone for an extended period of time. When he would leave, the church would be 30-40 people, and Susanna Wesley would take over the ministry during the time he was gone. When her husband got back she'd turn the parish back over to him with attendance running 200 strong. It would soon go back to 30-40 but that was ok.

Susanna Wesley with all of those children born in that period of time could have said things like, "I just can't keep track of the kids. There's not a thing I can do with all of this humanity around my legs all day long. These children are driving me nuts. My husband is gone all the time. What can you expect for me to accomplish? I can't get the decent things of life. I can hardly feed my family."

Susanna Wesley chose not to live with all of these kind of things she could have said as the mother of that many children. What she did say is very significant. A phrase comes out of her life that molded church history. She said, "Order is heaven's first law." And she insisted that order be brought into her household. From the time a baby was born until they were three months of age they were changed on schedule rather than on the basis of need. They were changed on a set schedule. And they were put to sleep on a set schedule whether they slept or not. They learned right from day one to begin operating on schedule. I suppose if you were bringing a child into the world about every year you would have to adopt some sort of system. It is said that in the Wesley house that by the time any child reached one year of age, they had all learned to cry softly. When a child learned to talk, an older child took the child and taught him or her the Lord's prayers. The first thing a child learned. There were three set meals a day all served at regular times. At the age of five each child was given on his fifth birthday one day to learn the alphabet. Almost all her children learned it on their fifth birthday. One or two of the children took a couple of days. She conducted school in her home six hours a day. Her daughter Virginia could read the New Testament in Greek by the time he was 8 years of age as well as reading it of course in English. Each day an older child took a younger one and read to that younger child a psalm and a chapter in the Bible. Evening prayers were at 6:00. Supper followed at 7:00. The youngest went to bed and by 8:00 all the kids were in bed. She spent one hour a week with each child alone as that each child had significant time with her. In fact John Wesley credits his ministry so that one hour a week he had a chance to be alone with his mother. John Benjamin Wesley the 15th child was actually named after two deceased children – John and Benjamin.

Susanna was the first Methodist really. It was she that had the method. It was she that said order is heaven's first law and in many respects John Wesley simply put into existence what his mother had stood for.

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I'm fascinated even how she approached death. She lived to see her sons John and Charles come to great fame. At her deathbed she summoned her children together and she gave them stern instructions. She said, "When I am released, sing a hymn of praise to God." She gave them the hymn and when she expired, immediately her children who were gathered around her bed in respect for her wishes all sang together a hymn of her selection to God in praise.

That would be my way of living and going. I'd like to live that orderly. I'd like to die that orderly. I'm not saying that I've got everything that orderly yet but I am working on it. In fact the Lord has spoken a lot to me recently about order in my life and bringing things, even personal accounts into strict order so that in the inner recesses of my life, in the drawers of my desk where life really is often chucked away, there is a sense of order and priority.

Susanna Wesley like the ancient Joseph choose not to live with all phrases that were being used that would have excused her and allowed her to cop out. She chose to resist like Joseph that strike against her. And rise in spite of the environmentally unfriendly circumstances that she had been saddled with.

A second strike that was against Joseph and it closely relates to the first I want to dwell on it more length because we see it more fully developed in the book of Genesis. The second strike against Joseph were the mistakes in parenting that were made directly by his father.

We all know the importance of a father relationship in life. And the absence of a father relationship can as well have serious consequences. As I look at Jacob and the relationship he had with Joseph and his other sons it's not hard to spot these. He makes at least three critical mistakes in respect to his fatherly role.

One mistake that he made that's quite obvious is that he idolized one son above the rest. That's sure danger and tragedy. He idolized Joseph. Probably the reason that he did this was that Joseph was born to him when he was of old age and also he was the first son born of his beloved wife Rachel. We know that he idolized Joseph from the standpoint that he gave Joseph a many-colored robe. How wrong psychologically and developmentally that was. It was no ordinary coat. It was a robe that somebody who was a prince or king would wear. It was a robe that set him apart from the other children. Joseph, it would be easy to see, is a person that begins to think of himself as a specially endowed individual because the sun rises and sets in him.

