

Sibling Rivalry

Genesis 37: 14-28, Gen 45:1-11

Friends, a couple of years ago the Capital One Credit Card company had some really funny commercials about bad combinations, things that don't really go well together; like ultimate mime fighting, or ballroom dentistry, or bungee gardening, and so on.

I mean ballroom dentistry and bungee gardening? Those are accidents waiting to happen, trouble brewing and truth be told that was kind of like going on vacation with my family when I was a kid.

You see I had three younger sisters, and our family vacations consisted of spending long hours travelling in our family van, driving from Ottawa to Minnesota to visit our relatives.

So you have a ten year old boy and three younger sisters in a confined space for hours on end...you do the math. Bad combination.

To say there was a bit of teasing and conflict would be an understatement!

Once, my parents got so fed up with our bickering and fighting they stopped and left me and my sister in some gas station parking lot and drove off to try and scare some good behavior out of us.

(They have since reassured me that we were never really out of their sight)

And having spent many years working in youth ministry travelling to retreats, going on road trips and campouts with kids and youth, I concede that I can understand their desperation to get my sister and I to behave and I don't hold it against them.

I'm not offended – and I think my sister has almost forgiven me for all the torment I subjected her too on those trips as well.

Of course this is an example of what we are looking at today – how the enemy uses “offence” within a family to break it down and destroy it.

Now my example is kind of funny – in retrospect... but if you look around today at what families are going through, or what your family might be going through, it really is no laughing matter.

For all the progress that we have made as a society in technology, science, medicine and civil rights, the institution of the family is crumbling apart.

The divorce rate is the highest it’s ever been. It is not uncommon for us to hear about a parent who breaks down and kills their spouse, their kids and then kills themselves.

Family courts are backed up sorting out custody cases; in fact the majority of missing children who have been abducted are taken by one of their parents.

We need agencies and web-sites to help collect child-support from deadbeat dads and we never used to hear about elder abuse – but now that’s a common problem as well, and the list could go on.

And even in what we would consider stable normal families; the busyness, the pressure, the stress levels from what is considered “normal everyday life and activity” is very high.

So, based on what we see and perhaps experience going on around us I think we can agree that the institution of the family is not doing too well.

So what is to blame for this?

Well, if you believe Focus on the Family it’s the loose morals that our society has adopted from the 60’s, the confusion of gender roles brought about by radical feminism.

Or if you prefer Disney’s approach, then the blame is on materialistic Dads who work too much, and don’t spend

enough time at home with the family. They release a movie based on that theme almost every holiday season.

And Public Educators would have you believe it's because we're not getting the right kind of education, and the blame game can go on and on.

Of course that's exactly what the Devil wants – we're blaming each other, and pointing the finger at decoys.

And this prevents us from seeing the real issue. The enemy is using offence “skandalons” – things which offend us, to bait us, and trip us up, and trap us! And then he can use us to destroy the family.

It's sneaky and covert and it's been very effective because not everyone has a problem with “loose morals from the 60's” not every dad is a “workaholic” and many of us are quite well educated... but we are all capable of getting offended, and we are all quite capable of offending our family members.

And when we hold on to offence in our family it breeds dysfunction and creates abusive cycles which and our family members become trapped in.

So this morning as we look at the story of Joseph, we see how holding on to some minor offences resulted in a very dysfunctional family and created the potential for an abusive cycle that could have destroyed them.

The scripture picks up the story of Joseph as a seventeen year old boy.

And the very first thing we read about Joseph is that once, after being out tending the sheep with his half-brothers, he had given his father a bad report about them.

Now, we don't know if this was done innocently, or if he was a tattle-tale, or if he was just playing on his father's favoritism.

But this is where it all started.

His brothers never forgot it – they were offended and they held on to that offence.

So when young Joseph, wearing his famous “techni-color dream coat,” begins to speak to his older brothers about his dreams where he becomes their ruler... well, it only added insult to injury and made things worse.

The brothers were baited and trapped, and they were just waiting for their change to take revenge!

And they saw their opportunity when Joseph is sent out once again to check up on them – they would throw him into an empty watering hole to scare him good.

But somehow this act of revenge progress and ended up with Joseph being sold into slavery and an agreement that they would lie to their father and say a wild animal had killed Joseph.

Do you see how “offence” escalates?

Its starts with a bad report, then a pit, then selling into slavery, then covering up by conspiring to lie to their father – they’ve become a fully dysfunctional family.

Now this story shows us how the offence creates a dysfunctional cycle – and in the midst of this Joseph’s story there’s a short side bar in chapter 38 about Judah’s family.

Judah’s sons hate each other so much that when the eldest son dies leaving his widow childless, his brother would not fulfill his duty to give his brother’s widow a child.

Onan refused to get her pregnant, using her only for his pleasure instead, so Tamar resorts to dressing up as a prostitute and seducing Judah into sleeping with her in order to get a child to continue the family line.

Friends, this episode is included to show how the “offence” which Judah carried with him from Joseph is passed on to his sons, and affects their family relationships as well.

Now we normally think that it's only the victim who tends to pass on that dysfunction... but "offence" creates cycles of abuse and dysfunction from one generation to the next whether you are the victim or the perpetrator.

Now, back to Joseph's story, what are the consequences for him?

Well Joseph's life is going to go from bad to worse. And it the worst kind of bad to worse, because every time he thinks he might be catching a break something else happens.

