

# Joseph – Week 1 – An Introduction – Genesis 37:1-2a

## Scripture Reading: Genesis 30:22-24

### Introduction

Have you ever met someone who seemed impossible to offend?

Someone who could absorb any slight or act of injustice or injury and never lose their composure or even seemingly consider the need to get even?

Those people are a rare breed to be sure and it seems they are becoming scarcer every day

I believe we would all agree that we are presently living in a time of great division where it seems one person cannot even disagree with another without viewing his rival as an evil person

We have reached the sad state where even dissenting or contrary words are considered to be violent acts worthy of punishment and payback

Revenge is the order of the day and “I don’t get mad, I get even” has gone from being a cute bumper-sticker slogan to a way of life as we have witnessed ever-increasing levels of rage and retaliation – sometimes deadly retaliation – for even the most minor and, sometimes, imagined wrongs

And we live in a time when virtually everyone is claiming to be a victim and seeking to be compensated in some way

We have moved so deeply into a victim culture that a tool called “intersectionality” had to be created just to add up the amount of victimhood a person can claim in order to sort out the pecking order at the reparations trough

Because being a victim obviously means you have the right to get revenge of some sort or another

Grace, mercy, forgiveness, and forbearance in the face of slights and injuries are concepts that are foreign to our way of thinking in our world today

But there is hope and as we look at the example of those who don’t buy into the culture of victimhood we see that there is another, better way

This morning we are beginning our look at the life of Joseph as it’s recorded in Genesis chapters 37-50

As we consider his life we are going to meet a man who had every right to play the “victim card” and seek to get even

**Other than Job, it would be difficult to find someone in the Bible who had more things go wrong for him**

Only while Job’s were purely Satanic and spiritual in origin, Joseph’s tribulations were all caused by other people

Through no fault of his own, Joseph went from the pinnacle to the pit as he suffered, seemingly, every possible injustice at the hands of others

He was hated and betrayed by his brothers, mistreated, sold into slavery, falsely accused, and wrongly imprisoned

**But in spite of all of that, Joseph never stopped trusting his God and he never became bitter or vengeful**

**He never threw up his hands in despair or used his situation to excuse giving in to any form of bad behavior**

**Through it all, Joseph maintained his integrity and ultimately triumphed in ways he could never have imagined**

**And Joseph’s triumph is the triumph of faith as he put his trust in God into action**

To fully understand Joseph we really need to begin **before** Joseph was even born and take a look at his family history and the **early years** of his upbringing that take place before the main account of his life that begins in Genesis 37

Then we will take a look at **what** the example of Joseph can teach us today about how to live in a world that is just as full of underserved injustices and severe setbacks that – while perhaps not the same as those Joseph faced – are no less painful to those who experience them

## **I. Before Joseph**

Open your Bibles to Genesis 37 and look with me at how the passage begins (**Genesis 37:1-2a**) –

*Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old...*

The main account of Joseph begins when he was seventeen years old but this isn't the first time Scripture mentions him

The birth of Joseph is recorded for us in **Genesis 30:22-24** which we just heard as our Scripture reading but we need to back up just a bit further still and take a look at the type of family that Joseph joined

**To say that Joseph was born into a dysfunctional family would be an understatement**

Joseph came from a great lineage in Jewish culture – he was the great-grandson of Abraham, Isaac was his grandfather; and Jacob was his father – and of course, Jacob's twin brother, Esau, the patriarch of the Edomites, was his uncle

**Let's begin by looking at Jacob and Esau because that's where the real trouble starts for the family**

Genesis 25 tells us of the birth of Esau and Jacob and it seems the two boys could hardly have been more different. Esau, we are told, was an outdoorsman and Jacob was a homebody but the real difficulty between the two began because Esau was his father's favorite and Jacob was favored by his mother

As you might expect, parental favoritism typically has negative consequences and in the case of Jacob and Esau it proved to be just so as Jacob and his mother, Rebekah schemed to steal the blessing that was rightly Esau's because he was born first