I think that children who have a sense that the sun rises and sets in them because their parents idolize them – we are never meant to be gods. And if our parents make us as children, gods, then we're going to have some rather rough bruises in life to come to reality when we grow up.

Joseph has to have a lot of hard knocks to knock out this god-like quality in him that he is this green light kid against whom nothing bad can happen.

The special treatment too that he was given by his father meant that the other sons knew that they were not as loved. When love is denied, hate results. So they hated their brother.

If you make one child above all your other children, a favorite child and this is of course easy to happen where there are divided families and remarriage. God must help parents in those kind of

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situations to not put one child up on a pedestal and use that child and say to the other brothers and sisters “If you would just do it like he does it...” That might help him to keep better behavior but it says to the other children, You’re not as good. Because they realize and know they’re not as good they will respond not by becoming like the favored one but instead by becoming the reverse. It’s a reactive way of expressing anger in order to try to reach out and get love. It’s a no win situation all the way around.

A second parenting mistake that Jacob made was he failed to discipline his children.

We see three glaring examples in the text of Genesis. One is Genesis 34, a sordid story. A story of Dinah and Shechem. Shechem was not a member of the Abraham patriarchal family therefore not a member of the line of promise. He had a passion for Dinah. He had relations with Dinah. But he was not a love-em and leave-em kind of man. He evidently genuinely loved Dinah so he attempted to make up for his wrong by asking his father to intercede. And the two of them asked for the privilege of his marrying Dinah. They agreed in Genesis 34 to provide some sort of a dowry to make this possible. Jacob said, at his other sons urging, that the whole thing could be taken care of if they would become circumcised and therefore that way express their fidelity to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob himself actually the whole attempt to have Shechem and his father and all the men in their household and city to be circumcised was a rouse by Jacob’s son. Two days after they were circumcised and while they were in a condition of weakness Dinah’s brothers, Jacob’s sons, took sword in hand and went in the inability of Shechem and the members of his household to defend themselves all the men in that family and in that city were killed while they were in this state after having been circumcised.

Jacob’s response to the situation is the wrong response. It’s an incredibly fascinating response. His sons have been wrong. They’ve killed innocent people. People who were trying to atone for wrong which they had done. They come in and seize their property and plunder their good – Genesis 34:28-29. When Jacob hears about it in verse 30 this is his response, “Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, you have brought trouble on me.” He does not say to them, You did wrong. He said, You’ve made me lose face.

When a parent’s correction of a child is based upon the idea that your activity wasn’t wrong in itself but what you did made me lose face, they are on the wrong track.

There are a lot of things kids can do to make us lose face, but that ought not to be the reason why we discipline them. When the discipline needs to be exercised we need to say something to our children that Jacob didn’t have the courage to say to his, “You did wrong!” But there is no discipline. We never read of Jacob disciplining his children for this.

A second case where Jacob failed to discipline is with Reuben, his oldest son, the first born son of Leah. In Genesis 35:22 we read that Reuben and went in and slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah, an unheard of breach of morals even in the pagan world. The response simply is, Israel or Jacob heard of it. Again he does nothing. He simply receives the news but he doesn’t do anything with it. No other response. No letting Reuban know “You did wrong!” It’s interesting that while Jacob heard of it, he didn’t forget it. Thirty years later while he is on his deathbed he is blessing the various sons that come before him. In Genesis 49 we find what he says to his firstborn son Reuben, verse 3-4 “Reuben, you are my first born, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honor, excelling in power. You will no longer excel for you went up upon

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your father's bed, onto my couch and defiled it." While he never did anything to Reuben when the event happened, he stored it away in his memory and it was still eating him on his deathbed forty years later. He hadn't forgiven it. He hadn't forgotten it. And he never dealt with it. He was a failure in that sense as a parent.

It does no good to nurse and remember the wrongs that our children do to us later down the road. Somehow we must come to grips with them when they occur. Letting the child know that what they have done is wrong and moving on with life and not simply acting as if nothing happened.