Just when he becomes the chief slave in his master's house, the Lady of the house begins making advances on him. When he refuses her, out of respect for God and his master, she is scorned – offended... (*there's that whole offence thing again*) and so she falsely accuses him of rape.

And so Joseph loses his position as steward and ends up in the King's Prison, a sort of minimum security house arrest.

Now, while he is under house arrest Joseph is a model prisoner – and before long the captain of the Guard has him taking care of other prisoners. He even interprets their dreams for them.

At this point it seem Joseph might catch a break because one of his fellow prisoners is about to be released and go back into the Pharaoh's service.

Joseph hopes that his good behavior will somehow reach the Pharaoh's ears and he can plead his case for justice – He says to his fellow prisoner "*I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon*"

Joseph has been wronged – offended - and he knows it!

But it's not to be – once the man is out of prison he forgets about Joseph.

So Joseph's life and his potential had been reduced to being a servant to prisoners and nothing in the foreseeable future was going to change that.

Now we might wonder if his brothers ever thought about what had become of him. If they had known he finally had ended up in prison with no foreseeable future would that have made them happy?

Would they feel he got what he deserved for being such a spoiled, arrogant brat who tattled on them? Would his suffering have settled the score and removed the offence?

We might wonder about them, but what about us?

Did you ever get back at someone or take revenge only to feel regret because it seemed they got paid back perhaps more than they deserved.

Your revenge was overkill, and now you actually feel sorry for the person who offended you.

Friends - that's part of the cycle of abuse as well. Once you were trapped by offence, now you are trapped by guilt.

Or maybe you were the victim, and like Joseph you know that you've done nothing to deserve what has happened to you.

Your life has gone from bad to worse because of things your family and other people have done to you – and you feel you never catch a break!

Friends, there's a cycle of abuse here too. Offence creates a victim mentality, and a victim mentality is so easily offended that it only makes the trap deeper for the victim.

Normal life challenges are no longer normal, but are interpreted as personal attacks and opposition, and the victim's life becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

Can you see how offense progresses for perpetrator or victim?

How it escalates and creates destructive cycles in a family situation, breaking down relationships, and warping what a family is supposed to be, and passing it on to the next generation?

So friends, as we've looked at Joseph's story this morning I hope the Holy Spirit has brought a couple things to our attention.

I hope He's made us more aware of how "offence" is the means by which the enemy works insidiously to try and break down our families.

I hope that He's helped us recognize how "offence" creates cycles of family dysfunction, but that we can break those cycles because we can recognize how offence triggers, traps and escalates, and we won't allow ourselves be a part of that anymore.

Because friends, through the power of the Holy Spirit we needn't allow offences to stick with us. We can walk away

from the trap of trying to get even, to get payback – and so we break the cycle and make room for Christ's healing power to make our families whole.

Proverbs 19:11 says *"A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense."*

Now it may be all very well and good that you're hearing this – but some of you might be thinking *"that's good advice – but a few years too late for me! If only I could have known this when I really needed it - but things fell apart and it's not possible to reconcile because of what I've done or what's been done to me."*

But friends, the good news is that regardless of where our family situation is... whether we have been the perpetrators or the victims... I know that because of how Joseph's story turns out – the Holy Spirit wants to give us hope for some sort of reconciliation this morning.

Because Joseph's story is ultimately about how God keeps His promise and gives grace and stays near to us in spite of our dysfunction.

You you'll notice that each time the offence progresses and Joseph's life gets worse, as he is victimized again – the scripture notes that the LORD was with him.

Gen 39:2 The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did.... the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field

Did God bless Potiphar because Joseph was such a fine upstanding man of character? No – Joseph was a spoiled brat from a very dysfunctional family.

It was because God had made a promise to Joseph's ancestor Abraham – *"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

Through God's sovereign choice, Joseph had inherited and carried this promise in his life – so that those who were connected to him, or in proximity to him - got blessed.

Potiphar's estate prospered, the Captain of the Guard had his prison running efficiently, the Royal Cup-bearer received a favorable interpretation of his dream, Pharaoh was warned about an coming season of drought and famine, and the nation of Egypt survived because of the grain Joseph was able to store up... and eventually that lead to even his brothers and family being blessed.

At first it was just by receiving food to survive the famine – but then they were blessed in being reconciled and reunited as a family.

And friends the hope for reconciliation for whatever situation we may be in comes when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see that God's promise to Abraham was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

So, regardless of whether we are perpetrator or victim we receive blessing when we come to Christ by believing in Him.

For the perpetrators those blessings are the forgiveness and the removal of our guilt for what we've done to offend others, for how we've perpetrated that cycle of abuse to continue in our lives and families...

For the victims, we receive the blessings of being freed from the bondage of "offence" and being given the power to offer forgiveness to those who offended us.

So let these words of our Lord Jesus bless you!

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18)

Friends, God blesses us in Jesus Christ – believe it, put your faith in it – trust it!

He makes us rich in forgiveness, to free us from your victim mentality, to remove our perpetrators guilt and open our eyes to help us see how he will bless other's lives through us.

Friends, when Joseph saw how God was working like this, when he realized God was making good on His promise to bless – that was the turning point.

And he says to his brothers - do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years

there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. (Gen 45:5-8)

Those are not the words of someone who has been offended!

Those are the words of someone who knows, and who has seen, as Paul says in Romans 8:28 - that *God can work in all things for the good of those who love him, and have been called according to his purpose.*

Friends that is why there is hope in the story of Joseph and that is why there is hope for us.

So – *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."* (Romans 15:13)

Amen!