This led to Esau hating Jacob and Esau vowing to kill his brother at the first opportunity after their father had died

And when Esau's plan came to light, Rebekah arranged to send Jacob to live with her brother Laban in Haran

**When Jacob arrived in Haran he was immediately captivated by Laban's daughter, Rachel**

It seems to have been a case of love at first sight when Rachel showed up at the well with her sheep

And Jacob was so taken with Rachel that he agreed to work for Laban for seven years if at the end of that time he could marry her

Of course, Uncle Laban proved to be a sneaky, manipulative, controlling man and at the end of the seven years he tricked Jacob into marrying his oldest daughter, Leah

And when the deception was revealed, Jacob promised to work another seven years if only he could also marry Rachel – Laban agreed to the bargain and the two were married straight away

**Then we read in Genesis 29-30 how the two sisters engaged in a contest of sorts wherein each tried to outdo the other in providing sons to Jacob during those seven years**

Leah got off to a head start right out of the gate while Rachel remained childless

This caused Rachel to give Jacob her servant, Bilhah, as a wife in order to provide sons through her which was a common arrangement in those days for women who were barren

Somewhere in the chain of events, Leah, after having four boys hit a pause in the fertility derby

And when Bilhah bore Jacob two sons, Leah gave Jacob her servant, Zilpah, as a wife and she bore two sons for Jacob also on behalf of Leah

Then Leah hit her stride again and had two more sons and a daughter

Then, finally, after many years and many children had already been born, Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob's eleventh son

And then, jumping ahead a bit in the narrative, we read in **Genesis 35:18** that some years later Rachel died while giving birth to Benjamin, Jacob's twelfth and final son

So the final tally was that:

Leah was the mother of six sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun and one daughter, Dinah

Bilhah, Rachel's servant, was the mother of two sons: Dan and Naphtali

Leah's servant, Zilpah, was the mother of two sons: Gad and Asher

And Rachel was the mother of two sons: Joseph and Benjamin

A handy list of the sons and their mothers is provided for us in **Genesis 35:23-26** (should you want to make note of it)

**Just as a side note, it's difficult to determine with any certainty the exact spacing between the sons**

We know the birth order but we aren't given the timing of the births

And with four women being involved it's very possible, and it seems probable, that some of the boys were born very close together

For instance, it seems unlikely that it took four sons being born to Leah, even though it appears that Leah had an easy time getting pregnant at the start and had her sons in quick succession, for Rachel to decide she was having difficulty getting pregnant and hatching the plan to have children through Bilhah

That would be at least four years

So Bilhah's sons were probably born contemporaneously with some of Leah's sons

We also don't know the timing of Leah's hiatus from the baby derby or how long it lasted

It's quite possible that she and Zilpah and Bilhah were all pregnant at the same time with at least some of the boys

The only thing that seems apparent is that the first eleven sons and one daughter were born during the second seven years that Jacob labored for Rachel – and even that is questioned by some scholars

Suffice it to say we don't know for sure and we just have to look at the text and try to determine what seems to be the best interpretation

And it seems reasonable to me to say that Joseph was born seven years after Reuben and then to be content with knowing the others were lined up in between some way or another

## II. Joseph's Early Years

But clearly, Joseph was born into a family that was a bit of a mess – we might well say it was not just dysfunctional it was **generationally dysfunctional**

Grandma and grandpa played favorites with their twin sons

Grandma and dad conspired to deceive grandpa and steal his blessing from dad's twin brother which led to dad being on the run from his brother who had vowed to kill him

Now dad was hiding out; living with and serving an uncle who was also a deceiver and manipulator

And dad continued the pattern of showing favoritism by openly loving one wife more than the other leading to ongoing tension and competition within the family

If reality TV had been a thing back then Joseph's family might have given the Kardashians some competition!