A third example of Jacob's failure to discipline and what a classic example of what bad parenting is, is Genesis 37:2. Joseph comes back and he brings a bad report concerning his brothers. Your guess is as good as mine concerning what that bad report could be. It wouldn't surprise me that given what some of the activity the sons were involved in, in respect to anger and immorality that this sort of thing was going on in their lives. Again we don't read of any action of Jacob doing anything about it. He simply hears the report.

In fact, a few days later he hears that his sons are down in Shechem and he sends Joseph to them to see how they're doing. It's intriguing that he would send them to Shechem because Shechem is where they had killed all of the people to rescue, so to speak, the name of their sister Dinah. I think he's concerned because he's worried about what mayhem they may be up to again. So he sends Joseph his spy. But Joseph doesn't get back from this journey as we know. But Jacob does nothing.

A third mistake that Jacob makes as a parent is he not only has a favorite and not only does he fail to discipline but he missed the signals his kids were sending him.

I admit that it's not always easy to read children. It's difficult to read teenagers. It helps if a family talks a lot, if parent can learn the non-verbal signals. But you can see Jacob's terrible failure. When a child is picked out as Joseph was and given something that in this culture was the equivalent of a Corvette and all the other kids weren't, you better believe that Jacob was missing the signals with his children. Had he realized these feeling of his sons that were breaking out against Joseph he would have known better than to send Joseph out to see how they were doing. He could have been suspicious of a plot that could have broken against him. He did not know his children's inner feelings.

We can make it as a matter of prayer that God would help us know our children's inner feelings. In spite of the strikes against him Jacob and Joseph indeed have a wonderful relationship when all the turbulence is over. God ultimately turned it for good and in fact down the road Jacob's relationship with his sons, as Genesis 49 shows us, was largely repaired. God can overrule even the parenting mistakes that we make. But they can be a strike against us.

Joseph again chose, found some place a position in God that the mistakes made against him did not ruin him, did not impair his service to God in life.

I think a third strike against Joseph was his amazing immaturity and naiveté. As a seventeen-year-old he is excessively wet behind the ears. Here is a boy who is having dreams about being the priority son. He dreams that his sheath of grain, Genesis 37:6, is out in the field when suddenly his sheath rose and stood upright while the sheaths of his brothers gathered around and

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bowed down to it. There are some things if we feel God is going to use us in our lives, some of the best things we can do is just shut up. But Joseph was a mile a minute. He had to talk his position up. "I'm the best." And we can all think of people we've known ourselves who have talked too much about what they were going to do.

He not only makes the mistake once, he makes the mistake twice. He can see the resentment of his brothers after he told the first dream. He has another dream and comes back and tells them the second dream. "Listen. I had another dream. This time the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." It didn't take a great interpreter of dreams to figure out that he meant his eleven brothers, his mother and his dad.

His brothers are rightly incensed with this behavior.

A psychiatrist has said there are four kinds of egocentric, self-centered types of persons.

There's the Nero person who wants to dominate. There is the person who might be called a turtle who is self-centered, inside a shell and nobody can reach them because they always withdraw. There's the clinging vine self centered person who's basically parasitical and who's identity is totally made up in what other people or some special person thinks of them. Then a fourth kind of egocentricity is the star. The person who loves the limelight. Stars love to shine. They love adulation and glory.

Jacob was Nero kind of person. He had to dominate. He wanted to dominate from the day he came out of the womb he was grabbing his brother's heel. Joseph was not a Nero person. Although ultimately great power came to him he was a star. He wanted to shine. And he wanted everybody to bow down. Stars love applause. Some kids just love to shine, love applause.

But his dreams got him into trouble that even his father got a little bit upset with him. Although his father kept the thing in mind which shows that Jacob had some of the spiritual sensitivity of his own mother Rebecca who also knew something special about Jacob's existence when he was born.

Against that immaturity and naiveté God will have to do a work of reshaping Joseph's life. To the ego centric, self centered person or the self sufficient person there is no better way and probably no quicker way to remake that than to be shattered, to be tried, to be tested in a heads over heels situation.

Joseph is going to be called to go through a crucible that his immaturity and naiveté might yield to a better personality.

As I look at the strikes against him and see what emerged I come to the kind of bottom line of three applications that I close with this evening from this first look at Joseph's life.

The one is the word *grace*. God does overrule. God overrules our mistakes. He overruled Jacob's mistakes. Granted he made mistakes in the number of wives that he had. Granted he made mistakes in parenting that he had. But let's look at the fact that Israel came from Jacob. That the twelve tribes come from the twelve sons. And that that composite group made God's people from whom came the Messiah. God in his great grace and sovereignty worked through a

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family situation that was very troubled to bring about his purposes. I think we ought to look at all of our failures in light of God's overruling. That we may come to a situation where we realize we've been at fault. We've made mistakes. We feel very frustrated because we cannot undo those. We cannot unscramble an egg as somebody said. Once the egg is scrambled it cannot be unscrambled. But God in his great grace and in his great mercy can yet overrule and make it for good.

A second kind of a lesson that in this early look at Joseph's life that I can pick up is the need for sensitivity. Parents, we need to be sensitive in discipline for our children. We also need to be very sensitive if we are a non-favored child. There are some children whom I'm actually convinced are not non-favored children but think they are. Every event that happens in their family they read as a sign that they are not the special one that is the object of their parents deepest love. I would say beware of self fulfilling prophecy. If you get it between your ears that you're not a favorite child, everything that happens will be filtered and interpreted by what you're thinking and your parents could never prove you otherwise. They could even make you their favored child but you would go on believing that you weren't once you accept that analysis. If you know that you're not favored, ask the Lord to help you to avoid anger. You'll want to use anger to try to gain their love. You'll want to do things that will gain attention. Don't do that. Respond in love. Do good. Let good replace evil. Change your attitude and your behavior. All easier said than done but be sensitive to that fact. You might in the soul of your existence ask yourself, Am I a favored child.

At some point in your life you have to come to peace with where you came from and who your parents were and what happened to you. Be sensitive to the fact that you're a special person and God can take the good and the bad and work them out for his glory and honor.

I think a third lesson coming out of this is the benefit of fire in our life, the benefit of adversity and stress. You'll find Joseph next week going down into Egypt. We know that when he emerges from Egypt he will immerge a better person. Although he would have chosen not to emerge at all. Or he could have chosen to immerge the worse. It is Joseph's choices that count.

Some people say you are what you eat. There is some degree of truth in that. Another person says, You are what you read. There is truth in that as well because what we fill our mind with determines a great deal of what we're going to be saying, thinking and feeling. But the most fundamental definition is you are what you choose. I believe that's right.

God has given you the freedom to choose and you are becoming what you are choosing. Not just what your parents have made you. Not what your environment has made you. Not what your church has made you. You are becoming what you are choosing to be. Like Joseph may we choose to follow God.

Our Father, in this evening hour we give you thanks for the lesson of scripture to our lives. We thank you for not only the positive example of Joseph but for the beautiful example of Susanna Wesley who gave to her children a heritage and gave to the world a benefit. Lord, in the making of our life we pray that you would be present to us. Lord, may young people think of strikes against them if life isn't ideally what they'd like it to be and things have happened. God, I pray that you would not let us simply walk in life with chips on our shoulders and strikes against us and how we are treated here and deprived here or denied

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there. That you would help us to be courageous and firm in spirit and overcome that and have a deeper resiliency and a deeper level of confidence than what simply happened to us in the past. Only you, Lord, can put courage within our breast. Only you can make us what we ought to be. I pray, Lord that we may turn from those things which would undo us. To you who can truly make us. Help us to dream. Especially when the times when dreaming seems futile because the odds against us seem so overwhelming. Help us to be people of vision. People who can somehow see a way, a place for us in your kingdom. A place for us to work productively, fruitfully in your vineyard. Grant it, Lord. Bless each person here this evening. May this be a wonderful evening for us for having gathered in your presence. May our hearts have been strangely warmed by you. We ask in your name. Amen.