Now, during the time between the births of Joseph and Benjamin, Jacob continued to serve Laban and Laban was blessed by God because of Jacob's service so that he prospered greatly

But Jacob wanted to take his wives and children and strike out on his own so the two men struck a deal whereby Laban would give Jacob all of the sheep and goats that were speckled, spotted, or solid black to form a flock for himself

Then we read about how Jacob engaged in a really strange form of animal husbandry involving peeled sticks floating in the watering troughs that causes Jacobs share of the flock to grow in both strength and number

Looking at **Genesis 31:41** we see Jacob tell Laban that he had served him for twenty years – fourteen for his daughters and six to build up his flock so Jacob had no doubt built up a sizable flock for himself

Jacob's success caused Laban's sons to accuse him of theft and turned Laban against him so Jacob took his family and his flock and fled from his father-in-law headed back to Canaan

Of course, Laban couldn't just let them go so he pursued the caravan with some of his men leading to a tense situation when he caught up to them which was resolved in the end due to Rachel's deception of her father

I imagine there was a sense of bitter-sweet relief as Laban arose early the next morning, kissed his grandchildren and daughters goodbye, gave them his blessing and turned back toward Haran

The relief the caravan felt was likely short-lived though as they received the news that Esau was on the way to meet them with 400 armed men

Imagine what young Joseph must have been thinking as he witnessed the preparations his father took in dividing the caravan into groups and sending them on with space between them so that if Esau attacked one the other might escape

Picture what it must have been like to see all of the people head out, perhaps to meet their deaths, as you and your immediate family camped on one side of the river while dad remained behind on the other side all night

And the impression that Jacob's story of why he came limping across the river the next morning must have made on young Joseph who would have likely been six years old at the time

After all, it's not every boy who can say his dad wrestled with God and lived to tell about it!

And God changed Jacob's name to Israel after that night because, as God said, "*you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed*" (**Genesis 32:28**)

Israel may have had a new name and a new limp to go along with it but he hadn't changed all that much as he continued to show favoritism just as his parents before him had done

Notice how in **Genesis 33:1-2** he put the servants, Bilhah and Zilpah out front along with their four sons, followed by Leah along with her seven children, and he put Rachel and Joseph in the place of greatest safety at the very end

But Jacob displayed at least some growth in his character as went ahead of them all to face whatever fate might befall him as he faced his brother Esau after 20 years

In the end, Esau was eager to forgive and the brothers enjoyed a warm embrace as Jacob introduced his family to his brother

But Israel proved to still be Jacob deep down as he once again deceived Esau by sending him on ahead of them while promising to follow him southward to Seir but instead turned northward and headed to Succoth once Esau was out of sight

Jacob apparently also disobeyed God by going to Succoth and then Shechem because it appears in **Genesis 32:13** that God had commanded him to return to Bethel

**And his children were watching all of his deceit and disobedience so their actions in the next episode should be come as no surprise**

While they were camped before Shechem, a man named Shechem raped Dinah, Leah's daughter

When Jacob's sons heard about the matter they were indignant and when Shechem and his father tried to make things as right as they could by seeking marriage between Shechem and Dinah they saw a way to get revenge

So they told them the only way for their clans to intermarry was if all the men among them agreed to be circumcised

The men in the area saw this to be an advantageous arrangement so they all submitted to being circumcised and on the third day afterwards, while they were still too sore to fight, Simeon and Levi went in and killed all of the men of the city

It was a terrible act of deceit that brought dishonor to their family but it was also the catalyst that was needed to get Jacob to finally obey God and go to Bethel

It wasn't long after that Jacob's beloved Rachel was in the throes of labor with Benjamin and died as a result and Jacob buried Rachel and set a pillar over her tomb as a monument

Then when we read in **Genesis 35:22** that Jacob's eldest son, Reuben, had sexual relations with Bilhah, his father's concubine we aren't really all that surprised – it almost seems to be expected from this family

To this point none of them have proven themselves to be particularly spiritual people

I want to just pause briefly here and say that the example of Joseph's family and their generational dysfunction should serve as a warning to us

Parents, grandparents, really, all older adults need to recognize that young eyes are watching them and what they see us do often has greater impact on them than what we say

We shouldn't be surprised when our kids turn out much the same as us

After all, the old saying, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree" is an old saying for a reason

So when we are engaged in less than noble behaviors and attitudes and our conversations are not edifying why would we be surprised to see and hear the same from them?

Just something to think about...

But this is the family into which Joseph was born and we could be forgiven if we didn't expect much from him

After all, his family's behavior thus far would make them prime candidates for the Jerry Springer show

Their desire for revenge whether by fair means or by foul permeates our culture today

But as we are going to see in the coming weeks, Joseph is going to prove to be different and his example is much needed in our world today

**So let's take a few minutes to consider what we might expect to learn from this study**

### **III. What Joseph Can Teach Us**

Given the importance of some of the figures in the Old Testament like Abraham, Moses and Joshua, it might surprise you to learn that more space is given to Joseph's life than is given to anyone else's

In fact, the account of Joseph is about 25% longer than the account of Abraham who is the next longest

**The mere fact that God chose to give so much attention to Joseph should make us sit up and take notice**

As we read it we notice that the account of Joseph is unique because nowhere in his entire life's story do we find even one negative word about him – which is even more remarkable when you consider his background

And while we know that he was born with a sin nature as all men are, no outward sign of it is reported

I believe that's because at no point in his 110 years of life do we ever see Joseph take his eyes off of God or even a hint that he wavered in his trust in God

**In fact, the greatest and most notable characteristic of Joseph was his absolute, unflinching faithfulness to God in all circumstances**

And Joseph's circumstances were far from ideal; in fact, they were terrible

The way he was treated and the situations he found himself in through no fault of his own would break most people

But Joseph was able to look at the circumstances that he was in and see more than the difficulty

He recognized that God was with him and working in his life and nothing was an accident

He was able to see the warp and woof of a fine tapestry being woven in the ups and downs he experienced

In fact, he didn't view those ups and downs as mere happenstance but saw God's purposeful hand at work in everything that happened to him

Therefore, Joseph didn't succumb to the most prevalent attitudes that we see today when people are faced with injustice

**Joseph never complained, he never sought revenge, and he never compromised his integrity**

In fact, we never even see him express any measure of anger or resentment toward those who did him wrong

As a result, he never lost his ability to receive and to project God's power and blessing in his life

Now, I can't say that Joseph never had moments when he struggled or what he may have wrestled with in his private thoughts because we aren't told those things

But what we do see is that his outward actions and attitudes were excellent

In the final analysis, Joseph proved to be a man of unwavering faith meaning he not only trusted God; he put that trust into action

So, what can we learn from this long-ago man of God that will be of any value to us today?

I hope many things but just to list a few things, I believe Joseph can teach us:

- How to overcome envy
- How to face adversity
- How to resist temptation
- How to plan for the future – and how to implement those plans
- How to forgive the people who do us wrong
- How to assure people when they doubt our forgiveness
- How to have faith in God and his promises
- How to recognize the sovereignty of God, especially when things stink

Joseph did all of those things and they are all going to be in the passages we look at over the next several weeks

## **Conclusion**

My plan for this sermon series is to take a chapter each week and see what we can learn from it

I am going to skip chapter 38, though, because it concerns Joseph's brother, Judah and really doesn't deal directly with Joseph

Judah does serve as a sort of counter-example to Joseph and I recommend you read it through on your own even though we won't be considering it during the series

Next week, then, we will be looking at chapter 37

Let me encourage you to read through the chapter a few times this week as you prepare for Sunday

As you read, think back on the family history we've looked at today and consider what part it might have played in the events as they played out

Let's pray